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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
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Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
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Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
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Lady Connie

Humphry, Mrs. Ward

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PART I

CHAPTER I

"Well, now we've done all we can, and all I mean to do," said Alice Hooper, with a pettish accent of fatigue. "Everything's perfectly comfortable, and if she doesn't like it, we can't help it. I don't know why we make such a fuss."

The speaker threw herself with a gesture of fatigue into a dilapidated basket-chair that offered itself. It was a spring day, and the windows of the old schoolroom in which she and her sister were sitting were open to a back garden, untidily kept, but full of fruit-trees just coming into blossom. Through their twinkling buds and interlacing branches could be seen grey college walls--part of the famous garden front of St. Cyprian's College, Oxford. There seemed to be a slight bluish mist over the garden and the building, a mist starred with patches of white and dazzlingly green leaf. And, above all, there was an evening sky, peaceful and luminous, from which a light wind blew towards the two girls sitting by the open window. One, the elder, had a face like a Watteau sketch, with black velvety eyes, hair drawn back from a white forehead, delicate little mouth, with sharp indentations at the corners, and a small chin. The other was much more solidly built--a girl of seventeen, in a plump phase, which however an intelligent eye would have read as not likely to last; a complexion of red and brown tanned by exercise; an expression in her clear eyes which was alternately frank and ironic; and an inconvenient mass of golden brown hair.

"We make a fuss, my dear," said the younger sister, "because we're bound to make a fuss. Connie, I understand, is to pay us a good round sum for her board and lodging, so it's only honest she should have a decent room."

"Yes, but you don't know what she'll call decent," said the other rather sulkily. "She's probably been used to all sorts of silly luxuries."

"Why of course, considering Uncle Risborough was supposed to have twenty-odd thousand a year. We're paupers, and she's got to put up with us. But we couldn't take her money and do nothing in return."

Nora Hooper looked rather sharply at her sister. It fell to her in the family to be constantly upholding the small daily traditions of honesty and fair play. It was she who championed the servants, or insisted, young as she was, on bills being paid, when it would have been more agreeable to buy frocks and go to London for a theatre. She was a great power in the house, and both her languid, incompetent mother, and her pretty sister were often afraid of her. Nora was a "Home Student," and had just begun to work seriously for English Literature Honours. Alice on the other hand was the domestic and social daughter. She helped her mother in the house, had a head full of undergraduates, and regarded the "Eights" week and Commemoration as the shining events of the year.

Both girls were however at one in the uneasy or excited anticipation with which they were looking forward that evening to the arrival of a newcomer, who was, it seemed, to make part of the household for some time. Their father, Dr. Ewen Hooper, the holder of a recently founded classical readership, had once possessed a younger sister of considerable beauty, who, in the course of an independent and adventurous career, had captured--by no ignoble arts--a widower, who happened to be also an earl and a rich man. It happened while they were both wintering at Florence, the girl working at paleography, in the Ambrosian Library, while Lord Risborough, occupying a villa in the neighbourhood of the Torre San Gallo, was giving himself to the artistic researches and the cosmopolitan society which suited his health and his tastes. He was a dilettante of the old sort, incurably in love with living, in spite of the loss of his wife, and his only son; in spite also of an impaired heart--in the physical sense--and various other drawbacks. He came across the bright girl student, discovered that she could talk very creditably about manuscripts and illuminations, gave her leave to work in his own library,

where he possessed a few priceless things, and presently found her company, her soft voice, and her eager, confiding eyes quite indispensable. His elderly sister, Lady Winifred, who kept house for him, frowned on the business in vain; and finally departed in a huff to join another maiden sister, Lady Marcia, in an English country *ménage*, where for some years she did little but lament the flesh-pots of Italy--Florence. The married sister, Lady Langmoor, wrote reams of plaintive remonstrances, which remained unanswered. Lord Risborough married the girl student, Ella Hooper, and never regretted it. They had one daughter, to whom they devoted themselves--preposterously, their friends thought; but for twenty years, they were three happy people together. Then virulent influenza, complicated with pneumonia, carried off the mother during a spring visit to Rome, and six weeks later Lord Risborough died of the damaged heart which had held out so long.

The daughter, Lady Constance Bledlow, had been herself attacked by the influenza epidemic which had killed her mother, and the double blow of her parents' deaths, coming on a neurasthenic condition, had hit her youth rather hard. Some old friends in Rome, with the full consent of her guardian, the Oxford Reader, had carried her off, first to Switzerland, and then to the Riviera for the winter, and now in May, about a year after the death of her parents, she was coming for the first time to make acquaintance with the Hooper family, with whom, according to her father's will, she was to make her home till she was twenty-one. None of them had ever seen her, except on two occasions; once, at a hotel in London; and once, some ten years before this date, when Lord Risborough had been D.C.L.ed at the Encænna, as a reward for some valuable gifts which he had made to the Bodleian, and he, his wife, and his little girl, after they had duly appeared at the All Souls' luncheon, and the official fête in St. John's Gardens, had found their way to the house in Holywell, and taken tea with the Hoopers.

Nora's mind, as she and her sister sat waiting for the fly in which Mrs. Hooper had gone to meet her husband's niece at the station, ran persistently on her own childish recollections of this visit. She sat in the window-sill, with her hand behind her, chattering to her sister.

"I remember thinking when Connie came in here to tea with us--'What a stuck-up thing you are!' And I despised her, because she couldn't climb the mulberry in the garden, and because she hadn't begun Latin. But all the time, I envied her horribly, and I expect you did too, Alice. Can't you see her black silk stockings--and her new hat with those awfully pretty flowers, made of feathers? She had a silk frock too--white, very skimp, and short; and enormously long black legs, as thin as sticks; and her hair in plaits. I felt a thick lump beside her. And I didn't like her at all. What horrid toads children are! She didn't talk to us much, but her eyes seemed to be always laughing at us, and when she talked Italian to her mother, I thought she was showing off, and I wanted to pinch her for being affected."

"Why, of course she talked Italian," said Alice, who was not much interested in her sister's recollections.

"Naturally. But that didn't somehow occur to me. After all I was only seven."

"I wonder if she's really good-looking," said Alice slowly, glancing, as she spoke, at the reflection of herself in an old dilapidated mirror, which hung on the schoolroom wall.

"The photos are," said Nora decidedly. "Goodness, I wish she'd come and get it over. I want to get back to my work--and till she comes, I can't settle to anything."

"Well, they'll be here directly. I wonder what on earth she'll do with all her money. Father says she may spend it, if she wants to. He's trustee, but Uncle Risborough's letter to him said she was to have the income if she wished--*now*. Only she's not to touch the capital till she's twenty-five."

"It's a good lot, isn't it?" said Nora, walking about. "I wonder how many people in Oxford have two thousand a year? A girl too. It's really rather exciting."

"It won't be very nice for us--she'll be so different." Alice's tone was a little sulky and depressed. The advent of this girl cousin, with her title, her good looks, her money, and her unfair advantages in the way of talking French and Italian, was only moderately pleasant to the eldest Miss Hooper.

"What--you think she'll snuff us out?" laughed Nora. "Not she! Oxford's not like London. People are not such snobs."

"What a silly thing to say, Nora! As if it wasn't an enormous pull everywhere to have a handle to your name, and lots of money!"

"Well, I really think it'll matter less here than anywhere. Oxford, my dear--or some of it--pursues 'the good and the beautiful'"--said Nora, taking a flying leap on to the window-sill again, and beginning to poke up some tadpoles in a jar, which stood on the window-ledge.

Alice did not think it worth while to continue the conversation. She had little or nothing of Nora's belief in the other-worldliness of Oxford. At this period, some thirty odd years ago, the invasion of Oxford on the north by whole new tribes of citizens had already begun. The old days of University exclusiveness in a ring fence were long done with; the days of much learning and simple ways, when there were only two carriages in Oxford that were not doctors' carriages, when the wives of professors and tutors went out to dinner in "chairs" drawn by men, and no person within the magic circle of the University knew anybody--to speak of--in the town outside. The University indeed, at this later moment, still more than held its own, socially, amid the waves of new population that threatened to submerge it; and the occasional spectacle of retired generals and colonels, the growing number of broughams and victorias in the streets, or the rumours of persons with "smart" or "county" connections to be found among the rows of new villas spreading up the Banbury Road were still not sufficiently marked to disturb the essential character of the old and beautiful place. But new ways and new manners were creeping in, and the young were sensitively aware of them, like birds that feel the signs of coming weather.

Alice fell into a brown study. She was thinking about a recent dance given at a house in the Parks, where some of her particular friends had been present, and where, on the whole, she had enjoyed herself greatly. Nothing is ever perfect, and she would have liked it better if Herbert Pryce's sister had not--past all denying--had more partners and a greater success than herself, and if Herbert Pryce himself had not been--just a little--casual and inattentive. But after

all they had had two or three glorious supper dances, and he certainly would have kissed her hand, while they were sitting out in the garden, if she had not made haste to put it out of his reach. "You never did anything of the kind till you were sure he did not mean to kiss it!" said conscience. "I did not give myself away in the least!"--was vanity's angry reply. "I was perfectly dignified."

Herbert Pryce was a young fellow and tutor--a mathematical fellow; and therefore, Alice's father, for whom Greek was the only study worth the brains of a rational being, could not be got to take the smallest interest in him. But he was certainly very clever, and it was said he was going to get a post at Cambridge--or something at the Treasury--which would enable him to marry. Alice suddenly had a vague vision of her own wedding; the beautiful central figure--she would certainly look beautiful in her wedding dress!--bowing so gracefully; the bridesmaids behind, in her favourite colours, white and pale green; and the tall man beside her. But Herbert Pryce was not really tall, and not particularly good-looking, though he had a rather distinguished hatchet face, with a good forehead. Suppose Herbert and Vernon and all her other friends, were to give up being "nice" to her as soon as Connie Bledlow appeared? Suppose she was going to be altogether cut out and put in the back-ground? Alice had a kind of uneasy foreboding that Herbert Pryce would think a title "interesting."

Meanwhile Nora, having looked through an essay on "Piers Plowman," which she was to take to her English Literature tutor on the following day, went aimlessly upstairs and put her head into Connie's room. The old house was panelled, and its guest-room, though small and shabby, had yet absorbed from its oaken walls, and its outlook on the garden and St. Cyprian's, a certain measure of the Oxford charm. The furniture was extremely simple--a large hanging cupboard made by curtaining one of the panelled recesses of the wall, a chest of drawers, a bed, a small dressing-table and glass, a carpet that was the remains of one which had originally covered the drawing-room for many years, an armchair, a writing-table, and curtains which having once been blue had now been dyed a serviceable though ugly dark red. In Nora's eyes it was all comfortable and nice. She herself had insisted on having the carpet and curtains redipped, so that they really looked almost new, and

the one mattress on the bed "made over"; she had brought up the armchair, and she had gathered the cherry-blossoms, which stood on the mantelpiece shining against the darkness of the walls. She had also hung above it a photograph of Watts "Love and Death." Nora looked at the picture and the flowers with a throb of pleasure. Alice never noticed such things.

And now what about the maid? Fancy bringing a maid! Nora's sentiments on the subject were extremely scornful. However Connie had simply taken it for granted, and she had been housed somehow. Nora climbed up an attic stair and looked into a room which had a dormer window in the roof, two strips of carpet on the boards, a bed, a washing-stand, a painted chest of drawers, a table, with an old looking-glass, and two chairs. "Well, that's all I have!" thought Nora defiantly. But a certain hospitable or democratic instinct made her go downstairs again and bring up a small vase of flowers like those in Connie's room, and put it on the maid's table. The maid was English, but she had lived a long time abroad with the Risboroughs.

Sounds! Yes, that was the fly stopping at the front door! Nora flew downstairs, in a flush of excitement. Alice too had come out into the hall, looking shy and uncomfortable. Dr. Hooper emerged from his study. He was a big, loosely built man, with a shock of grizzled hair, spectacles, and a cheerful expression.

A tall, slim girl, in a grey dust-cloak and a large hat, entered the dark panelled hall, looking round her. "Welcome, my dear Connie!" said Dr. Hooper, cordially, taking her hand and kissing her. "Your train must have been a little late."

"Twenty minutes!" said Mrs. Hooper, who had followed her niece into the hall. "And the draughts in the station, Ewen, were something appalling."

The tone was fretful. It had even a touch of indignation as though the speaker charged her husband with the draughts. Mrs. Hooper was a woman between forty and fifty, small and plain, except for a pair of rather fine eyes, which, in her youth, while her cheeks were still pink, and the obstinate lines of her thin slit mouth and prominent chin were less marked, had beguiled several lovers, Ewen Hooper at their head.

Dr. Hooper took no notice of her complaints. He was saying to his niece--"This is Alice, Constance--and Nora! You'll hardly remember each other again, after all these years."

"Oh, yes, I remember quite well," said a clear, high-pitched voice. "How do you do!--how do you do?"

And the girl held a hand out to each cousin in turn. She did not offer to kiss either Alice or Nora. But she looked at them steadily, and suddenly Nora was aware of that expression of which she had so vivid although so childish a recollection--as though a satiric spirit sat hidden and laughing in the eyes, while the rest of the face was quite grave.

"Come in and have some tea. It's quite ready," said Alice, throwing open the drawing-room door. Her face had cleared suddenly. It did not seem to her, at least in the shadows of the hall, that her cousin Constance was anything of a beauty.

"I'm afraid I must look after Annette first. She's much more important than I am!"

And the girl ran back to where a woman in a blue serge coat and skirt was superintending the carrying in of the luggage. There was a great deal of luggage, and Annette, who wore a rather cross, flushed air, turned round every now and then to look frowningly at the old gabled house into which it was being carried, as though she were more than doubtful whether the building would hold the boxes. Yet as houses went, in the older parts of Oxford, Medburn House, Holywell, was roomy.

"Annette, don't do any unpacking till after tea!" cried Lady Constance. "Just get the boxes carried up, and rest a bit. I'll come and help you later."

The maid said nothing. Her lips seemed tightly compressed. She stepped into the hall, and spoke peremptorily to the white-capped parlourmaid who stood bewildered among the trunks.

"Have those boxes--" she pointed to four--two large American Saratogas, and two smaller trunks--"carried up to her ladyship's room. The other two can go into mine."

"Miss!" whispered the agitated maid in Nora's ear, "we'll never get any of those boxes up the top-stairs. And if we put them four into her ladyship's room, she'll not be able to move."

"I'll come and see to it," said Nora, snatching up a bag. "They've got to go somewhere!"

Mrs. Hooper repeated that Nora would manage it, and languidly waved her niece towards the drawing-room. The girl hesitated, laughed, and finally yielded, seeing that Nora was really in charge. Dr. Hooper led her in, placed an armchair for her beside the tea-table, and stood closely observing her.

"You're like your mother," he said, at last, in a low voice; "at least in some points." The girl turned away abruptly, as though what he said jarred, and addressed herself to Alice.

"Poor Annette was very sick. It was a vile crossing."

"Oh, the servants will look after her," said Alice indifferently.

"Everybody has to look after Annette!--or she'll know the reason why," laughed Lady Constance, removing her black gloves from a very small and slender hand. She was dressed in deep mourning with crape still upon her hat and dress, though it was more than a year since her mother's death. Such mourning was not customary in Oxford, and Alice Hooper thought it affected.

Mrs. Hooper then made the tea. But the newcomer paid little attention to the cup placed beside her. Her eyes wandered round the group at the tea-table, her uncle, a man of originally strong physique, marred now by the student's stoop, and by weak eyes, tried by years of Greek and German type; her aunt--

"What a very odd woman Aunt Ellen is!" thought Constance.

For, all the way from the station, Mrs. Hooper had talked about scarcely anything but her own ailments, and the Oxford climate. "She told us all about her rheumatisms--and the east winds--and how she ought to go to Buxton every year--only Uncle Hooper wouldn't take things seriously. And she never asked us anything at all about our passage, or our night journey! And there was Annette--as yellow as an egg--and as *cross*--"

However Dr. Hooper was soon engaged in making up for his wife's shortcomings. He put his niece through many questions as to the year which had elapsed since her parent's death; her summer in the high Alps, and her winter at Cannes.

"I never met your friends--Colonel and Mrs. King. We are not military in Oxford. But they seem--to judge from their letters--to be very nice people," said the Professor, his tone, quite unconsciously, suggesting the slightest shade of patronage.

"Oh, they're dears," said the girl warmly. "They were awfully good to me."

"Cannes was very gay, I suppose?"

"We saw a great many people in the afternoons. The Kings knew everybody. But I didn't go out in the evenings."

"You weren't strong enough?"

"I was in mourning," said the girl, looking at him with her large and brilliant eyes.

"Yes, yes, of course!" murmured the Reader, not quite understanding why he felt himself a trifle snubbed. He asked a few more questions, and his niece, who seemed to have no shyness, gave a rapid description, as she sipped her tea, of the villa at Cannes in which she had passed the winter months, and of the half dozen families, with whom she and her friends had been mostly thrown. Alice Hooper was secretly thrilled by some of the names which dropped out casually. She always read the accounts in the *Queen*, or the *Sketch*, of "smart society" on the Riviera, and it was plain to her that Constance had been dreadfully "in it." It would not apparently have been possible to be more "in it." She was again conscious of a hot envy of her cousin which made her unhappy. Also Connie's good looks were becoming more evident. She had taken off her hat, and all the distinction of her small head, her slender neck and sloping shoulders, was more visible; her self-possession, too, the ease and vivacity of her gestures. Her manner was that of one accustomed to a large and varied world, who took all things without surprise, as they came. Dr. Hooper had felt some emotion, and betrayed some, in this meeting with his sister's motherless child; but the girl's only betrayal of feeling had lain in the sharpness with

which she had turned away from her uncle's threatened effusion. "And how she looks at us!" thought Alice. "She looks at us through and through. Yet she doesn't stare."

But at that moment Alice heard the word "prince," and her attention was instantly arrested.

"We had some Russian neighbours," the newcomer was saying; "Prince and Princess Jaroslav; and they had an English party at Christmas. It was great fun. They used to take us out riding into the mountains, or into Italy." She paused a moment, and then said carelessly--as though to keep up the conversation--"There was a Mr. Falloden with them--an undergraduate at Marmion College, I think. Do you know him, Aunt Ellen?" She turned towards her aunt.

But Mrs. Hooper only looked blank. She was just thinking anxiously that she had forgotten to take her tabloids after lunch, because Ewen had hustled her off so much too soon to the station.

"I don't think we know him," she said vaguely, turning towards Alice.

"We know all about him. He was introduced to me once."

The tone of the eldest Miss Hooper could scarcely have been colder. The eyes of the girl opposite suddenly sparkled into laughter.

"You didn't like him?"

"Nobody does. He gives himself such ridiculous airs."

"Does he?" said Constance. The information seemed to be of no interest to her. She asked for another cup of tea.

"Oh, Falloden of Marmion?" said Dr. Hooper. "I know him quite well. One of the best pupils I have. But I understand he's the heir to his old uncle, Lord Dagnall, and is going to be enormously rich. His father's a millionaire already. So of course he'll soon forget his Greek. A horrid waste!"

"He's detested in college!" Alice's small face lit up vindictively. "There's a whole set of them. Other people call them 'the bloods.' The dons would like to send them all down."

"They won't send Falloden down, my dear, before he gets his First in Greats, which he will do this summer. But this is his last term. I never knew any one write better Greek iambs than that fellow," said the Reader, pausing in the middle of his cup of tea to murmur certain Greek lines to himself. They were part of the brilliant copy of verses by which Douglas Falloden of Marmion, in a fiercely contested year, had finally won the Ireland, Ewen Hooper being one of the examiners.

"That's what's so abominable," said Alice, setting her small mouth. "You don't expect reading men to drink, and get into rows."

"Drink?" said Constance Bledlow, raising her eyebrows.

Alice went into details. The dons of Marmion, she said, were really frightened by the spread of drinking in college, all caused by the bad example of the Falloden set. She talked fast and angrily, and her cousin listened, half scornfully, but still attentively.

"Why don't they keep him in order?" she said at last. "We did!" And she made a little gesture with her hand, impatient and masterful, as though dismissing the subject.

And at that moment Nora came into the room, flushed either with physical exertion, or the consciousness of her own virtue. She found a place at the tea-table, and panting a little demanded to be fed.

"It's hungry work, carrying up trunks!"

"You didn't!" exclaimed Constance, in large-eyed astonishment. "I say, I am sorry! Why did you? I'm sure they were too heavy. Why didn't Annette get a man?"

And sitting up, she bent across the table, all charm suddenly, and soft distress.

"We did get one, but he was a wretched thing. I was worth two of him," said Nora triumphantly. "You should feel my biceps. There!"

And slipping up her loose sleeve, she showed an arm, at which Constance Bledlow laughed. And her laugh touched her face with something audacious--something wild--which transformed it.

"I shall take care how I offend you!"

Nora nodded over her tea.