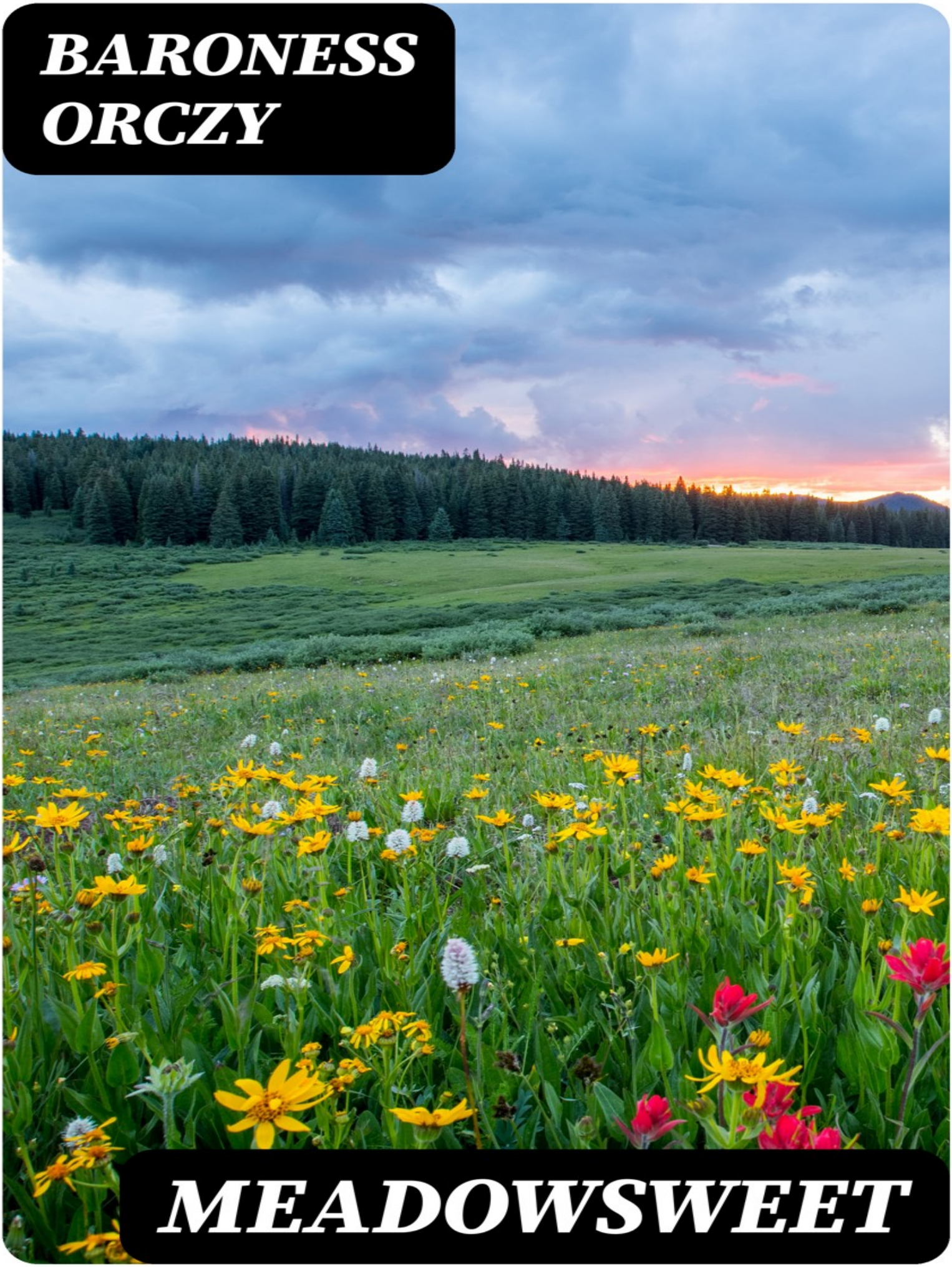
BARONESS ORCZY



MEADOWSWEET

Baroness Orczy

Meadowsweet

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Chapter 1
A Curious Old Bird

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You cannot imagine what a tangle and muddle reigned in Uncle Jasper’s museum! If you were not one of the privileged few, allowed to gaze wide-eyed on the countless treasures which positively littered every corner of the room — well, then, it would be no use to close your eyes and think what it must have looked like, because your wildest imaginings would fall far short of the reality.

I went into it once when I was a tiny mite, and Uncle Jasper was then very, very old; but the picture of that room as I saw it then impressed me more vividly than anything I have ever seen since then.

The room, you must know, was long and low, with a raftered ceiling, every beam of which was black with age and carved by hand. There were no two beams alike, for one had a garland of oak leaves festooned along it, another was decorated with trails of brier-rose, another with bunches of holly berries tied together with true-love knots, and so on, all most beautifully hand-carved and dating back to the time of Henry VII. Then on one side of the room there was a huge, deep, mullioned window with tiny panes of greenish glass, through which you couldn’t possibly see, all held together by lines of lead. The embrasure of the window was panelled with oak, quite as black as the beams of the ceiling, and these panels, too, were beautifully carved, in lovely patterns that represented folded linen, with every fold different, as you may imagine, for there was nothing

conventional in any single portion or ornament of Uncle Jasper’s museum.

Even the doors looked askew; though, of course, they were made of stout oak, and never creaked when you opened them. But their lines seemed to defy regularity and positively to sneer at plumb-lines.

There were two doors to the room, one which gave on the rest of the house — about which I must tell you later — and the other which was near the embrasured window and gave on a little stone porch.

Now, the best way to appreciate the view of Uncle Jasper’s museum was not to enter it from the house, but rather from this same little stone porch which faced a square yard at the back of the house — a yard that might once have been a miniature farmyard, for it had barns all around it — great, big barns made coal black with tar and covered with heather thatch, on the top of which pigeons were always sitting, and beneath which I strongly suspect owls of holding their midnight palavers.

They were wonderful barns these, and put to many uses. One was fitted up roughly with boxes to accommodate two or three horses, if visitors came a-riding; another was used as a cowshed; a third held the small waggonette, wherein Uncle Jasper occasionally drove to Canterbury, eleven miles away; and a fourth held just all the rubbish and all the lumber that you could possibly think of — bits of iron gate and all the old hayrakes and the chicken coops that weren’t wanted, and the pea-sticks that were worth keeping, and pussy’s latest family that had escaped the scullery bucket,

and the herd of mice and rats that had evaded the vigilance of the cat, of the owls, and of the terrier.

And then, of course, there was the barn which belonged exclusively to the chickens, even though the chickens did not belong exclusively to it; for they were everywhere, and made their homes in every barn round the yard, and scratched up the flooring and the brick foundations, and roosted in the waggonette, and generally did as much mischief as a colony of self-respecting chickens can very well do.

Finally, there was the barn which adjoined the museum, and which held all the superfluous rubbish and lumber which no longer could find a place inside the house. This barn — it was really a loft — had no entrance from the yard, and it was raised some seven or eight feet from the ground on brick pillars. Its only ingress gave on the museum itself, and when you stood in that room looking towards the window and the yard, the door into this loft would be in the end wall on your right at some height from the floor, and a short flight of wooden stairs led up to it.

But, of course, you don’t want to hear just now about the yard, or the barn, or the chickens; your concern, like mine, is of Uncle Jasper’s museum, of which I desire to tell you.

Well, suppose that you — instead of knocking at the front door of Old Manor Farm, which, perhaps, would have been more polite, even if more bold — had skirted the house, and were now standing in the yard, with the barns to your right and left and also behind you, you would be facing that same little stone porch of which I have already told you, and no

doubt you would be wondering how the columns, being askew, contrived to uphold the quaint architrave.

The stone was of a delicate mellow colour, a grey made up of golds and greens, and in spring it was covered with the pale mauve of the wistaria and in the summer with the deep purple of the clematis, for these two climbers joined tendrils over the porch and never quarrelled, the wistaria always making way for the clematis when the time came, and the clematis keeping small and unobtrusive whilst the wistaria wanted plenty of room.

The door under the porch gave direct on the museum, and if you entered it this way you had a splendid view of the place. You saw the tall bookshelves opposite to you, with rows upon rows of books; you saw the wooden steps leading up to the loft on your left, and all round you saw cases on the walls filled with all kinds of eggs; you saw the table in the centre of the room, with Uncle Jasper’s wig upon its stand, and the huge microscope, with its brass fittings shining like gold.

Then in the dark corners at either end you saw the skeleton of beasts such as you had never seen before, and antlers and horns of every shape and size. I could not, in fact, tell you what you did not see; there was a stuffed alligator, that hung by a chain from the ceiling, and stuffed lizards, that peered at you from every point; and I could not even begin to tell you about the stuffed birds, for they were literally everywhere — on the tops of the bookcases and in cases on the wall, on the tables, the chairs, and the sofas. There were little birds and big birds, song birds and birds of prey, British birds and tropical birds, and birds from the ice

regions, white birds, grey birds, red birds, and birds of every tone and colour.

And, believe me, that by far the most extraordinary bird in the whole museum sat in a tall-backed chair, covered in large-flowered tapestry, and had name Jasper Hemingford.

I suppose it was this constant handling of birds and being with birds that made Uncle Jasper look so like a bald-headed stork. For all day would he sit, with glue-pot and stuffing and I don’t know what other implements, turning limp, dead birds into erect, defiant-looking ones, with staring eyes that were black in the centre and yellow round the rims, and could be bought by the thousand in a shop in London city.

Now, to get those birds into their proper position, so that the bird looked straight at you without the suspicion of a squint, required a great deal of skill and of precision, and Uncle Jasper would sit by the hour in his high-backed chair, bone-rimmed spectacles on nose, and his mouth screwed up as if he were perpetually whistling.

And that is the reason, no doubt, why his face was so like a bird’s.

I told you that his wig always stood on a stand in the very centre of the big table, as if it were presiding over the assembly of glue-pots and balls of string, of metal tools and boxes of eyes, and of eggs and dusty bottles that surrounded it like a crowd does a popular orator. And Uncle Jasper always wore a white cotton cap with a tassel to it, in order to protect his bald head against the draught. Aunt Caroline always knitted these caps for Uncle Jasper, as she did his white cotton stockings, and Susan washed them when they were dirty.

He invariably slipped off his coat the moment he entered the museum, and put it down somewhere amongst the litter, and never could find it again when he wanted it later on to go to dinner in. But his flowered dressing-gown was always laid ready for him on the back of his chair, so he found that easily enough, and put it on before settling down to work, and he would always forget to tie the cord and tassels round his waist, and they would trail after him when he moved about in the room, and Aunt Caroline's pet cat — if she happened to be in the museum — would pretend that one of the tassels was a mouse, and she would stalk it, and pounce upon it just when Uncle Jasper was about to mount his rickety library steps, and cause him to trip, and to break one of the panes of glass of his bookshelves, trying to save himself from falling.

But Uncle Jasper never swore when this happened. He only quoted Latin at the cat, and, as she didn't understand Latin, she went on in just the same perverse way as before.

Now Susan, the country wench, whom Aunt Caroline dignified by the name of "maid," did not know Latin any better than the cat, and I am quite sure that in her own mind she thought that her master swore more often and more vigorously than was consistent with Christian piety.

On this same afternoon — the events of which crowded in so remarkably that that memorable day became the turning point in the career of several members of the Hemingford family — on this same afternoon, I say, which was on the 2nd of June, in the year 1835, Susan was sent to the museum by Mrs. Hemingford in order that she should tell the master that tea was served.

Susan, whose cap was always awry, and whose feet and hands appeared to have been made for somebody else, and clapped on to her arms and shins by mistake, invariably became very nervous and excited when she had to face the stuffed birds and beasts of the museum.

“For all the world like the internals,” she would explain to her follower, Thomas Scrutch, the tea grocer’s son from Birchington.

And this nervous excitement caused her to be still more clumsy than she usually was, her arms becoming like the wings of a windmill, her hands like flappers, and her feet like fire shovels, whilst her eyes, staring out of her round, red face, were very like those that lay in boxes on the centre table, and could be bought by the thousand in a shop in London city.

She did her best at first to attract Uncle Jasper’s attention from the doorway. Of course, he had not heard her knock, nor was he conscious of her blue print dress and her cap, all awry, with its double row of starched frills.

He had got some awful-looking, grey, stark thing in his hands, and his bone-rimmed spectacles were midway down his nose, and he was staring through them at the nasty-looking thing which he held, and muttering to himself all the while.

“He give me the jumps!” commented Susan inaudibly.

“Undoubtedly — undoubtedly,” murmured Uncle Jasper, who was chuckling with delight, “a very fine specimen indeed of the Vespertilio ferrum equinum, or horseshoe bat.”

“No wonder he be swearing at the horrible thing,” thought Susan, whose nervousness was gaining more and more upon her. She was balancing herself first on one huge foot, then on the other, and saying in an awed whisper at intervals:

“An it please you, sir.”

But, of course, Uncle Jasper took no notice of her. He just was delighted with the ugly, grey thing, and he cocked his head to one side and patted the thing with his long, bony fingers all the time.

“Length from the nose to the tip of the tail,” he said meditatively, “three and a half inches to three and nine-sixteenths at the most.”

“An it please you, sir,” murmured poor Susan.

“Undoubtedly — undoubtedly!”— and a deep sigh of satisfaction came through the screwed-up lips of Uncle Jasper; “or, as one might more appropriately say, non est disputan . .”

Now, wasn’t it a pity that an elfin chance chose that very second in which to make poor, nervous Susan lose her equilibrium? She had danced about from one foot to another for some time, and during the process her cap had slipped down over her left ear, the perspiration had fallen from her forehead to the tip of her nose, where it formed one ever-increasing drop, and she was shedding hairpins like a porcupine sheds his quills. Otherwise she had done no mischief.

But now when Latin once more fell from her master’s lips she lurched forward, with arms outstretched; her hands, which certainly had been made for somebody much larger

than herself, clutched at the nearest thing to support her falling person.

That nearest thing happened to be a chair, and on the chair were all kinds of funny things, including a number of pale blue eggs and a box of eyes; the chair slid on the oak floor, and Susan slid after the chair, until the chair and Susan encountered an obstacle and could slide no more; then both were turned over together, whilst eggs and eyes flew with amazing rapidity and in every possible direction along the shiny floor.

All that had occurred at the very moment that Uncle Jasper said the beginning of his last word of Latin, and when the clatter broke in on his meditations he paused before finishing his word, for the sudden noise had taken his breath away.

And when he recovered both his breath and his Latin it was to emit the last syllable of his interrupted phrase, and that was:

“. . . dum!”

Can you wonder that Susan, who was sprawling on the floor like a starfish, had only just strength enough to gasp feebly:

“Yes, sir — please, sir!”

Then, of course, Uncle Jasper became aware of her presence. He looked at her over the rims of his spectacles, wondering, no doubt, why she had chosen this extraordinary method of entering his room.

“Lord bless my soul, Susan,” he murmured in profound astonishment, “what are you doing there on the floor?”

“I am very sorry, sir — please, sir!” she stammered as she picked herself up and began to chase the fallen eggs and the rolling eyes.

“Go away,” said Uncle Jasper mildly; “go away — never mind those things. Can’t you see that I’m busy?”

“Yes, sir . . . but please, sir! . .

But already Uncle Jasper had forgotten the brief incident which had distracted him from the examination of his beloved specimen. He readjusted his spectacles, and once more turned his attention to the grey, flabby thing in his hand.

“The upright membrane at the end of the nose,” he murmured, with every sigh of ecstatic delight visible in his glittering eyes and his twitching mouth, “perfect— perfect in shape, just like a horseshoe.”

There is a courage that is born of despair and a boldness that comes of intense nervousness. Susan suddenly felt both, for she had had orders from her mistress not to return from her errand without bringing the master along with her, and there he was back again in the moon or somewheres paying no more heed to her than if she were a bit of dirt — and he never did mind dirt much.

So now she no longer muttered, she suddenly shouted right at the top of her voice — shouted just like people shout when they are very frightened.

“The mistress sent me to tell you, sir —”

Uncle Jasper heard the voice, for he looked at her over the top of his spectacles; but he looked just as if he had never seen Susan before to-day.

“Lord bless my soul, Susan,” he said mildly, “I didn’t know you were here!”

“The mistress says, sir,” said Susan, still shouting, for having got his attention she didn’t want to lose it again, “will you please come to tea?”

“Eh?” queried Uncle Jasper in his funny, absent-minded way. “What?”

“Tea, sir,” yelled Susan at the top of her voice. “It’s getting cold, and Master Crabtree is eating all the muffins!”

“All right, all right, Susan!” said Uncle Jasper placidly. “You waste too many words, my girl! Dictum sapienti sat est. . . A word to the wise is enough, Susan. And — what were you saying just now, my girl?” he asked absently.

“I was saying, sir—”

Uncle Jasper was staring at her in absolute blankness, whilst in his hand he held that ugly little thing, grey and flabby, with tiny claws pointing upwards and limp, pointed wings. Susan, too, stared at Uncle Jasper; he sat perfectly still, and his pale, watery eyes looked vacantly at her above his big spectacles.

“For all the world like one of his own mannies,” thought Susan, whose sudden courage had already given way. The creepy feeling which always came over her when she was in the museum mastered her now more strongly than ever. “I was that scared,” she said later on, “my poor back just opened and shut when I saw that hugeous thing lying in his hand, for all the world like a begum.”

At the time she just threw her apron over her face, and crying:

“The Lord preserve us!” she fled incontinently from the room.

Uncle Jasper gave a very deep sigh of satisfaction. He put down the precious specimen with infinite gentleness upon the table, then he rose from his chair and worked his way round the several pieces of furniture in the room toward the bookshelves against the wall. And all the while that he moved he muttered to himself in an absent-minded kind of way:

“Strange how much time is wasted by the uneducated in idle talk. Yet, fugit irreparabile tempus — time flies never to be recalled.”

He took hold of the rickety little wooden steps and moved them to that position beside the bookshelves which he desired, then he began slowly to mount them. And all the while that he mounted his eyes travelled with the quickness of vast experience over the rows of books behind the glass doors.

Apparently the book that he required was on the very top of the bookcase, so Uncle Jasper mounted slowly and carefully until he had reached the top of the rickety wooden steps. There he now sat down, and, having opened one of the glass doors, he took out a ponderous volume bound in calf. He crossed one lean shank over the other so as to afford firm support for the book, then he opened it, and his bony fingers — so like the claws of birds — wandered lovingly over the yellow-stained pages.

“Now, let me see!” he murmured, for he had a habit of talking to himself when he was engrossed in his work,

“Vespertilio ferrum equinum. Vesper — vesper — ah, here we are!”

And having totally forgotten all about Susan and tea and his wife, he sat perched up there, very like a bald-headed old stork. His long, thin nose was bent over his book, his lean shanks were encased in white cotton stockings, and the tassels of his dressing-gown beat an uneven tattoo against the wood of the rickety library steps.

Chapter 2
A Kind Old Soul

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One of the many fallacies invented by learned people with a view to confusing the unlearned is the saying that “Nature never makes a mistake.”

Now no one on earth makes more mistakes than Dame Nature makes up aloft, or wherever else she may dwell. And I will tell you one of the greatest mistakes that she ever did make, and that was that she put a true mother’s heart inside the ample chest of Aunt Caroline and then wholly omitted — or forgot — to give her children of her own to love, to cosset, and to worry out of all patience.

Aunt Caroline as a mother would have been splendid. Her children’s faces would have been a bright red, and would have shone like apples that have been polished against the sleeve of a well-worn smock; their hair would have been smooth and glossy, their hands white and adorned with well-trimmed nails; they would have been learned in the art of making every kind of wine and preserve and pickle that mind of woman can conceive and stomach of man can digest, and totally ignorant of everything else in the world.

As an aunt, Aunt Caroline was a failure. For from the moment that her sister’s children were placed in her charge by their dying mother they did exactly as they liked at Old Manor Farm, and twiddled Aunt Caroline right round their thumbs.

To be sure Olive, the eldest, had snow-white hands with beautifully shaped nails to them; but she did not employ

them in making cowslip wine and rhubarb preserve: she employed them chiefly for the decking up and the ornamentation of the rest of her lovely person, and one of them she employed now in the wearing of the golden ring which Sir Baldwin Jeffreys had placed on it some three or four years ago.

Olive, from the time that she left off playing with dolls — and that was very early in the history of her short life — had made up her mind that she would not wear out her youth and her beauty at the Old Manor Farm in the company of Uncle Jasper's stuffed abominations: and since Aunt Caroline could not afford to take her up to London, where she might have made a suitable match, she looked about her in Thanet itself, in search of the most likely gentleman of wealth and position who would prove willing and eager to ask her to quit the lonely farmhouse, and to grace London society in his company and his own house as his mistress.

The most likely gentleman turned out to be Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, who had a large estate near Ashford and a fine house in town. He had come down to the neighbourhood of Minster-in-Thanet for some fishing with his friend, Mr. Culpepper, and Mr. Culpepper — to while away a fine Sunday afternoon — had driven him over to have tea with Mr. and Mrs. Hemingford at Old Manor Farm, and to see old Jasper Hemingford's museum, which was the pride and talk of Thanet.

Sir Baldwin Jeffreys sat in the oak-rafted parlour of Old Manor Farm, and Miss Olive Aldmarshe handed him a cup of tea. Sir Baldwin Jeffreys was five-and-forty years old, but he looked thirty-five, and on that afternoon he felt twenty-two.

That was more than three years ago now, and in the meanwhile Lady Jeffreys had been the bright comet of two London seasons, and Old Manor Farm and its inhabitants had not seen her since the day when she walked out of it, a radiant and beautiful bride, on the arm of her middle-aged husband, and entered the smart coach, with its white and scarlet liveries and heavy Flemish horses, which were to convey her to her new home.

And now she had arrived quite unexpectedly on this very morning, and at the moment when Aunt Caroline was about to carve Cousin Barnaby's third helping of lamb. There had come the noise of a distant coach rattling down the hill, the clatter of horses, the jingling of harness, the shouts of the postilions. Aunt Caroline had just time to ejaculate: "I wonder now who that might be!" and Barnaby Crabtree to grunt in response: "Nobody for us, I hope!" when the handsome coach was seen to swing in through the narrow gates, and — with a great deal more clatter and a vast amount more jingling — to come to a halt before the front door.

"Lord bless us all, it must be Olive!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, as she quickly put down the pair of carvers and started fiddling nervously with the strings of her apron.

"That is no excuse, Caroline," remarked Barnaby Crabtree acidly, "for not handing me over a further portion of lamb as I desired."

"No, Barnaby," said Aunt Caroline meekly.

And it was because she was then obliged to resume her work of carving and to help Cousin Barnaby with two slices of lamb, a roast potato, a spoonful of peas, and a sprinkling

of mint sauce, that she was not standing at the front door to receive Sir Baldwin and his lady when the latter descended from her coach.

Indeed it was Olive who had arrived so unexpectedly. She had come in her coach, together with numerous boxes, and Sir Baldwin had ridden beside the coach all the way from Ashford.

Soon Olive was standing in the hall, meekly submitting to Aunt Caroline’s embrace, whilst Uncle Jasper fussed round them both like an old hen, and Susan stood in the doorway wide-eyed and open-mouthed, gaping at the beautiful lady with the shot silk cloak and the five huge feathers in her bonnet, until Aunt Caroline roused her from this state of semi-imbecility by giving her arm a vigorous pinch and ordering her back into her kitchen to put a couple more plates in the Dutch oven.

In the meanwhile Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, having greeted Aunt Caroline and Uncle Jasper with all the courtly grace peculiar to gentlemen who live much in London, gave directions to his servants and postilions to stable his saddle-horse in Mr. Hemingford’s stables, but to return to Ashford with the coach forthwith, since her ladyship would make a stay here for a few days. He himself would return home that selfsame evening.

Aunt Caroline’s notions of hospitality, however, would not allow her to let Sir Baldwin’s servants depart without at least a good cut off that leg of lamb when it presently found its way into the kitchen. So for at least an hour after that coachman and postilions in white and scarlet graced the huge stonewalled kitchen with their presence, and made

Susan’s eyes grow larger and larger with the tales they told her of the magnificent society in London of which their master and mistress were the most fêted leaders.

All this had occurred earlier in the day, of course, for twelve o’clock was the dinner hour at Old Manor Farm, and since then everyone had had a brief hour’s rest. Uncle Jasper had retired to his museum, where he quickly forgot that he had a niece and that she had arrived that day. Aunt Caroline had vainly tried to keep awake whilst Sir Baldwin Jeffreys talked politely on agricultural subjects; she nodded over Jersey cows, and closed her eyes over late lambs, but when the harvest of sainfoin came on the *tapis* she frankly lay back in her chair and began to snore.

Olive in the meanwhile had found her way to the room which she used to occupy when she was a girl. It seemed mightily small and uncomfortable after the luxuries of her house in St. James’s street, or of her home near Ashford. Aunt Caroline, who had come up with her, found herself vaguely apologising for these discomforts, even though Olive had occupied that selfsame room for fifteen years of her life.

“Try and rest now, Olive dear,” she said, as she prepared to rejoin Sir Baldwin in the little front parlour, “the child will be home by the time you come down again.”

“Ah, yes!” said Olive languidly, smothering a yawn. “By the way, where is the child?”

“On some bird’s-nesting expedition,” replied Aunt Caroline, with a sigh; “she is still the tomboy you used to scold. I haven’t seen her since breakfast time, but she’ll surely be home to tea.”

Two hours later the little party was gathered around the tea-table. Aunt Caroline's best silver teapot had come out of its green baize bag for the occasion and resplended above the china cups and saucers and the plates full of bread and butter and home-made cakes. Olive, languid and bored, was sipping her tea. Sir Baldwin, looking black as thunder, was busy whacking his boot with his riding-crop, and Cousin Barnaby Crabtree sat in the most comfortable armchair, with the dish of muffins close to his hand, and his third cup of tea nearly empty.

Susan had been sent to fetch the master, but had not yet returned.

"I declare," said Aunt Caroline as she put down the heavy silver teapot and rose from her chair— "I declare that that girl is nothing short of an imbecile. I sent her to fetch your uncle," she added, not specially addressing Olive, but because she always referred to her husband as "your uncle" whoever she might be talking to at the time — "I sent her to fetch your uncle, and now I hear her moving about in the scullery, and he'll already have forgotten all about having been sent for, and all about his tea."

"Even if he comes now," said Barnaby Crabtree placidly, "the tea will have drawn too much, and there are no more muffins left. Leave him alone, Caroline," he added more sternly; "he'll come when he wants to, and in the meanwhile cut me a piece of plum cake."

However, Aunt Caroline did not like the idea of Uncle Jasper going without his tea, so, having cut the desired piece of plum cake, she begged to be excused, and made her way straight to the museum.

There she found Uncle Jasper sitting at the top of his library steps deeply absorbed in a book.

Aunt Caroline could have smacked him, so angry did she feel.

“There you go again, Jasper,” she cried; “there you go, up in the clouds, and no more heeding your own lawful wife than a bunch of woody carrots. Jasper,” she added, seeing that indeed he took but scant notice of her, “Jasper, I say!”

And she rapped with her bunch of keys upon the back of the nearest chair.

“Eh? What?” asked Uncle Jasper meekly.

“You’ve scared that silly minx Susan out of her wits, and now your tea is getting cold, and Sir Baldwin will be going directly.”

“Sir Baldwin?” queried Uncle Jasper vacantly as he stared down at her like an old crow from its perch.

He had wholly forgotten who Sir Baldwin might be, and vaguely wondered what this gentleman’s going and coming had to do with the Vespertilio ferrum equinum, a specimen of which — so rare in the British Islands — was even now lying upon his own table.

“Jasper,” ejaculated Aunt Caroline, who you must own had grave cause for vexation, “Jasper, you don’t mean to tell me that you had forgotten that Sir Baldwin Jeffreys said at dinner-time that he must leave us directly after tea!”

“No, no, my dear,” replied Uncle Jasper vaguely; “indeed I had not forgotten that circumstance, and I am truly sorry that Sir Baldwin is going so soon.”

“A very kind word, my good Hemingford,” came in pleasing accents from Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, who had followed

in Aunt Caroline's footsteps and was even now standing at the door of the museum. "May I enter?" he added courteously.

"Of course, of course," said Aunt Caroline. "Do enter, Sir Baldwin. Jasper was asking after you."

When he was not scowling, as he had done ever since his arrival, Sir Baldwin could be exceedingly pleasant in his manner. He came into the room now, and at Aunt Caroline's invitation sat on one of the chairs that did not happen to be littered with eggs and stuffed lizards.

"A very kind word indeed," he said, "and 'tis pleasant for the parting guest when 'so soon' waits upon 'farewell.'"

"Must you really go to-day, Sir Baldwin?" said Aunt Caroline.

"Alas! madam," replied Sir Baldwin, and he sighed with becoming regret, "urgent business recalls me to London to-morrow, and I must sleep at Ashford tonight."

"'Tis a short visit you have paid us," she remarked.

"I only escorted my wife down from home — and now," he said, while with old-fashioned gallantry he raised Aunt Caroline's mittened hand to his lips, "I leave her in the safest and kindest of hands."

"With a membrane at the end of the nose."

This from Uncle Jasper, who, absent-minded as usual, was reading aloud to himself out of his book. Sir Baldwin looked startled, as well he might, seeing that Uncle Jasper had but a moment ago appeared to be taking part in the conversation; but Aunt Caroline remarked indignantly:

"Jasper, how can you say such a thing? I am sure Olive always had a beautiful nose!"

Whereupon Sir Baldwin laughed immoderately, and for the first time to-day cast off the gloom which had been weighing over his spirits.

“Nay!” Aunt Caroline went on quite placidly, for she did not perceive that anything funny had been said; but she was too polite to resent Sir Baldwin’s levity. “We are happy, of course, to have our Olive back with us for awhile.’ ’Tis sorely we missed her when you took her away from us.”

Then she sighed with every appearance of deep sorrow, though to be sure no one had desired a marriage for Olive more earnestly than had Aunt Caroline. But the good soul had always a remarkable store of regrets laid down somewhere in the bottom of her soul, and whenever occasion demanded she would deck out one of these regrets and trot it out for the benefit of the beholder; and the regret came out well accompanied by sighs and decked out to look very real, though in reality it only existed in Aunt Caroline’s imagination.

Having duly sighed over Olive’s most longed-for departure from Old Manor Farm, she now produced yet another fond regret.

“How I wish,” she said, “that her sister were more like her!”

“Is the child as much a tomboy, then, as ever?” asked Sir Baldwin kindly.

“Worse, my dear Sir Baldwin,” sighed Aunt Caroline —“worse! Now look at her to-day. Off she goes directly after breakfast — and only one piece of bacon did she have, though I fried a bit of the streaky, of which she is very fond. She’d be hungry — wouldn’t you think so, now? But no! Off

she goes, Heaven only knows where — all alone — without asking her aunt’s permission or excusing herself for not appearing at dinner. Not in for tea, either. You saw me putting a muffin down for her by the hob. No! No dinner, no tea — and now it’s nearly four o’clock, and the child not home yet, and your uncle and I not knowing whether she has broken her neck climbing a tree or torn her stockings going through the scrub. And it isn’t that I don’t do my best with her; but, there, she’ll never be like Olive, though I do give her brimstone and peppermint once a week for her complexion! Such a name, too! Boadicea! Whatever can her poor mother have been thinking about!”

“An unusual elongation of the tail,” came solemnly from the top of the library steps.

And at this Sir Baldwin was seized with such an uncontrollable fit of laughter that his eyes were streaming and he was forced to hold his sides, for they ached furiously. What made him laugh more than anything was that Aunt Caroline was apparently under the impression that Uncle Jasper was taking part willingly in the conversation, and that his remark was a comment upon what she had said. For even now when Uncle Jasper made the funny statement about the elongation of the tail she retorted quite angrily: “She was not, Jasper! I am sure my dear sister never thought of such things.”

At which Sir Baldwin, fearing that he would break his sides, went quickly out of the room.

Chapter 3
A Provoking Young Wife

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Lady Jeffreys met her husband in the square oak-panelled hall, which gave directly on every portion of the old house. She was coming out of the little parlour on the left, having duly finished tea.

“Ah, Sir Baldwin,” she said in that affected, mincing way which had grown on her in the past two years, “your groom has just been round from the stables! He wanted to know at what hour you wish to start, since you must return to Ashford to-night.”

In a moment all Sir Baldwin’s good humour had vanished. He frowned, and his handsome face wore an air of deep wrath and also of gloom, and anyone could see that to speak politely and quietly now cost him no little effort. It required no great power of observation to see that a matrimonial storm was effectually brewing — nay, it even seemed as if the storm had already broken out previously, and that the halt at Old Manor Farm had been but a momentary lull between two vigorous claps of thunder.

Olive stood in the hall, looking remarkably pert and pretty. She was beautifully dressed in a gown of emerald-green silk, with trimmings of black braid and quaint buttons. She had a very slim waist, and the elongated shape of her bodice and full gathers in the skirt set off her trim figure to great advantage.

She had taken off her bonnet, and her fair hair now showed all round her head in a maze of innumerable curls

and puffs, which were richly set off by a high comb of pierced tortoiseshell. No doubt she was excessively pretty, and so dainty, too, from the tip of her dainty leather shoe and her fine white silk stockings to the cluster of curls that fell each side of her small oval face from the temple to the cheek, and anyone who was not observant would naturally marvel how any husband could scowl on such a picture.

She looked very provocative just now, with her head cocked on one side like a pert robin, one hand on her hip, and the other swinging an embroidered reticule by its long delicate chain.

Sir Baldwin looked on her, and the scowl darkened yet more deeply on his face. But he made no comment in reply to what she had said, until Aunt Caroline's entrance into the hall recalled him to himself; then he asked calmly:

"And what answer did your ladyship give to my groom?"

"That you would start within half an hour," she replied flippantly.

"Nay, Olive," said Aunt Caroline from under the lintel of the museum door; "perhaps Sir Baldwin may be persuaded to tarry with us until to-morrow at the least."

"That were presumptuous on my part, Madam," said Sir Baldwin, "since my wife seems so mightily eager to rid herself of me."

Olive laughed lightly, but I must say that her laughter sounded a little forced and devoid of true mirth.

"Faith!" she said, "with your temper at boiling point, you have not been an agreeable companion."

"I intruded as little as I could on your ladyship's privacy," he retorted.