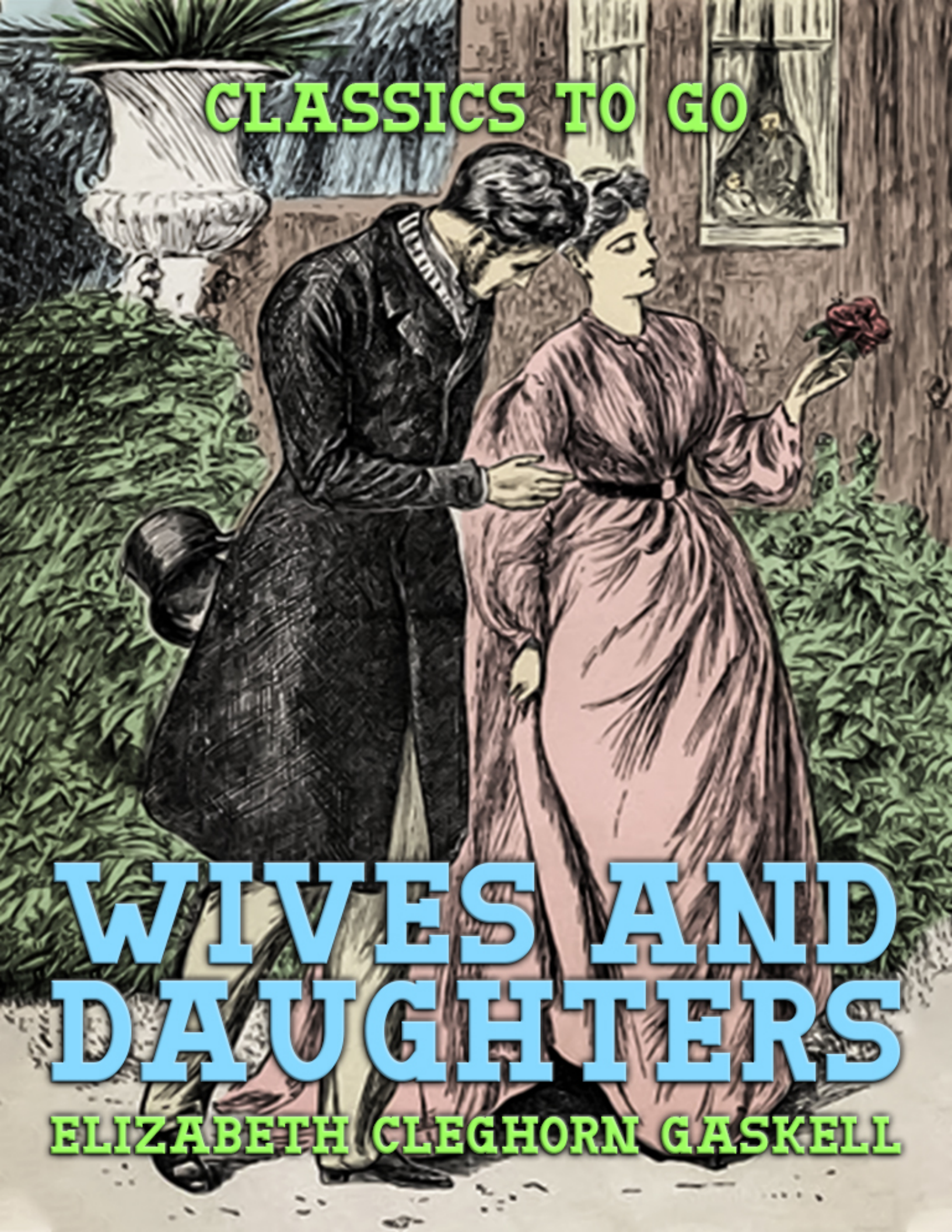
CLASSICS TO GO
WIVES AND DAUGHTERS
ELIZABETH CLEGHORN GASKELL

WIVES AND DAUGHTERS

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

MOLLY'S NEW BONNET.

ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I.

THE DAWN OF A GALA DAY.

To begin with the old rigmarole of childhood. In a country there was a shire, and in that shire there was a town, and in that town there was a house, and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a bed, and in that bed there lay a little girl; wide awake and longing to get up, but not daring to do so for fear of the unseen power in the next room—a certain Betty, whose slumbers must not be disturbed until six o'clock struck, when she wakened of herself "as sure as clockwork," and left the household very little peace afterwards. It was a June morning, and early as it was, the room was full of sunny warmth and light.

On the drawers opposite to the little white dimity bed in which Molly Gibson lay, was a primitive kind of bonnet-stand on which was hung a bonnet, carefully covered over from any chance of dust with a large cotton handkerchief, of so heavy and serviceable a texture that if the thing underneath it had been a flimsy fabric of gauze and lace and flowers, it would have been altogether "scomfished" (again to quote from Betty's vocabulary). But the bonnet was made of solid straw, and its only trimming was a plain white ribbon put over the crown, and forming the strings. Still, there was a neat little quilling inside, every plait of which Molly knew, for had she not made it herself the evening before, with infinite pains? and was there not a little blue bow in this quilling, the very first bit of such finery Molly had ever had the prospect of wearing?

Six o'clock now! the pleasant, brisk ringing of the church bells told that; calling every one to their daily work, as they had done for hundreds of years. Up jumped Molly, and ran with her bare little feet across the room, and lifted off the handkerchief and saw once again the bonnet; the pledge of the gay bright day to come. Then to the window, and after some tugging she opened the casement, and let in the sweet morning air. The dew was already off the flowers in the garden below, but still rising from the long hay-grass in the meadows directly beyond. At one side lay the little town of Hollingford, into a street of which Mr. Gibson's front door opened; and delicate columns, and little puffs of smoke were already beginning to rise from many a cottage chimney where some housewife was already up, and preparing breakfast for the bread-winner of the family.

Molly Gibson saw all this, but all she thought about it was, "Oh! it will be a fine day! I was afraid it never, never would come; or that, if it ever came, it would be a rainy day!" Five-and-forty years ago, children's pleasures in a

country town were very simple, and Molly had lived for twelve long years without the occurrence of any event so great as that which was now impending. Poor child! it is true that she had lost her mother, which was a jar to the whole tenour of her life; but that was hardly an event in the sense referred to; and besides, she had been too young to be conscious of it at the time. The pleasure she was looking forward to to-day was her first share in a kind of annual festival in Hollingford.

The little straggling town faded away into country on one side close to the entrance-lodge of a great park, where lived my Lord and Lady Cumnor: "the earl" and "the countess," as they were always called by the inhabitants of the town; where a very pretty amount of feudal feeling still lingered, and showed itself in a number of simple ways, droll enough to look back upon, but serious matters of importance at the time. It was before the passing of the Reform Bill, but a good deal of liberal talk took place occasionally between two or three of the more enlightened freeholders living in Hollingford; and there was a great Tory family in the county who, from time to time, came forward and contested the election with the rival Whig family of Cumnor. One would have thought that the above-mentioned liberal-talking inhabitants would have, at least, admitted the possibility of their voting for the Hely-Harrison, and thus trying to vindicate their independence. But no such thing. "The earl" was lord of the manor, and owner of much of the land on which Hollingford was built; he and his household were fed, and doctored, and, to a certain measure, clothed by the good people of the town; their fathers' grandfathers had always voted for the eldest son of Cumnor Towers, and following in the ancestral track, every man-jack in the place gave his vote to the liege lord, totally irrespective of such chimeras as political opinion.

This was no unusual instance of the influence of the great land-owners over humbler neighbours in those days before railways, and it was well for a place where the powerful family, who thus overshadowed it, were of so respectable a character as the Cumnors. They expected to be submitted to, and obeyed; the simple worship of the townspeople was accepted by the earl and countess as a right; and they would have stood still in amazement, and with a horrid memory of the French sansculottes who were the bugbears of their youth, had any inhabitant of Hollingford ventured to set his will or opinions in opposition to those of the earl. But, yielded all that obeisance, they did a good deal for the town, and were generally condescending, and often thoughtful and kind in their treatment of their vassals. Lord Cumnor was a forbearing landlord; putting his steward a little on one side sometimes, and taking the reins into his own hands now and then, much to the annoyance of the agent, who was, in fact, too rich and independent to care greatly for preserving a post where his decisions might any day be overturned by my lord's taking a fancy to go "pottering" (as the agent irreverently expressed it in the sanctuary of his own home), which, being interpreted, meant that occasionally the earl asked his own questions of his own tenants, and used his own eyes and ears in the management of the smaller details of his property. But his tenants liked my lord all the better for this habit of his. Lord Cumnor had certainly a little time for gossip, which he contrived to combine with the failing of personal intervention between the old land-steward and the tenantry. But, then, the countess made up by her unapproachable dignity for this weakness of the earl's. Once a year she was condescending. She and the ladies, her daughters, had set up a school; not a school after the manner of schools now-a-days, where far better intellectual teaching is given to the boys and girls of labourers and

work-people than often falls to the lot of their betters in worldly estate; but a school of the kind we should call "industrial," where girls are taught to sew beautifully, to be capital housemaids, and pretty fair cooks, and, above all, to dress neatly in a kind of charity uniform devised by the ladies of Cumnor Towers;—white caps, white tippets, check aprons, blue gowns, and ready curtseys, and "please, ma'ams," being *de rigueur*.

Now, as the countess was absent from the Towers for a considerable part of the year, she was glad to enlist the sympathy of the Hollingford ladies in this school, with a view to obtaining their aid as visitors during the many months that she and her daughters were away. And the various unoccupied gentlewomen of the town responded to the call of their liege lady, and gave her their service as required; and along with it, a great deal of whispered and fussy admiration. "How good of the countess! So like the dear countess—always thinking of others!" and so on; while it was always supposed that no strangers had seen Hollingford properly, unless they had been taken to the countess's school, and been duly impressed by the neat little pupils, and the still neater needlework there to be inspected. In return, there was a day of honour set apart every summer, when with much gracious and stately hospitality, Lady Cumnor and her daughters received all the school visitors at the Towers, the great family mansion standing in aristocratic seclusion in the centre of the large park, of which one of the lodges was close to the little town. The order of this annual festivity was this. About ten o'clock one of the Towers' carriages rolled through the lodge, and drove to different houses, wherein dwelt a woman to be honoured; picking them up by ones or twos, till the loaded carriage drove back again through the ready portals, bowled along the smooth tree-shaded road, and deposited its covey of smartly-dressed ladies on the great

flight of steps leading to the ponderous doors of Cumnor Towers. Back again to the town; another picking up of womankind in their best clothes, and another return, and so on till the whole party were assembled either in the house or in the really beautiful gardens. After the proper amount of exhibition on the one part, and admiration on the other, had been done, there was a collation for the visitors, and some more display and admiration of the treasures inside the house. Towards four o'clock, coffee was brought round; and this was a signal of the approaching carriage that was to take them back to their own homes; whither they returned with the happy consciousness of a well-spent day, but with some fatigue at the long-continued exertion of behaving their best, and talking on stilts for so many hours. Nor were Lady Cumnor and her daughters free from something of the same self-approbation, and something, too, of the same fatigue; the fatigue that always follows on conscious efforts to behave as will best please the society you are in.

For the first time in her life, Molly Gibson was to be included among the guests at the Towers. She was much too young to be a visitor at the school, so it was not on that account that she was to go; but it had so happened that one day when Lord Cumnor was on a "pottering" expedition, he had met Mr. Gibson, *the* doctor of the neighbourhood, coming out of the farm-house my lord was entering; and having some small question to ask the surgeon (Lord Cumnor seldom passed any one of his acquaintance without asking a question of some sort—not always attending to the answer; it was his mode of conversation), he accompanied Mr. Gibson to the out-building, to a ring in the wall of which the surgeon's horse was fastened. Molly was there too, sitting square and quiet on her rough little pony, waiting for her father. Her grave eyes opened large and wide at the close neighbourhood and evident advance of "the earl;" for

to her little imagination the grey-haired, red-faced, somewhat clumsy man, was a cross between an arch-angel and a king.

"Your daughter, eh, Gibson?—nice little girl, how old? Pony wants grooming though," patting it as he talked. "What's your name, my dear? He's sadly behindhand with his rent, as I was saying, but if he's really ill, I must see after Sheepshanks, who is a hardish man of business. What's his complaint? You'll come to our school-scrimmage on Thursday, little girl—what's-your-name? Mind you send her, or bring her, Gibson; and just give a word to your groom, for I'm sure that pony wasn't singed last year, now, was he? Don't forget Thursday, little girl—what's-your-name?—it's a promise between us, is it not?" And off the earl trotted, attracted by the sight of the farmer's eldest son on the other side of the yard.

Mr. Gibson mounted, and he and Molly rode off. They did not speak for some time. Then she said, "May I go, papa?" in rather an anxious little tone of voice.

"Where, my dear?" said he, wakening up out of his own professional thoughts.

"To the Towers—on Thursday, you know. That gentleman" (she was shy of calling him by his title), "asked me."

"Would you like it, my dear? It has always seemed to me rather a tiresome piece of gaiety—rather a tiring day, I mean—beginning so early—and the heat, and all that."

"Oh, papa!" said Molly, reproachfully.

"You'd like to go then, would you?"

"Yes; if I may!—He asked me, you know. Don't you think I may?—he asked me twice over."

"Well! we'll see—yes! I think we can manage it, if you wish it so much, Molly."

Then they were silent again. By-and-by, Molly said,—

"Please, papa—I do wish to go,—but I don't care about it."

"That's rather a puzzling speech. But I suppose you mean you don't care to go, if it will be any trouble to get you there. I can easily manage it, however, so you may consider it settled. You'll want a white frock, remember; you'd better tell Betty you're going, and she'll see after making you tidy."

Now, there were two or three things to be done by Mr. Gibson, before he could feel quite comfortable about Molly's going to the festival at the Towers, and each of them involved a little trouble on his part. But he was very willing to gratify his little girl; so the next day he rode over to the Towers, ostensibly to visit some sick housemaid, but, in reality, to throw himself in my lady's way, and get her to ratify Lord Cumnor's invitation to Molly. He chose his time, with a little natural diplomacy; which, indeed, he had often to exercise in his intercourse with the great family. He rode into the stable-yard about twelve o'clock, a little before luncheon-time, and yet after the worry of opening the post-bag and discussing its contents was over. After he had put up his horse, he went in by the back-way to the house; the "House" on this side, the "Towers" at the front. He saw his patient, gave his directions to the housekeeper, and then went out, with a rare wild-flower in his hand, to find one of the ladies Tranmere in the garden, where, according to his

hope and calculation, he came upon Lady Cumnor too,—now talking to her daughter about the contents of an open letter which she held in her hand, now directing a gardener about certain bedding-out plants.

"I was calling to see Nanny, and I took the opportunity of bringing Lady Agnes the plant I was telling her about as growing on Cumnor Moss."

"Thank you, so much, Mr. Gibson. Mamma, look! this is the *Drosera rotundifolia* I have been wanting so long."

"Ah! yes; very pretty I daresay, only I am no botanist. Nanny is better, I hope? We can't have any one laid up next week, for the house will be quite full of people,—and here are the Danbys waiting to offer themselves as well. One comes down for a fortnight of quiet, at Whitsuntide, and leaves half one's establishment in town, and as soon as people know of our being here, we get letters without end, longing for a breath of country air, or saying how lovely the Towers must look in spring; and I must own, Lord Cumnor is a great deal to blame for it all, for as soon as ever we are down here, he rides about to all the neighbours, and invites them to come over and spend a few days."

"We shall go back to town on Friday the 18th," said Lady Agnes, in a consolatory tone.

"Ah, yes! as soon as we have got over the school visitors' affair. But it is a week to that happy day."

"By the way!" said Mr. Gibson, availing himself of the good opening thus presented, "I met my lord at the Cross-trees Farm yesterday, and he was kind enough to ask my little daughter, who was with me, to be one of the party here on Thursday; it would give the lassie great pleasure, I believe." He paused for Lady Cumnor to speak.

"Oh, well! if my lord asked her, I suppose she must come, but I wish he was not so amazingly hospitable! Not but what the little girl will be quite welcome; only, you see, he met a younger Miss Browning the other day, of whose existence I had never heard."

"She visits at the school, mamma," said Lady Agnes.

"Well, perhaps she does; I never said she did not. I knew there was one visitor of the name of Browning; I never knew there were two, but, of course, as soon as Lord Cumnor heard there was another, he must needs ask her; so the carriage will have to go backwards and forwards four times now to fetch them all. So your daughter can come quite easily, Mr. Gibson, and I shall be very glad to see her for your sake. She can sit bodkin with the Brownings, I suppose? You'll arrange it all with them; and mind you get Nanny well up to her work next week."

Just as Mr. Gibson was going away, Lady Cumnor called after him, "Oh! by-the-by, Clare is here; you remember Clare, don't you? She was a patient of yours, long ago."

"Clare," he repeated, in a bewildered tone.

"Don't you recollect her? Miss Clare, our old governess," said Lady Agnes. "About twelve or fourteen years ago, before Lady Cuxhaven was married."

"Oh, yes!" said he. "Miss Clare, who had the scarlet fever here; a very pretty delicate girl. But I thought she was married!"

"Yes!" said Lady Cumnor. "She was a silly little thing, and did not know when she was well off; we were all very fond of her, I'm sure. She went and married a poor curate, and became a stupid Mrs. Kirkpatrick; but we always kept on

calling her 'Clare.' And now he's dead, and left her a widow, and she is staying here; and we are racking our brains to find out some way of helping her to a livelihood without parting her from her child. She's somewhere about the grounds, if you like to renew your acquaintance with her."

"Thank you, my lady. I'm afraid I cannot stop to-day. I have a long round to go; I've stayed here too long as it is, I'm afraid."

Long as his ride had been that day, he called on the Miss Brownings in the evening, to arrange about Molly's accompanying them to the Towers. They were tall handsome women, past their first youth, and inclined to be extremely complaisant to the widowed doctor.

"Eh dear! Mr. Gibson, but we shall be delighted to have her with us. You should never have thought of asking us such a thing," said Miss Browning the elder.

"I'm sure I'm hardly sleeping at nights for thinking of it," said Miss Phœbe. "You know I've never been there before. Sister has many a time; but somehow, though my name has been down on the visitors' list these three years, the countess has never named me in her note; and you know I could not push myself into notice, and go to such a grand place without being asked; how could I?"

"I told Phœbe last year," said her sister, "that I was sure it was only inadvertence, as one may call it, on the part of the countess, and that her ladyship would be as hurt as any one when she didn't see Phœbe among the school visitors; but Phœbe has got a delicate mind, you see, Mr. Gibson, and all I could say she wouldn't go, but stopped here at home; and it spoilt all my pleasure all that day, I do assure you, to think of Phœbe's face, as I saw it over the window-

blinds, as I rode away; her eyes were full of tears, if you'll believe me."

"I had a good cry after you was gone, Dorothy," said Miss Phœbe; "but for all that, I think I was right in stopping away from where I was not asked. Don't you, Mr. Gibson?"

"Certainly," said he. "And you see you are going this year; and last year it rained."

"Yes! I remember! I set myself to tidy my drawers, to string myself up, as it were; and I was so taken up with what I was about that I was quite startled when I heard the rain beating against the window-panes. 'Goodness me!' said I to myself, 'whatever will become of sister's white satin shoes, if she has to walk about on soppy grass after such rain as this?' for, you see, I thought a deal about her having a pair of smart shoes; and this year she has gone and got me a white satin pair just as smart as hers, for a surprise."

"Molly will know she's to put on her best clothes," said Miss Browning. "We could perhaps lend her a few beads, or artificials, if she wants them."

"Molly must go in a clean white frock," said Mr. Gibson, rather hastily; for he did not admire the Miss Brownings' taste in dress, and was unwilling to have his child decked up according to their fancy; he esteemed his old servant Betty's as the more correct, because the more simple. Miss Browning had just a shade of annoyance in her tone as she drew herself up, and said, "Oh! very well. It's quite right, I'm sure." But Miss Phœbe said, "Molly will look very nice in whatever she puts on, that's certain."

CHAPTER II.

A NOVICE AMONGST THE GREAT FOLK.

At ten o'clock on the eventful Thursday the Towers' carriage began its work. Molly was ready long before it made its first appearance, although it had been settled that she and the Miss Brownings were not to go until the last, or fourth, time of its coming. Her face had been soaped, scrubbed, and shone brilliantly clean; her frills, her frock, her ribbons were all snow-white. She had on a black mode cloak that had been her mother's; it was trimmed round with rich lace, and looked quaint and old-fashioned on the child. For the first time in her life she wore kid gloves; hitherto she had only had cotton ones. Her gloves were far too large for the little dimpled fingers, but as Betty had told her they were to last her for years, it was all very well. She trembled many a time, and almost turned faint once with the long expectation of the morning. Betty might say what she liked about a watched pot never boiling; Molly never ceased to watch the approach through the winding street, and after two hours the carriage came for her at last. She had to sit very forward to avoid crushing the Miss Brownings' new dresses; and yet not too forward, for fear of incommoding fat Mrs. Goodenough and her niece, who occupied the front seat of the carriage; so that altogether the fact of sitting down at all was rather doubtful, and to add to her discomfort, Molly felt herself to be very conspicuously placed in the centre of the carriage, a mark for all the observation of Hollingford. It was far too much of a gala day for the work of the little town to go forward with its usual regularity. Maid-servants gazed out of upper windows; shopkeepers' wives stood on the door-steps;

cottagers ran out, with babies in their arms; and little children, too young to know how to behave respectfully at the sight of an earl's carriage, huzzaed merrily as it bowled along. The woman at the lodge held the gate open, and dropped a low curtsey to the liveries. And now they were in the Park; and now they were in sight of the Towers, and silence fell upon the carriage-full of ladies, only broken by one faint remark from Mrs. Goodenough's niece, a stranger to the town, as they drew up before the double semicircle flight of steps which led to the door of the mansion.

"They call that a perron, I believe, don't they?" she asked. But the only answer she obtained was a simultaneous "hush." It was very awful, as Molly thought, and she half wished herself at home again. But she lost all consciousness of herself by-and-by when the party strolled out into the beautiful grounds, the like of which she had never even imagined. Green velvet lawns, bathed in sunshine, stretched away on every side into the finely wooded park; if there were divisions and ha-has between the soft sunny sweeps of grass, and the dark gloom of the forest-trees beyond, Molly did not see them; and the melting away of exquisite cultivation into the wilderness had an inexplicable charm to her. Near the house there were walls and fences; but they were covered with climbing roses, and rare honeysuckles and other creepers just bursting into bloom. There were flower-beds, too, scarlet, crimson, blue, orange; masses of blossom lying on the greensward. Molly held Miss Browning's hand very tight as they loitered about in company with several other ladies, and marshalled by a daughter of the Towers, who seemed half amused at the voluble admiration showered down upon every possible thing and place. Molly said nothing, as became her age and position, but every now and then she relieved her full heart by drawing a deep breath, almost like a sigh. Presently they came to the long glittering range

of greenhouses and hothouses, and an attendant gardener was there to admit the party. Molly did not care for this half so much as for the flowers in the open air; but Lady Agnes had a more scientific taste, she expatiated on the rarity of this plant, and the mode of cultivation required by that, till Molly began to feel very tired, and then very faint. She was too shy to speak for some time; but at length, afraid of making a greater sensation if she began to cry, or if she fell against the stands of precious flowers, she caught at Miss Browning's hand, and gasped out—

"May I go back, out into the garden? I can't breathe here!"

"Oh, yes, to be sure, love. I daresay it's hard understanding for you, love; but it's very fine and instructive, and a deal of Latin in it too."

She turned hastily round not to lose another word of Lady Agnes' lecture on orchids, and Molly turned back and passed out of the heated atmosphere. She felt better in the fresh air; and unobserved, and at liberty, went from one lovely spot to another, now in the open park, now in some shut-in flower-garden, where the song of the birds, and the drip of the central fountain, were the only sounds, and the tree-tops made an enclosing circle in the blue June sky; she went along without more thought as to her whereabouts than a butterfly has, as it skims from flower to flower, till at length she grew very weary, and wished to return to the house, but did not know how, and felt afraid of encountering all the strangers who would be there, unprotected by either of the Miss Brownings. The hot sun told upon her head, and it began to ache. She saw a great wide-spreading cedar-tree upon a burst of lawn towards which she was advancing, and the black repose beneath its branches lured her thither. There was a rustic seat in the

shadow, and weary Molly sate down there, and presently fell asleep.

She was startled from her slumbers after a time, and jumped to her feet. Two ladies were standing by her, talking about her. They were perfect strangers to her, and with a vague conviction that she had done something wrong, and also because she was worn-out with hunger, fatigue, and the morning's excitement, she began to cry.

"Poor little woman! She has lost herself; she belongs to some of the people from Hollingford, I have no doubt," said the oldest-looking of the two ladies; she who appeared to be about forty, though she did not really number more than thirty years. She was plain-featured, and had rather a severe expression on her face; her dress was as rich as any morning dress could be; her voice deep and unmodulated, —what in a lower rank of life would have been called gruff; but that was not a word to apply to Lady Cuxhaven, the eldest daughter of the earl and countess. The other lady looked much younger, but she was in fact some years the elder; at first sight Molly thought she was the most beautiful person she had ever seen, and she was certainly a very lovely woman. Her voice, too, was soft and plaintive, as she replied to Lady Cuxhaven,—

"Poor little darling! she is overcome by the heat, I have no doubt—such a heavy straw bonnet, too. Let me untie it for you, my dear."

Molly now found voice to say—"I am Molly Gibson, please. I came here with Miss Brownings;" for her great fear was that she should be taken for an unauthorized intruder.

"Miss Brownings?" said Lady Cuxhaven to her companion, as if inquiringly.

"I think they were the two tall large young women that Lady Agnes was talking about."

"Oh, I daresay. I saw she had a number of people in tow;" then looking again at Molly, she said, "Have you had anything to eat, child, since you came? You look a very white little thing; or is it the heat?"

"I have had nothing to eat," said Molly, rather piteously; for, indeed, before she fell asleep she had been very hungry.

The two ladies spoke to each other in a low voice; then the elder said in a voice of authority, which, indeed, she had always used in speaking to the other, "Sit still here, my dear; we are going to the house, and Clare shall bring you something to eat before you try to walk back; it must be a quarter of a mile at least." So they went away, and Molly sat upright, waiting for the promised messenger. She did not know who Clare might be, and she did not care much for food now; but she felt as if she could not walk without some help. At length she saw the pretty lady coming back, followed by a footman with a small tray.

"Look how kind Lady Cuxhaven is," said she who was called Clare. "She chose you out this little lunch herself; and now you must try and eat it, and you'll be quite right when you've had some food, darling—You need not stop, Edwards; I will bring the tray back with me."

There was some bread, and some cold chicken, and some jelly, and a glass of wine, and a bottle of sparkling water, and a bunch of grapes. Molly put out her trembling little hand for the water; but she was too faint to hold it. Clare

put it to her mouth, and she took a long draught and was refreshed. But she could not eat; she tried, but she could not; her headache was too bad. Clare looked bewildered. "Take some grapes, they will be the best for you; you must try and eat something, or I don't know how I shall get you to the house."

"My head aches so," said Molly, lifting her heavy eyes wistfully.

"Oh, dear, how tiresome!" said Clare, still in her sweet gentle voice, not at all as if she was angry, only expressing an obvious truth. Molly felt very guilty and very unhappy. Clare went on, with a shade of asperity in her tone: "You see, I don't know what to do with you here if you don't eat enough to enable you to walk home. And I've been out for these three hours trapesing about the grounds till I'm as tired as can be, and missed my lunch and all." Then, as if a new idea had struck her, she said,—"You lie back in that seat for a few minutes, and try to eat the bunch of grapes, and I'll wait for you, and just be eating a mouthful meanwhile. You are sure you don't want this chicken?"

Molly did as she was bid, and leant back, picking languidly at the grapes, and watching the good appetite with which the lady ate up the chicken and jelly, and drank the glass of wine. She was so pretty and so graceful in her deep mourning, that even her hurry in eating, as if she was afraid of some one coming to surprise her in the act, did not keep her little observer from admiring her in all she did.

"And now, darling, are you ready to go?" said she, when she had eaten up everything on the tray. "Oh, come; you have nearly finished your grapes; that's a good girl. Now, if you will come with me to the side entrance, I will take you

up to my own room, and you shall lie down on the bed for an hour or two; and if you have a good nap your headache will be quite gone."

So they set off, Clare carrying the empty tray, rather to Molly's shame; but the child had enough work to drag herself along, and was afraid of offering to do anything more. The "side entrance" was a flight of steps leading up from a private flower-garden into a private matted hall, or ante-room, out of which many doors opened, and in which were deposited the light garden-tools and the bows and arrows of the young ladies of the house. Lady Cuxhaven must have seen their approach, for she met them in this hall as soon as they came in.

"How is she now?" she asked; then glancing at the plates and glasses, she added, "Come, I think there can't be much amiss! You're a good old Clare, but you should have let one of the men fetch that tray in; life in such weather as this is trouble enough of itself."

Molly could not help wishing that her pretty companion would have told Lady Cuxhaven that she herself had helped to finish up the ample luncheon; but no such idea seemed to come into her mind. She only said,—"Poor dear! she is not quite the thing yet; has got a headache, she says. I am going to put her down on my bed, to see if she can get a little sleep."

Molly saw Lady Cuxhaven say something in a half-laughing manner to "Clare," as she passed her; and the child could not keep from tormenting herself by fancying that the words spoken sounded wonderfully like "Over-eaten herself, I suspect." However, she felt too poorly to worry herself long; the little white bed in the cool and pretty room had too many attractions for her aching head.

The muslin curtains flapped softly from time to time in the scented air that came through the open windows. Clare covered her up with a light shawl, and darkened the room. As she was going away Molly roused herself to say, "Please, ma'am, don't let them go away without me. Please ask somebody to waken me if I go to sleep. I am to go back with Miss Brownings."

"Don't trouble yourself about it, dear; I'll take care," said Clare, turning round at the door, and kissing her hand to little anxious Molly. And then she went away, and thought no more about it. The carriages came round at half-past four, hurried a little by Lady Cumnor, who had suddenly become tired of the business of entertaining, and annoyed at the repetition of indiscriminating admiration.

"Why not have both carriages out, mamma, and get rid of them all at once?" said Lady Cuxhaven. "This going by instalments is the most tiresome thing that could be imagined." So at last there had been a great hurry and an unmethodical way of packing off every one at once. Miss Browning had gone in the chariot (or "chawyot," as Lady Cumnor called it;—it rhymed to her daughter, Lady Hawyot —or Harriet, as the name was spelt in the *Peerage*), and Miss Phœbe had been speeded along with several other guests, away in a great roomy family conveyance, of the kind which we should now call an "omnibus." Each thought that Molly Gibson was with the other, and the truth was, that she lay fast asleep on Mrs. Kirkpatrick's bed—Mrs. Kirkpatrick *née* Clare.

The housemaids came in to arrange the room. Their talking aroused Molly, who sat up on the bed, and tried to push back the hair from her hot forehead, and to remember where she was. She dropped down on her feet by the side

of the bed, to the astonishment of the women, and said, —"Please, how soon are we going away?"

"Bless us and save us! who'd ha' thought of any one being in the bed? Are you one of the Hollingford ladies, my dear? They are all gone this hour or more!"

"Oh, dear, what shall I do? That lady they call Clare promised to waken me in time. Papa will so wonder where I am, and I don't know what Betty will say."

The child began to cry, and the housemaids looked at each other in some dismay and much sympathy. Just then, they heard Mrs. Kirkpatrick's step along the passages, approaching. She was singing some little Italian air in a low musical voice, coming to her bedroom to dress for dinner. One housemaid said to the other, with a knowing look, "Best leave it to her;" and they passed on to their work in the other rooms.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick opened the door, and stood aghast at the sight of Molly.

"Why, I quite forgot you!" she said at length. "Nay, don't cry; you'll make yourself not fit to be seen. Of course I must take the consequences of your over-sleeping yourself, and if I can't manage to get you back to Hollingford to-night, you shall sleep with me, and we'll do our best to send you home to-morrow morning."

"But papa!" sobbed out Molly. "He always wants me to make tea for him; and I have no night-things."

"Well, don't go and make a piece of work about what can't be helped now. I'll lend you night-things, and your papa must do without your making tea for him to-night. And another time don't over-sleep yourself in a strange

house; you may not always find yourself among such hospitable people as they are here. Why now, if you don't cry and make a figure of yourself, I'll ask if you may come in to dessert with Master Smythe and the little ladies. You shall go into the nursery, and have some tea with them; and then you must come back here and brush your hair and make yourself tidy. I think it is a very fine thing for you to be stopping in such a grand house as this; many a little girl would like nothing better."

During this speech she was arranging her toilette for dinner—taking off her black morning gown; putting on her dressing-gown; shaking her long soft auburn hair over her shoulders, and glancing about the room in search of various articles of her dress,—a running flow of easy talk came babbling out all the time.

"I have a little girl of my own, dear! I don't know what she would not give to be staying here at Lord Cumnor's with me; but, instead of that, she has to spend her holidays at school; and yet you are looking as miserable as can be at the thought of stopping for just one night. I really have been as busy as can be with those tiresome—those good ladies, I mean, from Hollingford—and one can't think of everything at a time."

Molly—only child as she was—had stopped her tears at the mention of that little girl of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's, and now she ventured to say,—

"Are you married, ma'am; I thought she called you Clare?"

In high good-humour Mrs. Kirkpatrick made reply:—"I don't look as if I was married, do I? Every one is surprised. And yet I have been a widow for seven months now: and

not a grey hair on my head, though Lady Cuxhaven, who is younger than I, has ever so many."

"Why do they call you 'Clare?'" continued Molly, finding her so affable and communicative.

"Because I lived with them when I was Miss Clare. It is a pretty name, isn't it? I married a Mr. Kirkpatrick; he was only a curate, poor fellow; but he was of a very good family, and if three of his relations had died without children I should have been a baronet's wife. But Providence did not see fit to permit it; and we must always resign ourselves to what is decreed. Two of his cousins married, and had large families; and poor dear Kirkpatrick died, leaving me a widow."

"You have a little girl?" asked Molly.

"Yes: darling Cynthia! I wish you could see her; she is my only comfort now. If I have time I will show you her picture when we come up to bed; but I must go now. It does not do to keep Lady Cumnor waiting a moment, and she asked me to be down early, to help with some of the people in the house. Now I shall ring this bell, and when the housemaid comes, ask her to take you into the nursery, and to tell Lady Cuxhaven's nurse who you are. And then you'll have tea with the little ladies, and come in with them to dessert. There! I'm sorry you've over-slept yourself, and are left here; but give me a kiss, and don't cry—you really are rather a pretty child, though you've not got Cynthia's colouring! Oh, Nanny, would you be so very kind as to take this young lady—(what's your name, my dear? Gibson?),—Miss Gibson, to Mrs. Dyson, in the nursery, and ask her to allow her to drink tea with the young ladies there; and to send her in with them to dessert. I'll explain it all to my lady."

Nanny's face brightened out of its gloom when she heard the name Gibson; and, having ascertained from Molly that she was "the doctor's" child, she showed more willingness to comply with Mrs. Kirkpatrick's request than was usual with her.

Molly was an obliging girl, and fond of children; so, as long as she was in the nursery, she got on pretty well, being obedient to the wishes of the supreme power, and even very useful to Mrs. Dyson, by playing at tricks, and thus keeping a little one quiet while its brothers and sisters were being arrayed in gay attire,—lace and muslin, and velvet, and brilliant broad ribbons.

"Now, miss," said Mrs. Dyson, when her own especial charge were all ready, "what can I do for you? You have not got another frock here, have you?" No, indeed, she had not; nor if she had had one, could it have been of a smarter nature than her present thick white dimity. So she could only wash her face and hands, and submit to the nurse's brushing and perfuming her hair. She thought she would rather have stayed in the park all night long, and slept under the beautiful quiet cedar, than have to undergo the unknown ordeal of "going down to dessert," which was evidently regarded both by children and nurses as the event of the day. At length there was a summons from a footman, and Mrs. Dyson, in a rustling silk gown, marshalled her convoy, and set sail for the dining-room door.

There was a large party of gentlemen and ladies sitting round the decked table, in the brilliantly lighted room. Each dainty little child ran up to its mother, or aunt, or particular friend; but Molly had no one to go to.

"Who is that tall girl in the thick white frock? Not one of the children of the house, I think?"

The lady addressed put up her glass, gazed at Molly, and dropped it in an instant. "A French girl, I should imagine. I know Lady Cuxhaven was inquiring for one to bring up with her little girls, that they might get a good accent early. Poor little woman, she looks wild and strange!" And the speaker, who sate next to Lord Cumnor, made a little sign to Molly to come to her; Molly crept up to her as to the first shelter; but when the lady began talking to her in French, she blushed violently, and said in a very low voice,—

"I don't understand French. I'm only Molly Gibson, ma'am."

"Molly Gibson!" said the lady, out loud; as if that was not much of an explanation.

Lord Cumnor caught the words and the tone.

"Oh, ho!" said he. "Are you the little girl who has been sleeping in my bed?"

He imitated the deep voice of the fabulous bear, who asks this question of the little child in the story; but Molly had never read the "Three Bears," and fancied that his anger was real; she trembled a little, and drew nearer to the kind lady who had beckoned her as to a refuge. Lord Cumnor was very fond of getting hold of what he fancied was a joke, and working his idea threadbare; so all the time the ladies were in the room he kept on his running fire at Molly, alluding to the Sleeping Beauty, the Seven Sleepers, and any other famous sleeper that came into his head. He had no idea of the misery his jokes were to the sensitive girl, who already thought herself a miserable sinner, for having slept on, when she ought to have been awake. If