

MRS. MOLESWORTH



***THE LAUREL
WALK***

Mrs. Molesworth

The Laurel Walk

EAN 8596547337607

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

["The Laurel Walk"](#)

[Chapter One.](#)

[Chapter Two.](#)

[Chapter Three.](#)

[Chapter Four.](#)

[Chapter Five.](#)

[Chapter Six.](#)

[Chapter Seven.](#)

[Chapter Eight.](#)

[Chapter Nine.](#)

[Chapter Ten.](#)

[Chapter Eleven.](#)

[Chapter Twelve.](#)

[Chapter Thirteen.](#)

[Chapter Fourteen.](#)

[Chapter Fifteen.](#)

[Chapter Sixteen.](#)

[Chapter Seventeen.](#)

[Chapter Eighteen.](#)

[Chapter Nineteen.](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty One.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four.](#)

"The Laurel Walk"

[Table of Contents](#)



Chapter One.

[Table of Contents](#)

A Rainy Evening.



Mary Louise Holmes

There was a chemist's shop at Craig Bay, quite a smart chemist's shop, with plate-glass windows and the orthodox "purple" and other coloured jars of Rosamund fame. It was one of the inconsistencies of the place, of which there were several. For Craig Bay was far from being a town; it was not even a big village, and the two or three shops of its early days were of the simplest and quaintest description, emporiums of a little of everything, into which you made your way by descending two or three steps below the level of the rough pavement outside. The chemist's shop was the first established, I think, of the new order of things, when the place and neighbourhood suddenly rose into repute as peculiarly bracing and healthy from the mingling of sea and hill air with which they were favoured. It was kept in countenance now by several others, a draper's, a stationer's, a photographer's, of course, besides the imperative butcher's, fishmonger's, and so on, some of which subsided into closed shutters and vacancy after the "season" was over and the visitors had departed. For endeavours which had been made to introduce a *winter* season had not been crowned with success. The place was too out-of-the-way, the boasted mildness of climate not altogether to be depended upon. But the chemist's shop stood faithfully open all the year round, doing a little business in wares not, strictly speaking, belonging to it, such as note-paper and even books, when the library-and-stationer's in one had gone to sleep for the time.

On a cold raw evening in late November, Betty Morion stood waiting for her sister Frances on the door-step of the shop. It would have been warmer inside, but Betty had her

fancies, like many other people, and one of them was a dislike to the smell of drugs, with which “inside,” naturally, was impregnated. And she was thickly clad and fairly well used to cold and to damp—even to rain—for to-night it was drizzling depressingly.

“I wish Francie would be quick,” thought the girl more than once during the first few moments of her waiting, though she knew it was certainly not poor Frances’ fault. Their father’s prescriptions had always some very special and peculiar directions accompanying them, and Betty knew of old that the waiting for them was apt to be a long affair.

And she was not of an impatient nature. After a while she forgot about the tiresomeness, and fell to watching the reflections of the brilliant colours of the jars in the puddles and on the surface of the wet pavement just below her, as she had often watched them before. They were pretty—in a sense—and yet somehow they made the surrounding dreariness drearier.

“I wonder if it does rain more here than anywhere else,” she said to herself dreamily. “What a splashing walk home we shall have! I wish we did not live up a hill—at least I think I wish we didn’t, though perhaps if our house was down here I should wish it was higher up! Perhaps it doesn’t really rain more at Craig Bay than at other places, but we notice it more. For nearly everything pleasant that ever comes to us depends on the weather.” And Betty sighed. “I could fancy,” she went on, “living in a way that would make one scarcely care what it was like out of doors. A beautiful big house with ferneries and conservatories, and lovely rooms to wander about in, and a library full of delightful

books, and lots of people to stay with us and—well, yes, of course, it would be nice to go drives and rides and walks too, and to have exquisite gardens. But still life might be very pleasant even when it did rain,” and again Betty sighed. “It needn’t be anything so very tremendous, after all,” she added to herself. “Craig-Morion might be—” but a gentle touch on her shoulder made her turn. It was her sister, packages in hand, and rather embarrassed by her umbrella.

“Can you open it for me, dear?” she said, and Betty hastened to do so. “I am so afraid,” Frances went on, when Betty’s own umbrella was ready for business too, and they were both under way, “I am so afraid of dropping any of these things. Papa is so anxious to have them at once. Do you remember the day that Eira dropped the bottle of red ink—wasn’t it dreadful?” and Frances laughed a little at the recollection.

Her laugh was very sweet, but scarcely merry. There are laughs which tell of sadness more quickly almost than tears. But it was not that kind either; it was the laugh of one who is resolutely cheerful, who has learnt by experience the wisdom of making the best of things—a lesson not often learnt by the young while young, though by some it is acquired so gradually and unconsciously that on looking back from the table-land of later years they do not realise it had ever been a lesson to be learnt at all.

For its roots lie deeper than philosophy. They are to be found in unselfishness, in self-forgetting, and earnest longing to carry the burdens of others, or at least to share them.

And Frances Morion was still young, though twenty-seven. She by no means looked her age. Her life in many ways had been a healthy one in its material surroundings, and she herself had made it so in other ways.

Betty scarcely laughed in return. It is doubtful if she heard what her sister said.

"Isn't it *horribly* wet?" she said. "I was really wondering just now if it rains more here than anywhere else, or if—" and after a moment's hesitation—"if we notice it more, Francie, because, you see, there is so little else to notice."

Miss Morion turned quickly and glanced at her sister, forgetting that it was far too dark to discern the girl's features. She always felt troubled when Betty spoke in that way, when her voice took that particular tone. She could be philosophical for herself far more easily than for her younger sisters.

"Well, on the other hand," she said cheerfully, "doesn't it show that we have no very great troubles to bear if we have leisure to think so much about small ones?"

"I don't say we *have* any very big troubles to bear," said Betty. "I—I almost sometimes find myself wishing we had—"

"Oh, Betty, *don't*," said her sister quickly, "don't wish anything like that!"

"No," said Betty, "I wasn't going to say quite what you thought. I mean I wish anything big would come into our lives! Anything really interesting, and—well, yes! I may as well own it—anything exciting! It is all on such a dull, dead level, and has always been the same, and always will be, it seems to me. And when one is no longer very young the spring and buoyancy seem to go. When I was seventeen or

eighteen I'd all sorts of happy fancies and expectations, but now—why, Francie, I'm twenty-four, and *nothing* has come."

For a moment or two Frances walked on in silence.

"I dare say," she said at last, "if we knew more of other lives, we should find a good many something like ours. And after all, Betty, one's real life is what one is oneself."

Betty laughed slightly. Her laugh was not bitter, but without any ring of joyousness.

"I know that," she said. "But it doesn't do me any good. It's just *myself* that depresses me. I'm not big enough, nor brave enough, nor anything enough, to rise above circumstances, as people talk about. I want circumstances to help me a little! And I don't ask anything very extravagant, I know.

"No, Frances," she added, "you're not—not quite right. I think I could bear things better and feel more spirit if you would allow that our lives *are* exceptional in some ways."

"Perhaps so," the elder sister agreed.

"You know," continued Betty, "it isn't fallings in love or marriage that I'm talking about. I really and truly very seldom think of anything of that kind, though of course, in the abstract, I can see that a home of one's own, and the feeling oneself a centre, is the ideal life; but heaps of girls don't marry, and there are plenty, lots of other interests and objects to live for, which we *are* unusually without!"

Frances opened her mouth with an intention of remonstrating, but the words died away before she gave them utterance. There was so much truth in what Betty said, and Frances was too thorough-going to believe in the

efficacy of any consolation without a genuine root, so she said nothing.

“And I’m afraid,” pursued Betty, who certainly could not be accused this evening of having donned rose-coloured spectacles, “I’m afraid,” she repeated, “that it’s coming over Eira too, though she has kept her youngness marvellously, so far.”

In her turn Frances gave a little laugh which could scarcely be called mirthful.

“Betty dear,” she said, “you are rather unmerciful to-night, piling on the agony! You think me very philosophical, but I must confess I am not proof against our present depressing circumstances. I don’t think I’ve ever come up the hill in such rain and darkness, and so horribly cold too.” And in spite of herself she shivered a little.

In a moment Betty’s mood had changed to penitence.

“Oh, Frances, I’m a brute,” she exclaimed, “for I know you were tired before we came out; reading aloud to papa for so long together is really exhausting. I know what I’ll do,” she went on, with a tone of defiance; “if I have to carry the coals and wood myself upstairs, you shall have a fire in your room as soon as we go in, you shall!”

Frances laughed again, this time with real amusement. She was always happier about Betty when the younger girl’s latent energy asserted itself.

“I’m all right, dear,” she said, “and we’re getting near home now. We must be near the lodge gates. I thought I saw a light a moment ago.”

In spite of the drenching rain, Betty stood still an instant to reconnoitre.

“Yes,” she said, “I see a light, more than one, two or three, but they’re not from the lodge. Francie!” with a sudden excitement in her voice, “they’re up at the house. We’ll see them more clearly as we go on. Who can be there? It’s not likely Mrs Webb would have chosen an evening like this to be making the rounds, or lighting fires in the big house.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Frances, half indifferently. “They may have been doing some extra cleaning or something of that kind earlier in the day, and not have finished yet. There’s nobody at the lodge itself, anyway,” as at this moment they approached the gates. “There’s no light in the windows except from the kitchen fire and—oh dear! I’m sorely afraid that the gates are locked, and neither of the Webbs there to let us through;” and she sighed ruefully, for this meant a quarter of a mile’s further walk—there being an understanding that the Morion family should have a right of way through the grounds of the deserted home of their far-away relatives, to their own little house which stood just beyond the enclosure. “It is unlucky,” she added, “to-night of all nights, when every step of the way is an aggravation of our miseries!”

Strangely enough, Betty’s depression seemed, for the time being, to have vanished. For some passing moments, the sisters might almost have changed characters. Frances was honestly, physically tired. She had had a trying, fatiguing day at home, and the walk to the village, which had in a sense invigorated Betty (who, to confess the truth, had spent the day in doing little or nothing), had really been too much for the elder sister.

“Never mind,” said Betty briskly; “we’ll soon be there now. I shall keep a sharp lookout when we turn the corner to see if there are lights at the back of the big house too.”

Frances, for once, was feeling too tired to rise to her sister’s little fit of excitement, though she smiled to herself in the darkness with pleasure, as she realised that if Betty’s spirits were apt to sink very much below par, they were ready enough to rise again on very small provocation.

“She is still so young,” thought the elder sister; “so much younger than most girls of her age. If only I had a little more in my power for her and Eira!” And the smile gave way, all too quickly, to a sigh, which in its turn was intercepted by an eager exclamation from Betty, for they had turned the corner of the road by this time.

“Look, Francie!” she said, in an involuntary whisper, as if by some extraordinary possibility her remarks could have been overheard at the still distant big house; “look, Francie, it *is* something out of the common! The offices are lighted up—some of them, anyway; and don’t you see lights moving about too, as if there were several people there? What can be going to happen?”

“Your curiosity will soon be satisfied,” returned Frances; “that’s one good thing of living in a little world like this. By to-morrow at latest, any news there is will be all over the place.” And then she relapsed into silence; and Betty, always quick of perception, seeing that her sister was really tired, said no more, though her little head kept turning round from under the shelter of her umbrella as long as the back precincts of Craig-Morion remained visible.

This was not for long, however. A few moments more, and their path skirted a thickly-planted belt of Scotch firs, which here bordered the park. They had almost to feel their way now, so dark had it become.

"Oh dear," said Betty, when there was no longer anything to distract her attention from the woes of the present moment. "Oh dear, Francie, did the way home ever seem quite so long before? I do hope the next time papa wants his medicine in a hurry that he'll choose a fine evening."

"Dear," said Frances regretfully, "I shouldn't have let you come with me."

"Rubbish! nonsense!" cried Betty, "as if Eira and I would have let you go alone. I do believe in my heart that we're both quite as strong as you, though you won't allow it. Poor little Eira, she would have come too, except for her chilblains. It is unlucky that she has got them so early this year. And they spoil her pretty hands so."

"It's only from the unusual cold," said Frances, "and—" she hesitated. "I am sure I could cure them," she resumed, "if I had my own way, or if I had *had* it when you were both growing up. What makes me really stronger is, I am sure, that I had so much better a time as a child than either of you, before papa gave up his appointment and we were better off."

"I wish you'd leave off repeating that old story," said Betty. "After all, I'm not four years younger than you, and whatever Eira and I have *not* had, we've had you, darling—a second mother as people say, a great, great deal better than a second mother / say, and oh joy! here we are at last;

I see the white gate-posts.” And in another moment they were plodding the short, badly kept gravel path, not to be dignified by the name of a drive, which led to their own door.

“Take care of the big puddle just in front of the steps; it must be a perfect lake to-night,” Betty was saying, when, before they had quite reached it, the door was cautiously opened, and a girl’s face peered out, illumined by the light, faint though it was, of the small hall behind her. It was Eira, the third and youngest of the Morion sisters.

“It’s you at last,” she said in a low voice; “come in quickly, and I’ll take the medicine to papa, he’s been fussing like a—I don’t know what, and if he gets hold of you he’ll keep you waiting in your soaking things for half-an-hour while he goes on about your having been so long! Now go straight upstairs,” she continued, when she had got her sisters inside, and extricated them from their dripping umbrellas and waterproofs. “I’ll see to these things as soon as I’ve been to papa. Go straight up to your room, Frances; there’s a surprise for you there. Go up quickly and keep the door closed till I come.”

She took the parcel from her elder sister’s hands as she spoke, and, without wasting time in more words, gave her a gentle little push toward the staircase. Frances and Betty went up softly, but as quickly as their feet, tired and stiffened with cold and wet, would allow. The staircase, like everything in the house, was meagre and dingy, the steps steep and the balusters rickety. At the top a little landing gave access to the best rooms, and a long narrow passage at one side led to the sisters’ own quarters.

Betty ran on in front and threw open the door of her elder sister's room eagerly. She had hard work to repress an exclamation of delight at what met her eyes. It was a fair-sized, bare-looking room, though scrupulously neat and not without some simple and tasteful attempts at ornamentation, and to-night it really looked more attractive than was often the case, for a bright glowing fire sent out its pleasant rays of welcome, and on a little table beside it stood, neatly arranged, everything requisite for a good, hot cup of tea.

"How angelic of Eira!" exclaimed Betty. "How has she managed it? Just when I was planning how I could possibly get you a fire, Francie."

The eldest sister sat down with a smile of satisfaction in front of the warm blaze.

"Run into your own room, Betty, and take off your wet things as quickly as possible, and then come back here for tea. We have still over an hour till dinner-time."

Betty hurried across the room and threw open the door, almost running into Eira as she did so.

"Oh! this is lovely," she exclaimed, "especially as you've got away too, Eira. Do tell us how you managed it."

"No, no," remonstrated Frances, "tell her nothing. Don't answer her till she has taken off her wet things. She will be all the quicker if you don't begin speaking."

So Betty ran off and Eira joined her elder sister at the fireside.

"Wasn't it a good idea?" she said, smiling at the cheering glow.

“Yes, indeed,” said Frances. “Betty was meditating something of the kind as we were coming home, but I doubt if she could have managed it. Anyway it wouldn’t have been ready to welcome us in this comfortable way. Oh dear! it was wet and dreary coming home, and we were kept waiting such a long time for papa’s medicine! By-the-by, is it all right?”

Before Eira could answer, the door reopened to admit Betty.

“Haven’t I been quick?” she exclaimed brightly. “Do pour out the tea, Frances. And tell me, Eira, I am dying to hear what good fairy aided and abetted you in this unheard-of extravagance.”

“Nobody,” said Eira. “I simply did it. After all, I think it’s the best way sometimes to go straight at a thing. And if papa had met me carrying up the tea-tray I should have reminded him that it was better to have some hot tea ready for you, than to risk you both getting rheumatic fever. I didn’t meet him, as it happened, but just now when I gave him the medicines I took care, by way of precaution, to dilate on the drenched state you had arrived in and the long time you had been kept waiting at the chemist’s. The latter fact I made a shot at.”

Frances drew a breath of relief.

“Then we may hope for a fairly comfortable evening,” she said.

“Yes,” said Betty; “to give the—no, Frances, you needn’t look shocked, I won’t finish it. I must allow that papa is more sympathising about physical ills than about some other things.”

"And so he should be," said Eira, "considering that he says he never knows what it is to feel well himself. Mamma is worse than he about being hardy and all that sort of thing. I often wonder how children grew up at all in the old days if they really were so severely treated as we're told."

"It's the old story," said Frances; "the delicate ones were killed off, and those who did survive must have been strong enough to be made really hardy. How are your chilblains, Eira dear?"

"Pretty bad," the girl replied cheerfully; "at least I feel some premonitory twinges of another fit coming on! I mustn't stay so near the fire. Talk of something else quick to make me forget them."

"Drink up this tea, in the first place," said Frances. "That kind of warmth is good for them."

"And, oh, I have something to tell you," said Betty, "something quite exciting! What do you think? I believe something has happened or is going to happen at Craig-Morion. It was all lighted up as we passed. No, I mustn't exaggerate! There were lights moving about in several of the rooms, and the old Webbs were not at the lodge. It was all dark, and the gates locked, so they must have been up at the big house. That helped to make us late, you see."

"You poor things!" exclaimed Eira, though her pity was quickly drowned by this exciting news. "Can they be expecting some one? After all these years of nothing ever happening and nobody ever coming!"

"It looks like it," said Betty shortly. Then she gave herself a little shake, as if some unexpressed thought was irritating her. "Anything about Craig-Morion makes me cross," she

went on in explanation, “even though there’s something fascinating about it, too—tantalising rather. Just to think how different, how utterly different our lives would have been, if that stupid old woman had done what she meant to do, or at least what she promised. It wouldn’t have been anything so wildly wonderful! We should scarcely have been rich even then, as riches go. But it would have been enough to make a starting-point, a centre, for all the interests that make life attractive. We could make it so pretty!”

“And have lots of people to stay with us, and whom we could stay with in return,” said Eira. “Just think what it would be to have really nice friends!”

“Yes,” said Frances, in her quiet voice; “and as it is, the people it belongs to scarcely value it. It is so little in comparison to what they have besides. Yet,” and she hesitated, for she was a scrupulously loyal daughter, “unless papa and mamma had been able to interest themselves in things as we three would, *perhaps* it wouldn’t have made much radical difference, after all?”

“Oh, yes, it would,” said Betty quickly. “It would have made all the difference. Papa wouldn’t have got into these nervous ways, if he had had things to look after and plenty of interests, and money, of course. And mamma would have been, oh! quite different.”

“Perhaps so,” Frances agreed, “but it isn’t only circumstances that make lives. There are people, far poorer than we, I know, whose lives are ever so much *fuller* and wider. It is that,” she went on, speaking with unusual energy, “it is that that troubles me about you two! I want to see my way to helping you to make the best you can—in the

very widest sense of the words—of your lives;” and her sweet eyes rested with almost maternal anxiety, pathetic to see in one still herself so young, on her two sisters.

“And you, you poor old darling!” said Eira, “what about your own life?”

“Oh!” said Frances, “I don’t feel as if I had any, separate from yours. All my day-dreams and castles in the air and aspirations are for you;” and in the firelight it seemed as if tears were glistening in her eyes.

She was, as a rule, so self-contained and calm that this little outburst impressed her sisters almost painfully, and, with youthful shrinking from any expression of emotion, Eira answered half-jestingly:

“I’m ashamed to own it, but do you know really sometimes that life would be quite a different thing to me—twice or three times as interesting—if I could have—”

“What?” said Betty.

“Heaps and heaps of lovely clothes?” said the girl. At which they all three laughed, though half-ruefully, for no doubt their present wardrobe left room for improvement.

Chapter Two.

Table of Contents

A Break in the Clouds.

Things, externally at least, had brightened up by the next morning. The rain had ceased during the night, and some rays of sunshine, doubly welcome after its late absence, though not without the touch of pathos often associated with it in late autumn, came peeping in at the dining-room window of Fir Cottage, when the family assembled there for breakfast. For Mr Morion, valetudinarian though he was, had not even the “qualités de ses défauts” in some respects. That is to say, he was exasperatingly punctual, and at all seasons and under almost all circumstances an exemplary early riser.

Naughty Eira groaned over this sometimes. “If he would but stay in bed, and enjoy his ill-health comfortably, and let us breakfast in peace, I could face the rest of the day ever so much more philosophically,” she used to say. “Or at least if he wouldn’t expect us to praise him for coming down in time when he hasn’t closed an eye all night!”

“I always think that rather an absurd expression,” said Frances, “begging poor papa’s pardon; for when one can’t sleep, one both opens and shuts one’s eyes a great deal oftener than when you go straight off the moment your head touches the pillow.” At which her sisters laughed. The spirit of mischief latent in both the younger ones enjoyed decoying their sister into the tiniest approach to criticism of their elders. But this morning the rise in the barometer seemed to have affected Mr Morion’s nerves favourably; he

even went the unusual length of congratulating himself openly on the promptitude with which the impending attack had been warded off, thanks to Frances.

“Yes, indeed,” Lady Emma agreed, “it was a very good thing that the girls went themselves. If we had sent the boy he would have come back with some ridiculous nonsense about its being too late to make up the prescriptions last night. What are you fidgeting about so, Eira?” she went on; “you make me quite nervous.”

“It’s only my chilblains, mamma,” the girl replied, holding up a pair of small and naturally pretty, but for the moment sadly disfigured hands, while a gleam, half of amusement, half of reproach, came into her bright blue eyes.

“Really,” said her mother, “it is very provoking! I don’t know how you manage to get them, and you so strong. If it were Betty now, I shouldn’t be so surprised.”

And certainly her youngest daughter, little hands excepted, looked the picture of health. She had the thoroughly satisfactory and charming complexion, a tinge of brown underlying its clearness, which is found with that beautiful shade of hair which some people would describe as red, though in reality it is but a rich nut-brown. Betty, on the contrary, was pale, and looked paler than she actually was from the contrast with darker eyes and dusky hair. The family legend had it that she “took after” her mother, whose still remaining good looks told of Irish ancestry. And for this reason, possibly, it was taken for granted that the second girl was her mother’s favourite, though, even if so, the favouritism was not of a nature or an amount to rouse violent jealousy on the part of her sisters, had they been

capable of it, for Lady Emma Morion had certainly never erred on the side of over-indulgence of her children. She was a good woman, and meant to be and believed herself to be an excellent mother, but under no circumstances in life could she have fulfilled more than one *rôle*, and the *rôle* which she had adopted since early womanhood had been that of wife. It simply never occurred to her that her daughters could have any possible cause of complaint, beyond that of the very restricted condition in which the family were placed by the prosaic fact of limited means.

That she or her husband could have done aught to soften or improve these for their children would have been a suggestion utterly impossible for her to digest. The privations, such as they were, she looked upon as falling far more hardly on herself and their father than on the daughters, who, when all was said and done, had youth and health and absence of cares.

That their youth was passing; that absence of cares may on the other side mean absence of interest; that the due supply of mere physical necessities can or does ensure health in the fullest sense of the word to eager, capable natures longing for work and “object” as well as enjoyment, never struck her. Nor, had such considerations been put before her in the plainest language, could she have understood them, for she was not a woman of much intellect or, what matters more in a mother, of any width of sympathy.

Greater blame, had he realised the position, would have lain at her husband’s door. He was a cultivated, almost a scholarly man, but the disappointments of life had narrowed

as well as soured him. His was a sad instance of the dwarfing and stunting effects of self-pity, yielded to and indulged in till it comes to pervade the whole atmosphere of a life.

The brighter morning had cheered the sisters half-unconsciously, and Frances felt sorry at any friction beginning again between her mother and Eira. For though Lady Emma was not sympathising by temperament, she was not indifferent to annoyances, and that chilblains should be described by any stronger term she would have thought an exaggeration. Yet the fact of them worried her, and Frances felt about in her usual way for something to smooth the lines of irritation on her mother's face.

"I have often heard, mamma," she said, "that strong people suffer quite as much from chilblains as delicate ones, and they sometimes are worse the first cold weather than afterwards."

"I believe they come from want of exercise," said Lady Emma, in a somewhat softened tone. "If this bright dry weather lasts, you must go some good long walks, Eira."

Eira made a wry face.

"I am sure I've no objection, mamma," she said; "there's nothing I like better than walking, but it's a vicious circle, don't you see? I dare say my not walking makes my circulation worse, but then again the chilblains make walking, for the time being, simply impossible." Perhaps it was lucky that at this juncture Betty's voice made a sudden interruption. Betty, though the quietest of the three, was rather given to sudden remarks.

"Papa," she said, "have you possibly heard any sort of news about Craig-Morion?"

Her father glanced at her sharply over his eyeglasses.

"What do you mean, child?" he said. "News about Craig-Morion! What sort of news?"

"Oh, that it's going to be sold or let, or something of that kind," replied Betty calmly.

"Going to be *sold*, Craig-Morion!" exclaimed her father, his voice rising to a thin, high pitch. "What on earth has put such a thing in your head? Of course not." But the very excitement of his tones testified to a certain unacknowledged uneasiness.

"Oh, well," said Betty, "I didn't really suppose it was going to be *sold*. But none of its present owners ever care to come there, so I thought perhaps there was to be a change of some kind."

"And why should you suppose there was to be a change of any kind?" repeated Mr Morion, with a sort of grim repetition of her words, decidedly irritating, if his daughters had not been inured to it.

Betty flushed slightly.

"It was only something we noticed last night," she replied, going on to relate the incidents that had attracted their attention. Her father would not condescend to comment on her information, but Lady Emma did not conceal her interest, and cross-questioned both her daughters. And from behind his newspaper her husband listened, attentively enough.

"It is curious," she said. "If you pass that way to-day, girls, try to see old Webb and find out if anything has

happened. Can any of the Morions possibly be coming down, Charles, do you suppose?"

Mr Morion grunted.

"Any of the Morions! How many of them do you think there are?" he said ironically. "You know very well that the present man was an only son, and his father before him the same."

"Yes," replied Lady Emma meekly, "but there were sisters in both cases. When I spoke of the Morions I meant any members of the family. Though I suppose it is very unlikely that any of them would suddenly come down here, when they care nothing about the place, and have got homes of their own."

"That to me," said Betty, speaking again abruptly, "is the aggravating part of the whole affair. If people lived at the big house who enjoyed it and appreciated it, it would be quite different. One couldn't grudge it to them, but to see it empty and deserted year in and year out, when—" she stopped short, a touch on her foot from Frances', under the table, warning her that it would scarcely be wise to dwell further on what was a sore subject.

Mr Morion rose, pushing back his chair with a rasping sound on the thin, hard carpet, and left the room.

"I hope the fire in his study is all right," said Lady Emma anxiously.

"Yes," said Frances; "I glanced in on my way. Is there anything you want us to do this morning, mamma?" she added.

"I cannot possibly say till I have seen the cook," her mother replied. "There is pretty sure to be something

forgotten—servants are so stupid—if you are going to the village.”

“It’s my morning for reading to old Gillybrand,” said Frances rather drearily, “so while I am there Betty can do any messages there are—that’s to say if you care to come with me, Betty.”

“Tell me before you start, then,” said their mother, as she, in her turn, left the room for her kitchen interview. Poor woman! Housekeeping at the Firs was no sinecure, for Mr Morion was, like all hypochondriacs, difficult to please in the matter of food, firmly believing that his life depended on a special dietary. And such a state of things, when there is no financial margin, taxes invention and ingenuity sorely enough.

“What are you going to do to-day, Eira?” asked Frances. “You can’t possibly go out, I’m afraid.”

For all reply Eira extended first one foot and then the other, both encased in woolly slippers, each of which was large enough to have held two inmates at once, under ordinary circumstances.

“You poor child,” said her elder sister. “But those slippers are a comfort to you, I hope.”

“My dearest Frances,” Eira replied, “but for them I really don’t think I should be alive at the present moment. But I *must* pay you for them with the first money I can lay hands on. You don’t suppose I didn’t notice your shabby gloves last Sunday?”

“Oh, what does it matter in winter?” said Frances indifferently. “One can always use a muff.”

“When you’ve got one to use,” said Eira. “Mine looks more fit to be a mouse’s nest than anything else.”

Betty had been standing at the window, gazing out at the oval grass plot, not imposing enough to be dignified by the name of lawn, and at the shrubberies enclosing it.

“Do you see those berries?” she said, wheeling round as she spoke. “If only all the bushes were not so dreadfully wet still, I could make up some lovely bunches and trails for the drawing-room vases, if mamma would let me.”

“It will be dry enough by the afternoon,” said Frances, “or we may find some treasures on our way through the grounds, without having to paddle over wet grass to reach them.”

“The best plan,” said Eira, “is to arrange the vases first, and then let mamma see the effect. It doesn’t do to ask leave beforehand, for if we do we are sure to be told not to fill the house with rubbish and weeds. Bring in the prettiest things you can find, Betty, and we’ll do them after luncheon. It will help to pass the afternoon for poor me. Oh dear! things are never so bad but they might be worse. I’m beginning to feel now as if life would be worth having if only I could go a good long walk! And before my chilblains got bad, I didn’t think anything could be duller or drearier than the way we were going on.”

“We’ll try to bring you in some lovely berries and tinted leaves to cheer you,” said Frances, but Betty’s next remark did not follow up her elder sister’s determined effort to make the best of things.

“What’s the good?” she said lugubriously, “what’s the good of trying to make the drawing-room look better? It’s

hopelessly ugly, and even if we could make it pretty, who would care? There's nobody to see it."

"Come now, Betty," said Frances, "don't be untrue to your own belief. Beauty of any kind is always worth having. Let us be thankful that, living in the country, we never can be without the possibility of some, even in our indoor life. What would you do, Betty, if we lived in a grey—no, drab-coloured—street in some terrible town?"

"Do? I should die!" replied Betty.

"I shouldn't," said Eira. "I'd get to know some people, and that, after all, is more interesting than still life. But the present question is what shall I do with myself all this long morning?"

"You must stay in a warm room, whatever you do, if you want to cure those poor hands and feet. The only thing you can do is to read, and oh! by-the-by, I was forgetting—I got one or two books at the lending library yesterday that I want to look through before I read them aloud. I think they seem rather interesting. So if you can glance at one of them for me this morning it would really be a help."

Eira brightened up a little at this, and before her sisters left her, they had the satisfaction of seeing her comfortably established on the old sofa.

"Yes," she said, as they nodded good-bye from the doorway, "I repeat, things never are so bad but that they might be worse. We might have a dining-room without a sofa."

Frances and Betty, despite their curiosity to spy the state of the land—that is to say, of the big house—at close quarters, had to make their way to the village this morning

by the road, as one of their mother's messages took them to the laundress' cottage which stood at some little distance from the Craig-Morion grounds. Further on, however, they passed the lodge, and there for a moment they halted, on the chance of a word with the old gate-keeper. But she was evidently not there and the gates were still locked.