Wives and Daughters

illustrated

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

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CHAPTER I.

THE DAWN OF A GALA DAY.

o 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 overslept 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 Molly had been in the habit of putting two and two together, she might have found an excuse for herself, by remembering that Mrs. Kirkpatrick had promised faithfully to awaken her in time; but all the girl thought of was, how little they wanted her in this grand house; how she must seem like a careless intruder who had no business there. Once or twice she wondered where her father was, and whether he was missing her; but the thought of the familiar happiness of home brought such a choking in her throat, that she felt she must not give way to it, for fear of bursting out crying; and she had instinct enough to feel that, as she was left at the Towers, the less trouble she gave, the more she kept herself out of observation, the better.

She followed the ladies out of the dining-room, almost hoping that no one would see her. But that was impossible, and she immediately became the subject of conversation between the awful Lady Cumnor and her kind neighbour at dinner.

"Do you know, I thought this young lady was French when I first saw her? she has got the black hair and eyelashes, and grey eyes, and colourless complexion which one meets with in some parts of France, and I know Lady Cuxhaven was trying to find a well-educated girl who would be a pleasant companion to her children."

"No!" said Lady Cumnor, looking very stern, as Molly thought. "She is the daughter of our medical man at Hollingford; she came with the school visitors this morning, and she was overcome by the heat and fell asleep in Clare's room, and somehow managed to over-sleep herself, and did not waken up till all the carriages were gone. We will send her home to-morrow morning, but for to-night she must stay here, and Clare is kind enough to say she may sleep with her."

There was an implied blame running through this speech, that Molly felt like needle-points all over her. Lady Cuxhaven came up at this moment. Her tone was as deep, her manner of speaking as abrupt and authoritative, as her mother's, but Molly felt the kinder nature underneath.

"How are you now, my dear? You look better than you did under the cedar-tree. So you're to stop here to-night? Clare, don't you think we could find some of those books of engravings that would interest Miss Gibson."

Mrs. Kirkpatrick came gliding up to the place where Molly stood; and began petting her with pretty words and actions, while Lady Cuxhaven turned over heavy volumes in search of one that might interest the girl.

"Poor darling! I saw you come into the dining-room, looking so shy; and I wanted you to come near me, but I could not make a sign to you, because Lord Cuxhaven was speaking to me at the time, telling me about his travels. Ah, here is a nice book—*Lodge's Portraits*; now I'll sit by you and tell you who they all are, and all about them. Don't trouble yourself any more, dear Lady Cuxhaven; I'll take charge of her; pray leave her to me!"

Molly grew hotter and hotter as these last words met her ear. If they would only leave her alone, and not labour at being kind to her; would "not trouble themselves" about her! These words of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's seemed to quench the gratitude she was feeling to Lady Cuxhaven for looking for something to amuse her. But, of course, it was a trouble, and she ought never to have been there.

By-and-by, Mrs. Kirkpatrick was called away to accompany Lady Agnes' song; and then Molly really had a few minutes' enjoyment. She could look round the room, unobserved, and, sure, never was any place out of a king's house so grand and magnificent. Large mirrors, velvet curtains, pictures in their gilded frames, a multitude of dazzling lights decorated the vast saloon, and the floor was studded with groups of ladies and gentlemen, all dressed in gorgeous attire. Suddenly Molly bethought her of the children whom she had accompanied into the dining-room, and to whose ranks she had appeared to belong,—where were they? Gone to bed an hour before, at some quiet signal from their mother. Molly wondered if she might go, too—if she could ever find her way back to the haven of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's bedroom. But she was at some distance from the door; a long way from Mrs. Kirkpatrick, to whom she felt herself to belong more than to any one else. Far, too, from Lady Cuxhaven, and the terrible Lady Cumnor, and her jocose and good-natured lord. So Molly sate on, turning over pictures which she did not see; her heart growing heavier and heavier in the desolation of all this grandeur. Presently a footman entered the room, and after a moment's looking about him, he went up to Mrs. Kirkpatrick, where she sate at the piano, the centre of the musical portion of the company, ready to

accompany any singer, and smiling pleasantly as she willingly acceded to all requests. She came now towards Molly, in her corner, and said to her,—

"Do you know, darling, your papa has come for you, and brought your pony for you to ride home; so I shall lose my little bedfellow, for I suppose you must go?"

Go! was there a question of it in Molly's mind, as she stood up quivering, sparkling, almost crying out loud. She was brought to her senses, though, by Mrs. Kirkpatrick's next words.

"You must go and wish Lady Cumnor good-night, you know, my dear, and thank her ladyship for her kindness to you. She is there, near that statue, talking to Mr. Courtenay."

Yes! she was there—forty feet away—a hundred miles away! All that blank space had to be crossed; and then a speech to be made!

"Must I go?" asked Molly, in the most pitiful and pleading voice possible.

"Yes; make haste about it; there is nothing so formidable in it, is there?" replied Mrs. Kirkpatrick, in a sharper voice than before, aware that they were wanting her at the piano, and anxious to get the business in hand done as soon as possible.

Molly stood still for a minute, then, looking up, she said, softly,—

"Would you mind coming with me, please?"

"No! not I!" said Mrs. Kirkpatrick, seeing that her compliance was likely to be the most speedy way of getting through the affair; so she took Molly's hand, and, on the way, in passing the group at the piano, she said, smiling, in her pretty genteel manner,—

"Our little friend here is shy and modest, and wants me to accompany her to Lady Cumnor to wish good-night; her father has come for her, and she is going away."

Molly did not know how it was afterwards, but she pulled her hand out of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's on hearing these words, and going a step or two in advance came up to Lady Cumnor, grand in purple velvet, and dropping a curtsey, almost after the fashion of the school-children, she said,—

"My lady, papa is come, and I am going away; and, my lady, I wish you good-night, and thank you for your kindness. Your ladyship's kindness, I mean," she said, correcting herself as she remembered Miss Browning's particular instructions as to the etiquette to be observed to earls and countesses, and their honourable progeny, as they were given that morning on the road to the Towers.

She got out of the saloon somehow; she believed afterwards, on thinking about it, that she had never bidden good-by to Lady Cuxhaven, or Mrs. Kirkpatrick, or "all the rest of them," as she irreverently styled them in her thoughts.

Mr. Gibson was in the housekeeper's room, when Molly ran in, rather to the stately Mrs. Brown's discomfiture. She threw her arms round her father's neck. "Oh, papa, papa, papa! I am so glad you have come;" and then she burst out crying, stroking his face almost hysterically as if to make sure he was there.

"Why, what a noodle you are, Molly! Did you think I was going to give up my little girl to live at the Towers all the rest of her life? You make as much work about my coming for you, as if you thought I had. Make haste, now, and get on your bonnet. Mrs. Brown, may I ask you for a shawl, or a plaid, or a wrap of some kind to pin about her for a petticoat?"

He did not mention that he had come home from a long round not half an hour before, a round from which he had returned dinnerless and hungry; but, on finding that Molly had not come back from the Towers, he had ridden his tired horse round by Miss Brownings', and found them in self-reproachful, helpless dismay. He would not wait to listen to their tearful apologies; he galloped home, had a fresh horse and Molly's pony saddled, and though Betty called after him with a riding-skirt for the child, when he was not ten yards from his own stable-door, he refused to turn back for it, but went off, as Dick the stableman said, "muttering to himself awful."

Mrs. Brown had her bottle of wine out, and her plate of cake, before Molly came back from her long expedition to Mrs. Kirkpatrick's room, "pretty nigh on to a quarter of a mile off," as the housekeeper informed the impatient father, as he waited for his child to come down arrayed in her morning's finery with the gloss of newness worn off. Mr. Gibson was a favourite in all the Towers' household, as family doctors generally are; bringing hopes of relief at times of anxiety and distress; and Mrs. Brown, who was subject to gout, especially delighted in petting him whenever he would allow her. She even went out into the stable-yard to pin Molly up in the shawl, as she sate upon the rough-coated pony, and hazarded the somewhat safe conjecture,—

"I daresay she'll be happier at home, Mr. Gibson," as they rode away.

Once out into the park Molly struck her pony, and urged him on as hard as he would go. Mr. Gibson called out at last:

"Molly! we're coming to the rabbit-holes; it's not safe to go at such a pace. Stop." And as she drew rein he rode up alongside of her.

"We're getting into the shadow of the trees, and it's not safe riding fast here."

"Oh! papa, I never was so glad in all my life. I felt like a lighted candle when they're putting the extinguisher on it."

"Did you? How d'ye know what the candle feels?"

"Oh, I don't know, but I did." And again, after a pause she said,—"Oh, I am so glad to be here! It is so pleasant riding here in the open, free,

fresh air, crushing out such a good smell from the dewy grass. Papa! are you there? I can't see you."

He rode close up alongside of her: he was not sure but what she might be afraid of riding in the dark shadows, so he laid his hand upon hers.

"Oh! I am so glad to feel you," squeezing his hand hard. "Papa, I should like to get a chain like Ponto's, just as long as your longest round, and then I could fasten us two to each end of it, and when I wanted you I could pull, and if you didn't want to come, you could pull back again; but I should know you knew I wanted you, and we could never lose each other."

"I'm rather lost in that plan of yours; the details, as you state them, are a little puzzling; but if I make them out rightly, I am to go about the country, like the donkeys on the common, with a clog fastened to my hind leg."

"I don't mind your calling me a clog, if only we were fastened together."

"But I do mind you calling me a donkey," he replied.

"I never did. At least I didn't mean to. But it is such a comfort to know that I may be as rude as I like."

"Is that what you've learnt from the grand company you've been keeping to-day? I expected to find you so polite and ceremonious, that I read a few chapters of *Sir Charles Grandison*, in order to bring myself up to concert pitch."

"Oh, I do hope I shall never be a lord or a lady."

"Well, to comfort you, I'll tell you this: I'm sure you'll never be a lord; and I think the chances are a thousand to one against your ever being the other, in the sense in which you mean."

"I should lose myself every time I had to fetch my bonnet, or else get tired of long passages and great staircases long before I could go out walking."

"But you'd have your lady's-maid, you know."

"Do you know, papa, I think lady's-maids are worse than ladies. I should not mind being a housekeeper so much."

"No! the jam-cupboards and dessert would lie very conveniently to one's hand," replied her father, meditatively. "But Mrs. Brown tells me that the thought of the dinners often keeps her from sleeping; there's that anxiety to be taken into consideration. Still, in every condition of life, there are heavy cares and responsibilities."

"Well! I suppose so," said Molly, gravely. "I know Betty says I wear her life out with the green stains I get in my frocks from sitting in the cherry-tree."

"And Miss Browning said she had fretted herself into a headache with thinking how they had left you behind. I'm afraid you'll be as bad as a bill of fare to them to-night. How did it all happen, goosey?"

"Oh, I went by myself to see the gardens; they are so beautiful! and I lost myself, and sat down to rest under a great tree; and Lady Cuxhaven and that Mrs. Kirkpatrick came; and Mrs. Kirkpatrick brought me some lunch, and then put me to sleep on her bed,—and I thought she would waken me in time, and she didn't; and so they'd all gone away; and when they planned for me to stop till to-morrow, I didn't like saying how very, very much I wanted to go home,—but I kept thinking how you would wonder where I was."

"Then it was rather a dismal day of pleasure, goosey, eh?"

"Not in the morning. I shall never forget the morning in that garden. But I was never so unhappy in all my life, as I have been all this long afternoon."

Mr. Gibson thought it his duty to ride round by the Towers, and pay a visit of apology and thanks to the family, before they left for London. He found them all on the wing, and no one was sufficiently at liberty to listen to his grateful civilities but Mrs. Kirkpatrick, who, although she was to accompany Lady Cuxhaven, and pay a visit to her former pupil, made leisure enough to receive Mr. Gibson, on behalf of the family; and assured him of her faithful remembrance of his great professional attention to her in former days in the most winning manner.

CHAPTER III.

MOLLY GIBSON'S CHILDHOOD.

Sixteen years before this time, all Hollingford had been disturbed to its foundations by the intelligence that Mr. Hall, the skilful doctor, who had attended them all their days, was going to take a partner. It was no use reasoning to them on the subject; so Mr. Browning the vicar, Mr. Sheepshanks (Lord Cumnor's agent), and Mr. Hall himself, the masculine reasoners of the little society, left off the attempt, feeling that the *Che sarà sarà* would prove more silencing to the murmurs than many arguments. Mr. Hall had told his faithful patients that, even with the strongest spectacles, his sight was not to be depended upon; and they might have found out for themselves that his hearing was very defective, although, on this point, he obstinately adhered to his own opinion, and was frequently heard to regret the carelessness of people's communication nowadays, "like writing on blotting-paper, all the words running into each other," he would say. And more than once Mr. Hall had had attacks of a suspicious nature,—"rheumatism" he used to call them, but he prescribed for himself as if they had been gout—which had prevented his immediate attention to imperative summonses. But, blind and deaf, and rheumatic as he might be, he was still Mr. Hall the doctor who could heal all their ailments—unless they died meanwhile—and he had no right to speak of growing old, and taking a partner.

He went very steadily to work all the same; advertising in medical journals, reading testimonials, sifting character and qualifications; and just when the elderly maiden ladies of Hollingford thought that they had convinced their contemporary that he was as young as ever, he startled them by bringing his new partner, Mr. Gibson, to call upon them, and began "slyly," as these ladies said, to introduce him into practice. And "who was this Mr. Gibson?" they asked, and echo might answer the question, if she liked, for no one else did. No one ever in all his life knew anything more of his antecedents than the Hollingford people might have found out the first day they saw him: that he was tall, grave, rather handsome than otherwise; thin enough to be called "a very genteel figure," in those days, before muscular Christianity had come into vogue; speaking with a slight Scotch accent; and, as one good lady observed, "so very trite in his conversation," by which she meant sarcastic. As to his birth, parentage, and education,—the favourite conjecture of Hollingford society was, that he was the illegitimate son of a Scotch duke, by a Frenchwoman; and the grounds for this conjecture were these:—He spoke with a Scotch accent; therefore, he must be Scotch. He had a very genteel appearance, an elegant figure, and was apt —so his ill-wishers said—to give himself airs; therefore, his father must have been some person of quality; and, that granted, nothing was easier than to run this supposition up all the notes of the scale of the peerage, —baronet, baron, viscount, earl, marquis, duke. Higher they dared not go, though one old lady, acquainted with English history, hazarded the remark, that "she believed that one or two of the Stuarts—hem—had not

always been,—ahem—quite correct in their—conduct; and she fancied such—ahem—things ran in families." But, in popular opinion, Mr. Gibson's father always remained a duke; nothing more.

Then his mother must have been a Frenchwoman, because his hair was so black; and he was so sallow; and because he had been in Paris. All this might be true, or might not; nobody ever knew, or found out anything more about him than what Mr. Hall told them, namely, that his professional qualifications were as high as his moral character, and that both were far above the average, as Mr. Hall had taken pains to ascertain before introducing him to his patients. The popularity of this world is as transient as its glory, as Mr. Hall found out before the first year of his partnership was over. He had plenty of leisure left to him now to nurse his gout and cherish his eyesight. The younger doctor had carried the day; nearly every one sent for Mr. Gibson. Even at the great houses—even at the Towers, that greatest of all, where Mr. Hall had introduced his new partner with fear and trembling, with untold anxiety as to his behaviour, and the impression he might make on my lord the Earl, and my lady the Countess, Mr. Gibson was received at the end of a twelvemonth with as much welcome respect for his professional skill as Mr. Hall himself had ever been. Nay—and this was a little too much for even the kind old doctor's good temper—Mr. Gibson had even been invited once to dinner at the Towers, to dine with the great Sir Astley, the head of the profession! To be sure, Mr. Hall had been asked as well; but he was laid up just then with his gout (since he had had a partner the rheumatism had been allowed to develope itself), and he had not been able to go. Poor Mr. Hall never quite got over this mortification; after it he allowed himself to become dim of sight and hard of hearing, and kept pretty closely to the house during the two winters that remained of his life. He sent for an orphan grand-niece to keep him company in his old age; he, the woman-contemning old bachelor, became thankful for the cheerful presence of the pretty, bonny Mary Pearson, who was good and sensible, and nothing more. She formed a close friendship with the daughters of the vicar, Mr. Browning, and Mr. Gibson found time to become very intimate with all three. Hollingford speculated much on which young lady would become Mrs. Gibson, and was rather sorry when the talk about possibilities, and the gossip about probabilities, with regard to the handsome young surgeon's marriage, ended in the most natural manner in the world, by his marrying his predecessor's niece. The two Miss Brownings showed no signs of going into a consumption on the occasion, although their looks and manners were carefully watched. On the contrary, they were rather boisterously merry at the wedding, and poor Mrs. Gibson it was that died of consumption, four or five years after her marriage—three years after the death of her great-uncle, and when her only child, Molly, was just three years old.

Mr. Gibson did not speak much about the grief at the loss of his wife, which it was supposed that he felt. Indeed, he avoided all demonstrations of sympathy, and got up hastily and left the room when Miss Phœbe Browning first saw him after his loss, and burst into an uncontrollable flood of tears, which threatened to end in hysterics. Miss Browning declared she never could forgive him for his hard-heartedness on that occasion; but a fortnight afterwards she came to very high words with old Mrs. Goodenough, for gasping out her doubts whether Mr. Gibson was a man of deep feeling; judging by the narrowness of his crape hat-band, which ought to have covered his hat, whereas there was at least three inches of beaver to be seen. And, in spite of it all, Miss Browning and Miss Phœbe considered themselves as Mr. Gibson's most intimate friends, in right of their regard for his dead wife, and would fain have taken a quasi-motherly interest in his little girl, had she not been guarded by a watchful dragon in the shape of Betty, her nurse, who was jealous of any interference between her and her charge; and especially resentful and disagreeable towards all those ladies who, by suitable age, rank, or propinquity, she thought capable of "casting sheep's eyes at master."

Several years before the opening of this story, Mr. Gibson's position seemed settled for life, both socially and professionally. He was a widower, and likely to remain so; his domestic affections were centred on little Molly, but even to her, in their most private moments, he did not give way to much expression of his feelings; his most caressing appellation for her was "Goosey," and he took a pleasure in bewildering her infant mind with his badinage. He had rather a contempt for demonstrative people, arising from his medical insight into the consequences to health of uncontrolled feeling. He deceived himself into believing that still his reason was lord of all, because he had never fallen into the habit of expression on any other than purely intellectual subjects. Molly, however, had her own intuitions to guide her. Though her papa laughed at her, quizzed her, joked at her, in a way which the Miss Brownings called "really cruel" to each other when they were quite alone, Molly took her little griefs and pleasures, and poured them into her papa's ears, sooner even than into Betty's, that kind-hearted termagant. The child grew to understand her father well, and the two had the most delightful intercourse together—half banter, half seriousness, but altogether confidential friendship. Mr. Gibson kept three servants; Betty, a cook, and a girl who was supposed to be housemaid, but who was under both the elder two, and had a pretty life of it in consequence. Three servants would not have been required if it had not been Mr. Gibson's habit, as it had been Mr. Hall's before him, to take two "pupils" as they were called in the genteel language of Hollingford, "apprentices" as they were in fact—being bound by indentures, and paying a handsome premium to learn their business.

They lived in the house, and occupied an uncomfortable, ambiguous, or, as Miss Browning called it with some truth, "amphibious" position. They had their meals with Mr. Gibson and Molly, and were felt to be terribly in the way; Mr. Gibson not being a man who could make conversation, and hating the duty of talking under restraint. Yet something within him made him wince, as if his duties were not rightly performed, when, as the cloth was drawn, the two awkward lads rose up with joyful alacrity, gave him a nod, which was to be interpreted as a bow, knocked against each other in their endeavours to get out of the dining-room quickly; and then might be heard dashing along a passage which led to the surgery, choking with half-suppressed laughter. Yet the annoyance he felt at this dull sense of imperfectly fulfilled duties only made his sarcasms on their inefficiency, or stupidity, or ill manners, more bitter than before.

Beyond direct professional instruction, he did not know what to do with the succession of pairs of young men, whose mission seemed to be, to be plagued by their master consciously, and to plague him unconsciously. Once or twice Mr. Gibson had declined taking a fresh pupil, in the hopes of shaking himself free from the incubus, but his reputation as a clever surgeon had spread so rapidly that his fees which he had thought prohibitory, were willingly paid, in order that the young man might make a start in life, with the prestige of having been a pupil of Gibson of Hollingford. But as Molly grew to be a little girl instead of a child, when she was about eight years old, her father perceived the awkwardness of her having her breakfasts and dinners so often alone with the pupils, without his uncertain presence. To do away with this evil, more than for the actual instruction she could give, he engaged a respectable woman, the daughter of a shopkeeper in the town, who had left a destitute family, to come every morning before breakfast, and to stay with Molly till he came home at night; or, if he was detained, until the child's bed-time.

"Now, Miss Eyre," said he, summing up his instructions the day before she entered upon her office, "remember this: you are to make good tea for the young men, and see that they have their meals comfortably, and—you are five-and-thirty, I think you said?—try and make them talk,—rationally, I am afraid is beyond your or anybody's power; but make them talk without stammering or giggling. Don't teach Molly too much: she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I'll see about giving it to her myself. After all, I'm not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name; it's rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy; but, however, we must yield to the prejudices of society, Miss Eyre, and so you may teach the child to read."

Miss Eyre listened in silence, perplexed but determined to be obedient to the directions of the doctor, whose kindness she and her family had good cause to know. She made strong tea; she helped the young men liberally in Mr. Gibson's absence, as well as in his presence, and she found the way to unloosen their tongues, whenever their master was away, by talking to them on trivial subjects in her pleasant homely way. She taught Molly to read and write, but tried honestly to keep her back in every other branch of education. It was only by fighting and struggling hard, that bit by bit Molly persuaded her father to let her have French and drawing lessons. He was always afraid of her becoming too much educated, though he need not have been alarmed; the masters who visited such small country towns as Hollingford forty years ago, were no such great proficients in their arts. Once a week she joined a dancing class in the assembly-room at the principal inn in the town: the "George;" and, being daunted by her father in every intellectual attempt, she read every book that came in her way, almost with as much delight as if it had been forbidden. For his station in life, Mr. Gibson had an unusually good library; the medical portion of it was inaccessible to Molly, being kept in the surgery, but every other book she had either read, or tried to read. Her summer place of study was that seat in the cherry-tree, where she got the green stains on her frock, that have already been mentioned as likely to wear Betty's life out. In spite of this "hidden worm i' th' bud," Betty was to all appearance strong, alert, and flourishing. She was the one crook in Miss Eyre's lot, who was otherwise so happy in having met with a suitable well-paid employment just when she needed it most. But Betty, though agreeing in theory with her master when he told her of the necessity of having a governess for his little daughter, was vehemently opposed to any division of her authority and influence over the child who had been her charge, her plague, and her delight ever since Mrs. Gibson's death. She took up her position as censor of all Miss Eyre's sayings and doings from the very first, and did not for a moment condescend to conceal her disapprobation. In her heart she could not help respecting the patience and painstaking of the good lady,—for a "lady" Miss Eyre was in the best sense of the word, though in Hollingford she only took rank as a shopkeeper's daughter. Yet Betty buzzed about her with the teasing pertinacity of a gnat, always ready to find fault, if not to bite. Miss Eyre's only defence came from the quarter whence it might least have been expected—from her pupil; on whose fancied behalf, as an oppressed little personage, Betty always based her attacks. But very early in the day Molly perceived their injustice, and soon afterwards she began to respect Miss Eyre for her silent endurance of what evidently gave her far more pain than Betty imagined. Mr. Gibson had been a friend in need to her family, so Miss Eyre restrained her complaints, sooner than annoy him. And she had her reward. Betty would offer Molly all sorts of

small temptations to neglect Miss Eyre's wishes; Molly steadily resisted, and plodded away at her task of sewing or her difficult sum. Betty made cumbrous jokes at Miss Eyre's expense; Molly looked up with the utmost gravity, as if requesting the explanation of an unintelligible speech; and there is nothing so quenching to a wag as to be asked to translate his jest into plain matter-of-fact English, and to show wherein the point lies. Occasionally Betty lost her temper entirely, and spoke impertinently to Miss Eyre; but when this had been done in Molly's presence, the girl flew out into such a violent passion of words in defence of her silent trembling governess, that even Betty herself was daunted, though she chose to take the child's anger as a good joke, and tried to persuade Miss Eyre herself to join in her amusement.

"Bless the child! one 'ud think I was a hungry pussy-cat, and she a hen-sparrow, with her wings all fluttering, and her little eyes aflame, and her beak ready to peck me just because I happened to look near her nest. Nay, child! if thou lik'st to be stifled in a nasty close room, learning things as is of no earthly good when they is learnt, instead o' riding on Job Donkin's hay-cart, it's thy look-out, not mine. She's a little vixen, isn't she?" smiling at Miss Eyre, as she finished her speech. But the poor governess saw no humour in the affair; the comparison of Molly to a hen-sparrow was lost upon her. She was sensitive and conscientious, and knew, from home experience, the evils of an ungovernable temper. So she began to reprove Molly for giving way to her passion, and the child thought it hard to be blamed for what she considered her just anger against Betty. But, after all, these were the small grievances of a very happy childhood.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. GIBSON'S NEIGHBOURS.