ELIZABETH GASKELL

ROUND THE SOFA

Elizabeth Gaskell

Round the Sofa

EAN 8596547395614

DigiCat, 2022
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Round the Sofa

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Long ago I was placed by my parents under the medical treatment of a certain Mr Dawson, a surgeon in Edinburgh, who had obtained a reputation for the cure of a particular class of diseases. I was sent with my governess into lodgings near his house, in the Old Town. I was to combine lessons from the excellent Edinburgh masters, with the medicines and exercises needed for my indisposition. It was at first rather dreary to leave my brothers and sisters, and to give up our merry out of doors life with our country home, for dull lodgings, with only poor grave Miss Duncan for a companion; and to exchange our romps in the garden and rambles through the fields for stiff walks in the streets, the decorum of which obliged me to tie my bonnet strings neatly, and put on my shawl with some regard to straightness.

The evenings were the worst. It was autumn, and of course they daily grew longer: they were long enough, I am sure, when we first settled down in those grey and drab lodgings. For, you must know, my father and mother were not rich, and there were a great many of us, and the medical expenses to be incurred by my being placed under Mr Dawson’s care were expected to be considerable; therefore, one great point in our search after lodgings was economy. My father, who was too true a gentleman to feel false shame, had named this necessity for cheapness to Mr Dawson; and in return, Mr Dawson had told him of those at No. 6 Cromer Street, in which we were finally settled. The house belonged to an old man, at one time a tutor to young

men preparing for the University, in which capacity he had become known to Mr Dawson. But his pupils had dropped off; and when we went to lodge with him, I imagine that his principal support was derived from a few occasional lessons which he gave, and from letting the rooms that we took, a drawing room opening into a bedroom, out of which a smaller chamber led. His daughter was his housekeeper: a son, whom we never saw, supposed to be leading the same life that his father had done before him, only we never saw or heard of any pupils; and there was one hard-working, honest little Scottish maiden, square, stumpy, neat, and plain, who might have been any age from eighteen to forty.

Looking back on the household now, there was perhaps much to admire in their quiet endurance of decent poverty; but at this time, their poverty grated against many of my tastes, for I could not recognise the fact, that in a town the simple graces of fresh flowers, clean white muslin curtains, pretty bright chintzes, all cost money, which is saved by the adoption of dust coloured moreen, and mud coloured carpets. There was not a penny spent on mere elegance in that room; yet there was everything considered necessary to comfort: but after all, such mere pretences of comfort! a hard, slippery, black horse hair sofa, which was no place of rest; an old piano, serving as a sideboard; a grate, narrowed by an inner supplement, till it hardly held a handful of the small coal which could scarcely ever be stirred up into a genial blaze. But there were two evils worse than even this coldness and bareness of the rooms: one was that we were provided with a latchkey, which allowed us to open the front door whenever we came home from a walk, and go upstairs without meeting any face of welcome, or hearing the sound of a human voice in the apparently deserted house – Mr Mackenzie piqued himself on the noiselessness of his

establishment; and the other, which might almost seem to neutralise the first, was the danger we were always exposed to on going out, of the old man – sly, miserly, and intelligent – popping out upon us from his room, close to the left hand of the door, with some civility which we learned to distrust as a mere pretext for extorting more money, yet which it was difficult to refuse: such as the offer of any books out of his library, a great temptation, for we could see into the shelf lined room; but just as we were on the point of yielding, there was a hint of the “consideration” to be expected for the loan of books of so much higher a class than any to be obtained at the circulating library, which made us suddenly draw back. Another time he came out of his den to offer us written cards, to distribute among our acquaintance, on which he undertook to teach the very things I was to learn; but I would rather have been the most ignorant woman that ever lived than tried to learn anything from that old fox in breeches. When we had declined all his proposals, he went apparently into dudgeon. Once when we had forgotten our latchkey we rang in vain for many times at the door, seeing our landlord standing all the time at the window to the right, looking out of it in an absent and philosophical state of mind, from which no signs and gestures of ours could arouse him.

The women of the household were far better, and more really respectable, though even on them poverty had laid her heavy left hand, instead of her blessing right. Miss Mackenzie kept us as short in our food as she decently could – we paid so much a week for our board, be it observed; and if one day we had less appetite than another our meals were docked to the smaller standard, until Miss Duncan ventured to remonstrate. The sturdy maid-of-all-work was scrupulously honest, but looked discontented, and scarcely

vouchsafed us thanks, when on leaving we gave her what Mrs Dawson had told us would be considered handsome in most lodgings. I do not believe Phenice ever received wages from the Mackenzies.

But that dear Mrs Dawson! The mention of her comes into my mind like the bright sunshine into our dingy little drawing room came on those days; – as a sweet scent of violets greets the sorrowful passer among the woodlands.

Mrs Dawson was not Mr Dawson's wife, for he was a bachelor. She was his crippled sister, an old maid, who had, what she called, taken her brevet rank.

After we had been about a fortnight in Edinburgh, Mr Dawson said, in a sort of half doubtful manner to Miss Duncan –

"My sister bids me say, that every Monday evening a few friends come in to sit round her sofa for an hour or so, – some before going to gayer parties – and that if you and Miss Greatorex would like a little change, she would only be too glad to see you. Any time from seven to eight tonight; and I must add my injunctions, both for her sake, and for that of my little patient's, here, that you leave at nine o'clock. After all, I do not know if you will care to come; but Margaret bade me ask you;" and he glanced up suspiciously and sharply at us. If either of us had felt the slightest reluctance, however well disguised by manner, to accept this invitation, I am sure he would have at once detected our feelings, and withdrawn it; so jealous and chary was he of anything pertaining to the appreciation of this beloved sister.

But if it had been to spend an evening at the dentist's, I believe I should have welcomed the invitation, so weary was I of the monotony of the nights in our lodgings; and as for Miss Duncan, an invitation to tea was of itself a pure and

unmixed honour, and one to be accepted with all becoming form and gratitude: so Mr Dawson's sharp glances over his spectacles failed to detect anything but the truest pleasure, and he went on.

"You'll find it very dull, I dare say. Only a few old fogies like myself, and one or two good sweet young women: I never know who'll come. Margaret is obliged to lie in a darkened room – only half-lighted I mean, – because her eyes are weak, – oh, it will be very stupid, I dare say: don't thank me till you've been once and tried it, and then if you like it, your best thanks will be to come again every Monday, from half-past seven to nine, you know. Goodbye, goodbye."

Hitherto I had never been out to a party of grown-up people; and no court ball to a London young lady could seem more redolent of honour and pleasure than this Monday evening to me.

Dressed out in new stiff book-muslin, made up to my throat, – a frock which had seemed to me and my sisters the height of earthly grandeur and finery – Alice, our old nurse, had been making it at home, in contemplation of the possibility of such an event during my stay in Edinburgh, but which had then appeared to me a robe too lovely and angelic to be ever worn short of heaven – I went with Miss Duncan to Mr Dawson's at the appointed time. We entered through one small lofty room, perhaps I ought to call it an antechamber, for the house was old-fashioned, and stately and grand, the large square drawing room, into the centre of which Mrs Dawson's sofa was drawn. Behind her a little was placed a table with a great cluster candlestick upon it, bearing seven or eight wax lights; and that was all the light in the room, which looked to me very vast and indistinct after our pinched up apartment at the Mackenzie's. Mrs Dawson must have been sixty; and yet her face looked very

soft and smooth and childlike. Her hair was quite grey: it would have looked white but for the snowiness of her cap, and satin ribbon. She was wrapped in a kind of dressing gown of French grey merino: the furniture of the room was deep rose colour, and white and gold, – the paper which covered the walls was Indian, beginning low down with a profusion of tropical leaves and birds and insects, and gradually diminishing in richness of detail till at the top it ended in the most delicate tendrils and most filmy insects.

Mr Dawson had acquired much riches in his profession, and his house gave one this impression. In the corners of the rooms were great jars of Eastern china, filled with flower-leaves and spices; and in the middle of all this was placed the sofa, which poor Margaret Dawson passed whole days, and months, and years, without the power of moving by herself. By-and-by Mrs Dawson's maid brought in tea and macaroons for us, and a little cup of milk and water and a biscuit for her. Then the door opened. We had come very early, and in came Edinburgh professors, Edinburgh beauties, and celebrities, all on their way to some other gayer and later party, but coming first to see Mrs Dawson, and tell her their *bon mots*, or their interests, or their plans. By each learned man, by each lovely girl, she was treated as a dear friend, who knew something more about their own individual selves, independent of their reputation and general society character, than any one else.

It was very brilliant and very dazzling, and gave enough to think about and wonder about for many days.

Monday after Monday we went, stationary, silent; what could we find to say to any one but Mrs Margaret herself? Winter passed, summer was coming, still I was ailing, and weary of my life; but still Mr Dawson gave hopes of my ultimate recovery. My father and mother came and went;

but they could not stay long, they had so many claims upon them. Mrs Margaret Dawson had become my dear friend, although, perhaps, I had never exchanged as many words with her as I had with Miss Mackenzie, but then with Mrs Dawson every word was a pearl or a diamond.

People began to drop off from Edinburgh, only a few were left, and I am not sure if our Monday evenings were not all the pleasanter.

There was Mr Sperano, the Italian exile, banished even from France, where he had long resided, and now teaching Italian with meek diligence in the northern city; there was Mr Preston, the Westmoreland squire, or, as he preferred to be called, statesman, whose wife had come to Edinburgh for the education of their numerous family, and who, whenever her husband had come over on one of his occasional visits, was only too glad to accompany him to Mrs Dawson's Monday evenings, he and the invalid lady having been friends from long ago. These and ourselves kept steady visitors, and enjoyed ourselves all the more from having the more of Mrs Dawson's society.

One evening I had brought the little stool close to her sofa, and was caressing her thin white hand, when the thought came into my head and out I spoke it.

"Tell me, dear Mrs Dawson," said I, "how long you have been in Edinburgh; you do not speak Scotch, and Mr Dawson says he is not Scotch."

"No, I am Lancashire – Liverpool born," said she, smiling. "Don't you hear it in my broad tongue?"

"I hear something different to other people, but I like it because it is just you; is that Lancashire?"

"I dare say it is; for, though I am sure Lady Ludlow took pains enough to correct me in my younger days, I never could get rightly over the accent."

“Lady Ludlow,” said I, “what had she to do with you? I heard you talking about her to Lady Madeline Stuart the first evening I ever came here; you and she seemed so fond of Lady Ludlow; who is she?”

“She is dead, my child; dead long ago.”

I felt sorry I had spoken about her, Mrs Dawson looked so grave and sad. I suppose she perceived my sorrow, for she went on and said – “My dear, I like to talk and to think of Lady Ludlow: she was my true, kind friend and benefactress for many years; ask me what you like about her, and do not think you give me pain.”

I grew bold at this.

“Will you tell me all about her, then, please, Mrs Dawson?”

“Nay,” said she, smiling, “that would be too long a story. Here are Signor Sperano, and Miss Duncan, and Mr and Mrs Preston are coming tonight, Mr Preston told me; how would they like to hear an old world story which, after all, would be no story at all, neither beginning, nor middle, nor end, only a bundle of recollections?”

“If you speak of me, madame,” said Signor Sperano, “I can only say you do me one great honour by recounting in my presence anything about any person that has ever interested you.”

Miss Duncan tried to say something of the same kind. In the middle of her confused speech, Mr and Mrs Preston came in. I sprang up; I went to meet them.

“Oh,” said I, “Mrs Dawson is just going to tell us all about Lady Ludlow, and a great deal more, only she is afraid it won’t interest anybody: do say you would like to hear it!”

Mrs Dawson smiled at me, and in reply to their urgency she promised to tell us all about Lady Ludlow, on condition that each one of us should, after she had ended, narrate

something interesting, which we had either heard, or which had fallen within our own experience. We all promised willingly, and then gathered round her sofa to hear what she could tell us about my Lady Ludlow.

My Lady Ludlow

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Chapter 1

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I am an old woman now, and things are very different to what they were in my youth. Then we, who travelled, travelled in coaches, carrying six inside, and making a two days' journey out of what people now go over in a couple of hours with a whizz and a flash, and a screaming whistle, enough to deafen one. Then letters came in but three times a week: indeed, in some places in Scotland where I have stayed when I was a girl, the post came in but once a month; – but letters were letters then; and we made great prizes of them, and read them and studied them like books. Now the post comes rattling in twice a day, bringing short jerky notes, some without beginning or end, but just a little sharp sentence, which well bred folks would think too abrupt to be spoken. Well, well! they may all be improvements, – I dare say they are; but you will never meet with a Lady Ludlow in these days.

I will try and tell you about her. It is no story: it has, as I said, neither beginning, middle, nor end.

My father was a poor clergyman with a large family. My mother was always said to have good blood in her veins; and when she wanted to maintain her position with the people she was thrown among, – principally rich democratic manufacturers, all for liberty and the French Revolution, – she would put on a pair of ruffles, trimmed with real old English point, very much darned to be sure, – but which could not be bought new for love or money, as the art of making it was lost years before. These ruffles showed, as she said, that her ancestors had been Somebodies, when

the grandfathers of the rich folk, who now looked down upon her, had been Nobodies, – if, indeed, they had any grandfathers at all. I don’t know whether any one out of our own family ever noticed these ruffles, – but we were all taught as children to feel rather proud when my mother put them on, and to hold up our heads as became the descendants of the lady who had first possessed the lace. Not but what my dear father often told us that pride was a great sin; we were never allowed to be proud of anything but my mother’s ruffles: and she was so innocently happy when she put them on, – often, poor dear creature, to a very worn and threadbare gown, – that I still think, even after all my experience of life, they were a blessing to the family. You will think that I am wandering away from my Lady Ludlow. Not at all. The Lady who had owned the lace, Ursula Hanbury, was a common ancestress of both my mother and my Lady Ludlow. And so it fell out, that when my poor father died, and my mother was sorely pressed to know what to do with her nine children, and looked far and wide for signs of willingness to help, Lady Ludlow sent her a letter, proffering aid and assistance. I see that letter now: a large sheet of thick yellow paper, with a straight broad margin left on the left-hand side of the delicate Italian writing, – writing which contained far more in the same space of paper than all the sloping, or masculine handwritings of the present day. It was sealed with a coat of arms, – a lozenge, – for Lady Ludlow was a widow. My mother made us notice the motto, “Foy et Loy,” and told us where to look for the quarterings of the Hanbury arms before she opened the letter. Indeed, I think she was rather afraid of what the contents might be; for, as I have said, in her anxious love for her fatherless children, she had written to many people upon whom, to tell truly, she had but little claim; and their cold, hard answers had

many a time made her cry, when she thought none of us were looking. I do not even know if she had ever seen Lady Ludlow: all I knew of her was that she was a very grand lady, whose grandmother had been half-sister to my mother's great-grandmother; but of her character and circumstances I had heard nothing, and I doubt if my mother was acquainted with them.

I looked over my mother's shoulder to read the letter; it began, "Dear Cousin Margaret Dawson," and I think I felt hopeful from the moment I saw those words. She went on to say, – stay, I think I can remember the very words:

> Dear Cousin Margaret Dawson,
>
> I have been much grieved to hear of the loss you have sustained in the death of so good a husband, and so excellent a clergyman as I have always heard that my late cousin Richard was esteemed to be.

"There!" said my mother, laying her finger on the passage, "read that aloud to the little ones. Let them hear how their father's good report travelled far and wide, and how well he is spoken of by one whom he never saw. COUSIN Richard, how prettily her ladyship writes! Go on, Margaret!" She wiped her eyes as she spoke: and laid her fingers on her lips, to still my little sister, Cecily, who, not understanding anything about the important letter, was beginning to talk and make a noise.

> You say you are left with nine children. I too should have had nine, if mine had all lived. I have none left but Rudolph, the present Lord Ludlow. He is married, and lives, for the most part, in London. But I entertain six young gentlewomen at my house at Connington, who

are to me as daughters – save that, perhaps, I restrict them in certain indulgences in dress and diet that might be befitting in young ladies of a higher rank, and of more probable wealth. These young persons – all of condition, though out of means – are my constant companions, and I strive to do my duty as a Christian lady towards them. One of these young gentlewomen died (at her own home, whither she had gone upon a visit) last May. Will you do me the favour to allow your eldest daughter to supply her place in my household? She is, as I make out, about sixteen years of age. She will find companions here who are but a little older than herself. I dress my young friends myself, and make each of them a small allowance for pocket money. They have but few opportunities for matrimony, as Connington is far removed from any town. The clergyman is a deaf old widower; my agent is married; and as for the neighbouring farmers, they are, of course, below the notice of the young gentlewomen under my protection. Still, if any young woman wishes to marry, and has conducted herself to my satisfaction, I give her a wedding dinner, her clothes, and her house linen. And such as remain with me to my death, will find a small competency provided for them in my will. I reserve to myself the option of paying their travelling expenses, – disliking gadding women, on the one hand; on the other, not wishing by too long absence from the family home to weaken natural ties.

‘If my proposal pleases you and your daughter – or rather, if it pleases you, for I trust your daughter has been too well brought up to have a will in opposition to yours – let me know, dear cousin Margaret Dawson, and I will make arrangements for meeting the young

gentlewoman at Cavistock, which is the nearest point to which the coach will bring her.’

My mother dropped the letter, and sat silent.

“I shall not know what to do without you, Margaret.”

A moment before, like a young untried girl as I was, I had been pleased at the notion of seeing a new place, and leading a new life. But now, – my mother’s look of sorrow, and the children’s cry of remonstrance: “Mother; I won’t go,” I said.

“Nay! but you had better,” replied she, shaking her head. “Lady Ludlow has much power. She can help your brothers. It will not do to slight her offer.”

So we accepted it, after much consultation. We were rewarded, – or so we thought, – for, afterwards, when I came to know Lady Ludlow, I saw that she would have done her duty by us, as helpless relations, however we might have rejected her kindness, – by a presentation to Christ’s Hospital for one of my brothers.

And this was how I came to know my Lady Ludlow.

I remember well the afternoon of my arrival at Hanbury Court. Her ladyship had sent to meet me at the nearest post town at which the mail coach stopped. There was an old groom enquiring for me, the ostler said, if my name was Dawson – from Hanbury Court, he believed. I felt it rather formidable; and first began to understand what was meant by going among strangers, when I lost sight of the guard to whom my mother had intrusted me. I was perched up in a high gig with a hood to it, such as in those days was called a chair, and my companion was driving deliberately through the most pastoral country I had ever yet seen. By-and-by we ascended a long hill, and the man got out and walked at the horse’s head. I should have liked to walk, too, very much

indeed; but I did not know how far I might do it; and, in fact, I dared not speak to ask to be helped down the deep steps of the gig. We were at last at the top, – on a long, breezy, sweeping, unenclosed piece of ground, called, as I afterwards learnt, a Chase. The groom stopped, breathed, patted his horse, and then mounted again to my side.

“Are we near Hanbury Court?” I asked.

“Near! Why, Miss! we’ve a matter of ten mile yet to go.”

Once launched into conversation, we went on pretty glibly. I fancy he had been afraid of beginning to speak to me, just as I was to him; but he got over his shyness with me sooner than I did mine with him. I let him choose the subjects of conversation, although very often I could not understand the points of interest in them: for instance, he talked for more than a quarter of an hour of a famous race which a certain dog fox had given him, above thirty years before; and spoke of all the covers and turns just as if I knew them as well as he did; and all the time I was wondering what kind of an animal a dog fox might be.

After we lost the Chase, the road grew worse. No one in these days, who has not seen the byroads of fifty years ago, can imagine what they were. We had to quarter, as Randal called it, nearly all the way along the deep-rutted, miry lanes; and the tremendous jolts I occasionally met with made my seat in the gig so unsteady that I could not look about me at all, I was so much occupied in holding on. The road was too muddy for me to walk without dirtying myself more than I liked to do, just before my first sight of my Lady Ludlow. But by-and-by, when we came to the fields in which the lane ended, I begged Randal to help me down, as I saw that I could pick my steps among the pasture grass without making myself unfit to be seen; and Randal, out of pity for his steaming horse, wearied with the hard struggle through

the mud, thanked me kindly, and helped me down with a springing jump.

The pastures fell gradually down to the lower land, shut in on either side by rows of high elms, as if there had been a wide grand avenue here in former times. Down the grassy gorge we went, seeing the sunset sky at the end of the shadowed descent. Suddenly we came to a long flight of steps.

“If you’ll run down there, Miss, I’ll go round and meet you, and then you’d better mount again, for my lady will like to see you drive up to the house.”

“Are we near the house?” said I, suddenly checked by the idea.

“Down there, Miss,” replied he, pointing with his whip to certain stacks of twisted chimneys rising out of a group of trees, in deep shadow against the crimson light, and which lay just beyond a great square lawn at the base of the steep slope of a hundred yards, on the edge of which we stood.

I went down the steps quietly enough. I met Randal and the gig at the bottom; and, falling into a side road to the left, we drove sedately round, through the gateway, and into the great court in front of the house.

The road by which we had come lay right at the back.

Hanbury Court is a vast red-brick house – at least, it is cased in part with red bricks; and the gatehouse and walls about the place are of brick, – with stone facings at every corner, and door, and window, such as you see at Hampton Court. At the back are the gables, and arched doorways, and stone mullions, which show (so Lady Ludlow used to tell us) that it was once a priory. There was a prior’s parlour, I know – only we called it Mrs.Medlicott’s room; and there was a tithe barn as big as a church, and rows of fish ponds, all got ready for the monks’ fasting days in old time. But all this I

did not see till afterwards. I hardly noticed, this first night, the great Virginian Creeper (said to have been the first planted in England by one of my lady’s ancestors) that half covered the front of the house. As I had been unwilling to leave the guard of the coach, so did I now feel unwilling to leave Randal, a known friend of three hours. But there was no help for it; in I must go; past the grand-looking old gentleman holding the door open for me, on into the great hall on the right hand, into which the sun’s last rays were sending in glorious red light, – the gentleman was now walking before me, – up a step on to the dais, as I afterwards learned that it was called, – then again to the left, through a series of sitting rooms, opening one out of another, and all of them looking into a stately garden, glowing, even in the twilight, with the bloom of flowers. We went up four steps out of the last of these rooms, and then my guide lifted up a heavy silk curtain and I was in the presence of my Lady Ludlow.

She was very small of stature, and very upright. She wore a great lace cap, nearly half her own height, I should think, that went round her head (caps which tied under the chin, and which we called “mobs,” came in later, and my lady held them in great contempt, saying people might as well come down in their nightcaps). In front of my lady’s cap was a great bow of white satin ribbon; and a broad band of the same ribbon was tied tight round her head, and served to keep the cap straight. She had a fine Indian muslin shawl folded over her shoulders and across her chest, and an apron of the same; a black silk mode gown, made with short sleeves and ruffles, and with the tail thereof pulled through the pocket hole, so as to shorten it to a useful length: beneath it she wore, as I could plainly see, a quilted lavender satin petticoat. Her hair was snowy white, but I

hardly saw it, it was so covered with her cap: her skin, even at her age, was waxen in texture and tint; her eyes were large and dark blue, and must have been her great beauty when she was young, for there was nothing particular, as far as I can remember, either in mouth or nose. She had a great gold-headed stick by her chair; but I think it was more as a mark of state and dignity than for use; for she had as light and brisk a step when she chose as any girl of fifteen, and, in her private early walk of meditation in the mornings, would go as swiftly from garden alley to garden alley as any one of us.

She was standing up when I went in. I dropped my curtsey at the door, which my mother had always taught me as a part of good manners, and went up instinctively to my lady. She did not put out her hand, but raised herself a little on tiptoe, and kissed me on both cheeks.

“You are cold, my child. You shall have a dish of tea with me.” She rang a little handbell on the table by her, and her waiting maid came in from a small anteroom; and, as if all had been prepared, and was awaiting my arrival, brought with her a small china service with tea ready made, and a plate of delicately cut bread and butter, every morsel of which I could have eaten, and been none the better for it, so hungry was I after my long ride. The waiting maid took off my cloak, and I sat down, sorely alarmed at the silence, the hushed footfalls of the subdued maiden over the thick carpet, and the soft voice and clear pronunciation of my Lady Ludlow. My teaspoon fell against my cup with a sharp noise, that seemed so out of place and season that I blushed deeply. My lady caught my eye with hers, – both keen and sweet were those dark blue eyes of her ladyship’s:

“Your hands are very cold, my dear; take off those gloves” (I wore thick serviceable doeskin, and had been too

shy to take them off unbidden), “and let me try and warm them – the evenings are very chilly.” And she held my great red hands in hers, – soft, warm, white, ring laden. Looking at last a little wistfully into my face, she said – “Poor child! And you’re the eldest of nine! I had a daughter who would have been just your age; but I cannot fancy her the eldest of nine.” Then came a pause of silence; and then she rang her bell, and desired her waiting maid, Adams, to show me to my room.

It was so small that I think it must have been a cell. The walls were whitewashed stone; the bed was of white dimity. There was a small piece of red staircarpet on each side of the bed, and two chairs. In a closet adjoining were my washstand and toilet table. There was a text of Scripture painted on the wall right opposite to my bed; and below hung a print, common enough in those days, of King George and Queen Charlotte, with all their numerous children, down to the little Princess Amelia in a go-cart. On each side hung a small portrait, also engraved: on the left, it was Louis the Sixteenth; on the other, Marie Antoinette. On the chimney piece there was a tinderbox and a Prayer book. I do not remember anything else in the room. Indeed, in those days people did not dream of writing tables, and inkstands, and portfolios, and easy chairs, and what not. We were taught to go into our bedrooms for the purposes of dressing, and sleeping, and praying.

Presently I was summoned to supper. I followed the young lady who had been sent to call me, down the wide shallow stairs, into the great hall, through which I had first passed on my way to my Lady Ludlow’s room. There were four other young gentlewomen, all standing, and all silent, who curtsied to me when I first came in. They were dressed in a kind of uniform: muslin caps bound round their heads

with blue ribbons, plain muslin handkerchiefs, lawn aprons, and drab-coloured stuff gowns. They were all gathered together at a little distance from the table, on which were placed a couple of cold chickens, a salad, and a fruit tart. On the dais there was a smaller round table, on which stood a silver jug filled with milk, and a small roll. Near that was set a carved chair, with a countess's coronet surmounting the back of it. I thought that some one might have spoken to me; but they were shy, and I was shy; or else there was some other reason; but, indeed, almost the minute after I had come into the hall by the door at the lower hand, her ladyship entered by the door opening upon the dais; whereupon we all curtsied very low; I because I saw the others do it. She stood, and looked at us for a moment.

"Young gentlewomen," said she, "make Margaret Dawson welcome among you;" and they treated me with the kind politeness due to a stranger, but still without any talking beyond what was required for the purposes of the meal. After it was over, and grace was said by one of our party, my lady rang her handbell, and the servants came in and cleared away the supper things: then they brought in a portable reading desk, which was placed on the dais, and, the whole household trooping in, my lady called to one of my companions to come up and read the Psalms and Lessons for the day. I remember thinking how afraid I should have been had I been in her place. There were no prayers. My lady thought it schismatic to have any prayers excepting those in the Prayer book; and would as soon have preached a sermon herself in the parish church, as have allowed any one not a deacon at the least to read prayers in a private dwelling house. I am not sure that even then she would have approved of his reading them in an unconsecrated place.

She had been maid of honour to Queen Charlotte: a Hanbury of that old stock that flourished in the days of the Plantagenets, and heiress of all the land that remained to the family, of the great estates which had once stretched into four separate counties. Hanbury Court was hers by right. She had married Lord Ludlow, and had lived for many years at his various seats, and away from her ancestral home. She had lost all her children but one, and most of them had died at these houses of Lord Ludlow's; and, I dare say, that gave my lady a distaste to the places, and a longing to come back to Hanbury Court, where she had been so happy as a girl. I imagine her girlhood had been the happiest time of her life; for, now I think of it, most of her opinions, when I knew her in later life, were singular enough then, but had been universally prevalent fifty years before. For instance, while I lived at Hanbury Court, the cry for education was beginning to come up: Mr.Raikes had set up his Sunday Schools; and some clergymen were all for teaching writing and arithmetic, as well as reading. My lady would have none of this; it was levelling and revolutionary, she said. When a young woman came to be hired, my lady would have her in, and see if she liked her looks and her dress, and question her about her family. Her ladyship laid great stress upon this latter point, saying that a girl who did not warm up when any interest or curiosity was expressed about her mother, or the "baby" (if there was one), was not likely to make a good servant. Then she would make her put out her feet, to see if they were well and neatly shod. Then she would bid her say the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. Then she enquired if she could write. If she could, and she had liked all that had gone before, her face sank – it was a great disappointment, for it was an all but inviolable rule with her never to engage a servant who could write. But I have

known her ladyship break through it, although in both cases in which she did so she put the girl's principles to a further and unusual test in asking her to repeat the Ten Commandments. One pert young woman – and yet I was sorry for her too, only she afterwards married a rich draper in Shrewsbury – who had got through her trials pretty tolerably, considering she could write, spoilt all, by saying glibly, at the end of the last Commandment, "An't please your ladyship, I can cast accounts."

"Go away, wench," said my lady in a hurry, "you're only fit for trade; you will not suit me for a servant." The girl went away crestfallen: in a minute, however, my lady sent me after her to see that she had something to eat before leaving the house; and, indeed, she sent for her once again, but it was only to give her a Bible, and to bid her beware of French principles, which had led the French to cut off their king's and queen's heads.

The poor, blubbering girl said, "Indeed, my lady, I wouldn't hurt a fly, much less a king, and I cannot abide the French, nor frogs neither, for that matter."

But my lady was inexorable, and took a girl who could neither read nor write, to make up for her alarm about the progress of education towards addition and subtraction; and afterwards, when the clergyman who was at Hanbury parish when I came there, had died, and the bishop had appointed another, and a younger man, in his stead, this was one of the points on which he and my lady did not agree. While good old deaf Mr.Mountford lived, it was my lady's custom, when indisposed for a sermon, to stand up at the door of her large square pew, – just opposite to the reading desk, – and to say (at that part of the morning service where it is decreed that, in quires and places where they sing, here followeth the anthem): "Mr.Mountford, I will not trouble you

for a discourse this morning.” And we all knelt down to the Litany with great satisfaction; for Mr.Mountford, though he could not hear, had always his eyes open about this part of the service, for any of my lady’s movements. But the new clergyman, Mr.Gray, was of a different stamp. He was very zealous in all his parish work; and my lady, who was just as good as she could be to the poor, was often crying him up as a godsend to the parish, and he never could send amiss to the Court when he wanted broth, or wine, or jelly, or sago for a sick person. But he needs must take up the new hobby of education; and I could see that this put my lady sadly about one Sunday, when she suspected, I know not how, that there was something to be said in his sermon about a Sunday school which he was planning. She stood up, as she had not done since Mr.Mountford’s death, two years and better before this time, and said –

“Mr.Gray, I will not trouble you for a discourse this morning.”

But her voice was not well-assured and steady; and we knelt down with more of curiosity than satisfaction in our minds. Mr.Gray preached a very rousing sermon, on the necessity of establishing a Sabbath school in the village. My lady shut her eyes, and seemed to go to sleep; but I don’t believe she lost a word of it, though she said nothing about it that I heard until the next Saturday, when two of us, as was the custom, were riding out with her in her carriage, and we went to see a poor bedridden woman, who lived some miles away at the other end of the estate and of the parish: and as we came out of the cottage we met Mr.Gray walking up to it, in a great heat, and looking very tired. My lady beckoned him to her, and told him she should wait and take him home with her, adding that she wondered to see him there, so far from his home, for that it was beyond a

Sabbath day’s journey, and, from what she had gathered from his sermon the last Sunday, he was all for Judaism against Christianity. He looked as if he did not understand what she meant; but the truth was that, besides the way in which he had spoken up for schools and schooling, he had kept calling Sunday the Sabbath: and, as her ladyship said, “The Sabbath is the Sabbath, and that’s one thing – it is Saturday; and if I keep it, I’m a Jew, which I’m not. And Sunday is Sunday; and that’s another thing; and if I keep it, I’m a Christian, which I humbly trust I am.”

But when Mr.Gray got an inkling of her meaning in talking about a Sabbath day’s journey, he only took notice of a part of it: he smiled and bowed, and said no one knew better than her ladyship what were the duties that abrogated all inferior laws regarding the Sabbath; and that he must go in and read to old Betty Brown, so that he would not detain her ladyship.

“But I shall wait for you, Mr.Gray,” said she. “Or I will take a drive round by Oakfield, and be back in an hour’s time.” For, you see, she would not have him feel hurried or troubled with a thought that he was keeping her waiting, while he ought to be comforting and praying with old Betty.

“A very pretty young man, my dears,” said she, as we drove away. “But I shall have my pew glazed all the same.”

We did not know what she meant at the time; but the next Sunday but one we did. She had the curtains all round the grand old Hanbury family seat taken down, and, instead of them, there was glass up to the height of six or seven feet. We entered by a door, with a window in it that drew up or down just like what you see in carriages. This window was generally down, and then we could hear perfectly; but if Mr.Gray used the word “Sabbath,” or spoke in favour of

schooling and education, my lady stepped out of her corner, and drew up the window with a decided clang and clash.

I must tell you something more about Mr.Gray. The presentation to the living of Hanbury was vested in two trustees, of whom Lady Ludlow was one: Lord Ludlow had exercised this right in the appointment of Mr.Mountford, who had won his lordship’s favour by his excellent horsemanship. Nor was Mr.Mountford a bad clergyman, as clergymen went in those days. He did not drink, though he liked good eating as much as any one. And if any poor person was ill, and he heard of it, he would send them plates from his own dinner of what he himself liked best; sometimes of dishes which were almost as bad as poison to sick people. He meant kindly to everybody except dissenters, whom Lady Ludlow and he united in trying to drive out of the parish; and among dissenters he particularly abhorred Methodists – some one said, because John Wesley had objected to his hunting. But that must have been long ago for when I knew him he was far too stout and too heavy to hunt; besides, the bishop of the diocese disapproved of hunting, and had intimated his disapprobation to the clergy. For my own part, I think a good run would not have come amiss, even in a moral point of view, to Mr.Mountford. He ate so much, and took so little exercise, that we young women often heard of his being in terrible passions with his servants, and the sexton and clerk. But they none of them minded him much, for he soon came to himself, and was sure to make them some present or other – some said in proportion to his anger; so that the sexton, who was a bit of a wag (as all sextons are, I think), said that the vicar’s saying, “The Devil take you,” was worth a shilling any day, whereas “The Deuce” was a shabby sixpenny speech, only fit for a curate.