

Molesworth Mrs.

Not Without Thorns



Mrs. Molesworth

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Molesworth Mrs. Not Without Thorns

Volume One – Chapter One. Sweet Seventeen

There a girl comes with brown locks curl'd,
My friend and we talk face to face;
Crying, "Oh, what a beautiful world!"
Crying, "Oh, what a happy place!"

The Bird.

La danse au piano est ou très-charmante ou très-ennuyeuse, selon le sort.

A foggy evening in early December. Fogs are quick to gather and slow to disperse in the heavily laden air surrounding an assemblage of tall chimneys; and the manufacturing town of Wareborough, low-lying and flat, seemed to have a special attraction for them. Unprepossessing at its best, Wareborough was peculiarly so at this season and in such weather; it would, indeed, have been difficult to choose a day on which it could have less favourably impressed a stranger than the one just drawing drearily to a close.

There was a good deal of confusion in the streets, for the fog greatly impeded the traffic.

"What a place! How can human beings be found willing to spend their lives here?" thought to himself, with a shudder at the bare idea, a young man seated in a rattling Wareborough fly, whose driver, notwithstanding constantly recurring risk of collision, was doing his best to keep his tired horse up to its usual speed. "Where in the world is the fellow taking me to?" was his next reflection. "It seems to me I have been hours in this wretched shandry-dan."

Just as he was about putting his head out of the window to shout inquiries or directions to the driver, the fly stopped. The gentleman jumped out, then stood still, bewildered.

"Where is the house?" he exclaimed. "Is this Barnwood Terrace? I see no houses at all."

"There's a gate, sir, just by where you're standing," replied the man. "You've some little way to walk up the path. Can't drive up to the door. There's three houses together, and Mr Dalrymple's is the middle one. I'll run up to the door and ring, sir."

He was preparing to descend, but the young man stopped him. "Never mind, stay where you are, I'll find my way. Come for me about eleven or half-past. You stand near our place, don't you? Yes. All right then."

He fumbled away for some time at what he discovered by feeling, to be an iron railing, before he succeeded in finding anything like a gate. He came upon it at last suddenly: it was open. The path fortunately was straight, and the light of a gas-lamp glimmering feebly through the fog showed him, in time to prevent his tumbling against it, a flight of five or six stone steps to be ascended before he could ring the front-door bell of Number 2, Barnwood Terrace. It showed him something more. Some one was there before him. On the top step stood a figure, waiting apparently for admission. It was a human being, but that was about all he could discern as he cautiously mounted the steps; then as he drew nearer, it gradually assumed to him through the exaggerating, distorting medium of the fog the dimensions of an unnaturally tall, curiously shrouded woman. It remained perfectly motionless, whether the face was turned towards him or not he could not tell. Now he was quite close to it, standing on the same step, yet it gave not the slightest sign of having perceived his

approach. The young man began to think it rather odd – who could it be? A woman, apparently, standing there alone waiting – was she a beggar? No, even through the fog he could distinguish nothing crouching or cringing in the attitude, the figure stood erect and firm, the shrouding drapery seemed to fall in rich and ample folds. The new-comer felt extremely puzzled. Then suddenly he resolved to end his perplexity.

“Have you rung?” he asked, courteously. The figure moved a little, but seemed to hesitate to answer. “Shall I ring?” he repeated, “or have you done so already?”

“I have rung, but perhaps not loudly enough.”

“I think you had better ring again, for I have been waiting here some minutes,” came the reply at last in low, clear, refined tones.

“A lady! How very strange for her to be standing here alone in the dark – what a queer place Wareborough must be,” thought the young man; but he said nothing more, and almost before his vigorous pull at the bell could have taken effect, the door was thrown open, revealing a brightly lighted, crimson carpeted hall, and two or three servants in unexceptionable attire.

“Come, this looks more promising,” was the reflection that glanced through the stranger’s mind as he drew back to allow his companion to enter. The glare of light was almost blinding for a moment, but still as she passed him he managed to catch a glimpse of her face – a mere glimpse however. By what he saw of her features only, he would hardly have been able to recognise her. Still, hurried as it was, his glance satisfied him on one point – she was *very* young, and he felt all but certain, very pretty. But in a moment she had disappeared, how or where he could not tell; so quickly that but for the remembrance of her voice he could have imagined her altogether the offspring of his own fancy. He stood still for a moment or two, feeling somehow confused and bewildered, and very much inclined to rub his eyes or pinch himself to make sure he was awake. Then suddenly he was recalled to himself by hearing his own name sonorously announced, and in another moment he found himself ushered into a large, richly furnished drawing-room, all mirrors and gilding, damask and velvet pile, among a dozen or more well-dressed people of both sexes, one of whom, a lady comely and pleasant looking, advanced quickly to meet him.

“Captain Chancellor, I am so delighted to see you. So glad you have found your way to us already. Henry,” turning to a stout good-humoured-looking man beside her, “Henry, this is my old – my long-ago young friend. Captain Chancellor, let me introduce my husband to you, Mr Dalrymple.”

The old young friend responded with becoming graciousness to this cordial reception, though not feeling so thoroughly at his ease as was usual to him. He was conscious of having been expected, looked for, talked over probably by the company among whom he found himself, before he had made his appearance. And though thoroughly accustomed to please and be pleased, he was not a vain man, and this curious little sensation of conspicuousness was not altogether agreeable. By way of making him feel himself at home, his host proceeded to introduce him right and left to so many of the assembled guests, that the result was a feeling of increased bewilderment and utter confusion as to their identity. Still to all appearance he proved himself quite equal to the occasion, shook hands heartily with the men, looked amiably at the women and, being a remarkably handsome and perfectly well-bred man, succeeded even during the few minutes that elapsed before the dinner gong sounded in securing to himself the favourable prepossessions of nearly every one in the room.

He had reasons of his own for wishing to impress his entertainers agreeably; his efforts speedily met with their reward.

“I have a surprise for you,” said Mrs Dalrymple when her Henry at length allowed the young man a little breathing time. “Guess who is here – ah yes, there she comes – she had just gone upstairs to fetch her fan when you came in. Roma dear, here is Captain Chancellor at last. I must manage to let you two sit next to each other at dinner, you will have so much home news to talk over. You have not met for some months, Roma tells me.”

The young lady addressed came forward quietly, with a slight look of amusement on her face, to greet the new-comer.

“How funny it seems to find you here? Who would have thought of you turning up at Wareborough, Beauchamp?”

“Not half so funny as *your* being here, it strikes me,” replied the gentleman. “Very lucky for me that it is so of course, but what you can find to amuse you here I cannot imagine.” Their hostess had by this time turned away.

“She – Mrs Dalrymple – is my cousin, you know,” said Miss Eyrecourt, in a lower tone, with a very slight inclination of her head in the direction of the lady referred to.

“I know that; but people are not obliged to visit their cousins if they bury themselves in such places. I daresay you are wondering at my not seeming more surprised to see you, are you not? The truth is, Gertrude mentioned it in a letter I got this morning, but what the reason was of your coming here she didn’t say.”

The announcement of dinner prevented the young lady replying. It fell to Captain Chancellor’s lot to escort his hostess to the dining-room, but, thanks to her good offices, Miss Eyrecourt was placed at his right hand.

“You were asking the reason of my coming to Wareborough, were you not, Beauchamp?” she began, after calmly snubbing the first feeble effort of her legitimate companion of the dinner table – a Wareborough young gentleman – to enter into conversation. “I don’t see why you should think it so extraordinary. I have been at my godmother’s – up in the Arctic regions somewhere – in Cumberland, you know – for three weeks. Now I am on my way to Brighton for a fortnight. Gertrude is already there, you know, with the children, and we shall all go home together for Christmas. I don’t suppose you ever learnt geography; but if you had, you would know that Wareborough is somewhere between the two points I name, which was lucky for me. Pearson objects to long journeys without a break.”

Captain Chancellor smiled. “Then why drag her up to Cumberland in the middle of winter? I can’t imagine any motive strong enough to make you risk her displeasure.”

“Can’t you?” said Roma, languidly, leaning back in her chair. “Not even god-daughterly devotion? Seriously, Beauchamp, you know Lady Dervock has ever so many thousand pounds to leave to somebody, and I don’t see why I should not be that happy person. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to get some money – a good comfortable sum of course.”

A slightly cynical expression came over Captain Chancellor’s face, and there was a suspicion of a sneer in his voice as he replied —

“Really? I didn’t know your views had progressed so far. Perhaps this is the real secret of your visit to Wareborough: it is said to be a first-rate neighbourhood for picking up millionaires in.”

“Thank you for the suggestion,” answered Miss Eyrecourt, calmly; “but I have no intention of the kind. I have no idea of selling myself. When I do get my money I should prefer it without appendages. I shall not try for a Wareborough millionaire at present; certainly not – as long as there is a chance of godmamma Dervock awakening to a proper sense of her duty.”

Captain Chancellor’s brow cleared a little. Just then Mrs Dalrymple, whose attention had been caught by a stray word or two of their low-toned conversation, interrupted it by an inquiry as to what he thought of Wareborough. He laughed a little as he answered her, that so far he could hardly venture to have any thoughts on the subject.

“I only crossed over from Ireland yesterday,” he said. “It was eleven o’clock last night when I reached Wareborough, and the whole of to-day I have been conscious but of one sensation.”

“Fog?” inquired Roma.

“Yes, fog,” he replied. “And, by-the-bye, that reminds me I had such a funny little adventure when I came here to-night,” he stopped abruptly and looked searchingly round the table.

“What is the matter? Whom are you looking for?” asked both his neighbours at once.

“No, she is certainly not here,” he replied inconsequently. “Even if my impression of her features is mistaken, there is no girl here dressed as she was. She had a scarlet band round her hair and something silver at one side. What can have become of her?”

“Beauchamp, are you going out of your mind? What are you talking about?” exclaimed Miss Eyrecourt. “Mary,” to Mrs Dalrymple, “I am sure his senses are going – a mysterious ‘she’ with scarlet and silver in her hair?”

“I think I understand,” said Mrs Dalrymple, looking amused. “Captain Chancellor must have met my little friend Eugenia Laurence as he came in. I remember hearing the bell ring just before you rang,” she continued, turning to the young man – “the first was a very feeble attempt.”

“But she is not little, she is very tall, whoever she is,” objected Beauchamp.

“Rather, not very. Certainly she is not taller than Roma, but then she is so very thin.”

“Thank you, that means I am very fat,” observed Miss Eyrecourt.

“Nonsense, you are just right. Eugenia is a mere child. So you made acquaintance with her outside in the fog, did you, Captain Chancellor? How very funny! I wonder she didn’t run away in a fright, poor child. I should like to know if you think she promises to be pretty. Roma thinks so, don’t you, dear? But you are very hard to please I hear, Captain Chancellor. I must introduce you to Eugenia after dinner. She is a great pet of mine.”

This was all the information Mrs Dalrymple vouchsafed on the subject of the mysterious young lady, for before Captain Chancellor had time to make any further inquiry the usual smiling signal was exchanged, and the ladies retired with much stateliness and rustle to the drawing-room.

Mrs Dalrymple, the most good-natured of her sex, was never so happy as when she saw “young people,” as she expressed it, “enjoying themselves,” and her ideas on this subject, as on most others, being practical in the extreme, a somewhat unexpected sight met the eyes of Captain Chancellor on his re-entering the drawing-room in company with the other gentlemen.

“Dancing,” he exclaimed, slightly raising his eyebrows, when he had made his way across the room to Miss Eyrecourt, “and on this heavy carpet. Won’t it be rather hard work?”

“Very, I should say,” replied Roma, indifferently. “I certainly don’t mean to try it.”

“Not with me?” said he in a low voice, looking down on her where she sat, with the deep blue eyes he so well knew how to make the most of.

“No, not with you,” she answered, coolly. “Carpet dances are not at all in my way, as you might know.”

Captain Chancellor looked considerably piqued.

“I don’t understand you, Roma,” he exclaimed. “If the floor were red hot I should enjoy dancing on it if it were with you.”

Miss Eyrecourt laughed softly.

“You would dance vigorously enough in that case, I have no doubt,” she replied; “but as for enjoying it, that’s quite another affair. Seriously, Beauchamp, I am going away to-morrow, and I don’t want to knock myself up before the journey. Besides, what is the use of dancing with me here? Wait for the hunt ball at Winsley, when you come home on leave. You had better make friends with some of these Wareborough people, as you are sure to be here for some time to come. There are at least six or eight passable-looking girls in the room, and Mary Dalrymple is dying to show off her new lion. They want to hear you roar a little; you don’t half appreciate the position.”

“Who are all these people? Where have they sprung from?” asked Captain Chancellor, ignoring her last remarks. “I counted how many there were at dinner – sixteen I think – but there are several more in the room now.”

“Yes; those were mostly papas and mammas. The young ladies come after dinner, and some of the young gentlemen. We have had one or two little entertainments of the kind in the week I have been here. I found them very fatiguing; but then I have no interest in the place or the people. I am not going to be here for months like you.”

“And you won’t dance?” urged Beauchamp.

“No, really I don’t feel inclined for it,” she replied decidedly. “And it looks uncivil to go on like this, talking to ourselves so much. Do go and get introduced to some one, Beauchamp. I don’t want to offend Mary.”

Captain Chancellor walked off without saying any more, but he felt chafed and cross, and by no means inclined to waste his waltzing on a Wareborough young lady. He retired into a corner, and stood there, looking and feeling rather sulky, and trusting devoutly that his energetic hostess might not discover his retreat. It was a large room, with several windows and a good deal of drapery about it: there were heavy curtains, only partially drawn, close to where he was standing, and these for some moments concealed from his view a young lady sitting by herself on a low chair very near his corner.

Her head was the first thing he caught sight of; a scarlet band and a small cluster of silvery leaves at one side, just above a pretty little ear. He could not see her face, but the simple head-dress, the arrangement of the bright wavy brown hair, he recognised at once. He moved his position slightly, drawing a little, a very little nearer, enough however to attract her attention. She looked up – ah yes, he had been right, his instinct had not deceived him; it never did in such matters, he said to himself; she was pretty, very pretty, though so young and unformed a creature. The gloomy expression, softened out of his face as he watched her for a moment without speaking; then gradually a slight colour rose on her cheeks, she looked down quickly, as if becoming conscious of his observation, and the movement recalled him to himself.

“I beg your pardon,” he began hurriedly, without quite knowing what he meant. “I did not see you when I invaded your quiet corner. Are you not going to dance?” he went on, as if speaking to a child, for almost as such he unconsciously regarded her, calmly ignoring the fact that he had not been introduced to her. “Don’t you like dancing?”

“Oh, yes, at least I think I do,” she answered, with some hesitation. “I have never danced much. I don’t care for it *very* much.”

Captain Chancellor looked at her again, this time with increasing interest and some perplexity. He could not make her out. She was not shy, certainly not the least awkward; but for the slightly fluctuating colour on her cheeks, he would have imagined her to be thoroughly at her ease, rather more so perhaps than he quite cared about in a girl of her tender years, for “she can’t be more than sixteen,” he said to himself, as he observed her silently, sitting there alone, gravely watching the dance which had now begun. It seemed unnatural that she should not join in it; he felt sorry for her – but yet – it was quite against his principles to risk making a spectacle of himself – he wished she would dance with some one else; he could judge of her powers in a moment then. But no one came near their corner – even Mrs Dalrymple seemed to have forgotten them both. Captain Chancellor was a kind-hearted man, the sort of man, too, to whom it came naturally to try to attract any woman with whom he might be thrown in contact. And then this girl was undoubtedly pretty, and with something out of the common about her. He began to feel himself getting good-tempered again. It was stupid work sulking in a corner on account of Roma; he had had plenty of experience of her freaks before now, much better show her he did not pay any attention to them. Just as he had reached this point in his meditations, a faint, an all but inaudible little sigh caught his ear. It carried the day.

“Don’t you find it rather wearisome to sit still, watching all this waltzing?” he said at last. “Though you don’t care much about dancing, a turn or two would be a change, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” the girl answered, raising her face to his, with a rather melancholy expression in her eyes. “Yes, I daresay it would be very nice; but no one has asked me to dance. I hardly know any one here, for it is almost the first time I have been out anywhere in this way.”

Her frankness somewhat embarrassed her companion. It is not often that young ladies calmly announce a dearth of partners as a reason for their sitting still, and Captain Chancellor hardly knew

how to reply. Condolence, he feared, might seem impertinent. He took refuge, at last, in her extreme youth.

“No one could think it possible you had been out much,” he said gently. “At your age, many girls have never been out at all.” She looked up quickly at this, smiling a little, as if about to say something, but stopped. “As for not knowing any one here, we both seem in the same predicament, for I am a perfect stranger too. If no one better offers, will you condescend to give me the next dance? This one is just ending.”

A bright, almost a grateful glance was his reward.

“I didn’t understand that you were asking me to dance with you,” she said, half apologetically. “I should like it very much, but – ” here the rather stiff demureness of her manner fairly melted away, and she began to laugh. “You forget I don’t know who you are. I haven’t even heard your name.”

Captain Chancellor started. He felt considerably annoyed with himself. He was the last man to slight or ignore any recognised formality, and he could not endure to be laughed at. He drew himself up rather haughtily, and was just beginning a somewhat stilted apology, when the young lady interrupted him.

“Oh, please don’t be vexed!” she exclaimed eagerly. “I hope I haven’t said anything rude. It was so kind of you to ask me to dance, and I should like it so much! It doesn’t matter our not being regularly introduced, does it?”

“I hope not. We must consider the fog our master of ceremonies: it was under his auspices we first made each other’s acquaintance,” he replied, with a smile, for her “Oh, please don’t be vexed!” was irresistible; “and I think I do know your name. You are Miss Laurence, are you not? Your friend Mrs Dalrymple was speaking about you at dinner, and I know she quite intended asking your permission to introduce me to you. It is easy to tell you my name. It is Chancellor.”

“Captain Chancellor! Oh yes; I thought so,” she said naïvely; “but of course I was not sure. Now it is all right, isn’t it?” for by this time a new dance was beginning, and she was evidently eager to lose no more valuable time.

It was only a quadrille. They took their places, and though Miss Laurence’s gravity returned when she found herself facing so many people, an underlying expression of great content was nevertheless plainly visible in her countenance to an observer so experienced and acute as her partner, and the discovery by no means diminished his good, humour.

Volume One – Chapter Two. Mistakes

“This bud of love, by summer’s ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.”

Romeo and Juliet.

There was not much conversation between Captain Chancellor and his partner during the quadrille, for Miss Laurence seemed a little afraid of her own voice in so public a position, and bestowed her attention principally on the rest of the performers. Immediately after the square dance, however, there came another waltz, for which Captain Chancellor, waxing bolder as his practised eye followed the girl’s graceful and well-balanced, though somewhat timid movements, took care to secure her. His hopes were not disappointed. She danced beautifully; and then, too, how pretty it was to see how she enjoyed it! He forgot all about Miss Eyrecourt and her unamiability.

“How well you dance! I can hardly believe you have not had much practice. With one or two very trifling alterations, your waltzing would be perfection,” he exclaimed.

“Do you really think so? I am so glad!” she replied, looking up with a sweet flushed face from the sofa, where he had found a charming corner for two. “I was so afraid you would think me very heavy and awkward. I have hardly ever danced except at home with Sydney. Certainly, I have had plenty of that kind of practice.”

“With Sydney?” he repeated, interrogatively, just as one cross-questions a child. “Your brother, I suppose?”

“Oh no; I have no brothers,” she answered; and as she said the words, across her hearer’s mind there flashed the thought, “A cousin, I’ll bet anything. These sweet simple little girls are always spoilt by some odious cousin, or male friend ‘I have known all my life,’ in the background.” But “Oh no,” she went on; “Sydney is my sister.” Captain Chancellor breathed more freely. “She should have been here to-night; but Aunt Penton was not well, and Sydney thought she should not be left alone; and she *would* make me come. She is so unselfish!” with a tender look in her bright eyes, and a little sigh, as if the remembrance of Sydney’s self-sacrifice somewhat marred her own enjoyment.

“Your elder sister, is she not?”

“Oh no; she is a good deal younger – nearly two years younger.”

Captain Chancellor’s eyebrows went up a little. His companion read his thoughts, though he said nothing.

“I think you fancy I am younger than I am,” she explained, with a little blush. “I am nearly nineteen. I suppose I seem younger from having been so little in society. This is the very first time I have ever been anywhere without Sydney, and I disliked it so much, I asked Mrs Dalrymple if I might come early with my father, as he was passing here, and stay with her little girls in the school-room till after dinner, so that I might be in the drawing-room when every one came in.”

Captain Chancellor smiled at her confession; but its frankness made it the more difficult to realise that she was not the mere child he had guessed her. “And that was how you came to be standing out there in the fog, ‘all forlorn,’ then?” he returned. “Do you know you really frightened me? I don’t know what I didn’t take you for. A Wareshire witch at the least, though I don’t know that I was far wrong.” (A quick upward glance, and a slightly puzzled expression on the girlish face, here warned him that he was venturing on untried ground.) “But I forgot,” he went on hastily, “you don’t belong to Wareborough, I think you said.”

“Oh, yes I do. You misunderstood me a little. I only said I did not know many people here, that is to say personally – I know nearly every one by sight. I have lived here all my life, but my father does not allow us to visit much.”

“I have no doubt he is wise. In a place like this, the society must be very mixed, to say the least.”

Miss Laurence looked slightly embarrassed. “It isn’t exactly on that account. My father never speaks of Wareborough in that way. I don’t like living here much, but,” she hesitated.

“But though one may abuse one’s home oneself, one can’t stand any other person’s doing so – above all a perfect stranger, isn’t that it?” said Captain Chancellor, good-humouredly.

“Not quite. A perfect stranger’s opinion can’t matter much, for it can only be founded on hearsay,” replied the young lady, with a smile.

Her powers of repartee promised to be greater than he had expected, and Beauchamp Chancellor was not fond of repartee when exerted at his own expense. But he covered his slight annoyance by an increasingly paternal tone to his young companion. “Believe nothing you hear, and only half you see. You are rather too young to have adopted that motto yet, Miss Laurence; are you not? But after all, I don’t feel myself very guilty, for you own to not liking Wareborough yourself. You don’t really belong to it, do you? I can’t get it into my head that you do.”

The delicately implied flattery had the intended effect. The very slight disturbance of the young girl’s equanimity disappeared, and with an almost imperceptible elevation of the well-shaped little head, not lost on her companion, she replied:

“I don’t quite know what you mean by belonging to Wareborough? Of course, in one sense, we do not; that is to say, our grandfathers and great-grandfathers didn’t live here, but we, Sydney and I, were born here, and it has always been our home.”

“And yet you don’t like it? I suppose you have been a good deal away from home – abroad perhaps?” questioned Captain Chancellor.

“No, I have very seldom been away, and we have never been abroad,” said the girl, somewhat bluntly, but blushing a good deal as she spoke. “It is not from personal experience I can compare Wareborough with other places,” she went on; “it is from what I have read principally.”

“Ah, then, you indulge pretty freely in novels, like most young ladies,” observed Captain Chancellor.

Something in the tone or words jarred slightly on his hearer, but she had no time to define the sensation, for just then Mrs Dalrymple approached them.

“Well, Eugenia, my dear, you are enjoying yourself, I hope? And you, too, Captain Chancellor? I have been admiring your dancing. Henry introduced you, I suppose? Quite right. This dance is just about over. I want to introduce you to the Miss Harveys – charming girls. You must engage one of them for the next dance.”

“A little later in the evening, I shall be delighted to be introduced to any friend of yours, my dear Mrs Dalrymple,” replied Captain Chancellor. “For the next dance, you must excuse me. I am already engaged.”

“Ah, well, never mind. Come to me when it is over,” said the good-natured hostess. “You are not going to dance with Roma, I suppose? What has come over her to-night – can you tell me?”

“Not I. I have long ago left off trying to comprehend women in general, and Roma in particular,” said Captain Chancellor, lightly; but still with a certain constraint in his voice. Then as Mrs Dalrymple left them, he turned quickly to Miss Laurence: “There are refreshments in another room, I believe,” he said. “Won’t you let me get you an ice, or some lemonade, or whatever there is? Or suppose we both go and see?”

“Yes,” said Eugenia, rising as she spoke. “I should like to go into the other room; it is getting a little too hot here.”

She did not care for lemonade, or ices, or anything so material and commonplace. The novelty and excitement of the evening seemed to raise her above all such vulgar considerations as eating and drinking. She was not in the least tired, nor had she discovered that the room was too hot, till she heard Captain Chancellor's announcement of being engaged for the next dance. Then everything changed to her: she felt like Cinderella at the stroke of twelve.

"I am not going to sit all alone in a corner again with nobody noticing me, and watch him dancing with some one else," she said to herself. "I believe he is only making an excuse to get rid of me, and very likely he wants to go and talk to Miss Eyrecourt. He told me he knew no one here." So she gladly accepted the offer of his escort to the next room, quite unaware how visibly the brightness had faded out of her tell-tale face.

It was not all at once that her companion perceived the change; his thoughts seemed otherwise engaged. But when he had found her a deliciously draughty seat, had fetched her an ice, and was about to establish himself beside her, something in her manner caught his attention.

"You are not vexed with me for my little fib, I hope?" he said gently. Just then the music began again. She looked up, grave but puzzled.

"I don't quite understand what you mean," she replied. "But never mind about that. The next dance has begun, and you said you were engaged for it."

His face lighted up with amusement and something else. "But I am not engaged for it. That was the story I told to good Mrs Dalrymple. It is a galop – horrid dance – I was sure you would not care about it, and we can sit here so comfortably. I told you I knew no one here, and I am too shy to dance with any of the Miss Harveys."

"But Miss Eyrecourt, you know her?" persisted Eugenia, though the gravity was fast clearing off her face.

"Of course I do. She is a sort of a sister of mine. I fancied you knew, for she is Mrs Dalrymple's cousin, and she has been staying here for some little time. You know Mrs Dalrymple very well, don't you?"

"Yes. She is always very kind to us," replied the girl. "I knew Miss Eyrecourt was her cousin, but I didn't know she was any relation of yours, though I have heard Mrs Dalrymple talk of you. Is Miss Eyrecourt your step-sister? How proud you must be of her! She is so handsome."

"Handsome, yes, I suppose she is," he answered, rather absently. "But she is not exactly my step-sister," he went on, rousing himself. "She is – let me see – she is, or was rather, for my brother-in-law is dead, my sister's husband's step-sister. A terrible relationship, isn't it? Nearly as bad as 'Dick's father and John's son,' which I have never been able to master. But Roma and I have never troubled ourselves much to define our precise connection. It seemed quite unnecessary. We have always been a great deal together, and took it for granted we were some sort of cousins, I suppose."

To which Eugenia replied, "Oh, indeed," without repeating her admiration of the young lady under discussion.

"What a pretty name Roma is," she said, suddenly, after a minute or two's silence.

"It is uncommon enough, any way," replied Captain Chancellor. "But in Miss Eyrecourt's case there was a reason for it. She was born there – at Rome I mean."

"Then is she partly Italian?" asked Eugenia. "I could quite fancy she was."

"Because she is so dark? Oh, no; she is not Italian, though, as far as looks go, her name suits her. But in everything else she is the very reverse. I always tell her she should have had fair hair and light grey eyes," said Captain Chancellor, with some bitterness.

"Why?" said Miss Laurence, inconsiderately, regretting the question as soon as it was uttered. "Evidently he dislikes her," she said to herself. "How silly of me to urge him to talk about her."

"I don't think I could possibly make you understand why. A cold, calculating nature would always be an enigma to you," he replied, and the vivid colour which his words called forth on Eugenia's cheeks seemed to confirm his assertion. But he was a little mistaken. Like most

essentially transparent characters, Miss Laurence could not endure to be considered easy of comprehension. And to some extent her self-judgment was correct, for without the keynote to her undisciplined, half-developed nature, it was *not* easy to reconcile its inconsistencies – a careless or ignorant touch would too surely make terrible discord of its possible harmonies.

“I do not think you know enough of me to pronounce upon me so positively,” she said, a little coldly; but the words and the coldness were so very girlish that they only amused her hearer. He thought it better, however, not to reply to them, though he could not help smiling a little as he hastened to change the subject. He tried for a congenial one.

“Wareborough can’t be a very disagreeable place if we judge by Mrs Dalrymple,” he began. “She seems to have taken kindly to it, though her unmarried life was spent in a very different part of the country. How hearty and happy she seems!”

Eugenia was fond of Mrs Dalrymple, and liked to hear her praised. “Yes,” she answered eagerly; “she is one of the sunniest people I know. But she carries it about with, her. Wherever she was, in Wareborough or anywhere, she would be cheerful and happy.”

“Ah, indeed. Yes, I should say she takes things pretty easily,” observed Captain Chancellor.

He spoke carelessly – his attention being in reality occupied with observing the pretty way in which Miss Laurence’s face and eyes brightened up when she was interested – and again something in his words or tone seemed to jar slightly on the girl’s sensitive perceptions, though almost before she realised the sensation, the charm of his manner or handsome face, or both together, had completely obliterated it.

And the evening passed very quickly to Eugenia, for the two or three dances in which Captain Chancellor was not her partner, yet seemed in some indescribable way pervaded by his presence. She watched him dancing with Miss Florence Harvey without a twinge of envy or misgiving, though it was evident that the young lady’s fascinations were all being played off for his edification; she did not even feel deserted when he spent at least a quarter of an hour in close conversation with Miss Eyrecourt, for his manner when he returned to her, or an instant’s glance when he caught her eye from another part of the room, satisfied her she was not forgotten, – seemed, indeed, intended tacitly to assure her that of his own free will he would not have spent any part of the evening away from her. She could hardly believe it; this strange new homage was bewildering even while delightful; she shrank from recognising it as a fact even to herself, and took herself to task for being “dreadfully conceited.” To her extreme inexperience and ignorance of the extent of her attractiveness, it seemed incredible that this “preux chevalier,” this nineteenth-century hero, as he appeared to her, should thus distinguish her, should seem so desirous of wearing her colours. And all sorts of pretty hazy dreams began to float across her imagination of enchanted ladies who, barely past the threshold of their windowless tower, had found the fairy prince already in waiting – sweet, silly old stories of “love at first sight” and such like, which, though charming enough in romance, she had hitherto been the first to make fun of as possible in real life.

Poor little girl, she was practically most ignorant; she knew less than nothing of the world and its ways; she had no idea of the danger there might be to her in what, to a thorough-going man of the world like Beauchamp Chancellor, was but an hour’s pleasant and allowable pastime. There was one sharp pair of eyes in the room, however, quite as sharp and probably less spiteful than if they had been light grey. What would have become of Eugenia’s vaguely beautiful visions had she overheard some part of a little conversation between her hero and Miss Eyrecourt towards the close of the evening! They were sitting near each other, and there was no one close enough to overhear the remarks that passed between them, which, however, were not many, for Beauchamp’s sulkiness had returned when he found himself beside Roma again, and she, though as imperturbably good-tempered as ever, was irritatingly impenitent.

Suddenly Miss Eyrecourt’s tone changed. “Beauchamp,” she said, and her voice told him he was intended to give his attention to what she had to say.

“Well, Miss Eyrecourt, I am waiting for your remarks,” he said, snappishly.

“Don’t be cross. It *is* so silly,” she began.

“Is that all you have to say to me, Roma?”

“No, it isn’t. This is what I want to say – you have danced several times with that little Miss Laurence, Beauchamp.” Captain Chancellor’s manner changed instantly. He became quite brisk and amiable. “She is extremely pretty.”

“And dances charmingly,” added the gentleman.

“I daresay she does,” said Roma, with perfect composure, “but it isn’t only her dancing. You have *sat out* some dances with her too.”

“She is exceedingly nice to talk to,” observed he.

“I daresay she is,” said Roma again; “but for all that, Beauchamp – you may trust me, I don’t speak without reason, and you mustn’t mind my saying it. I do hope you are not going to be silly?”

Beauchamp smiled – a smile that said several things, all of which, however, were perfectly intelligible to his companion.

“Ah yes,” she said philosophically – “ah, yes, sir, you may smile and look contemptuous. I understand you. I understand why you looked so delighted just now when I began to speak about the girl – really, I did not think you could be so silly as *that*, and certainly you have one defence at your command! It is not the first, nor, I dare say, the twentieth little amusement of the kind you have indulged in. You are perfectly aware of the rules of the game, and in a general way, uncommonly well able to take care of yourself. But allow me to warn you that *some* day you may burn your own fingers. You think they are fire-proof? They are no such thing. You are just in the humour and at the stage to do something silly.”

“You think so?” he said. “Very well. Wait till you see me again, and then you shall see if you were right.”

“Very well. I shall see, and I only hope I shall be wrong. Seriously, Beauchamp, it would be in every way the silliest things of the kind you could do. Neither you nor I can afford to make any mistake of that sort, and you much less than I, for you would be the last, man to make the best of such a mistake once committed. I know all about Miss Laurence. I like her, and she interests me, and it is not only on practical grounds I warn you, though you know I value those sufficiently.”

“You certainly do,” he remarked, satirically.

“Well? I am not ashamed of doing so,” she answered calmly. “But suppose you are ‘proof,’ as you think, Beauchamp, that doesn’t say that child is, does it? And I am getting to feel differently about that sort of thing. I suppose it is a sign of advancing years.”

“It certainly is a sign of something very extraordinary,” he replied, “to find you, of all people, pitying the weakness of your sex. Something must be going to happen to you, I am afraid.”

Through the light bantering tone in which he spoke, Roma detected a certain ill-concealed triumph and satisfaction; the very things she least wished to see. “I have made a mistake,” she said to herself, “and done more harm than good.” But aloud, she only remarked quietly – “You are determined to misunderstand me, Beauchamp, but I can’t help it.”

She rose, as if to end the conversation, but before she had time to move away, Mrs Dalrymple and Eugenia, followed by an elderly gentleman, came up to where she was standing. Eugenia was the first to speak. “I am going, Miss Eyrecourt,” she said simply. “Papa,” with a pretty, affectionate glance at the tall, thin, grey-haired man beside her, “papa has come for me. I wanted to say good-night to you, because I fear I shall not see you again.”

The words were addressed to Roma, but the “papa” and the glance which seemed to say, “my father is not a person to be ashamed of, you see,” were evidently intended for the benefit of some one else – some one else, who came forward with marked, rather over-done empressment, hardly waiting for Roma’s cordial “yes, I am sorry to say it must be good-bye as well as good-

night,” to be spoken, before he exclaimed regretfully, “Going so early, Miss Laurence? I was quite counting on another dance.”

“It will have to be another evening, I am afraid,” said Mrs Dalrymple; “all our friends seem to be bent on deserting us early to-night. But I must not scold you, Mr Laurence; it is very good of you to have come for Eugenia yourself. You must be so tired. I can’t thank you enough for letting Eugenia join us, and the next time it must be little Sydney too. Oh, by-the-bye, I must introduce you gentlemen – Captain Chancellor, Mr Laurence, let me introduce you to each other.”

Then there was a little bustle of bowing and hand-shaking, and in another minute, of leave-taking all round, and Roma Eyrecourt had reason to congratulate herself on the successful result of her sisterly warning when she saw Eugenia, bright with smiles and girlish gratification, disappear from the scene on her father’s arm, closely attended on the other side by Captain Chancellor, looking as if the world contained for him no other human being than this white-robed maiden with the scarlet ribbon in her pretty brown hair.

“Poor child,” thought Roma. Then her reflections took a different turn. “Silly Beauchamp,” she murmured to herself, and for a minute or two she remained silent. Then, with a slight shrug of her white shoulders, she restored herself to her ordinary state of comfortable equanimity.

Some little time elapsed before Captain Chancellor re-entered the drawing-room. When he did so, it was in company with his host, who had been doing duty outside, seeing the last of his departing guests. Mrs Dalrymple and Roma were alone.

“A terrible night,” said Mr Dalrymple, cheerily, rubbing his hands as he briskly approached the fire. “Mary, my dear, I am trying to persuade our friend Chancellor to stay where he is for the night, for upon my word I don’t see how he is to find his way home. The fog is as thick as pea-soup.”

“But how will every one else get home, then? Captain Chancellor is not less likely to find his way than other people, is he?” said Roma.

The remark sounded a little ungracious.

“Other people came mostly in their own carriages, and brought one or two extra men with them,” replied Mr Dalrymple, who was matter-of-fact in the extreme. “Besides, no other of our friends came from such a distance; the barracks must be nearly three miles from here.”

“Do stay, Captain Chancellor. It would be far more comfortable, and you can see Roma off for Brighton at twelve o’clock. If you write a note now we can send it to your servant the very first thing to-morrow morning for whatever you want. Do stay,” said Mrs Dalrymple, cordially.

Captain Chancellor demurred a little; Roma said nothing. A servant was despatched on another fruitless search for the fly, which had not yet been heard of, and, after receiving his report, the guest at last gave in, and resigned himself, with suitable expressions of gratitude to his hosts, to passing the night at Barnwood Terrace. This point settled, the little party drew round the fire more closely, in the sociable, familiar way people do for the last few minutes before bed-time, when the house feels snug and self-contained, all outside communication being at an end for the night. Miss Eyrecourt was, perhaps, a trifle graver than usual, but roused up on her cousin’s inquiring if she were tired.

“Oh dear no,” she replied; “I have done nothing to tire myself.” Then, as if anxious to avoid the subject of not dancing, she hurried on to another. “By-the-bye, Mary, I wanted to ask you who that fair-haired girl in blue was. I was so much amused by a flirtation between her and that young – what is his name? – he sat opposite me at dinner.”

“Oh, young Hilton and Fanny Mayne? Yes, they certainly do flirt, and it can never come to anything more. They have neither of them a penny, and he is not shaping particularly well in business, didn’t you say, Henry? Too fond of amusing himself. We knew his parents – such nice people!” etc, etc.

Some little local gossip followed, not particularly interesting to the two strangers, till some remark of Mrs Dalrymple's brought the Laurences' name into the conversation. Then both Roma and Captain Chancellor pricked up their ears.

"How tired Mr Laurence looked to-night! I am sure he is doing too much," said Mrs Dalrymple, compassionately.

"What does he do?" asked Captain Chancellor. "He is not a clergyman; but Miss Laurence said something about his giving a lecture to-night, unless I misunderstood her."

"Oh no, you are quite right," answered Mrs Dalrymple. "He was lecturing on somebody – Milton or Shakespeare, or some one of that kind – at the Wareborough-Brook Mechanics' Institution to-night. It is really very good of him. We went to hear him once. It was most interesting, though perhaps a little too long, and I should have said, rather above his hearers' comprehension."

"I don't know that, my dear – I don't know that," put in Mr Dalrymple. "Laurence knows what he is about. At one time perhaps I might have agreed with you – we were inclined to think him high-flown and unpractical, he and those young Thurstons – but we've come to change our opinion. Laurence's lectures have been most successful, and he certainly makes good use of his talents."

"Are they always on literary subjects?" inquired Roma, languidly.

"No; he varies them," was the reply. "He gave a set on heat – or light, was it? He is really a wonderful man – seems at home on every subject. How he finds time to get together all his knowledge is what puzzles me!"

"Then, has he any regular occupation or profession?" asked Captain Chancellor.

"Oh dear, yes," answered his hostess. "He is in business – just like Henry and every one else here. He is an unusually talented man. Every one says he should have been in one of the learned professions, but he doesn't seem to think so. Whatever he had been, he could not have worked harder. Eugenia tells me he very often sits up till daylight, reading and writing. He makes the girls work too. They copy out his lectures, and look up references and all sorts of things. He has educated them almost like boys. It's a wonder it hasn't spoilt them. Yet they are simple, unaffected, nice girls. It is only a pity he shuts them up so."

"They will soon make up for lost time in that direction. Miss Eugenia, at least, seems to take very kindly to a little amusement when she gets a chance. Quite right too – don't you think so, Chancellor? She is very pretty, isn't she?" said good Mr Dalrymple.

Beauchamp felt uncertain if his host had any covert meaning in these questions. He felt a little annoyed, and inclined to ignore them; but a very slight smile, which crept over Roma's face, changed his intention.

"Pretty?" he repeated. "Yes, indeed she is; and her dancing is perfection."

The Dalrymples looked pleased; and when Roma soon after got up, saying she felt sleepy, and it must be getting late, Captain Chancellor hoped his last observation had to do with her sudden discovery of fatigue.

He saw her off next morning, as Mrs Dalrymple had proposed. They parted very amicably, for Miss Eyrecourt did not recur to the subject of her warning. The fog had cleared away, and Captain Chancellor felt in very good spirits. Ugly as Wareborough was, he began to think he could manage to exist there pretty comfortably for a few months.

"I must get Dalrymple to introduce me more definitely to the Laurences," he said to himself. "Mr Laurence's philanthropical tastes are not much in my way, certainly; but I like a well-educated man. And his daughter isn't the sort of girl one comes across every day – I saw that in an instant. Ah, yes, my dear Roma; I shall do very well, though your anxiety is most gratifying. Nor will it do you any harm to expend a little more of it upon me. I wonder if Mrs Dalrymple writes gossiping letters about what doesn't concern her, like most women? As things look now, I rather hope she does."

Volume One – Chapter Three. Sisters

All hearts in all places under the blessed light of day say it, each in its own language – why not in mine? – Hayward's *Translation of Faust*.

The short winter's day was already nearly over; though the fog had cleared off, and frost was evidently on the way, it was still dull and dreary. Eugenia Laurence sat on the rug as close to the fire as she could get, feeling unusually out of spirits. She could not tell what was the matter with her, she only felt that it was difficult to believe herself in the same world as that on which she had closed her eyes last night. She had fallen asleep in a bewildering haze of delicious excitement, with vague anticipations of a somehow equally delightful to-morrow; it seemed to her, that never before had she realised the full value of her life and youth, and timidly acknowledged beauty; her dreams had been filled with a new presence – a presence to which, even to herself, she shrank from giving a name; everything about her – past, present and future – seemed bathed in light and colour.

She had awakened with an indefinite feeling of expectancy, and had felt unreasonably disappointed when she found all the commonplace details of her little familiar world very much the same as usual – a good deal less agreeable than usual in point of fact, for she was more tired than a thorough-going young lady would have considered possible as the result of such very mild dissipation as Mrs Dalrymple's carpet dance, in consequence of which she slept three hours later than her wont – of itself a disturbing and depressing consciousness to a girl brought up to consider punctuality a cardinal virtue – and entered the dining-room only to find it deserted by its usual cheerful little breakfast party, and to be told by the servant, that "Miss Sydney" had been sent for early by the invalid aunt, and feared it would be afternoon before she could return home.

"How disappointing!" thought Eugenia, as she sat down to the solitary breakfast, she had little inclination to eat, "when I did so want to talk over last night with Sydney. I shall never go out anywhere without her again. I am not half as sensible as she is. How silly it is of me to feel so dull and unsettled this morning. I shall never want to go out if it makes me so silly. But oh, how I wish I could have it all over again to-night!"

Then she sat and dreamed for a few minutes – dreams which sent a smile and a blush over her pretty face. "Was it – could it be true?" she asked herself, "that he really thought her so pretty – so charming – as his tones and looks seemed to whisper?" She remembered every word he had said, she felt the very grasp of his hand as he bade her good-night. Then with a sharp revulsion came the remembrance that in all probability she would never see him again: he had said something about staying some little time in Wareborough – but what of that? Except for the chance of meeting him again at Mrs Dalrymple's – a very slight one, this was the very first time her father had allowed her to go to anything in the shape of a party at Barnwood Terrace – he might spend years in Wareborough without their ever seeing each other: her father seldom made new acquaintances – hardly ever invited any one to his house. And even supposing anything so extraordinary as that he should do so in this case, would it be desirable, would she wish it? She looked round with something almost approaching disgust at the substantial, but certainly faded and dingy furniture of the room; she glanced out of the window, the prospect was gloomy and unlovely – Wareborough smoke and its begriming influences visible in all directions. No, she confessed to herself, her home was far from an attractive one; all about her would too surely offend, and repel a fastidious man accustomed, as he evidently was, to very different surroundings from those of an ugly little manufacturing town, where money was all in all, culture and refinement comparatively of little or no account. Her own dress even – she got up and looked at herself for a minute or two in the old-fashioned oblong mirror over the mantelpiece – the reflection was not a flattering one; still it could not altogether destroy

the charm of the fresh young face, the eyes that could look so bright, though just now “a shadow lay” in them, the rich, soft chestnut brown hair. A little smile crept into the eyes and softened the curves of the mouth as she looked; perhaps her face really was rather nice, she had certainly never thought so much about it before – but her dress? What was wrong with it? It fitted well, its colour was unobtrusive and even pretty of its kind, the whole was perfectly suitable and becoming for a young girl of her age and position; only yesterday it had pleased her very well, but to-day it utterly failed to satisfy her vague, unreasonable aspirations. Poor Eugenia, the world began to look very unpromising and dreary again! She sat down and began to wish, or tried to fancy she wished, she had not gone to the Dalrymples’ the night before – had never had even this little peep of the beautiful, bewildering world outside her quiet humdrum middle-class home – the world in which all the women were graceful and charming, all the men high-bred and chivalrous, with irresistible eyes and sweet low voices like – “Captain Chancellor’s,” she was going on to say to herself, but stopped short suddenly.

Something – what she could not have exactly told – perhaps merely the matter-of-fact naming of a name – seemed to startle her a little. Her common sense – in which, after all, she was not deficient, though its suggestions were often overruled by the quickly-succeeding moods of her vehement, impressionable nature – came to the rescue, and told her plainly she was behaving like an extremely silly girl. “Here I am,” she said to herself, with considerable self-contempt, “here I am, wasting all this day – worse than wasting it, indeed.” And with an effort for which she deserved some credit, she set to work to think how best she could at the same time punish and cure her fit of folly.

“I know what I can do,” she decided. “I shall give the rest of the time to copying out those two old lectures of papa’s. They are very dry ones – at least, to me – and they are full of technicalities; so I must attend to them closely, or I shall make mistakes. It will please him too, for it was only yesterday he asked me to do them, and he won’t expect them so soon.”

It was pretty hard work. She got them done, however, before Sydney’s return. Then, feeling somewhat better pleased with herself, but still more depressed than she could account for (she had yet to learn how quickly, to a nature like hers, unaccustomed excitement does the work of physical fatigue), she sat down on the hearth-rug, cowering into the fire, to listen for her sister’s ring. The room was small and plainly furnished. Its bookshelves and globes and old cottage piano told their own story; yet, as Eugenia’s eyes glanced round it, noticing dreamily every little familiar detail: an ink-stain on the carpet – she remembered it for ever so many years – it had been caused by an inkstand overthrow, one Saturday afternoon that Frank Thurston was spending there; a penknife-cut on the wax-cloth of the table, which had drawn forth stern reprimand from kind “Mademoiselle,” and cost little Eugenia many tears; a picture on the wall – a French engraving of one of Scheffer’s earlier paintings, which had taken many a month’s joint pocket-money to obtain. (How well she remembered the day it was hung up!) As each well-known object in turn caught her glance, she owned to herself she had been very happy in that little old room. Would a day ever come on which she should wish herself back again in its safe, homely shelter? She could not tell what had put all these strange fancies in her head to-day. What was coming over her? It was too absurd to think that one short evening’s experience had changed her so. Oh, if only Sydney would come in! It seemed years since they had been talking together about what they should wear at Mrs Dalrymple’s, and yet it had been only yesterday morning. A ring at last – yes, it was the hall bell. Eugenia was darting forward, but a sudden thought stopped her. It might not, after all, be Sydney. It was just about the time a visitor – a stranger especially – would choose for a formal call. Could it be possible that her father – she had known him do odd, unexpected things of the kind sometimes – could he have asked Captain Chancellor to call? He was a much younger man than her father, and would not stand on ceremony in such a case; and she had seen them talking together, and shaking hands cordially at parting. It was just possible. The mere idea set her heart beating, and sent the blood rushing

furiously to her cheeks. She opened the school-room door cautiously, a very little, and stood with it in her hand while she watched the servant-maid's slow progress across the hall. The door opened at last. A man's voice – a gentleman's voice. Could it be he?

"Then, if Mr Laurence is not at home yet, can I see either of the young ladies?"

A momentary hesitation on the part of the servant – a quick, light step outside along the pavement – a pleased exclamation from the visitor. "Oh, Sydney, there you are! I was just asking if I could see you or your sister;" and all Eugenia's foolish hopes are crushed flat again. "He" was only Frank Thurston – stupid, uninteresting, every-day Frank Thurston: at no time, save for old habit and association, a special favourite of Miss Laurence's; peculiarly and irritatingly unwelcome just at present, when the one boon the girl had been craving all day – the having Sydney to herself – would be destroyed by his intrusion. How could they talk over Eugenia's adventures with that great boy standing by, listening to all they said, and putting in his censorious comments? – as if his being a newly-fledged curate gave him a right of judgment of things that in no way concerned him! Sydney, of course, might like it, and accept his opinions; but as for herself – in extreme disgust at the disappointment he had innocently caused her, and prophetic indignation at the remarks she felt sure the well-meaning young clergyman would make, Eugenia softly closed the school-room door, and retired to the rug again, in vain hopes of being left in peace till the visitor had departed. But no; such was not to be the case. The voices came nearer – Sydney's sweet, even, and cheerful as usual; Frank's, for him, sounding surely eager and excited. What could he be in a fuss about? In they came; Sydney's fair face glowing with her quick walk in the cold, and with pleasurable excitement.

"Oh, Eugenia dear, I thought I should never get away from poor aunt. She is so fidgety to-day! How lonely you must have been all day! I met Frank as I came in. What do you think he has come to tell us?"

He was in a fuss about something then. Eugenia rather enjoyed it. It was her turn for once to be cool and critical.

"You do look excited, Frank," she said, provokingly, returning, as she spoke, to the comfortable seat on the rug, from which she had risen to meet her sister. "What in the world is the matter? I thought fuss of every kind was against your principles."

"There are exceptions to every rule," said the young man, stiffly. "Not that I am in a fuss, as you call it, Eugenia; but if I were it would be quite excusable."

His tone brought a slight cloud over Sydney's face. The chronic, petty warfare between these two antagonistic spirits tried sorely her equanimity. Half unconsciously she turned towards her sister with an expression in her quiet blue eyes that struck home to Eugenia's good feeling.

"I don't mean to be teasing, Frank," she said, gently. "I really should like to know what your news is. It must be good, for Sydney and you both looked so beaming when you came in."

Eugenia seldom needed to try twice when she really wished to please or mollify; even the apparently accidental coupling of her sister's name with his did its work. Frank Thurston's tone was much more gracious as he proceeded to gratify her curiosity.

"Good news!" he repeated; "I should rather think it was good news. I have just heard from Gerald, Eugenia. He is home again – all but home again, at least. His letter was posted at Southampton by himself. He may be here any time now – sure to be in a few days."

"Gerald back again!" exclaimed Eugenia, with considerable surprise. "I had no idea there was any chance of his coming so soon. How delighted you will be to see him again, Frank."

She wished to be cordial, but her tone sounded slightly forced, and evidently did not satisfy the young clergyman. There seemed a little inquiry in his voice and manner as he replied —

"Of course I shall be. But not only I: I am sure your father, for one, will be glad to hear it. Gerald is one of the few men I know who is thoroughly liked and respected 'in his own country.' I am sure he will be heartily welcomed home again to Wareborough. You two used to be very fond of him in the old days. He didn't tease you as much as I did. Dear old fellow!"

“He was very good to Sydney and me – always. We shall all be delighted to see him again,” said Eugenia, rousing herself to speak as heartily as she saw was expected of her. “Dear me,” she went on, thoughtfully, “it is three years since he went away!”

“He will hardly know us again,” said Sydney. “I was scarcely fifteen then.”

“Yet you are less altered than Eugenia,” observed Mr Thurston.

It was true. The younger girl, though not quite as tall as her sister, might easily have been taken for the elder. She had reached her full height at an earlier age than Eugenia, her figure was rounder, her expression of face less changeable.

“Suppose we change characters – Sydney passing for me and I for her – when Gerald first sees us?” suggested Miss Laurence.

She spoke idly; she was not prepared for Frank’s hasty reply.

“No, indeed. I should not like it at all,” he exclaimed abruptly. Eugenia raised her head and looked at him; her eyes opened to their widest. He coloured a little. “I mean to say,” he went on, hurriedly and rather incoherently, “I mean – it would be nonsense. He could not mistake you, and I don’t like practical jokes – I thoroughly disapprove of them,” he had quite recovered himself by now. “They are objectionable in every way; they offend against both good feeling and good taste.”

Miss Laurence made no reply. She felt no spirit to-day to argue with Frank, dictatorial though he was, and she did not want to vex Sydney again. She only thought the curate a great bore, and wished he would go. Her silence proved her best ally, for, as no one appeared inclined to dispute his last dictum, Mr Thurston’s attention returned to other matters.

“I must go,” he said, drawing out a shabby silver watch – he was always intending to treat himself to a better one, but there was a good deal of distress in Wareborough this winter – “I have a confirmation class at half-past six, and three sick people to see before that. Oh, by-the-bye, Eugenia, how did your party go off last night?”

“I never know what people mean by things ‘going off,’” said Eugenia, rather superciliously. “If you mean to ask me if I enjoyed myself, that is quite another thing.”

Frank Thurston laughed. He always felt pleasantly good-humoured and “superior” when Miss Laurence’s feathers showed signs of becoming ruffled.

“I suppose I may infer from that that you *did* enjoy yourself,” he replied, amiably. “But I mustn’t stay to hear your adventures, even if they were in my line, which they are not likely to be. You must be anxious to narrate them to Sydney, however, so I must be off.”

He shook hands with both sisters quickly, and left them; but, somehow, Eugenia no longer felt eager to “talk it all over” with Sydney. As the door closed on their visitor, she strolled to the window and stood there without speaking for some minutes, looking out at the garden. Sydney, contrary to her usual habit, had seated herself – out-door wraps, muddy boots, and all – near the fire, and her sister’s silence surprised her.

“Did you *not* enjoy yourself last night, Eugenia?” she said at length, with some hesitation.

“I don’t know,” was the reply. The words were ungracious, but the tone wearied and dispirited.

“Is anything the matter?” asked Sydney again, after waiting to see if Eugenia had nothing more to say.

“Oh no – nothing. I am only cross. Don’t mind me, Sydney. I’ll tell you all there is to tell when I’m in a better humour. Oh, Sydney!” she broke off, abruptly, “how dreadfully ugly this garden is!” She was still staring out of the window. “I do hate this sort of half-town half-country garden. I wish you hated things too, sometimes, Sydney – it would be a comfort to me.”

“Would it?” said the younger girl, quietly. “I am not so sure of that.” But she got up from her seat as she spoke, and, crossing the room to her sister, stood beside her at the window. There seemed something soothing in her near presence. Eugenia’s face cleared a little.

Certainly the prospect was not an attractive one. A suburban garden is seldom satisfactory, and this one was no exception to the rule. There was about it none of that strange, touching charm of contrast, of unexpected restfulness, which affects one so curiously in some town gardens. It was too far out of the town for that, and even had it not been so, Wareborough, grim yet not venerable, was not the sort of place in which such an oasis could exist. Wareborough dirt was neither mould nor decay, but unavoidable nineteenth-century dirt, fresh from the factories and the tall chimneys. Wareborough noise was the noise, obtrusive and unmistakeable, of the workshop and the steam-engine – no muffled, mysterious roar: at no hour of day or night could Wareborough, distinct from its human element, inspire any but the most practical and prosaic sentiments; and Eugenia Laurence was of the nature and at the age to chafe and fret greatly at such surroundings. For she had not hitherto penetrated much below the surface of things: indignant as she would have been at the accusation, poetry and beauty were as yet known to her but in very conventional clothing. She had not yet learned to feel the beat of the universal “mighty heart,” nor been moved to tears by “the still, sad music of humanity.” And in such a mood as to-day’s, this unlovely garden caused her actual pain. Yet there was something to be said for the poor garden after all. It was praiseworthy even while almost provoking to see how very hard the stunted shrubs struggled for existence; a pitiful sort of consciousness seemed to pervade the whole of having known better days, of having in past years been pretty and flourishing, though now slowly but surely succumbing to the adverse influences of the ever-increasing building in the vicinity – the vast army of smuts, the year by year more heavily laden air.

“I wish,” said Eugenia, at length, “I wish we either lived quite in the middle of a great town – I shouldn’t mind if it were in the heart of the city even, in London, I mean – or quite, quite in the country. Up on the top of a hill or down in the depths of a valley, I don’t care which, provided it was out of sight and hearing of railways and omnibuses, and smoke and factories, and – and –”

“And shops?” suggested Sydney. “Shops and perhaps churches?”

“No, I like shops. At least, I like buying nice things. You know I do, Sydney – you are laughing at me,” reproachfully. “It isn’t nice of you when I am speaking seriously and want you to be sympathising. As for churches,” she went on, languidly, “I am not sure if I would rather be without them or not. It is one of the points I have not quite made up my mind upon yet. Don’t look so shocked child, I only said churches – I didn’t say clergymen; and of course, even up on the top of my hill there would be sure to be a church, with no music, and sermons an hour long.”

“Eugenia, what nonsense you do talk sometimes!” exclaimed Sydney, when her sister at last stopped to take breath. “I cannot understand how you, who are really so clever, can go on so. It doesn’t matter with me, of course, but a great many people wouldn’t like it at all – wouldn’t understand that you were in fun.”

“A great many people’ left the room ten minutes ago, my dear Sydney,” replied Eugenia, coolly. “Don’t distress yourself about me. We have each our special talents, you know; perhaps mine is talking nonsense. It is a great gift, but of course, like all great gifts, it requires cultivation.”

Sydney did not reply; she turned away, and moved slowly towards the door.

“I must go and take my things off,” she said, quietly.

“No, you mustn’t; at least, not till I let you,” exclaimed Eugenia. “Now, Sydney, don’t be tiresome. You are not to get cross; I’ve been quite cross enough for both. You should be glad to see I’ve talked myself into a good humour again. Come here, you crabbed little thing!” she pulled Sydney with her down into her old place in front of the fire; “and if you will be good and nice, I’ll tell you about last night. Oh, Sydney it was – I can’t tell you what it was – it was so delightful. I never thought anything in the world could be half so nice.”

She had flung herself down on the rug by her sister, and as she spoke she raised herself on her elbows, her head a little thrown back in her excitement, her bright, expressive eyes looking up

eagerly into Sydney's face. Sydney looked full of interest and inquiry; over her face, fair and soft and girlish as it was, there crept an expression of almost maternal anxiety.

"I am glad you enjoyed it so much," she said, sympathisingly. "Mrs Dalrymple was very kind, I suppose. Did you see that nice-looking Miss Eyrecourt again? Is she still there?"

"She was, but I think she was to leave to-day," said Eugenia. Then after a little pause she went on again – "Yes, she is handsome, certainly; but, Sydney, I don't think I like her. But never mind about her. Oh, Sydney, I did *so* enjoy it all."

"I am very glad," said the younger sister again; "but tell me, Eugenia, why did you enjoy it so much?"

It was very strange – now that she had Sydney all to herself comfortably – Sydney, as eager to hear, as ready to be sympathising as the most exacting narrator could demand, it seemed to Eugenia she had nothing to tell. At first the younger sister felt rather puzzled, but before long the mystery was explained – an accidental allusion to the hero of the evening by name, and Sydney understood the whole; understood it, young as she was, far better than Eugenia herself. The discovery by no means diminished her anxiety, the cause for which she, perhaps, a little exaggerated. She knew her sister's fitfulness and impressionability; she suspected, though but dimly, the unsounded depths beneath. Yet she made an almost unavoidable mistake in judging this vivid, complex, immature nature too much by her own. How could a girl of seventeen, wise though she might be for her years, have done otherwise?

She kept her suspicions to herself, her misgivings also at first, but she did not altogether succeed in concealing her gravity.

"What are you looking so gloomy about, Sydney?" said Eugenia.

"I don't quite know. I can't exactly say why I feel so – not gloomy, Eugenia, but anxious," she replied. "I am not sure that I like that Captain Chancellor, however handsome and charming he is. I don't think it was *quite* nice of him picking you out in that conspicuous way. It must have made people notice you."

"*That* would never trouble me," said Eugenia, loftily; but still the half-expressed doubt in her sister's words seemed to echo some hitherto unacknowledged instinct in herself. Sydney went on speaking —

"I have often felt a sort of vague dread of finding ourselves really grown-up, Eugenia. Papa *can't* enter into things as a mother could, though he is so kind and gentle. We seem to be thrown so on our own resources. I don't, of course, mean so much with regard to myself;" here a faint tinge of pink crept over her face; "I am wonderfully, unusually fortunate; but that does not make my anxiety for your happiness the less; I wish we had a mother, Eugenia."

"So do I," said the elder girl, wistfully. "Even if she had lived a few years with us it would have been different. But not even to be able to remember her! We can't expect papa to see that we are too much thrown upon ourselves, for he has never seen it otherwise. And, of course, Aunt Susan is less than no good. However, Sydney," she went on, in a different tone, "as far as regards this Captain Chancellor, whom, for some reason – I don't know what, I don't think you quite do yourself – you are so afraid of, you may set your mind at rest. I have been thinking very seriously to myself to-day. I thoroughly understand myself and the whole position of things, and I am very well able to take care of myself. I am not going to have my head turned so easily."

Sydney smiled, and shook her head.

"I hope not," she said. Eugenia grew more earnest.

"Don't look so unconvinced," she remonstrated. "Even supposing I were so contemptibly silly, do you think I couldn't stop in time – do you think I would let any one – even you – find it out? But, after all, what is more to the purpose, and will satisfy you better than all my assurances, the chances are very small that I shall ever meet this dangerous person again. So forget all about

him, Sydney, and I shall too. By-the-bye, how strange it will seem to have Gerald Thurston here again. I am glad for papa's sake."

"And for our own sakes too," said Sydney, with some indignation. "I think you are strangely ungrateful, Eugenia. Have you forgotten how very, very kind he was to us – to you especially? I know you cried bitterly when he went away."

"Did I? I was a child," said Eugenia, indifferently. But immediately her mood changed. "No, Sydney," she exclaimed, "it *is* ungrateful of me to speak like that; I do remember and I shall always like Gerald. But Frank provokes me into seeming uninterested by the fuss he makes about Gerald, as if such a piece of perfection never existed before. And you're nearly as bad yourself. Now, don't look dignified. I cannot help being contradictory sometimes. Kiss me, Sydney;" for by this time Sydney had risen and was really leaving the room, but stopped to kiss her sister as she was told. "That's a good child, and thank you for your advice, or warning, whichever it was, though I really don't need it as much as you think. I promise to forget all about Captain Chancellor as fast as I can. There now, won't that please you?"

The "forgetting all about him" was not to be done in a minute, she found, though she set to work at it vehemently enough; for the leaving anything alone, allowing a possible evil to die a natural death, as is not unfrequently the wisest policy, was a negative course quite opposed to Miss Laurence's principles. Constantly during the next few days she found herself speculating on the possibility of her meeting Captain Chancellor again, recalling his words, and looks, and tones; but these "follies" she did her best to discourage. Never had she been more active or energetic in her home duties, never more resolutely cheerful. Sydney watched her, wondered, and admired, but still could not feel quite as easy in her mind as before the talk in the old school-room. Eugenia, on the contrary, was eminently pleased with herself, and had thoroughly recovered her own respect. The task set before her she imagined to be all but achieved – the goal of perfect mastery of the impression she now believed to have been a very fleeting one, all but won.

One day at dinner, within a week of the foggy evening, her father turned towards her with a startling announcement.

"Oh, by-the-bye, Eugenia, I was forgetting to tell you. I expect two or three gentlemen to dine here the day after to-morrow. Mr Foulkes, the school-inspector, you know, Mr Payne, and Frank Thurston – there is just a chance of Gerald, but Frank hardly expects him so soon, he has been detained in town by business – and I asked Captain Chancellor, the Dalrymples' friend. He called on me yesterday at my office to get a little local information he required, and I was much pleased with him. He seems very intelligent, and superior to most young men of his standing. It must be dull for him here – very different from a place where there is a large garrison – but he says he likes it better."

Eugenia hardly heard her father's last words: she was conscious only of a rush of tumultuous, bewildering delight. What had become of her strong-mindedness, her self-control, all her grand resolutions? She felt that Sydney was purposely not looking at her; it was almost worse than if she had been. Never mind! Sydney soon would be able to judge for herself as to whether she were, after all, so very silly. In any case this was not of her doing – this un hoped-for fulfilment of her dreams. Dreams she had not encouraged, had kept down with a strong hand. It had been right to do so; might not this news of her father's be looked upon as her deserved reward? The idea was a pleasant one; it excused to herself her own extreme, unreasonable happiness.

The rest of the dinner appeared to her a very feast of the gods; she herself was radiant with happiness – it seemed to sparkle about her in a hundred different ways. Even her father was struck with her brightness and beauty. He held her back for a moment as she passed him when she and Sydney left the room, and kissed her fondly – an unusual thing for him to do, and it added to the girl's enchantment.

Only Sydney seemed in low spirits this evening, but she roused herself at Eugenia's first word of reproach, and wisely refrained, from the slightest renewal of her former warning. Eugenia's moods were seldom of long duration. A little cloud came over her sun even before they were joined by their father from the dining-room. Its cause was a very matter-of-fact one.

"Oh, Sydney!" she exclaimed, suddenly. "How can we manage to have a very nice dinner on Thursday? We must have everything good and well arranged, and there are some things cook never sends up nicely. And don't you think we might walk to Barton's nursery-gardens to-morrow and get some flowers? I am sure papa would like everything to look nice."

Sydney professed herself quite willing to speak to cook about exerting herself to the utmost – to walk any distance and in any direction Eugenia wished.

So they were very busy the next day, and on Thursday morning they went to Barton's and got the flowers, as many as they thought they might afford. There were a few camelias among them, and in arranging them for the table, Eugenia kept out two – a scarlet one for Sydney, a white one for herself. But at the last moment the white flower fell to pieces, which so distressed Sydney that Eugenia had difficulty in persuading her to allow her own one to remain in its nest among the plaits of her soft fair hair.

"I don't care for things you don't share, Eugenia. I couldn't be happy if you weren't," she said, with more earnestness than the occasion seemed to call for. And Eugenia laughed at her and called her a little goose, and looked as if she felt little fear that happiness and she would ever be far apart.

Volume One – Chapter Four. Sisters-in-Law

“Prithee, say thou – the damsel hath a dowry?”

“Nay, truly, not so. No diamonds hath she but those of her eyes, no pearls but those in her mouth, no gold but that hidden among her hair.”

Old Play.

The morning succeeding the day on which Captain Chancellor had seen Roma off for Brighton, found her comfortably seated at breakfast with her sister-in-law in the lodgings which Mrs Eyrecourt had engaged for the month of sea air, generally by a happy coincidence, found necessary in late autumn for “the children.” Their visit to Brighton was later than usual this year, having been delayed by home engagements; most of Mrs Eyrecourt’s friends had left, and she was beginning to feel anxious to follow their example.

“I am so glad to have you back again, Roma,” she said, as she watched her sister-in-law pouring out the coffee. “It has been dreadfully dull the last week or two, and so cold. I shall be glad to be at home again. How did you manage to keep yourself alive in Cumberland?”

“Lady Dervock keeps her house very warm,” replied Roma. “The coldness isn’t the worst part of it – it is so dreadfully dull and out-of-the way. She was very kind, as I told you, and did her best to entertain me. She invited all the neighbours she has, to come to dinner in turn, but there are not many, and they are mostly old and stupid. Still, it was gratifying in one sense. I have no objection to be considered the woman my dear godmamma delighteth to honour. It looks promising. But I couldn’t live there. Ah, no,” with a little shudder. “I shall certainly let Deepthorne if ever it belongs to me.”

Mrs Eyrecourt looked up quickly. “Lady Dervock may put a clause in her will obliging you to do so,” she said. “I have heard of such things. But, seriously, Roma, I do hope you are not allowing yourself to count upon anything of that kind? It would be very foolish.”

“Count upon it!” repeated Roma, with an air of the utmost superiority to any such folly. “Certainly not, my dear Gertrude. I never count upon anything. I amuse myself by a little harmless speculation upon possibilities; that’s all, I assure you.”

“And about Wareborough? How did you get on there? Mary Dalrymple was very kind, of course, and made a great deal of you and all that, I have no doubt. But oh, Roma, how unlucky it was about Beauchamp’s turning up there. I cannot tell you how provoked I was.”

A look of annoyance came over her face as she spoke, heightening for the time the slight resemblance she bore to her brother. It was not a striking resemblance. She was a small, fair woman, considerably less good-looking than one would have expected to find Beauchamp Chancellor’s sister. Her figure, of its kind, was good, and shown to advantage by her dress, which was always unexceptionable in make and material, delicately but not obtrusively suggestive of her early widowhood. She hardly looked her age, which was thirty-one, for her skin was of the fine smooth kind which is slow to wrinkle deeply; her eyes of the “innocent-blue” shade, her hair soft and abundant.

Roma did not at once reply; but looking up suddenly, Mrs Eyrecourt saw that her sister-in-law was smiling.

“What are you laughing at, Roma?” she asked, with some asperity. “It’s very strange that you should begin to laugh when I am speaking seriously.”

“I beg your pardon, Gertrude – I do, really,” said Roma, apologetically. “I didn’t mean to smile. I was only thinking how curiously like each other you and Beauchamp are when you are not pleased. Oh, he was *so* cross to me the other night at the Dalrymples’! Only to poor me! He was

more charming than ever to every one else. And it was all through trying to please you, Gertrude. I wouldn't dance with him on account of your letter, and whether you believe it of me or not, I do hate making myself disagreeable – even to Beauchamp.” There was a curious undertone of real feeling in her last words. Gertrude felt sorry for her, and showed it in her manner.

“I don't want you to make yourself disagreeable, Roma. I only want to save real disagreeables in the future. It is both of you I think of. Certainly this infatuation of Beauchamp's *is* most unlucky; and though you say you are so sure of yourself, still, you know, dear, he *is* very attractive, and – ”

“Of course he is,” interrupted Roma – “very attractive, and splendidly handsome, and everything that is likely to make any girl fall in love with him. But I am not any girl, Gertrude, and I never *could* fall in love with him. Oh, I do wish you would get that well into your little head! What a great deal of worry it would save you and me! I have a real liking and affection for Beauchamp – how could I not have it, when you remember how we have been thrown together? – but I know his faults and weaknesses as well as his good qualities. Oh, no! If ever I imagine myself falling in love with any one, it is with a very different sort of person. Not that I ever intend to do anything so silly; but that is beside the point. Now, Gertrude, are you convinced? By-the-bye, you should apologise for speaking of poor Beauchamp's amiable feelings as an ‘infatuation,’ shouldn't you?”

“I didn't mean it in that sense,” replied Mrs Eyrecourt, meekly. “I only meant – ”

“Yes, I know what you meant,” interrupted Roma again. “You meant that, as we are both penniless, or very nearly so, and, what is worse, both of us blessed with most luxurious tastes and a supreme contempt for economy, we couldn't do worse than set out on our travels through life together. Of course I quite agree with you. Even if I cared for Beauchamp – which I don't – I know we should be wretched. *I* couldn't stand it, and I am quite sure he couldn't. The age for that sort of thing is past long ago. Every sensible person must see that, though now and then, in weak moments, one has a sort of hazy regret for it, just as one regrets one's childish belief in fairy tales.” She sat silent for a minute or two, looking down absently, idly turning the spoon round and round in her empty cup. Then suddenly she spoke again. “It is very puzzling to know what is best to do,” she said, looking up. “Do you know, Gertrude, notwithstanding your repeated injunctions to me to try to snub Beauchamp without letting it come to a regular formal proposal, and all that, I really believe I should, on my own responsibility (it couldn't cause more uncomfortable feeling than the present state of things), have let it come to a crisis and be done with, but for another, a purely unselfish, reason.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mrs Eyrecourt, looking alarmed.

“Just this: I think it possible that his fancy – after all, I am not sure that it is anything but fancy, or whatever you call it – for me, may keep him from something still sillier.”

“What do you mean?” repeated Gertrude again. “You can't mean that Beauchamp would think of marrying any one still – ”

She hesitated.

“Still less desirable than I?” said Roma, coolly. “Yes – that is exactly what I do mean.”

“He would never be so foolish!” exclaimed her sister-in-law. “He is too alive to his own interests – too much a man of the world. And think what numberless flirtations he has had! Oh, no, Roma! he would never do anything foolish of that kind, I feel sure.”

“*I* don't,” said the younger lady. “He is a man of the world, he is alive to his own interests; but still, Gertrude, remember what we know as a fact – that at this moment, though it should ruin all his prospects for life, he is ready – more than ready, absurdly eager to marry me. So we mustn't count too much on his worldly wisdom, cool-headed and experienced in such matters as he seems. Certainly, contradiction may have had a good deal to do with the growth and continuance of his feelings for me. There is that to be considered; and knowing that, I was idiotic enough to try to warn him.”

“To warn him! Oh, Roma; do you mean that there is some one already that he would ever really think of seriously?” asked Mrs Eyrecourt, with great anxiety.

“Not exactly that – at least, not as yet,” replied Roma. “What I mean is, that if I succeeded, as I could easily, if it came to the point, in quite convincing him he must altogether give up thoughts of me, he would be very likely to do worse – or more foolishly, at least. I have no doubt the girl is as good as she is pretty – I was taken by her myself – but utterly, completely unsuited to him in every single respect. And for this reason, Gertrude, I was very civil to Beauchamp at the end: I let him come to the station to see me off – we parted most affectionately. I wanted to do away with the bad effects of my warning, which I feared had offended him deeply the night before. But after all, perhaps, the warning was rather encouraging to his vain hopes than otherwise. I do believe he thought I was jealous.”

She smiled at the recollection. “The worst of it is,” she went on, “if he thinks so, it will probably lead to his flirting all the more desperately, in hopes of my hearing of it. And then if it comes to my being driven into formally refusing him, what shall I do when he comes to us in February? He told me he is to have six weeks then. And he will go back to Wareborough again after that. Oh dear, oh dear, it is all dreadfully plain to my prophetic vision.”

“Roma, do be serious. You don’t mean to say – you can’t mean, that this girl, whoever she is, is a *Wareborough* girl. Wareborough!” with supreme contempt, “Why, we all thought your cousin, Mary Pevensey, throwing herself away when she married Henry Dalrymple, though he didn’t exactly belong to Wareborough, and was so rich. By-the-bye, this girl may be rich; not that that would reconcile me to it,” with a sigh.

“But it might somewhat modify the vehemence of your opposition,” said Roma, in her usual lazy, half-bantering tone, from which her unwonted earnestness had hitherto roused her. “No, Gertrude; you must not even apply that unction to your damask cheek – what am I saying? I never can remember those horrid little quotations we had to hunt up at school, and I am so sleepy with travelling all yesterday – lay that flattering unction to your soul, I mean. Beauchamp would say I was trying to make a female Dundreary of myself – a good thing he’s not here. No, she is not rich. I told you she was utterly unsuited to him in *every* way. I found out she wasn’t rich before Beauchamp ever saw her; something interested me in her, I don’t know what exactly, and I asked Mary about her.”

“Not rich, and Wareborough! Oh, no, Roma; I am quite satisfied. There is no fear in that quarter. It is only one of his incessant flirtations, I am sure.”

“If so, it will be all on his side. She isn’t the sort of girl to flirt. It would be all or nothing with her, I expect,” said Roma, oracularly.

“I can’t understand what makes you think so much of it,” said Mrs Eyrecourt, fretfully. “How often did you see them together?”

“Only once – that last evening at the Dalrymples! There was a carpet dance. Don’t you remember I wrote and told you they *would* ask Beauchamp, when they heard he was coming?” said Roma.

“Only once. You only saw them together once, and that at a dance, where Beauchamp was *sure* to flirt – especially as you snubbed him! Really, Roma, you are absurdly fanciful,” exclaimed Mrs Eyrecourt.

Roma took the remark in good part.

“Perhaps I am,” she replied; “but it isn’t generally a weakness of mine to be so. For all I know, the girl is engaged to someone else, or she and Beauchamp may never see each other again. I don’t say I have any grounds for what I fear. One gets impressions sometimes that one can’t account for.”

“Ah, yes, and I really think, dear, you are a little morbid on the subject. You have had so much worry about Beauchamp,” said Gertrude, consolingly. “But as you’ve told me so much, tell

me a little more. Is she such a very pretty girl? There must be something out of the common about her to have attracted you. Who is she?"

"She is a –" began Miss Eyrecourt, but a noise at the door interrupted her. There was a bang, then a succession of tiny raps, then a fumbling at the handle.

"That tiresome child!" exclaimed Mrs Eyrecourt. "Floss," in a higher key, "be quiet, do. Run up stairs – never mind her, Roma; go on with what you were saying." But the fumbling continued. Roma's nerves, perhaps, were not quite in train this morning; however that may have been, the noise was very irritating. She got up at last and opened the door.

"Come in, Floss," she said, good-humouredly, but her invitation was not accepted.

"I won't come into rooms when people call me a tiresome child at the door and I haven't been naughty," said the new-comer, with much dignity and scanty punctuation.

She was a very small person indeed. Of years she numbered five, in height and appearance she might easily have passed for three. She was hardly a pretty child, for her features, though small and delicate, were wanting in the rosebud freshness so charming in early childhood; her eyes, when one succeeded in penetrating to them through the tangle of wavy light hair that no combing and brushing could keep in its place, were peculiar in colour and expression. There was a queer greenish light in them as she looked up into Roma's face with a half-resentful, half-questioning gaze, standing there on the door-mat, her legs very wide apart, under one arm a very small kitten, under the other a very big doll – fond objects of her otherwise somewhat unappreciated devotion. She was a curious child, full of "touchy tempers and contrary ways," not easily cowed, rebellious and argumentative, and no one had as yet taken the trouble to understand her – to draw out the fund of unappropriated affection in her baby heart.

Roma got tired of holding the door open. "Come, Floss," she said, impatiently, "come in quickly."

Floss stared at her for another minute without speaking. Then, "No," she said deliberately. "I won't come in nor neither go out;" and as Roma turned away with a little laugh and a careless, "then stay where you are, Floss," the child shook with indignation and impotent resentment.

"She is really dreadful, Roma," said Mrs Eyrecourt, plaintively. "For some time past nurse tells me it is the same thing every day – out of one temper into another, from morning to night."

"She must take after her uncle," said Roma; "it is all contradiction. Don't bother yourself about her, Gertrude. I'll ring for nurse."

And the matter ended in the poor little culprit being carried off to the nursery in a whirlwind of misery and passion, reiterating as she went that mamma and aunt *made* her naughty when she had "comed down good."

"What has become of Quintin?" asked Roma, when they were again left in peace. "I haven't seen him this morning."

"He is spending the day with the Montmorris boys. He set off quite early, immediately after his breakfast, in great spirits, dear fellow," replied his mother. "How different he is from Floss, Roma!"

"Yes," answered Roma, "he is a nice boy. But it comes easily to people like Quintin to be good, Gertrude. He has everything in his favour – perfect health, a naturally easy temper, good looks, and every one inclined to think the best of him. Whereas poor little Flossy seems to have been always at war with the world. She is so delicate too. My conscience pricks me sometimes a little about that child."

"I don't see that there is anything more to be done for her. I trust to her growing out of these tempers in time," said Mrs Eyrecourt, philosophically – she was always philosophical about Floss when not in her immediate presence. "Speaking of the Montmorris boys, Roma, reminds me we are dining there to-day. That is to say – I accepted for myself certainly, and for you conditionally, the day before yesterday. You are not too tired to go?"

“Oh, no. I daresay I shall feel brisker by the evening,” replied Roma. “I suppose it isn’t anything very overwhelming, is it? for my wardrobe is getting rather dilapidated – I didn’t think I should have been so long without going home, you know. By-the-bye, Gertrude, are you not in deeper mourning than when I went away?”

“Yes, I forgot to tell you. Indeed, I hardly thought you would care to hear – the poor old man had been virtually dead for so long. It is for our old uncle – Beauchamp’s and my uncle I mean – Mr Chancellor of Halswood. He died a fortnight ago. It was hardly necessary to go into mourning; he was only my father’s uncle. But still he was the head of the family, and I thought it better.”

“Who succeeds him?” asked Roma. “Halswood is a nice place, isn’t it?”

“Very; but they have never kept it up properly,” said Mrs Eyrecourt. “At least, not for many years past. Old Uncle Chancellor has been half in his dotage for ever so long, but still he had sense enough to be jealous of his grandsons. There are two of them; the elder of course succeeds. He has sons; he has been married some years. We know very little of them now. My great uncle was angry with my father for selling Winsedge to your people, Roma; for though it was not entailed, and had come into the hands of a younger son, it had been a long, long time in the family. And that made a coolness they never got over.”

“Why did your father sell it?” inquired Roma. “It would have been very nice for you now if it had belonged to Beauchamp. Much nicer than for it to be Quin’s, who has got plenty already.”

“Yes,” replied Gertrude, slowly; “it would have been very nice, but it could not have been. My father was dreadfully in debt, and even selling Winsedge didn’t clear him. When he died it was all my poor mother could do to start Beauchamp in the army. Poor Beauchamp! it has been very hard upon him to be so restricted, with his tastes, and his looks, and his feelings altogether. He has never been extravagant, as young men go, but he hates poverty.” Roma laughed. “I don’t think he knows much about it, so far,” she said. “Wait till he is married with very little more than he has now – two or three hundred a year and his pay. It wouldn’t be long before love came flying out of *his* window. But, dear me,” starting up as a timepiece struck the hour, “how late it is! I must write to tell Mary Dalrymple of my safe arrival. What time is the Montmorris’s dinner hour? Seven; oh, I am glad of that; we shall get home early.”

The Montmorrises were quiet, steady-going, rather old-fashioned people, who lived in Brighton as evenly and monotonously as they would have lived in a country village. They were not by any means in Mrs Eyrecourt’s “set,” but they were very old friends of the Chancellor family – old Mr Montmorris, indeed, had been their lawyer for generations, and his firm, in which his eldest son now represented him, still managed the Halswood affairs. Once upon a time there had been a large family of young Montmorrises, but, after the manner of large families, they were now scattered far and wide – “some were married, some were dead,” two maiden sisters only, no longer youthful, still representing at home the boys and girls, the “children” of long ago. But their brother – Mr Christian Montmorris, the hope of the family and the head of the firm – had by this time a wife and large family of his own, none of whom had any objection to spending a few weeks now and then at “grandpapa’s,” on which occasions their father used to “run down” from town as many times a week as he could spare the time, “running up again” by the first train the next morning; for he was a shrewd, clever, energetic man, with some fingers to spare for other pies besides those it was his legitimate office to cook; with a clear head and a sharp eye for a wary venture or a profitable investment. Among other by-concerns of this kind, in which his name did not appear, he was interested in the affairs of the great Wareborough engineering company, in whose employ Gerald Thurston, the curate’s elder brother, had spent the last three years in India.

The sisters-in-law were received by their friends with open arms.

“So kind of you to come to us in this unceremonious way. So pleased to see Miss Eyrecourt again. We quite feared Mrs Eyrecourt would have left Brighton this year before you joined her,” said Miss Cecilia Montmorris. And then old Mrs Montmorris broke in with self-congratulations

that “Christy” had just arrived unexpectedly, and, what was more, had brought a friend with him, a gentleman just arrived from India. “We were quite pleased to see him, I assure you,” she continued, addressing Roma in particular, “for a new-comer always brings a little variety; and now that my boys are all away from us we seem to be falling out of fresh acquaintances sadly. Mr Montmorris and I are getting too old for any sort of gaiety,” she went on. “It is dull for Cecilia and Bessie sometimes, but they are good girls, very, and they know it won’t be always that they will have their father and me to care for. Besides, they have a little change now and then when Mrs Christian takes one of them up to town for a week or two. Bessie is going back with them next week. And you have been away up in the north, I hear, my dear? How did you like that? I used to know Cumberland in my young days.”

So she chattered on with the not unpleasing garrulity of gentle, kindly old age. She was a very sweet old lady, and Roma considered herself much more fortunate than her sister-in-law, who had been seized upon by Mrs Christian Montmorris to have poured into her sympathising ear an account of how dreadfully ill her youngest but one had been the last two days, cutting its eye-teeth. Gertrude smiled and said, “indeed,” and tried to look interested; but Roma laughed inwardly at her evident eagerness to change the conversation. Mrs Eyrecourt was not a person in whom the maternal instinct was in all directions fully developed: she loved her handsome little son as much as she could love anything; she honestly meant to do her best by Floss, but on certain points she was by no means an authority. It is, indeed, a question if both Quintin and Floss might not have passed through babyhood guiltless of cutting any teeth at all without her awaking from her happy unconsciousness of their failure in the performance of this important infantine obligation.

So poor Gertrude sat there, looking and feeling very much bored and rather indignant with Roma for the mischievous glances of pity she now and then bestowed upon her. At last, however, the door opened to admit the two gentlemen, whose late arrival had prolonged “the stupid quarter-of-an-hour,” and with, a sensation of relief Mrs Eyrecourt turned to reply to Mr Christian Montmorris’s greeting, feeling that she had had quite enough of his better-half for some time to come.

Volume One – Chapter Five. Mutual Friends

“Que serait la vie sans espérance? Qu’ils le disent ceux qui n’ont plus rien à espérer ici bas.”

L’Homme de Quarante Ans.

“Alas! alas! Hope is not prophecy.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting – quite against my habit, I assure you. But trains, you see, are worse than time and tide – they not only wait for no one, they very often make people wait for them,” said the lawyer, as he shook hands cordially with his mother’s guests. “And how is Master Quintin?” he inquired, turning again to Mrs Eyrecourt. “He got no cold bath this morning, I hope? I heard he was going skating with my youngsters.”

Gertrude was much more at home in skating and cricket than in babies and eye-teeth, and Quin was always a congenial subject; so seeing her released from her purgatory, Roma looked about in search of entertainment for herself. Old Mrs Montmorris was now busy talking to some one on her other side; it was the new arrival. Roma glanced up at him, he was standing besides his hostess listening attentively to her little soft, uninteresting remarks. He was quite a young man, at which Roma felt surprised; for with the curious impatience of suspense, with which a lively imagination, even on commonplace and not specially interesting details, takes precedence of knowledge, she had unconsciously pictured this friend of the lawyer’s as middle-aged, if not elderly. Her surprise made her examine him more particularly. He was not exactly what she was accustomed to consider good-looking, though tall and powerfully made without being awkward or clumsy. His hair, though dark, was distinctly brown, not black, and he somehow gave the impression of being naturally a fair-complexioned man, though at present so tanned by exposure to sun and air, that one could but guess at his normal colouring. From where she sat, Roma could not see much of his eyes: she was wondering if they were brown or blue – when a general movement, told her that dinner was announced.

Old Mr Montmorris toddled off with Gertrude on his arm, Roma was preparing to follow her with Mr Christian Montmorris, whom she saw bearing down in her direction, when his mother turned towards her with an apologetic little smile.

“You will excuse me, my dear, I am sure, for keeping my son to myself. I am very proud of having my boy’s arm into the dining-room when he is here – which is not so often as I should like.”

Miss Eyrecourt was perfectly resigned, and expressed her feelings to this effect in suitable language. She looked round for Miss Cecilia and Miss Bessie, with whom she supposed she was to bring up the rear in good-little-girl fashion, but this she found was by no means in accordance with the Montmorris ideas of etiquette.

“Miss Eyrecourt,” said the lawyer, recalling her truant attention, “will you allow me to introduce my friend Mr Thurston to you?”

So on Mr Thurston’s arm Miss Eyrecourt gracefully sailed away, feeling herself, to tell the truth, much smaller than she ever remembered to have felt herself before; he was so very tall and held himself so uprightly, giving her, at this first introduction, a general impression of unbendingness.

“What can I find to talk to him about?” she said to herself, for already her instinct had told her he was not one of the order of men with whom she was never at a loss for conversation. “He has only just returned from India. He won’t know anything about the regular set of things one begins with. And I can see he is the sort of man that looks down upon women as inferior creatures, and hasn’t tact or breeding enough to hide it. How I wish I could turn him into Beauchamp just till

dinner is over. How different it would be! Only the night before last, I was sitting beside him at the Dalrymples'! Poor Beauchamp – he is certainly very nice to talk to and laugh with!”

She gave a little sigh, quite unconscious that it was audible, till looking up, she found that Mr Thurston was observing her with, a slight smile on his face. She blushed – a weakness her four-and-twenty years were not often guilty of. “Hateful man!” she said to herself. Yet she could not help glancing at him again, unconcernedly as it were, just to show him she was above feeling annoyed by his rudeness. She found out what colour his eyes were now: they were grey, deep-set and penetrating. Suddenly he surprised her by beginning to speak.

“I am sorry I smiled just now,” he said – his voice was clear and decisive in tone – “I saw you did not like it. But I really could not help it. Your sigh was so very melancholy.”

“I hardly see that that is any excuse for your smiling,” she replied, rather stiffly.

“Perhaps not. I daresay it was quite inexcusable,” he said, quietly. “I fear I am a very uncivilised being altogether,” he went on. “For the last three years I have been living in an out-of-the-way part of India, where I seldom saw any Europeans but those immediately connected with my work, and you would hardly believe how strange it seems to me to be among cultivated, refined people again.”

“Then you are not in the army?” asked Miss Eyrecourt.

“Oh, no, I am an engineer; but only a civil one,” he replied. Roma looked as if she hardly understood him. “I don’t suppose you know much of my sort of work, or my part of the country,” he went on. “The south knows less of the north, in some ways, than the north of the south. It strikes one very forcibly when one returns home to little England, after being on the other side of the world. Still, it is natural you shouldn’t know much of the north; for though we come south for variety and recreation, we cannot expect you to find pleasure in visiting such places as the Black Country or the manufacturing districts.”

“You are taking a great deal for granted, I think,” said Roma, becoming interested. “And why should you not give credit for sometimes having other motives than pleasure to – ” “other classes besides your own,” she was going to have added, but the words struck her as ill-bred. “I mean to say,” she went on, choosing her words with difficulty, a very unusual state of things for her – “don’t you think it possible people – an idle person, like me, we will say – ever do anything or go anywhere with any other motive than pleasure or amusement? I think it a great mistake to take up those wholesale notions. As it happens, I *do* know something of the north – yes, of the north, in your sense of the word,” for she fancied he looked incredulous. “I only left Wareborough yesterday morning.” (“I needn’t tell *you* what took me up there,” she added to herself, smiling as she remembered how she had teased Beauchamp by her exaggerated account of the motives of her visit to Deepthorne).

“Wareborough!” exclaimed Mr Thurston. Roma was amused by his evident surprise. “How very odd! Wareborough is my home. I hope to be there again by Wednesday or Thursday. But that can’t interest you,” he went on, looking a little ashamed of his own eagerness; “and of course it isn’t really odd. People must be travelling between Wareborough and Brighton every day. One gets in the way of exaggerating trifles of the kind absurdly when one has lived some time so completely out of the world as I have done. It struck me as such a curious little coincidence, for I think you are the first lady I have had any conversation with since I landed. I came by long sea too, for the sake of an invalid friend, so my chances of re-civilising myself have been very small, so far.”

“It *was* an odd little coincidence,” replied Roma, good-humouredly. “But after all, you know,” she added, “the world is very small.”

He hardly caught the sense of her remark.

“In one sense, I suppose it is,” he said, slowly; “but in another – all, no, Miss Eyrecourt, you are fortunate if you have never felt how dreadfully big the world is! It used to seem a perfectly frightful way off from everything – everybody I cared for, out there sometimes.”

He spoke gravely, and with an introspective look in his eyes, as if reviewing past anxieties known only to himself.

“And then,” he went on in the same tone, “absence is absence, after all. One can never count surely on finding any one, or anything what one left them.”

“Nought looks the same save the nest we made,” said Roma, softly. “Don’t laugh at me, Mr Thurston – fray don’t,” she went on, hurriedly. “I am not the least sentimental. I never look at poetry, only sometimes little rubbishy bits I learnt as a child come into my head and ‘give me feelings,’ as I once heard a little girl say.”

“Then they are poetry to *you*,” said her companion, kindly – earnestly almost, and a look came into his eyes which she had not seen in them before – a look which gave Roma a silly passing feeling of envy of the woman on whom some day they might rest with an intensity of that gaze. “Let me see,” he went on, “I think I too remember learning those verses as a child —

“Gone are the heads of the silvery hair.
And the young that were have a brow of care.

“Isn’t that it? I don’t think I am likely to find those changes exactly. Perhaps, after all, what I most dread is not actual change – not change from what really *was* – but change from what I have gone on imagining to myself – hoping for, dreaming of. Ah, it would be very hard to bear!”

He seemed almost to have forgotten he was speaking aloud. Roma felt interested, though she could not altogether follow his train of thought.

“It looks rather like a case of the girl he left behind,” she said to herself, with her usual habit of making fun of anything approaching “sentiment,” and she thought it would be as well to give the conversation a turn. “Are you going to live at Wareborough now?” she inquired, “I wonder if you know my friends there!”

Here broke in the voice of Miss Bessie Montmorris, whose ears, from her seat on Mr Thurston’s other side, had caught the word Wareborough. “We had a governess once who afterwards went to live at Wareborough,” she remarked, with amusing irrelevancy; the truth was she thought Miss Eyrecourt had had quite her share of the good-looking stranger’s attention, and caught at the first straw to draw it to herself. “It was some years ago,” she continued.

“So I should suppose,” muttered Roma, who was not altogether pleased at Miss Bessie’s interruption, and felt delighted to see by a slight contraction of the muscles of Mr Thurston’s mouth, that her murmur had reached his ears.

“Her name,” went on Miss Bessie, calmly, “was Bérard – Mademoiselle Bérard. She was French. I remember all about her going to live at Wareborough, for she used to write to us regularly. I can tell you the name of the family she went to. She stayed there some years. I have the name and address written down somewhere, so I am sure I am right,” as if her hearers had been eagerly beseeching her for accurate information on the subject – “it was Laurence. There were two little girls, and no mother.”

Confirmed story-tellers, it is said, “sometimes speak the truth by mistake.” In the same way, exceedingly silly people do sometimes by a happy chance succeed in producing a sensation. Miss Bessie Montmorris, had she been gifted with clairvoyance, could not have hit upon a name as certain to affect vividly both her hearers as the one that had just passed her lips. For the interest of the morning’s conversation was still strong upon Roma, and Mr Thurston, for reasons best known to himself, was not in a frame of mind to hear quite unmoved this unexpected mention of his friends by name.

Both started, then each looked surprised at the other for doing so. Mr Thurston was the first to speak – it seemed to Miss Eyrecourt, that he was eager to conceal the slight momentary disturbance

of his equilibrium. His words were addressed to Miss Bessie, but Roma felt that she was intended to listen to them.

“I remember your friend, Mademoiselle Bérard, very well, Miss Montmorris,” he said. “And an excellent creature she is. The Laurences are old friends of mine. I thought them most fortunate in meeting with Mademoiselle Bérard, for of course motherless girls require extra care. Do you happen to know where she is now? Somewhere in the South of France was her home, I think, was it not?”

He engaged Miss Bessie in recalling how long it was since she had heard from “Mademoiselle,” what she had then said as to her plans, etc, and rather mischievously muddled the poor thing with questions exposing the extremely limited state of her acquaintance with French geography. So that in a few minutes Miss Bessie felt not indisposed to retire from the field and gave, subsequently, in the family council, as her opinion of “Christy’s friend,” that he was a “heavy, prosy young man, quite without conversation.”

When she was safely off his hands, engaged in an amicable sisterly discussion with Mrs Christian across the table as to the precise hour at which Mr Beamish, the family apothecary, had called this morning, and about what o’clock to-morrow it was thought probable the last eye-tooth would appear, Mr Thurston returned to Roma.

“After all,” he said, smiling. “I quite agree with you, the world is *very* small.” Roma laughed. “I certainly did not expect to have an instance of the truth of my quotation so very soon,” she said. “I met the Laurences when I was staying at Wareborough just now. I see you know them too.”

“Very well indeed,” he replied. “You will not wonder so much at my evident interest in what Miss Montmorris was talking about when I tell you that one of the Miss Laurences is engaged to be married to my brother – my only brother. He is a curate at Wareborough. Perhaps you met him too?”

Roma’s face expressed extreme surprise, and to any one well enough acquainted with her to read a little below the surface, it would have been plain, that at first, the surprise was not of a disagreeable kind.

“Miss Laurence engaged to your brother?” she repeated, without noticing the latter part of Mr Thurston’s speech. “How very strange! Somehow I feel as if I could hardly believe it – having seen her so lately, only the – night before last – ” she hesitated. After all, she must have been completely mistaken in her estimate of that girl’s character. She must be a flirt indeed, and not a very desirable sort of a flirt either, even according to Roma’s not very stringent notions on these subjects, to have looked up into any man’s face, be he never so charming, with those bright innocent smiles of hers, in the sort of way she had looked up into Beauchamp’s, knowing herself to be engaged to another. And a clergyman, too! Somehow the latter fact seemed to Roma to aggravate the unbecomingness of her dancing half the evening with him, and the still more marked “sitting out,” all of which Roma had explained by her extreme inexperience and youth, finding any other theory untenable in the presence of that buoyant girlish bearing, those lovely, honest, unsuspecting eyes. “I think I had fallen a little in love with her myself,” thought Roma. “But if she is really engaged, it is a great relief on Beauchamp’s account, and indirectly on my own. For Gertrude may be as incredulous as she likes – it is not often he will come across a girl like that, and more than half in love with him already, as, engaged or not engaged, I am *certain* she is.”

But when she had reached this point in her meditations, she became aware that Mr Thurston was looking at her in some perplexity, waiting for her to finish her uncompleted sentence. How could she finish it? She could not tell him what she was thinking, that his brother was very much to be pitied, and that Miss Laurence was by no means “what she seemed,” but that on all accounts, *her* own and Captain Chancellor’s included, the sooner they were married the better. “What a complication,” thought Roma, “and how odd that this complete stranger, this Mr Thurston, or rather his brother, should be mixed up in my private affairs in this roundabout way.” She felt a silly sort of inclination to burst out laughing: it made her feel nervous to see him sitting there looking at her,

waiting for her to speak. Why did he want so much to hear what she had to say? She could not understand the look of restrained eagerness in her face. She must say something.

"It is very absurd of me to feel as if Miss Laurence could not be engaged without its having been formally announced to me," she began. "I only saw her a few times, but I think she impressed me unusually. She is so *very* pretty, so – I don't know what to call it – like a bunch of wild flowers; a perfect embodiment of brightness and *young*-ness, and everything sweet and fresh and – ingenuous;" the last word came with a little halt. It was not lost on her companion; not a tone or a look of Miss Eyrecourt's but had been noted by him with breathless acuteness since Eugenia Laurence had become the subject of their conversation. But he refrained just yet from explaining her mistake to her. "It is rather curious that Mrs Dalrymple, my cousin, where I was staying – you know her, no doubt, she is a friend of the Laurence's – did not tell me of it, is it not?"

"I am not at all sure that she knows of the engagement as a fact," Mr Thurston replied, quietly. "It has been a sort of taken-for-granted thing among ourselves, but they were both so young, that it was agreed it should not be formally recognised for some time. Indeed, my return home is to be the signal for its actual announcement, as I stand *in loco parentis* to my brother, though not very many years his senior. It is no *secret*, though," with a smile, "most likely I should not have mentioned it had this been Wareborough instead of Brighton. But I fancied you must have thought my manner odd when the Laurences were mentioned. I must set you right on one point, however. From what you say of her I see you think it is the elder Miss Laurence I mean. It is not Eugenia, who is engaged to my brother, but the younger one – Sydney."

"Sydney, a younger sister? Oh yes, I remember; but I never happened to see her. She was away from home nearly all the week I was there. But, dear me, she must be a perfect child. Eugenia doesn't look eighteen," exclaimed Miss Eyrecourt.

"Sydney is almost that. Eugenia has always looked younger than her age. It was by that I recognised her – in your description, I mean."

He spoke rather confusedly, and his own slight embarrassment prevented his noticing the curious mingling of expressions on his companion's face. She did not know if she was glad or sorry to find herself mistaken.

"So I may reinstate Eugenia in my good opinion, and fall in love with her again if I choose," she reflected. "And Beauchamp may do so too, unfortunately, without clashing with the curate; but I am not by any means sure that it would not be clashing with the curate's brother."

She looked up again at Mr Thurston as the thought struck her definitely for the first time. Her wits were quick, her instinct quicker. Why should he have so instantly discovered it was Eugenia she was thinking of? That was a lame excuse he had given of her reference to the girl's extreme youth. Sydney was still younger. Ah, no! her words had been tinged with the charm she had herself felt the influence of in Eugenia; and he, lover-like, had forthwith appropriated the tribute of admiration as his lady-love's, and no one else's! Was she – would she be his lady-love? How would it all end? Roma fell into a reverie, which lasted till she found herself back in the drawing-room again, listening to old Mrs Montmorris's platitudes, and young Mrs Montmorris's pitter-patter conversation till she could almost have fancied the last hour was a dream.

After a while they asked her to sing. She was not sorry to do anything to get over the time till the gentlemen joined them again, for four female Montmorrises without an idea among them were not entertaining. And singing was a pleasure to Roma. It cost her no effort; her voice was sound and true and suggestive, and so well trained that it sounded perfectly natural. She had sung two songs, and was half-way through a third, when she heard the door open and the gentlemen enter. "Hush!" said Mrs Christian. "Hush!" repeated Miss Bessie and Miss Cecilia, and the two Messrs Montmorris obediently seated themselves with audibly elaborate endeavours at noiselessness till the song should be over. Roma felt more than half inclined to stop, and was lifting her hands from the piano with this intention, when a voice beside her whispering, "Go on, please," made her change

her mind. It was Mr Thurston. "How could such a great tall creature as he have come across the room so quietly?" thought Miss Eyrecourt to herself; and then she became suddenly alive to the very sentimental nature of the ballad she was singing. It was new to her to feel the least shy or self-conscious; she had sung it hundreds of times before, often with Beauchamp standing behind her chair, but the meaning of the words had never before come home to her as now. There was no help for it, however; she must go through with it now; but she wished Mr Thurston would go over to the sofa and talk to Miss Cecilia. She came to the fourth verse —

The time and all so fairy sweet,
That at each word we did say,
I felt the time for love so meet
That love I gave away.

She caught sight of Mr Thurston's face. It was very grave. Was he thinking of Eugenia? Roma resolved she would never sing a love song again. She got to the last verse: —

We take on trust, forsooth we must,
And reckon as we see;
But oh, my love, if false thou prove,
What reck's all else to me?

"Thank you," said Mr Thurston, and his words were echoed from all parts of the room. "I don't think I ever heard that song before," he observed, when the clamour of thanks had subsided again.

"I don't fancy you ever did," replied Roma. "I have only got it in manuscript. It was set to music by a friend of Be — my — my —" She stopped. Mr Thurston was looking at her curiously. For no reason that she could give to herself she felt her cheeks suddenly blushing crimson. What had come over her to-night? Never in all her life did she remember having been so absurdly silly. She made a great effort. "I always tumble over Captain Chancellor's connexion with me," she said, boldly; "it is such an indescribable one. He is my sister-in-law's brother. By the way, Mr Thurston, he is at Wareborough just now — stationed there; you may meet him."

"I shall certainly remember your mention of him if I do," said Mr Thurston, courteously. Then he recurred to the subject of the song. "It is very pretty, both words and music, and it is a great treat to me to hear such singing as yours, Miss Eyrecourt."

"It is the only thing I can do. I am very idle and useless," she said, rather sadly.

"Your one talent? I don't know about that," he replied. "I should say you could do a great many things well if you liked to try. Perhaps it is the thing you best like doing? We are often apt to consider that the only thing we *can* do."

"Perhaps. I daresay you are right," her voice was more subdued than usual. "I suppose there is no law forcing certain human beings to be drones."

"Or butterflies?" suggested Mr Thurston. "Well, or butterflies," she continued, with a smile, "whether they will or not. But," with a little hesitation, and a glance round to make sure that Gertrude was not within hearing, "when one has no special duties, no very near ties — however kind one's friends may be — it is a little difficult, isn't it, to be anything better?"

"Not a little — *very*," he said, kindly, looking sorry for her. "But it may not always be so," in a lower tone.

"That is thanks to my idiotic blush when I mentioned Beauchamp," thought Roma. She felt annoyed, and, rising from her seat, stood by the piano turning over the loose music lying about,

without speaking. For a moment Mr Thurston watched her silently, his face had a perplexed look as if he were endeavouring to make up his mind about something.

“Miss Eyrecourt,” he said at last. “Will you do me a little favour? Will you tell me something I want to know, and not think it odd of me to ask it?”

“If I can, I will,” she answered. “What is it?”

“I want you to tell me,” he said, speaking clearly and unhesitatingly now, “I want you to tell me why it was so much easier for you to believe the fact of my brother’s engagement to the younger Miss Laurence than to the elder.”

In her embarrassment, Roma gave a foolish answer —

“You forget,” she said, “that I don’t know the younger sister. It is easy to accept anything one is told about a perfect stranger, though I did feel surprised. She is so young.”

“Surprised perhaps, but nothing more?” he persisted. “It is just what you say – you know nothing of the one sister, but you do know something of the other; something which made it difficult for you to credit what you thought I told you of *her*. It is that something I want you to tell me. You don’t know what a service you may be doing me.”

“But I can’t tell you,” said Roma, becoming more and more uncomfortable. “And I don’t think I would if I could. It makes me feel like a spy.”

Just then her eye caught the last words of the song she had been singing, lying on the piano beside her!

But oh, *my* love, if false thou prove!

Mr Thurston’s glance followed hers. He read the line too.

“You don’t understand me,” he said, not resenting her hasty accusation. “It is nothing of that kind. One can’t talk of ‘false,’ when there has been no sort of promise claimed or given, directly or indirectly. I shall have no one but myself to thank for it, if it is all over. Only I think I should be much better – less likely to make a fool of myself, in short,” with a smile, “if I were not quite unprepared. That is why I want you to tell me what was in your mind. I know it is a very odd thing to ask, but our whole conversation has been odd. Just think; what have I not told you or allowed you to infer, and two hours ago I had never heard your name?”

While he was speaking, Roma had been collecting her wits. “Mr Thurston,” she said gravely, “I cannot tell you anything. There are passing impressions and fancies which take a false substance and form from merely putting them into words. Truly, I have nothing it would be fair – to yourself, I mean – to tell you *her*,” decision was strengthened by the recollection of Gertrude’s ridicule of her “absurd fancifulness” this very morning. “I can only say,” with a smile, “that I don’t agree with my song. There is no need for ‘taking on trust.’ Go and see for yourself. If you are disappointed, I pity you with all my heart, but if you are deceived in any way it will be your own fault, not *hers*. She is candour itself. Still, don’t be too easily discouraged. I wish you well.”

“Thank you,” he said, for he saw she was thoroughly determined to say no more, and they both moved away to other parts of the room.

Nothing more passed between them except a word or two when they were saying good-night. “We may meet again some day, Miss Eyrecourt – at Wareborough. Perhaps,” said Mr Thurston.

“Perhaps,” said Roma, “but ‘some day’ is a wide word.”

“Not always,” he replied, and that was all. “You seemed to get on unusually well with that friend of Christian Montmorris’s, Roma,” said Gertrude, when they were shut up together in the carriage on their way home. Her tone was half satisfied and inquisitive: she evidently had not made up her mind if her sister-in-law should be scolded or not. Roma had been debating how much of her conversation with Mr Thurston it would be well to retail to Mrs Eyrecourt, but something in Gertrude’s remark jarred upon her, and she instantly resolved to tell her nothing.

“Did I?” she said, indifferently. “Well, there was no one else to get on with; and he had just come from India, so he was rather more amusing than the Montmorrises.”

“Is he going back again immediately?” asked Mrs Eyrecourt, but she never waited for the answer. A new idea struck her. “Oh, by-the-bye, Roma,” she exclaimed. “Isn’t it odd – just when we were talking about the Halswood Chancellors this morning – old Mr Montmorris tells me the second son, that is to say rather, the second *grandson*, died last year. Isn’t it odd we never heard of it? He seems to have a very high opinion of the new head of the family – Herbert Chancellor; he says Halswood will be a very different place now. The income has increased amazingly; old Uncle Chancellor spent so little; and Herbert Chancellor’s wife has a large fortune too, he tells me. Fancy, Roma, their eldest child, a girl, is eighteen. Wouldn’t she be nice for Beauchamp?”

“Very,” replied Roma, satirically. “She’s got money – that’s all that needs to be considered.”

“You shouldn’t speak so, Roma. As if *I* would ever put money before other things – goodness and suitableness and all that,” said Gertrude, in an injured tone. “You’re in one of your queer humours to-night, I see. But I daresay you’re very tired, poor child! and it was very good-natured of you to come to the Montmorrises’ with me.”

Volume One – Chapter Six. Gerald's Home-Coming

Fairer than stars were the roses,
Faint was the fragrance and rare;
Not any flower in the garden
Could with those roses compare.

But another had taken delight
In colour and perfume rare.
And another hand had gathered
My roses beyond compare.

Wild Roses.

It was late in the evening when Gerald Thurston at last found himself again at Wareborough. He had written to Frank to expect him by a certain train, or, failing that, not till the following day; but after all he found himself too late to leave town at the appointed hour, and only just in time to catch the afternoon express. He hesitated at first about remaining where he was another night. It would be a disappointment to his brother not to meet him at the station; but in the end, the temptation of reaching a few hours sooner the place containing everything and everybody dearest to him on earth – to him, ugly and repellent though it might be to a stranger, emphatically *home*– proved too strong. And thus it came to pass that he reached his destination pretty late in the evening, and that no familiar figure standing on the station platform in eager anticipation met his eyes, as, in a sort of vague hope that “Frank or some one” might have thought it worth while to see the express come in, he stretched his head out of the carriage window, when the slackening speed and drearily-prolonged whistle told him he had reached his journey's end. He had not expected any one. It was entirely his own fault, he repeated to himself so positively, as to suggest some real though unrecognised and perhaps unreasonable disappointment. It seemed in every sense a cold welcome, and he felt glad to get away from the dingy station, where even the porters were strangers to him, out into the sloppy streets, for now every turn of the cab wheels was taking him nearer home. It was raining heavily, and was very cold. It had been raining heavily and had been bitterly cold too, he remembered, when he had left Wareborough at the same season three years ago.

“It all looks exactly the same,” he thought to himself, as he glanced at the gas-lighted shops, the muddy pavements, the passers-by hurrying along as if eager to get out of the rain. “For all the change I see, it might be the very evening I went away, and my three years in India a dream.”

He had left the bulk of his luggage at the station, and drove straight to the little house his brother and he had called home since their parents' death, where, with the help of an old servant who had once been their nurse, they had kept together the most valued of their household gods, and where Gerald had for long lived on the plainest fare, and denied himself every luxury, that Frank's university career might not come to an untimely close. All that was over now, however; brighter days had come: Frank had fulfilled Gerald's best hopes, and Gerald himself was now, comparatively speaking, a rich man. He had seen the worst of the material part of the struggle; he

had made his way some distance up the hill now, he told himself. He might pause and take breath, might allow himself to dream about a future he had worked hard for, the destruction of which, though he might strive to bear it manfully, would be no passing disappointment, would, it seemed to him, take all the light out of his life.

He was lost in a reverie when the cab stopped. Another little chill fell upon him, when the opening door showed, not Dorothy's familiar face, all aflame with eager anxiety to welcome her boy, but that of a total stranger. A freezingly proper maiden of mature years, who inquired in suspicious tones, eyeing with dissatisfaction the carpet bag he held in his hand, his only visible luggage, "if he were Mr Thurston's brother, for if so there was a note for him on the dining-room chimbley-piece." And into the dining-room she followed him, though evidently reassured by his acquaintance with the arrangements of the house, and stood by him in an uncomfortably uncertain uninterested manner, as unlike Dorothy's hospitable heartiness as darkness is to light, while he read Frank's note.

"I have been twice to the station," it said; "for as you named 4:50 as 'the latest,' I thought I had better meet the 3:55 also. You say so positively you will not come by a later, that I think I must quite give you up. I am dining at the Laurences'. There was a particular reason for it, so I can't get off without a better excuse than the mere ghost of a chance that you may still come to-night. Still, I leave this note, in the remote possibility of your doing so, to ask you, if you do come, to follow me. They will be delighted to see you, and it would never do for your first evening to be spent alone. Be sure you make Martha get you something. I wish we had Dorothy back."

Gerald remembered about Dorothy now. She had married a few months before. Of course; how stupid to have forgotten it! He had actually a wedding present for her in his trunk.

"No, thank you – nothing," he replied to Martha's inquiries as to what he would have, delivered in a tone suggestive of latent resentment of untimely meals. "Nothing except a glass of sherry – you can get me that, I suppose – and a biscuit; and stay – I shall want a cab in – yes, in ten minutes. Is the boy in? – you have a boy, I suppose? In ten minutes, remember;" for Martha's muttered reply that she "would see" was not very promising.

She was as good as, or rather better than, her words. Within the prescribed time the cab was at the door, and Gerald ready (for a postscript to Frank's note had told him "not to trouble about dressing. It would be too late if he stopped to unpack, and there were only to be one or two gentlemen at the Laurences'"), and rattling off again through the plashing streets, along the muddy road leading to the suburb where Mr Laurence lived. It was not a long drive, barely a mile, but to Gerald it seemed hours till he at last found himself standing outside the familiar door, the rain beating down steadily on his umbrella. The servant who opened here was also a stranger to him, and evidently Frank had forgotten to mention his brother's possible appearance, for she stood irresolute, at a loss to account for his unseasonable visit. It was uncomfortable, and for the first time Gerald began to get impatient at this succession of small rebuffs, individually of no-moment, but, all together, sufficient to lower the temperature of his eager hopes and anticipations. A sort of reaction began to set in; for a minute or two he felt inclined not to reply to the servant's inquiry as to whether he wished to see her master, but to turn away and walk home again through the rain – to Martha's disgust, no doubt, – and never let Frank know he had obeyed his injunctions. Then he laughed at himself for even momentarily contemplating conduct which, had he been a boy again, and Dorothy there to give her opinion, she would certainly have described as "taking the pet," and mustering his good spirits afresh, he inquired if Mr Frank Thurston were not dining with Mr Laurence.

"Mr Thurston is here to-night – Mr Thurston the clergyman," replied the young woman, with more alacrity, imagining evidently that this call was on Frank *ex officio*. "He is still in the dining-room with the other gentlemen; but if it is anything very particular, I can tell him he is wanted at once; or if not, perhaps you will wait a few minutes till he leaves the dining-room."

“Yes, that will be better. Do not disturb him till they come out. I am Mr Fra – Mr Thurston’s brother,” whereupon the damsel became all eagerness and civility – she was young and nice-looking, in no wise resembling the forbidding-looking Martha; “but I would rather you did not say who I am; just tell him he is wanted when he comes out. Where can I wait? In here?” She opened the door of the school-room. “Ah, yes, that will do.”

A chain of small coincidences seemed to connect Gerald’s return with his departure three years ago; trifling commonplace coincidences which, in a less highly-wrought state of feeling, he would probably not have observed, subtly preparing him, nevertheless, for sharper perception of the changes he had not yet owned to himself that he dreaded. For the least material natures are yet the most vividly impressed by their sensible surroundings, and a background of outward similarity throws out in strong relief immaterial differences and variations we should otherwise have been slower to realise, or, where the interest is but superficial, never perhaps have been conscious of at all.

A curious sensation came over Gerald as he entered the old school-room. Here it was that three years before he had seen the last of the Laurence sisters; it had been almost the same hour of the evening, for nine o’clock, he remembered, had struck while they were all standing there, and Frank had hurried him off, fearing he would lose his train. They had driven to the station by a very circuitous route, that his oldest friends might have his latest good-bye. And Sydney had cried, he remembered, when he kissed her, and Eugenia had grown pale when he shook hands with *her*, and mademoiselle had stood by with tears in her kind black French eyes, and three years had seemed to them all a very long look-out indeed! And now they were over; the winter of banishment and separation was past. Were the flowers about to spring for Gerald? was the singing of birds henceforth to sound through his life? was the fulfilment of his brightest hopes at hand?

Something was at hand. The door had been left slightly ajar, and his ear caught the approaching sounds of a slight rustle along the passage, and of a young, happy voice softly humming a tune. It came nearer and nearer. A sudden impulse caused Gerald to step back behind the doorway; the gas-light was low in the room: it was easy to remain in shadow.

She came in quickly, gave a slight exclamation of impatience at the insufficient light, then came forward into the middle of the room and stood on tiptoe, one arm stretched up as far it could reach to turn on the gas. She succeeded rather beyond her intentions, the light blazed out to the full, illuminating brilliantly her upraised face and whole figure, as she remained for a few moments in the same attitude, uncertain evidently if the flame was too high for safety. Was she changed? No, not changed, improved only, developed, young as she looked, from mere girlhood into early womanhood, of a loveliness surpassing even his high expectations. She was dressed in white, with no colour save somewhere a spot of bright rose; a knot of ribbon or a flower, he did not notice which, on the front of her dress. That was Eugenia all over; he remembered her love of brilliant contrast; however neutral in tint and unobtrusive the rest of her dress, there was always sure to be a dash of bright rich colour somewhere, in her hair, at her collar, round her wrists. Outwardly she was the same Eugenia, grown marvellously beautiful, but the same. And one look into her eyes would, he fancied, tell him all he so longed to know – that in spirit and heart she was still the same transparent, guileless, sensitive creature he had left, innocent and unsuspecting as a child, yet brightly intelligent, vividly imaginative. A rare creature, yet full of faults and inconsistencies; whose nature, however, he had studied closely, and knew well, and knowing it, asked no greater privilege than to take it into his own keeping, through life to guard it from all rude contact that might sully its purity or stunt its rich promise. He had left her, as he told Roma, free as air, bound by no shadow of a tie; yet there were times when he felt it almost impossible to believe that she had not guessed his secret, guessed it and – hope whispered – not resented it, and even, perhaps, in her vague girlish way looked forward to a day when it should no longer be a secret, when this strong deep love of his should receive its reward.

These were the dreams he had been living in, for three years; these were the hopes that had kept up his courage through much hard and toilsome work – dreams and hopes whose destruction would, indeed, be very hard to bear. But he felt no misgivings now; the mere sight of Eugenia, the delight of her near presence, seemed to have dispelled them like mists. He felt reluctant to break the sort of spell that had come over him since she entered the room; he stood in perfect silence, watching her, as if bewitched. She moved away in a minute or two, satisfied seemingly that the light might remain as it was, and crossed the room to a low cupboard at the other side from where Gerald stood. She pulled out a pile of loose music, and began searching among it for some missing piece. Mr Thurston thought it time to let her know he was there: she might be startled if she saw him suddenly when leaving the room. He came forward into the full light, giving a chair an obtrusively noisy push to attract her attention. She looked up, startled for an instant, but before she had time to realise her fear, he spoke.

“Eugenia.” That was all he said.

The colour came rushing over her face, for the momentary start had turned it somewhat pale. Whether her first sensation was pleasure or annoyance, it was impossible to say. That it was one or other Gerald felt certain, for that this crisis, to which he had looked forward so long and so anxiously, could appear to Eugenia an event of very trifling importance, it would have been impossible for him to believe. It took all his self-control to refrain from any expression of the strong emotion with which his whole being was filled; and he not unnaturally, therefore, attributed some degree of emotion, agreeable or the reverse, to the other chief actor in the little drama whose scenes he had so often rehearsed in imagination. He waited eagerly for her to speak.

“Gerald!” she exclaimed. “How you startled me! What in the world did you come in; in this queer way, for? We quite gave you up when you were not in time for dinner. Come into the drawing-room, or stay, I’ll send for Frank, if you would rather see him alone first. He will be so delighted.”

She was running away, but he called her back. Her last words were cordial enough, though her first had been undoubtedly cross. Few people like being startled; it sets them at a disadvantage, and in a more or less ludicrous position. Eugenia had a peculiar dislike to it; she could not bear to be thought nervous or wanting in self-control, and she felt conscious that her cheeks had betrayed her momentary panic, and this added to her annoyance. She had been very desirous of meeting Gerald Thurston heartily when he came, she wanted to please Sydney and Frank; she had felt so happy the last few days that she wanted to please everybody. It was just a little awkward Gerald’s arriving in this unexpected way when she was preoccupied and perhaps a little excited about other things, but after all it wouldn’t matter. Sydney and Frank would soon make him feel himself at home. So, her momentary annoyance past, she turned back, and willingly enough, when he called to her to stop.

“Won’t you even shake hands with me, Eugenia?” he said.

There was a strange change in his voice from the bright, eager tone in which he had first called her by her name, but she was too self-absorbed to perceive it.

“Of course I will,” she replied, heartily, holding out her hand. “I beg your pardon for forgetting it. But you really did startle me a good deal, Gerald,” she added, looking up with a pretty little air of mingled apology and reproach.

“Did I?” he said, gently. “I am very sorry.”

He had taken her hand and held it, and, anxious now to welcome him kindly, Eugenia did not at once withdraw it.

“Yes, indeed,” she said. “How was I to know you were not a housebreaker, standing there, you huge person. Fancy meeting you again for the first time in such a queer way.”

She was now full of brightness and merriment. So like, so very like, the Eugenia he had left, that he began to recover from the first thrill of disappointment, to think that perhaps there had been no real cause for it. This gay, laughing manner was not exactly what he had imagined hers would be when they first met again; but still it was natural and unaffected, and she had always had

rather a horror of “scenes.” And, after all, if he found her as he had left her, should he not feel satisfied? He had had no grounds for suspecting that she in the least returned his feelings, or was even aware of their existence. He was quite patient enough to begin at the beginning: to teach her by gentle degrees to love him; to serve, if need be, the old world seven years’ service for her sake, content with slow progress and small signs of her growing favour. There was but one dread which paralysed him altogether. What if he were too late?

He let go her hand. He was anxious in no way to ruffle the extreme sensitiveness he knew so well.

“You don’t know how I have looked forward to coming home again all these long years, Eugenia.”

Her sympathy was touched. “Poor Gerald,” she said, and for the first time she looked straight into his face, and their eyes met. He had thought he could read so much in those eyes; they were less easily fathomed than he had imagined.

“Eugenia,” he said, very gravely – she could not imagine what he was going to say – “you have grown very beautiful.”

To his surprise, she neither blushed nor looked down. She smiled up in his face, a bright, happy smile that seemed to flood over as with sunshine her lovely face, to add brilliance even to the rich wavy chestnut hair. “I am so glad you think so,” she said, softly. “It makes it more possible to understand *his* thinking so,” was the unuttered reflection that explained her curious speech.

Gerald had no key to her thoughts, therefore the strangeness of her reply struck him sharply, for he knew her to be incapable of small vanity or self-conceit. He looked at her again; she was still smiling; long ago her smile had seemed to him one of her greatest charms; it was so sweet and tender as well as bright, so wonderfully fresh and youthful, and with a certain dauntlessness about it – a defiance of failure and trouble, a fearless, childlike trustfulness. All this Gerald used to fancy he could read in Eugenia’s smile; could he do so still? He could not tell, he turned away. He would not own to himself that his instinct had discovered a change; a dreaminess, a strange wistfulness had come over the dear face as it smiled up at him – a subtle indescribable shadow of alteration.

“Perhaps it would be as well to tell Frank I am here,” said Mr Thurston, after a moment’s silence. “I should just like to shake hands with him in here, and then, if you will excuse my clothes,” he glanced down at his grey tweed travelling-suit rather doubtfully – the contrast between it and Eugenia’s delicate white evening dress striking him disagreeably, “I might go into the drawing-room for a few minutes to see your father and Sydney. You have some friends with you, though, have you not?”

“Only two or three gentlemen; never mind your clothes,” said Eugenia, lightly; and then she went to send a message to Frank, still in the dining-room, deep in a discussion with her father and Mr Foulkes. It was rather unlucky, she said to herself again, as she walked slowly along the passage, this unexpected appearance of Gerald’s. Of course it didn’t really matter about his clothes, but he did look rather rough, and papa would be sure to introduce him to Captain Chancellor as one of their most intimate friends; indeed, any one might see he considered himself such from his addressing her by her Christian name. Eugenia did not feel quite sure that she liked it; three years made a difference in that sort of thing; still, it might seem unkind, and might vex the others, if she were to give him a hint by calling him “Mr Thurston.” With Sydney, of course, it was different – at this point in her meditations she ran against Sydney, just coming to inquire what had detained her so long; could she not find the song she wanted? Captain Chancellor had come in and Mr Payne, and Sydney didn’t like the task of entertaining two gentlemen all alone. Eugenia’s news threw her into a state of great excitement; she readily undertook the pleasant task of telling Frank, and Miss Laurence returned to the drawing-room.

Gerald was not left long alone. In two minutes he heard his brother's voice, and felt Frank's hand shaking his with boyish vehemence. Sydney was there too – Sydney, just what he had expected to find her, fair and calm and sweet, the same as a woman that she had been as a girl.

"Frank *would* make me come with him," she said apologetically, as she shook hands; "dear Gerald, we are so pleased to have you back again."

Mr Thurston stooped and kissed her, and Sydney accepted it quite simply as his brotherly right. There was no doubt about the cordiality of the welcome of these two young people, nor of that of Mr Laurence, who soon joined them, and Gerald's spirits began to rise.

"Had we not better go back to the drawing-room?" said Sydney, when some minutes had been spent in the eager cross-questioning that always succeeds a long-looked-for arrival. "Eugenia is alone there with those three gentlemen, and she may not like it."

It hardly appeared on entering the drawing-room that their absence had been regretted. Mr Foulkes and Mr Payne, two middle-aged men who rode the same hobbies with agreeably adverse opinions as to the direction and management thereof, were seated comfortably by the fire in animated conversation, but it was not on them that Mr Thurston's eyes rested when they took in the little scene before him. At the other end of the room, before the piano, her fingers idly touching a note now and then, sat Eugenia. Leaning over her with an air of the most complete absorption, stood a gentleman whom Gerald had never seen before. Tall, or appearing so from his somewhat slight build, with clear regular features, fair hair and almond-shaped deep blue eyes, his possession of unusual good looks was undeniable at even the first glance, though what perhaps struck Mr Thurston more strongly, was the extreme, almost exaggerated, refinement of his whole bearing and appearance. Instinctively – so curiously even in moments of intense feeling do such trifles force themselves upon our attention – Gerald glanced down at his own somewhat travel-stained figure and rough attire. "Fop," was the word that rose to his lips with a sudden boyish impulse of resentment, but when he looked again he felt he could not apply it. The refinement might be outward only, but it was genuine and unaffected. While he was still silently observing them, it happened that Eugenia looked up for an instant into her companion's face. It was only a moment's quick passing glance, but it was enough: it told him all. Gerald felt faint and giddy, strong man that he was, and instinctively seemed to clutch at something to steady himself by. It had all passed so quickly, only one person had had time to notice him. Mr Laurence had not entered the room with the others, and Frank had joined the gentlemen by the fire. But one pair of eyes had followed Gerald's with anxious sympathy. Some one pulled his sleeve gently. It was Sydney.

"Will you come and sit down by me for a few minutes, Gerald," she said. "I have such a lot of things to say to you."

He followed her mechanically to the sofa she pointed out, but did not speak. When they were seated, she chattered away for a few minutes about various trifles, that did not call for a reply, till she thought he had recovered the first physical effects of the shock. Then she remained silent for a minute or two. Suddenly Gerald spoke. "Who is he, Sydney?" he asked, not seeming to care what Sydney might think.

She did not affect to misunderstand him.

"His name is Chancellor – Captain Chancellor. I think he is in the 203rd. He is stationed here just now. You know there is generally a company – isn't it called so? I think he spoke of his company at dinner – a small detachment, any way, at Wareborough, belonging to the regiment at Bridgenorth," she replied.

"I know," said Gerald, and relapsed into silence. But he quickly roused up again.

"Chancellor," he repeated – "Captain Chancellor. I have heard that name lately. I know something of him, Sydney, I am certain I do." Sydney looked eager to hear. "What can it be? No, it is no use, I cannot remember. It may come into my head afterwards. Have you – has – has your sister seen much of him?"

“No, oh no. I never saw him till to-night, and Eugenia has only seen him once before; but –” Sydney stopped.

“But that sort of thing isn’t always reckoned by many or few times, eh, Sydney?”

“Whoever loved, that loved not at first sight?”

“You think there’s something in that old saying, do you? I can’t say, I’m sure. My experience is limited in these matters,” said Gerald.

His tone was bitterly sarcastic, almost jeeringly so. It was so thoroughly unlike him that Sydney looked up in surprise and alarm. “Was this the Gerald she remembered so gentle, so delicate, so chivalrous? Ah, no. It must be as she feared. Poor Gerald!”

The distress in her face softened him – still more her words when she spoke again.

“I don’t know, Gerald. I can’t answer you. I only know that I am *very* anxious about her.”

“Don’t you like him, then? Do you know any ill of him?” inquired Mr Thurston, with a sort of fierce eagerness.

“Oh, no,” said Sydney, quickly. “Not that at all. I like him very well. Of course any one can see he is a gentleman and all that. And papa likes him. He has set himself to please papa, I can see already. It is just that we know so little of him, and Eugenia is *so* pretty, and so – I don’t know what to call it. You know how clever she is, Gerald, but even that makes me more anxious about her. She sees everything by her own ideas, as it were. And some day I feel as if she might be terribly, dreadfully disappointed. I believe it would kill her, Gerald,” in a lower voice.

“Ah,” he said, “I see. She would venture all.” His tone was perfectly gentle now. A great throb of manly pity seemed to drown for the moment his bitter, bitter disappointment. Only for the time, there was many a hard struggle before him yet, for this love of his had entwined itself round every fibre of his being, and now – sometimes it seemed to him that the beautiful thing he had so nursed and cherished had turned to a viper in his bosom; that its insidious breath would change to poison every spring of love, and trust, and hope in his whole nature.

No more was said for a few minutes. Then Sydney spoke – she had to call him twice by name before she caught his attention.

“Gerald,” she said, “I see papa speaking to Captain Chancellor. Now he is coming this way. I am sure he is going to introduce you and him to each other.”

“Very well,” replied Mr Thurston. “I have no objection.”

He rose as he spoke, and went forward a few steps to meet Mr Laurence, whose intention Sydney had guessed correctly. The two young men bowed and shook hands civilly enough. Then Captain Chancellor, who was always thoroughly equal to these little social occasions, said something pleasant in his soft, low voice, about the new arrival’s return home, as if he had known all about it, and had been anticipating Mr Thurston’s return with nearly as much eagerness as Frank himself. There was no denying it – there was a great charm about this man; even Gerald felt it as he replied to Beauchamp’s well-chosen words. And his face was far from a bad face, Mr Thurston was forced to admit, when he saw it more closely; the want in it he could not readily define.

Beauchamp, too, was making up his mind about this new-comer, and taking his measure in his own way, though from his manner no one would have suspected it. He hadn’t felt altogether easy about the absence of male cousin or old friend, in Miss Laurence’s case. Hitherto the only thing in the shape of a tame cat he had discovered about the establishment was most charmingly and felicitously engaged to the little sister. So far nothing could be better. But there might be other discoveries to make, and he didn’t want to get into anybody’s way, or cause any unpleasantness – he hated unpleasantnesses, and the only way out of unpleasantnesses of *this* kind, rivals, and all that, was sometimes a way in which Beauchamp’s training had by no means prepared him to go in a hurry – and he quite meant to be very careful, for Roma’s warning had impressed him a little after all. He only wanted to get over the next few weeks comfortably in this dreadful place, and

had no objection to Roma's hearing indirectly of the manner in which he was doing so. It would be too bad if this great hulking "cousin from India," was going to come in the way of his harmless little amusement. And whether or not there was any fear of this, Captain Chancellor could not all at once make up his mind, though from Miss Laurence's side, so far, it hardly looked like it.

When Gerald Thurston came to say good-night to Eugenia, she noticed that he called her "Miss Laurence." Captain Chancellor was within hearing, and Eugenia felt pleased by Gerald's tact and good taste, and her own good-night was on this account all the more cordial.

Beauchamp observed it all too, and drew his own conclusions.

Volume One – Chapter Seven. Several People's Feelings

Oh, for the ills half understood,
The dim, dead woe
Long ago.

R. Browning.

The rain was over, the evening had turned out fine after all. Captain Chancellor drove away in his fly from Mr Laurence's door, but the Thurston brothers decided to walk.

"I don't spend much on flies and that sort of thing, Gerald," said Frank, as he slipped his arm through his brother's; "you used to be afraid I was inclined to be extravagant in little things, but I can tell you it only wants a hard winter in Wareborough to make a fellow ashamed of all that self-indulgence. Good heavens, Gerald! you don't know, though you do know a good deal for a layman," Gerald smiled to himself at this little bit of clerical bumptiousness, "about the poor, but you don't know what there is here sometimes. I have half-a-dozen new schemes to consult you about. Mr Laurence has a clear head for organisation, but though so practical in his own department, he won't come out of it. Education, education, is his cry from morning till night. I quite agree with it, but you can't educate people or children till you've got them food to eat and clothes to wear. I know I don't expect them to listen to *my* part of the teaching till I show them I want to make their poor bodies more comfortable if I can."

"But Mr Laurence's attention is not given to the very poor. It is more given to the class above them," said Gerald.

"Only because he can't get hold of any others. His *theories* embrace the whole human race," replied Frank, laughing, "but he is wise enough to begin with those he can get hold of. It's a pity he is not a very rich man. He would do an immense deal of good."

"He never could be a rich man, it seems to me," said Gerald. "He is quite wanting in the love of money for its own sake, and I am not sure that any man ever amasses a great fortune who hasn't a spice of this enthusiasm of gold in him. What you will do with the gold when you have it, is a secondary consideration. I do believe there grows upon many men an actual love of the thing itself."

"You're not turning cynical, surely, Gerald?" said Frank, laughingly. "That would be a new *rôle* for you." His ear had detected a slight bitterness, a dispiritedness in his brother's tone, though Gerald had exerted himself to speak with interest on general subjects in order to conceal his real state of feeling.

Gerald laughed slightly. "I am afraid the more one sees of the world and of life the harder it is to keep altogether free of that sort of thing. But tell me about your own plans. What a sweet woman Sydney will be, Frank! I can hardly think of her as grown-up, you see. Have you and Mr Laurence touched upon business matters at all yet?"

"Oh dear, yes!" said Frank, importantly. "It's all as satisfactory as can be. With what you tell me is my share of our belongings, and what Mr Laurence can give Sydney, and my curacy we shall do splendidly. But I strongly suspect, Gerald, that you are giving me more than I have any right to. I believe you have added your own money to mine – I do really. Of course I can't tell, for we never went into these things much before you went abroad, but I'm certain my father didn't leave twice what you have made over to me."

"It's all right, Frank; it is indeed," said Gerald, earnestly. "I am doing very well now and am likely to do better. I shall go over my affairs with you some day soon to satisfy you. I could

easily make your income larger, but perhaps it is as well for you to begin moderately. You'll have to restrict your charities a little, you know, when you have a wife to think of."

"Yes, I know that," replied the curate; "but, Gerald, you should look to home too. You will be marrying yourself."

"It is not likely," said Mr Thurston. "I am thirty-one – seven years older than you, Frank; getting past the marrying *age*, you see."

Frank wondered a little, but said nothing, and went on to talk of other things. Suddenly a casual mention of the Dalrymples struck Gerald with a flash of remembrance.

"Is not that Captain Chancellor we met to-night a friend of theirs?" he asked his brother.

"Yes; I believe Mr Laurence and Eugenia met him there, and I am not at all sure that it wouldn't have been a great deal better if they had not done so," replied the young clergyman, oracularly. "Eugenia isn't a bad sort of girl; she is well-meaning, and not stupid, and certainly very pretty; but I must say she is very childish and silly. She is constantly in extremes, always running full tilt against something or other. For my part, I confess I can't make her out. I am uncommonly glad Sydney is so completely unlike her. I didn't at all admire the way she allowed herself to be monopolised by that Captain Chancellor to-night. If they had a mother it would be different, but Mr Laurence would never see anything of that kind if it was straight before his eyes."

"You are rather unreasonable, I think, Frank," said Gerald. "Such things will happen, you know. I suppose there have been occasions on which Sydney too has allowed herself to be monopolised. You would have thought it very hard if any one had objected."

"The cases are thoroughly different," replied the younger Thurston. "I should very much doubt this man's being in earnest."

This was a new view of the subject. Frank said no more, and Gerald did not encourage further remarks concerning Eugenia. He tried to recall all that had passed between himself and Miss Eyrecourt; but the more he thought it over, the more puzzled he became. Her evident self-consciousness when Captain Chancellor's name was mentioned had impressed him with a conviction he had not stopped to analyse, that her relations with the gentleman in question were more than ordinarily friendly ones; and yet again her manner of alluding to Eugenia was perfectly explained by the supposition that the incipient flirtation – how Gerald hated the word! – had come very plainly under her observation when at Wareborough, yet without arousing any personal feeling of indignation or annoyance. She knew this Captain Chancellor well. Could it be that he was only amusing himself, and that, therefore, from his side, the matter seemed to her of little consequence? Gerald ground his teeth at the thought. Sydney's inexperience of such things had limited her anxiety to the question of Captain Chancellor's worthiness and suitability. Frank's practical, matter-of-fact observation had suggested an even more painful misgiving to his brother, for Eugenia was not the sort of girl to whom a mere "flirtation" was possible. With her it would be all or nothing, and the damage to her whole nature of finding herself deceived could be little short of fatal. The fine metal would be sorely tested in so fiery a furnace. Were not the chances few that any of it would be left, save perhaps bent and distorted beyond recognition?

And this was the end of Gerald Thurston's long-anticipated return home – this was how he awoke from his dreams.

For the next few weeks Gerald had very little leisure. A great accumulation of business matters dependent upon his presence in Wareborough forced themselves on his attention. Had things been as he had hoped to find them, he would have chafed greatly at this; as they were, however, selfishly speaking, he felt glad of hard work, which there was no escaping. He saw very little of the Laurences – he saw little even of his brother. Now and then he asked himself if he had possibly been over hasty and premature, and for a day or two this misgiving tantalised him afresh. It might be as well, he thought, to seek an opportunity of judging for himself, and however things were, it was time to accustom himself to perfect self-command in Eugenia's presence. He

had never seen Sydney alone since that first evening. On the one or two occasions he had been in Mr Laurence's house since then, it seemed to him the young *fiancée* had avoided him purposely. "No doubt, poor little soul, she thinks it would pain me to revert to that evening," he thought to himself; "and she doesn't want to tell me that what she suspected then is becoming more and more confirmed, though I can see by her manner it is so." Once Gerald purposely led to the mention of Captain Chancellor's name in talking with his brother. To his surprise, he found that Frank's slight prejudice and dislike had completely disappeared.

"He is a very good fellow of his class," said the clergyman. "Not very much in him, perhaps, but he seems to me honourable and straightforward, and thoroughly gentlemanly. He's a good Churchman too, I'm glad to find. I like him very much – better than I expected. Eugenia might do worse. But, after all, if nothing comes of it, I can't see that he will be in the least to blame. I don't see that he pays her any more attention than he does to Sydney; but then certainly she is a very different person from Sydney," added Frank, with considerable self-congratulation in the last few words. "I am sorry you don't see more of Captain Chancellor, Gerald," he continued. "You have been so busy lately, and he has never happened to be there the one or two times you have dropped in lately."

"No," replied Mr Thurston; "Eugenia was not at home either, the last time. She has been staying somewhere, has she not?"

"At the Dalrymples'. She is there a great deal. But never mind about her," said Frank, rather cavalierly. "Give yourself a holiday now and then, Gerald. Even I find I must sometimes, and my work is not nearly so monotonous as yours. We are going to skate on Ayclough Pool to-morrow. I have promised to take the Dalrymple boys, whose holidays have begun."

"It's rather a long way," said Gerald, doubtfully.

"Only four miles, and the weather is delightful for walking. We don't start till one, so you'll have all the morning. Sydney and Eugenia are coming to watch us. Do come; it will do you ever so much good. You have been dreadfully shut up since you came home," persuaded Frank.

"Very well," said Gerald at last. This might be the opportunity he had been looking for. Frank's opinion of Captain Chancellor had not reassured him, for the young clergyman was in many ways very inexperienced, incapable of understanding Eugenia, and constitutionally predisposed to judge of everything and everybody from his own straightforward point of view.

"Whatever Captain Chancellor's intentions are," reflected Gerald, "he must be a man of a good deal of tact and foresight of a small kind."

It was quite true. "Of a kind," Captain Chancellor's acuteness and perception were unrivalled. He knew exactly how far to go without risking "anything unpleasant." In all his numerous flirtations he had come off unscathed; never had any papa, urged thereto by an over-anxious mamma, taken the terrible step of demanding "his intentions;" his fastidious taste would indeed have been attracted by no girl, however charming, behind whom loomed the shadow of so coarse and hideous a possibility. He made a rule of looking well about him, making himself acquainted with the country, before he indulged in one of his little amusements, and so far he had never found himself wrong. In the present case he had been unusually lucky; fortune literally seemed to play into his hands, or perhaps it had appeared so to him, because at first the difficulties had promised to be great, and he had prepared to meet them with more than ordinary caution and skill. Mr Laurence's house was just the sort of house in which it was far from easy to obtain a friendly and familiar footing. The arrangements were ponderous and formal notwithstanding their simplicity and absence of ostentation; the hours were regular and visitors few. When Mr Laurence expected a friend or two to dine with him, he gave his daughters a few days' notice, and they never pretended to "make no difference;" on the contrary, Sydney consulted the cookery-book, and exhorted the cook; Eugenia arranged the flowers and the dessert, and gave a finishing touch to the positions of the drawing-room chairs. A household of this kind was new to Captain Chancellor, and it took him some little

time quite to understand it, and when he did so he hesitated. Was it worth the necessary amount of “*chandelle*?” in this case represented by great tact, quick seizing of opportunity, and considerable patience; for Mr Laurence’s dissertations were quite out of his line, his cook not a French one, his wines – well, hardly so bad as might have been expected. But after all, life in Wareborough would be really unendurable without some *passe-temps* of the kind. A happy thought struck him – two happy thoughts. Frank Thurston and Mrs Dalrymple, excellent, admirable creatures both, perfectly adapted for his purpose. So he spent a few days in sedulously cultivating the curate, whose good word was of course, under existing circumstances, an Open sesame to the Laurence household, and so well succeeded in his design, that gradually all the family got accustomed to his dropping in at odd times just like Frank himself. They got accustomed to it, but did they like it? To Mr Laurence it was neither particularly agreeable nor the reverse; he got into the way of thinking of the new-comer as “a friend of Frank’s,” a pleasant, rather intelligent young man, who had seen a good deal of the world, and yet was easily entertained. To Sydney, this growing familiarity was the source of much secret anxiety, which yet she saw it best to keep to herself; to Eugenia – ah, what words will tell what it had come to be to Eugenia! – like the flowers in spring, like the sunshine, like life itself.

Then Captain Chancellor called pretty frequently on his old friend Mrs Dalrymple, and made himself very agreeable to her. He told her he really did not know how he should have got through this winter but for her kindness and hospitality; it was no small boon to him to have one person in Wareborough he might venture to look upon as a friend, with whom he might talk over old days, etc, etc. And gradually he led the conversation round to the Laurences, said he was so much obliged to Mr Dalrymple for his introduction to Mr Laurence, really a remarkable man, a man whose acquaintance any one might be proud of; but had it not struck Mr Dalrymple that his daughters were rather to be pitied, not the younger one, of course she was very happy in her engagement to young Thurston, but the elder one, she had really a very dull life? He felt quite sorry for her sometimes, a little kindness was well bestowed on a girl like that, and she was so grateful to Mrs Dalrymple for what she had already shown her. Altogether, he drew so moving a picture of Eugenia’s monotonous existence that Mrs Dalrymple felt ready to ask her to take up her quarters permanently at Barnwood Terrace, and ended by setting off that very afternoon to invite Miss Laurence to spend a week with her, for it was just about Christmas time, her own young people were home from school, and there were plenty of other young people ready to join them in the merry-makings wherein Mrs Dalrymple’s heart delighted – Eugenia would be so useful with the Christmas tree and all the rest of it. And Eugenia was only too happy to come, and during the fortnight to which the visit extended there were not many days on which she and Captain Chancellor did not meet. It was all done so cleverly, she hardly realised that these constant meetings were not the result of a series of happy accidents, or at least, their being otherwise was never obtruded on her notice, for one of the girl’s great attractions in Beauchamp’s eyes was the shrinking refinement he, in a superficial way, was able to appreciate and was most careful never to offend. In many ways, however, she puzzled him, set at defiance his preconceived ideas. Sensitive and shy though she was, she showed to him sometimes a confiding frankness which he could not explain as the simplicity of an inferior or uncultivated nature; and it never occurred to him that in judging of Eugenia Laurence his ordinary measure was quite at fault; his boasted knowledge of the world and of women – clumsy impediments in the way of the work, that to understand her rightly he had greater need to unlearn than to learn. “She is certainly quite unlike any other girl I ever came across. She is not the least stupid, yet she could be very easily deceived. She has decided opinions of her own, and yet she is so yielding. In short – she is a charming collection of contradictions,” he said to himself. “Perhaps it’s just as well I am not likely to be here much longer.”

Once or twice during the time that Eugenia was her guest, Mrs Dalrymple got alarmed at the responsibility she was incurring in allowing these young people to see so much of each other. But they seemed so light-hearted and happy, her boys and girls were so fond of Miss Laurence, Captain

Chancellor made himself so useful in escorting the merry party to the pantomime, taking the boys to the circus, helping to adorn the Christmas tree, and in half-a-dozen different ways, that Mrs Dalrymple had not the heart to interfere. Besides, what could she do? Eugenia was her invited guest, she could not send her home like a child in disgrace; Beauchamp Chancellor was the son of her oldest friends, she could not shut her doors on him because he was handsome and her young visitor was pretty. Things of this kind must just take their chance, she decided, and in the present case the good lady comforted herself by a peculiar form of argument. Either Beauchamp was engaged to Roma Eyrecourt or he wasn't. If he was, no harm was done; in other words, he, an engaged man, would never think of making love to another girl; if he wasn't, then why shouldn't he marry Eugenia Laurence as well as any one else, if he and she thought they would be happy together? And when the fortnight was over, and Eugenia kissed her and thanked her, and said she had "never been so happy before, never in all her life," Mrs Dalrymple confided to her Henry that if Beauchamp Chancellor didn't fall in love with her she would think very poorly of his taste; and she got quite cross with Henry for looking grave, and warning her that no good ever came of match-making.

Eugenia spoke truly when she said she had never been so happy in her life, for at this time every day seemed to add fresh delight to her already overflowing cup. She had got beyond the stage of looking either to the past or future; she lived entirely in the beautiful present. The tiny shocks of uncongeniality, unresponsiveness – she had never given it a name – which in the earliest part of her acquaintance with Beauchamp Chancellor had occasionally made themselves felt, were seldom now experienced by her; and if they were, her determination to see no flaw in her idol was a special pleader always ready to start up in his defence. It was sure "to be her own fault" – she was "stupid," or "matter-of-fact," or "absurdly touchy and fanciful." She was well under the spell. She never asked herself why she cared for him; she never thought, about his position, his prospects, his intentions; she did not trouble herself about whether he was rich or poor – whatever he was he was her perfection, her hero, her fairy prince, who had wakened her to life, whom she asked nothing better than to follow —

"O'er the hills, and far away
Beyond their utmost purple rim;
Beyond the night, across the day,
Thro' all the world..."

She was sinking her all in the venture.

Then there came the day of the expedition to Ayclough Pool.

Ugly as Wareborough was, both in itself and its situation, there were yet to be found, as there are in the neighbourhood of most small towns, some fairly pretty walks a mile or two beyond its suburbs. The Woldshire side was the most attractive, for on this side one got out of the dead level so depressing to pedestrians in search of "a view," and the undulating ground encouraged one to hope that in time, provided, of course, one walked far enough, one might come to something in the shape of a hill. Nor were such hopes deceptive. There really was a hill, or a very respectable attempt at one, which went by the name of Ayclough Brow, and half-way up which, one came upon the tiny little lake known as Ayclough Pool. There was rather a nice old farmhouse, perched up there too, not far from the Pool, and a chatty old farmer's wife who was fond of entertaining visitors with her reminiscences of "the old days," days when sheep could browse on the Brow without getting to look like animated soot-bags; when it was possible to gather a posy without smearing one's hands with the smuts on the leaves; when Wareborough was a little market town, where the mail-coach to London from Bridgenorth used to stop twice a week, and rattle out again in grand style, horn and all, along the Ayclough Road. Many an accident to this same Royal Mail could the old body tell of, for her husband's forbears had lived on the same ground for generations, and the smashes

of various kinds that had taken place at a sharp bend of the road just below the Brow had been the great excitement in the lives of the dwellers in the lonely farmhouse, and the records thereof had been handed down religiously from father to son. More than one unfortunate traveller had been carried up to the farm, as the nearest dwelling-house, there to remain till the fractured limb was sound again, or till the bruised body and shaken nerves had recovered their equilibrium, or, in one or two yet sadder cases, under the roof-tree of the old house, far from home and friends, to end indeed the journey.

There was one story which Eugenia since childhood had listened to with intense sympathy – a really tragic story – notwithstanding the exaggerated ghastliness of detail with which, like all local legends of the kind, in process of time it had become embellished. It was that of a bride and bridegroom, married “the self-same morn,” who had been among the victims of one of those terrible overturns. The bride had escaped unhurt, the husband was killed on the spot. They had carried him up to the farm, and then, for the day or two that elapsed before her friends could be communicated with, the poor girl had knelt in frantic agony beside the body, refusing to be comforted, at times wildly persisting he was not, could not be dead. By the next morning, the old farmer’s wife used to add in a solemnly impressive tone, “she had heard tell, th’ young leddy’s hair were that grey she moight ’a been sixty.” She had been taken away at last a raging lunatic, said the legend (probably in violent and very excusable hysterics), and of course never recovered her reason. There was no record of her name, the accident had occurred more than a hundred years ago, yet the story still clung to Ayclough Farm, and some people were not over and above fond of passing the bend in the road of a dark night. “’Twas lonesome, that bit of the way, very,” said the old woman, and the wind among the trees – there was a good deal of wind up Ayclough way sometimes – made queer sounds like a coach galloping furiously in the distance, and there were people that said still queerer sights were to be seen now and again on the fatal spot.

Altogether there was a good deal of fascination about Ayclough, fascination felt all the more strongly by the Laurence girls, on account of the unusual dearth of the picturesque or of any material food for romance in their dull Wareborough home. A walk to the old farm had always been one of their recognised childish “treats,” though Eugenia used to get dreadfully frightened, and hide herself well under the bedclothes when they were left alone by their nurse at night, after one of these expeditions. Sydney used to feel her way across the room in the dark, and climb into Eugenia’s cot, and try to reason her into calmness.

“How could the ghost of the young lady be so silly as to come back to the place where her husband had been killed, when it was more than a hundred years ago, and they *must* be both happy in heaven now, like the lovers on the willow pattern plates.”

“*They* were turned into birds,” Eugenia would remonstrate, but Sydney could not see that that signified; “they were happy any way, and people in heaven must be even happier than birds. She couldn’t think what they should ever want to come back for, or suppose they did, why any one should be afraid of them.”

Then Eugenia would shift her ground, and defend her terrors by a new argument.

“Suppose ghosts weren’t really people’s souls, but evil spirits who looked like them? She had read something *so* horrible like that in one of papa’s books the other day. It was a poem – she couldn’t remember the name – but it was ‘from the German.’ If it was only light, she would tell it to Sydney.”

But Sydney was not at all sure that she wanted to hear it, and she thought papa would be angry if he knew that Eugenia read books he left about, whereupon Eugenia would promise to do so no more, and in the diversion of her thoughts thus happily brought about, Sydney, finding the outside of her sister’s bed less warm and comfortable than the inside of her own, would seize the opportunity of returning to her little cot, and in two minutes would be fast asleep, rousing for a moment again to agree sleepily to the entreaty that came across the room in Eugenia’s irritatingly

wideawake voice, “that she wouldn’t tell nurse she had been frightened, or they would never be allowed to go to Ayclough any more.”

Volume One – Chapter Eight. On the Brink

I love snow, and all the forms
Of the radiant frost;
I love waves and winds and storms,
Everything almost
Which is nature's, and may be
Untainted by man's misery.

Shelley.

Of the many times the sisters had walked to Ayclough they had never had a lovelier day for their ramble than the one on which they set off with Frank Thurston and the young Dalrymples, to skate on the Pool. It was February, early February, and the Frost spirit, who had been late of coming this year, seemed inclined to make up for the delay by paying a pretty long visit now he had really got as far down south from his own home as Wareshire. He had greatly disappointed his special friends, the school-boys of the community, by not spending Christmas with them, as in the good old days, we are told, was his invariable custom, and the last two Saturdays Arthur and Bob Dalrymple had hardly consented to eat any dinner, so eager were they to make the most of their friend's company on these precious holiday afternoons.

"We expect Captain Chancellor to come with us, Frank," said Sydney, as the little party were setting off from Mr Laurence's door. "He said he would join us at the Brook Bridge at half-past one. He passes that way coming to our house, you know. He dined with us last night, and when he heard where we were going to-day, he said he would like to come too."

"All right," said Frank. "I expect some one too. I persuaded Gerald to promise to come. He never gives himself any play now at all. Ever since he came back from India he has been working far too hard. I don't think he is looking well either. He's not half the man he was before he went to India. Ah, there he comes! You girls must make a great deal of him to-day, for I want to coax him to give himself more relaxation."

Eugenia and Sydney were very ready to do as Frank wished, and when Gerald came up to them he was most graciously received. It was quite true that he was not looking well. Eugenia noticed it very distinctly; he was looking much less well even than on his first return, and her heart smote her for the scanty thought she had of late bestowed on her old friend.

"I am so very glad you can come with us to-day, Gerald," she said. "It is like old times, isn't it?"

"Like, but very different," he thought to himself, but aloud he answered cheerfully, and in spite of himself his spirits began to rise. It *was* like old times to have Eugenia walking beside him, her sweet bright face looking up in his, no one to dispute his claim upon her for the time. But his visions were soon dispelled. A new expression stole into her eyes, a soft flush crept over her face even while he watched it, and following the direction of her gaze to discover the cause of the change, Mr Thurston saw – Captain Chancellor coming forward quickly in their direction.

The two men had never met since the evening of Gerald's return. They had eyed each other with covert suspicion then; they eyed each other with a scarcely more cordial feeling now. A slight, an almost imperceptibly slight, shade, it seemed to Gerald, came over Captain Chancellor's handsome face when he recognised Eugenia's companion. And he was not mistaken.

“What can that fellow be turning up again for?” Beauchamp was saying to himself. “I thought he was comfortably over head and ears in business. I don’t fancy him somehow. I wish to goodness he were back in India!”

But notwithstanding this unexpressed hostility, outwardly, as was his habit, Captain Chancellor made himself very agreeable. He seemed to take special pains to be civil and cordial in his manner to Mr Thurston, and Frank felt a little annoyed at Gerald’s somewhat ungracious reception of his friendly overtures.

“What a pleasant fellow Chancellor is, really,” observed Frank to Sydney. “Poor old Gerald hasn’t improved in his manners with being in India, I’m afraid. I don’t think he can be well. He is so surly and stiff sometimes now, and he never used to be.”

“Poor old Gerald” was only human after all. He was feeling very cross and bitter just now. His one ewe-lamb of a happy afternoon had been stolen from him. He could not all at once respond with careless cordiality to David’s civil speeches, but walked on beside Eugenia in grave and moody silence.

Eugenia could not make him out. How could he – how could any one – feel cross or sad on such an exquisite day? She herself was so happy. Everything was so beautiful, she could hardly help singing and dancing as she went along. They were out of Wareborough and its suburbs by now. The feeling, to dwellers in towns so ever-fresh and exhilarating, of “being in the country” was beginning to come over them. The lane along which they were walking was pleasant even at this season – pleasanter, in a sense, than in spring or summer; for though some hardy primroses, some few dog-roses and honeysuckles, were brave enough still, year after year, to show their welcome faces along the banks, it seemed to cost them an effort. They hardly looked at home beside the dingy hedges and smoke-dulled grass. But to-day the fields wore their “silver thatch,” “icy feathers fledged” the hedges; there was no fault to be found with either, in this bright winter clothing. The lane was hardly distinguishable from a real country lane.

“How beautiful it is! Did you ever see a more exquisite day?” exclaimed Eugenia, looking up to the clear green-blue sky through the delicate tracery of the bare branches of the trees. “One could imagine oneself miles and miles away from any town.”

She had been walking a few steps in front of the others. As she spoke, she stopped for a moment, and turned round facing them. How pretty she looked! To Gerald it seemed she had never looked lovelier than standing there, in her thick dark-grey cloth dress, with her favourite bit of bright colour – a scarlet knot at her throat this time – reflecting its warmth and brilliance in her eager, upturned face.

“It is a lovely day!” said Sydney; “but, Eugenia, you used to dislike winter so – even bright frosty days you used to say were ghastly and mocking, and all sorts of disagreeable things.”

“I don’t like winter at all,” answered Eugenia, falling back into her place, and walking on beside the others. “But to-day is hardly like winter. There is a living feeling in the air, cold though it is – a sort of slight stir and rustle even among the bare boughs.”

“The spring comes slowly up the way,” said Gerald. “It’s very slowly, though. Of course we are only at the beginning of February; still, I know the feeling you mean, Eugenia. I have often fancied I could distinguish a sort of soft expectancy about this time of year.”

Captain Chancellor happened to be a little way behind them. Either Gerald imagined him out of ear-shot, or for the moment had forgotten him altogether.

“Yes,” said Eugenia; “that’s just it. It is the lifelessness of winter I dislike. And a bright still winter’s day has light without warmth – an idea that certainly is very ghastly to me. I like life, and movement, and warmth. Almost the loveliest summer sensation to me is that sort of soft, happy bustle that seems to go on among the birds and the flowers and the insects – all the dear creatures. Ah, how beautiful summer is!” She stopped for an instant; then, recurring to her former train of

thought, she went on. "Doesn't the idea of a 'crystal sea' seem rather repulsive to you, Gerald? I think it would be quite frightful. Fancy a motionless ocean!"

Beauchamp, and Frank, and the Dalrymple boys were close beside them now. Beauchamp had walked on faster since he saw Eugenia talking with apparent interest to the curate's brother. Her last remark was overheard.

"It would be jolly nice to skate upon!" said Bob Dalrymple.

Eugenia broke into clear, merry laughter.

"I'm afraid you'll not find any skates there, Bob," she said to the boy; and then they both laughed again, as if she had said something immensely funny.

"It takes very little water to make a perfect pool for a tiny fish;" it takes very little wit to satisfy a child's appreciative powers. Bob was only twelve, and Eugenia was apt to grow very like a child herself when in high spirits. Mr Thurston smiled at their merriment; and though Sydney, in Frank's presence, always trembled a little when she saw Eugenia verging on one of the reckless moods, charming enough when "a great many people" were not there, in the present case she could not help smiling too. Only Captain Chancellor looked annoyed. There were certain things that greatly offended his taste. He could not endure to hear a woman discuss religion or politics, he could not endure to hear a woman say anything funny, and then laugh at it. And of all conceivable subjects to joke upon, he most objected to joking on "religious subjects;" he thought it "bad style." As Frank had said, Captain Chancellor was, or at any rate considered himself, "a good churchman," of the class to whom it is not given to discriminate between the spirit and the letter. He hated Dissenters and Radicals – so far, that is to say, as he considered such beings worthy of attention at all. He was not the sort of man to whom it occurred readily, that to the best of rules there may be exceptions. More than once Roma herself had fallen under the ban of his disapproval, both as regarded the subjects she chose for discussion, and her remarks thereupon. But then Roma was a very different person; besides which, in her own set, she had established a name for a certain amount of originality, and this made her to some extent a privileged person.

Mr Thurston, happening to glance in Captain Chancellor's direction, saw, and rightly interpreted, the expression of his face. First, he felt amused, then a little indignant. What right had this man to approve or disapprove of whatever Eugenia chose to say or do? Lastly, an undefinable instinct urged him to turn the conversation, without appearing to do so, for happy Eugenia was walking on merrily, in unconsciousness of any cloud in her vicinity.

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