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The Carroll Girls

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THE CARROLL GIRLS.

By

MABEL QUILLER-COUCH.

1906

CHAPTER I.

Up and down, to and fro, backwards and for wards over the sunny garden the butterflies, white, sulphur, and brown, flitted and fluttered, lightly poising on currant-bush or flower, loving life as they basked in the sunshine; and Penelope lay and watched them. What did it matter to them that the garden was neglected, the grass rank and uncut, the currant-bushes barren from neglect, the lilacs old and blossomless? It mattered no more to them than it did to Penelope, lying so lazy and happy in the coarse grass.

Penelope had never known the garden other than it was now, except, perhaps, at very far-distant intervals when a visitor was expected— usually Aunt Julia, when a shilling or so had to be found to pay a gardener to come and 'tidy up.' She herself was always better pleased when he did not come, for almost invariably he charged too much, or Lydia said he did, and would tell him of it, not too politely, and tell her mistress that she was encouraging robbery; and Mrs. Carroll—who would far rather pay too much and hear no more about it than be bothered—would be worried, and Lydia would be cross; and to Penelope it seemed a pity to be made so uncomfortable for the sake of sixpence or a shilling. She could not bear jars and discords. These, though, were troubles that occurred but seldom to ruffle the surface of her usually happy life. As a rule, like the butterflies, she saw only the sunshine, and the green things growing, and nothing of the sordidness and neglect of everything about her. If she did, if things jarred or fretted her, she just walked away, far out into the country and the woods where everything was peaceful, and nothing seemed to matter; and out there she would very soon recover again and become her old happy self.

There were three other Carroll children — Esther, the eldest, Angela, and Poppy, the baby of them all. Penelope was the second, aged nearly twelve.

"Four girls! isn't it dreadful?" Esther sometimes sighed. "But there, I suppose it is better than some of us being boys, for now we *can* hand our clothes down from one to the other, and if we couldn't I am afraid the younger ones would often have to go without."

In the thirteen short years of her life poor Esther had grown to know all the shifts and economies and discomforts of poverty only too well. She had seen, so to speak, the rise and fall of her family, and at last had become almost the only prop which kept it from falling altogether. She could remember when the house was always full of company and life and laughter, when her mother always wore pretty frocks and beautiful jewels, and drove everywhere in their own carriage. She could remember gay dinner-parties, when she used to creep out of bed and sit on the stairs to listen to the singing in the drawing-room.

The scent of certain flowers still brought back the memory of those days, when she and Penelope used to go down in their prettiest frocks to dessert, and were given dainty sweets and fruits, and were made much of.

Then there came a dark time when, although she was so young, she felt vaguely that there was trouble overshadowing them, and saw it, too, reflected in her father's face; and the darkest day of all was when Grandpa Carroll came, and with scarcely a word or a glance for the children, went at once to the library with her father, and departed again that same night, leaving gloom and misery behind him. All the rest of the day, she remembered, her father remained shut up in the library, and her mother locked herself, weeping, in her bedroom; and Esther and Penelope went to bed that night without any good-night kiss from either; and worse than that, Esther heard nurse and Jane, the housemaid, talking in low, mysterious tones, and knew that they were talking of her parents' and their affairs; and, as any child would, bitterly resented it.

"Why don't you go downstairs, Jane?" she said at last, when she could endure it no longer; "you know mother doesn't allow gossiping in the nursery."

But she had only a shaking from nurse, and a rude answer from Jane, which made her anger burn hotter than ever. She lay awake a long time that night, trying to make sense of what they had been saying, but it was not until years later that she really understood.

The next day Jane had had a month's notice given her, not because she gossiped in the nursery, or was rude to Esther—Esther never told tales about the servants—but because Mr. Carroll said briefly that they must manage with fewer servants and cut down all expenses. For that same reason the children's pony was taken away and sold a few days later, and from that time it seemed to Esther it had been nothing but cutting down and giving up and doing with less and less. It was only a few months after the pony was sold that Poppy was born, and soon after that they left their old home and went to live in a little house where they had no library and no nursery, and no stables or horses, and the children had to play in the dining-room; and Esther's chief recollection of this time was her constant struggle to prevent Penelope and Angela and the new baby from crying or making too much noise, for she knew by the frown on her father's face that he was worried and bothered by it, and she could not bear to see him looking gloomy, or to hear the children scolded.

Having no nursery they had no nurse—no real nurse; they had a 'cook-general' and a 'nurse-housemaid' as the advertisements put it, and, in common with most persons who profess to be able to 'turn their hands to anything,' they could do few things, and nothing well. So it fell to Esther and her mother to take care of the babies, and as Mrs. Carroll had not yet learnt to take care of herself even, a very heavy burden rested on little serious-faced Esther.

It was better when the summer came, though, for then the family made another move. True it was to a yet smaller house, and more things had to be given up; but the smaller house was in a little village called Framley, and the little village had woods lying behind it, and here was nursery large enough for any number of children to laugh in or cry to their hearts' content, without disturbing any one; and Esther's heart was relieved of one big worry, and the children soon learnt to laugh a again, and play, and make as much noise as their hearts desired.

Summer, though, cannot last for ever, and woods do not make an ideal nursery in winter. The perplexed frown was beginning to pucker Esther's brow again when once more they were called on to relinquish something. The nurse-housemaid had to be sent away, and they had to learn how to manage with one servant; and it was just about that time that she heard her father say one day, "It will really be easier for you, dear, when I am gone," at which her mother burst into tears and wailed something Esther could not quite understand, about being left to bear all the worries alone. "It is much worse for those who are left than for those who go," she cried.

"But you will have the children," Mr. Carroll said sadly.

"Yes, four of them to feed and bring up on two hundred a year, and only one servant to help me. I don't know how any one can expect me to do it. I've not had a new gown myself for nearly a year."

"It shall not be for long, dear, if I can help it," her husband had said, very patiently. "As soon as possible I will send for you and the children. But it is no use to take you all out until I have a home of some sort ready for you; it would be greater misery than this."

But Mrs. Carroll had only wept more and more, until the children began to weep too, though they did not know for what.

Soon after that there had been a great deal of upset and excitement in the house: big boxes stood about on the landing, and the children were told that daddy was packing—he was going away to Canada, where they were all to join him soon. For a few days this news filled them with a pleasant excitement, and for months after their father had gone Esther and Penelope talked and talked of what they would do when they got to Canada, and Penelope dragged out an old trunk and began to pack a curious assortment of things that she thought peculiarly suitable for that country. But as time went on she found she needed the things, and by degrees the thought of Canada became dim, and of no immediate interest to them. They were excited at first when their father's letters came because they thought each one would bring the longed-for summons; then they grew almost to dread them, for their mother always broke out into tears and wailings on reading them, finally locking herself in her room for the rest of the day, and the children were left to them-

selves to try to throw off the load of oppression and wretchedness which weighed on them even while they played. The memory of the wretchedness of those days remained with them to the end of their lives.

Two, three, four years passed by, and gradually they forgot Canada, and Mrs. Carroll ceased to weep on receipt of a letter from her husband; but whether it was that she grew more used to her trouble, or that the news was better, the children did not know, though Esther often longed to.

So things were on that sunny May day when Penelope lay dreaming and watching the butterflies in the neglected garden, and Esther made a milk pudding in the kitchen, and the two younger children played about the house, while nearer and nearer came the postman bearing the letter that was to alter all their lives for them.

Esther had just finished making her pudding, and Poppy had that moment succeeded in inveigling Angela into the cupboard under the stairs and turning the key on her, when footsteps came up the path, a letter dropped in through the letter-box, and a postman's rattat sounded to the furthest corner of the little house.

The post was the principal excitement of the day to the little Carrolls, and there was usually a race to the door to try to be first to seize the letters. This time Poppy had a clear start, for Esther was in the kitchen, and Angela was safely under lock and key.

"A letter from daddy," she shouted, recognising the stamp; and in she flew with it to her mother.

Mrs. Carroll, roused from her reading, laid aside her novel and bottle of smelling-salts to take the letter. Having secured and handed over the prize, Poppy danced off again. She was far more interested, at that moment, in her prisoner, whose kicks on the door and screams of rage had brought Esther to her rescue.

Esther, having released one sister, strolled wearily out into the garden to seek another and a little rest. She was very tired and very depressed; but the garden did not look inviting when she got there.

"How can you like this untidy old place?" she cried, as she made her way through the long rank grass.

"Oh, Esther, come gently, do! Look, oh do look at that lovely dragon-fly! Did you ever see such a beauty? Don't disturb him. Oh, do be careful!"

But Esther looked with only half-interest at the gorgeous insect; then, turning away a little impatiently, "I don't know how you can be out here so much and not try to make it a little tidier," she said vexedly. "I only wish I had a machine, or shears or something, and more time, and I would do something to it."

Esther was by nature a very neat and dainty little person, with none of Penelope's dreamy indifference to her surroundings. The untidy garden with its air of neglect would have been irritating to her if it had belonged to some one else, but being their own, and feeling responsible for it, it vexed her so she could hardly endure to stay in it. If the others could have had their way, they would have had all their meals out there, but not so Esther; the sight of the poor neglected spot would have quite destroyed her appetite, though no one loved having meals out-of-doors better than she did. She often took the children to tea in the woods, but *that* was different; the woods were always lovely, and just what they should be.

Esther's earlier years had given her a brief experience of how things should be done, and how they should look, and she had never forgotten; Penelope, on the other hand, had forgotten, or never noticed Angela and Poppy, fired by Esther's example, had spasmodic passions for improving the house or garden, during which every one suffered more or less, and they themselves were exhausted long before the huge tasks they had undertaken were half completed.

So here and there the garden showed cleared and scarred patches where the children had 'worked,' which meant that they had begun to 'tidy' by pulling up everything that grew, after which they would scrape the bed over with a rake and replace in a prim row as many of the plants as they could get in, and a day or two later the eye would be caught by a square of brown earth, broken by a row of sorry-looking dead or dying plants standing conspicuous and solitary against the wild, untrained vegetation round about, while a later search would perhaps reveal, under the tangled litter in the path, one of the best dinner-knives, covered with rust, and other

lost treasures, such as a trowel, scissors, and occasionally a silver fork.

To Esther these attempts were merely depressing and irritating; they seemed only to emphasise their helplessness, and the uselessness of trying to make things better.

"Nothing is right here, somehow," she complained to Penelope now, "neither the house, nor the garden, nor ourselves. Look at us!" throwing out her hands dramatically. "We aren't educated, or dressed properly, or—or anything. Look at that," stretching out her foot, and eyeing disdainfully the clumsy shoe which disfigured it. "We aren't fit to go anywhere, and we can't ask any one here because the house is never fit to be seen, or the meals, or—"

"Never mind," said Penelope placidly. She was used to Esther's outbursts, but, though quite unable to sympathise, she was ready with attempts at comfort. "You don't want to know any one but ourselves, do you? I don't."

"No-o," admitted Esther. "But we ought to. It—well, it is always supposed to be right. We shall grow up like savages, Aunt Julia says, and not be fit to talk to any one or go anywhere, and we shan't have any friends; and every one *ought* to make nice friends; it looks so bad if one has none—"

"Miss Esther! Miss Esther!" called a sharp voice from the kitchen door. "You must all come in at once. Your ma wants you immejutely—all of you."

Esther rose, a little anxious pucker gathering on her brow as she remembered the Canadian letter.

"Come along, Pen," she said impatiently. "I wonder what it is. Bad news from father, I expect."

"Pr'aps it's good news," said Penelope hopefully, rising with a sigh of regret at having to leave her nest and the sunshine and the butterflies. Somehow, though, she did not really expect any such thing. "Pr'aps we are to go, at last. Oh," with sudden excitement, "wouldn't it be perfectly lovely! Oh, Essie, wouldn't it be splendid! Do let's run in and see if that is what it is mother wants us for."

CHAPTER II.

"Children, *do* make haste! How long you do take coming when I send for you! And I've had such news I am really quite bewildered, and haven't a moment to spare. All my plans are changed in a minute, and I can hardly realise all I have to do. I have heard from your father. He wants me to come out to him, and I am going, at once; of course, I *must* go. I couldn't refuse to, and—you must all go to live with your Aunt Julia. I know you don't like her—and it is very naughty and ungrateful of you— but I can't do anything else, and you must make up your minds to behave."

Mrs. Carroll paused at last from want of breath, and the children gasped in sympathy.

They had barely entered the dining-room when this cataract of speech was turned on them by their mother, with every appearance of excitement and gratification. All her usual melancholy apathy was thrown aside; her face was alight with pleasure, her eyes bright with excitement. Mrs. Carroll loved to be the bearer of startling news, to spring a surprise on people— just as she loved to have a pleasant one sprung on herself. She adored excitement, and under its influence saw nothing but the one thing that appealed to her at the moment.

Now, after hastily scanning her husband's letter, she grasped the one fact that he thought she might come out to him very soon. What the change might mean to others, never occurred to her; that it might be for the worse, never entered her head. She saw simply a chance of a change, an escape from the monotony and sordidness of her present life. She would have a new outfit, and travel, and meet new people, and escape from that dreadful little cheap house and dull village, not to speak of other tiresome things which had been

thrusting themselves on her attention for a long time, but had been put aside and aside for consideration 'some day.'

The children stood just within the door, startled and bewildered—too bewildered for the moment to move or speak. "Going away!" they gasped at last, "and—and *we* are to be left *behind!* Oh, mother, you can't mean it!"

They loved their careless, easy-going mother very dearly, and, in spite of her neglect of them were, as a rule, very happy. She was the one person in the world, too, that they knew well and were accustomed to; and to be thus suddenly bereft of her and left entirely to strangers, or worse, was a prospect too appalling almost to be credited. In spite of her neglect they loved her; in fact it was only as they grew older that they realised that she did neglect them, or was not to them all she might have been. Esther was beginning to realise it; but Esther, in spite of her odd, sharp temper and reserved manner, had a great love for her mother; she loved her so much that she wanted her to be different, to be more what the ideal mother was—such a one as she had read of in books.

"Oh, mother, you aren't really going away, and going to leave us!" cried Angela again. "Mother, you can't! We can't be left!" At the thought of it Poppy began to cry.

"Yes, your father wants me to come, and I must go as soon as I can make arrangements. Of course I can't take you all with me, so I am going to ask your Aunt Julia to let you go and live with her."

What Esther had been on the point of saying, was never said—her mother's apparent indifference to their separation hurt her too deeply. "Oh, then, Aunt Julia does not know it yet?" she remarked shrewdly.

"No, your father has left all the arrangements to me to make, and I am to come as soon as I like; so, as I see no use in delaying, I shall try to get away as soon as I possibly can."

Mrs. Carroll's brain could work very quickly under certain circumstances. Now, though only a few moments had elapsed since the momentous letter had arrived, she had formed plans innumerable, to be carried out at once in spite of all obstacles. She would give Lydia a month's notice this very day, and the landlord notice that

she was going to leave the house, and her sister Julia that she was about to send the four children to take up their abode with her at once—she would feel so much freer when they were settled, and she was alone.

"But perhaps Aunt Julia will not have us," said Penelope, joyfully clutching at the hope. They none of them loved their Aunt Julia. Not to be going to Canada was bad enough, but to have to go and live with Aunt Julia, for no one knew how long, was too dreadful to contemplate.

"Oh, mother, *don't* send us to her, *do* take us with you, mother dear," pleaded Angela tearfully. "Doesn't father say we are to come? I am sure he wants us too."

"Don't bother me now, child," said Mrs. Carroll, not crossly, but with a distracted air, pushing aside Angela's clinging, eager arms. "I've got more than enough to think of as it is. Of course you can't go now."

"Why, mother? Can't we afford it?" asked straightforward Penelope.

"Oh, do be quiet. Don't bother any more," cried Esther bitterly. "Don't you see that mother doesn't want us, and Aunt Julia won't want us— nobody wants us." And in a tumult of pain and anger she flung herself out of the room to hide the tears that made her eyes smart and tingle.

"I really think your Aunt Julia would refuse to have Esther if she knew how bad her temper has become," said Mrs. Carroll with a sigh. "She seems quite to have forgotten the respect due to her mother, and to think I may be spoken to in any way she chooses. I am sure no other mother would endure such behaviour from their children as I have to."

"Esther didn't mean to be rude, mother," pleaded Penelope. "I expect she is upset 'cause daddy didn't send for us too. He *said* he would, you know, and we always thought we should go too when you went. It is an *awful* disappointment," sadly.

"Mother," pleaded Angela wistfully, "it isn't true what Esther said, is it? You *do* want us, don't you?"

"I certainly do not want children with me who don't know how to behave," said Mrs. Carroll in a quick, reproving tone, never dreaming of the love and longing in the child's heart. A few words of explanation, of love, and sorrow for the parting, of hope of a speedy reuniting would have relieved all their young hearts of a load, would have banished that chilling feeling of being unloved, unwanted, would have filled them with hope and patience, and have bound their young hearts to their absent parents for ever. Instead of which they felt rebuffed and unloved, they were turned in on themselves, until such time as some other love should warm their chilled hearts and expand their natures, and a stranger, maybe, should mean more to them than a parent.

Of all the little brood Angela was the most affectionate, the most clinging little home-bird. She loved her mother passionately, and her home too, in spite of its unattractiveness, for the flaws she saw in persons or things only made her love with a deeper, more sympathetic desire to help. It was always to the most unlovable and unattractive that Angela's heart went out. If people or animals had no one else to care for them, she felt they might be glad of her.

She turned away from her mother with a little sigh. She did not blame her for her want of feeling, she only winced as at a new revelation of her own unlovableness.

Poppy, who all this while had been standing mute and considering, was at that moment struck by an inspiriting idea.

"But, mother," she said gravely, "if we don't know how to behave properly Aunt Julia won't want us either, and then what shall we do! You will *have* to take us with you," with rising hope in her voice, "and I am *sure* daddy would be glad, and I *do* want to go in the big ship and see daddy," with a deep sigh. "Oh, I *do*," pathetically, "want to see daddy, so badly."

"Don't talk nonsense, child. You can't remember your father. Why should you want to see him?"

"I do. I want to see what he is like. Esther remembers him, and she wants to see him too. *Do* take us with you, mother. We'll be—oh, ever so good. I *don't* like Aunt Julia; she is *always* cross, and I don't like cross people."

Poppy had no fear or awe of any one. Every one but Aunt Julia had loved her always, and done their best to make her happy, even cross Lydia, and she in return rewarded them by a placid, sweet acceptance of their efforts, and allowing them to love her.

"Mother," burst out Penelope eagerly, "couldn't we all go to boarding-school while you are away? It would be jolly, and ever so much nicer than living with Aunt Julia. I know we shall always be getting into scrapes if we go to her, and no one *could* please her, Lydia said so."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Carroll warmly, "Lydia is a very rude girl to speak so of a lady, and my sister, and if I were remaining here I should not allow you all to go into the kitchen so much. It will be very good for you to try to please your aunt. Children don't know what is best for them, and—and they should learn to consider others before themselves."

A grown-up observer might have smiled satirically at Mrs. Carroll's theories, so easily preached, so neglected in practice.

"Now run away. I have so much to think of, my poor head is quite bewildered. I think I must have a cup of tea at once—will you tell Esther or Lydia to make it for me—or I shall have a dreadful headache, and I *must* think out what outfit I shall require, or it will never be ready in time, and I must try to let the house, or we shall have to pay another quarter's rent, and there is the furniture to get rid of and—oh dear, oh dear, my poor head feels quite bewildered already; however *shall* I manage it all, and by myself too! It is really too much to face alone—now, children, don't make a noise or you will drive me distracted."

Without another word the three walked away in search of Esther, and to talk over the dreadful and bewildering change the last hour had wrought in their outlook; but Esther, sitting white-faced and angry-eyed on her bed, could not be brought to discuss anything. She was bitterly disappointed not to be going to Canada, furiously angry at having to go to Aunt Julia, who treated them all invariably as though they were naughty or going to be naughty, cruelly hurt that her mother showed so little feeling at being parted from them all, and, curiously, full of pain at the thought of parting from that mother.

Poor Esther could not see, of course, that this same parting was really for her good; that there, under the strain and discord of her home she was allowing herself to become irritable and captious, despondent and sharp-tongued. She knew she always felt cross and injured and sore, but she never set herself to face the reason and combat it.

Two days later a reply came from Miss Julia Foster, and a frown sat heavily on Mrs. Carroll's brow. Aunt Julia firmly refused to take over at a moment's notice the burden her sister was so calmly laying on her shoulders.

"People who have children must expect to give up something for them," she wrote. "You really must not expect to throw off your responsibilities in this way. It is your duty to stay with them if you cannot take them with you. I observe you say nothing as to the provision you are prepared to make for their board and clothing and education. I presume you don't expect me to take over the responsibility of providing all that too."

Miss Foster wrote as she talked, very candidly.

Mrs. Carroll's face flushed with anger and annoyance.

"Julia never would do anything to oblige any one," she said sharply. "She has always been the same. I only wonder I thought of asking her."

It never occurred to her to think what it would mean to a person unaccustomed to children to have four suddenly introduced into a quiet home hitherto occupied only by one very prim and particular lady and two equally prim servants, who did not know what real work was.

Miss Foster's first thought had been: "Neither of the maids would stay," and she could not contemplate the terrors of changing. Her second thought, "Who is to provide for the children?" She felt quite certain that that important point had never entered into their mother's calculations, and she felt distinctly annoyed with her sister for the abrupt and casual way in which she threw such a great responsibility on others' shoulders, and in her letter she made her feelings plain.

For a few moments Mrs. Carroll sat considering. One by one all her relations and friends were passed in review before her mind's eye. "There seems," she said at last in a musing tone, "no one but Cousin Charlotte. I wonder —"

There was not much doubt as to what Mrs. Carroll was wondering. Her face lightened, determination shone in her eye.

"Cousin Charlotte," or Miss Charlotte Ashe, was a cousin of Mrs. Carroll's mother. In her earlier years she had kept a girls' school in London, but when she found herself growing old she sold it, and retired to a little house in her native village in Devonshire. Schoolmistresses do not, as a rule, grow rich, and Miss Ashe was the last person to save money for herself while there was any one else wanting it; she managed, however, to save enough to keep herself, and Anna, her former cook, in their little house in comfort, and put a trifle by for an emergency.

It was to this quiet, modest little home that Mrs. Carroll's thoughts now flew, without the slightest feeling of compunction at invading it, as she meant it to be invaded. Her letter to Miss Ashe was a masterpiece of pathetic pleading. Miss Charlotte read it with tears of pity for the poor mother, reduced from affluence and luxury to poverty and the position of an emigrant's wife torn from her children by stress of circumstance. Then she read it again to Anna, and Anna's eyes filled too; but it was for the children that Anna wept. Both kind hearts agreed, though, that they could not refuse to give the homeless ones a home; and a letter was despatched at once, full of warm hospitality and affection, and almost before it was posted a perfect fury of cleaning, planning, rearranging burst over Moor Cottage, in preparation for the four new inhabitants.

"Children," cried Mrs. Carroll delightedly, when the letter arrived, "your dear Cousin Charlotte is quite anxious to have you in her charming little home in Devonshire. I know you will be happy there, she is so sweet and kind. I was always very fond of her, and so will you be, I know; and you must do all you can to help her, and not be too troublesome. She says she can have you at any time, so I think you really had better go as soon as I can get you ready. I shall be able to see to things better, and pay a few farewell visits, when I