Morton Hall

Elizabeth Gaskell

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Chapter I

Our old Hall is to be pulled down, and they are going to build streets on the site. I said to my sister, 'Ethelinda! if they really pull down Morton Hall, it will be a worse piece of work than the Repeal of the Corn Laws.' And, after some consideration, she replied, that if she must speak what was on her mind, she would own that she thought the Papists had something to do with it; that they had never forgiven the Morton who had been with Lord Monteagle when he discovered the Gunpowder Plot; for we knew that, somewhere in Rome, there was a book kept, and which had been kept for generations, giving an account of the secret private history of every English family of note, and registering the names of those to whom the Papists owed either grudges or gratitude.

We were silent for some time; but I am sure the same thought was in both our minds; our ancestor, a Sidebotham, had been a follower of the Morton of that day; it had always been said in the family that he had been with his master when he went with the Lord Monteagle, and found Guy Fawkes and his dark lantern under the Parliament House; and the question flashed across our minds, were the Sidebothams marked with a black mark in that terrible mysterious book which was kept under lock and key by the Pope and the Cardinals in Rome? It was terrible, yet, somehow, rather pleasant to think of. So many of the misfortunes which had happened to us through life, and which we had called 'mysterious dispensations,' but which some of our neighbours had attributed to our want of prudence and foresight, were accounted for at once, if we were objects of the deadly hatred of such a powerful order as the Jesuits, of whom we had lived in dread ever since we had read the Female Jesuit. Whether this last idea suggested what my sister said next I can't tell; we did know the female Jesuit's second cousin, so might be said to have literary connections, and from that the startling thought might spring up in my sister's mind, for, said she, 'Biddy!' (my name is Bridget, and no one but my sister calls me Biddy) 'suppose you write some account of Morton Hall; we have known much in our time of the Mortons, and it will be a shame if they pass away completely from men's memories while we can speak or write.' I was pleased with the notion, I confess; but I felt ashamed to agree to it ill at once, though even, as I objected for modesty's sake, it came into my mind how much I had heard of the old place in its former days, and how it was, perhaps, all I could now do for the Mortons, under whom our ancestors had lived as tenants for more than three hundred years. So at last I agreed; and, for fear of mistakes, I showed it to Mr Swinton, our young curate, who has put it quite in order for me.

Morton Hall is situated about five miles from the centre of Drumble. It stands on the outskirts of a village, which, when the Hall was built, was probably as large as Drumble in those days; and even I can remember when there was a long piece of rather lonely road, with high hedges on either side, between Morton village and Drumble. Now, it is all street, and Morton seems but a suburb of the great town near. Our farm stood where Liverpool Street runs now; and people used to come snipe−shooting just where the Baptist chapel is built. Our farm must have been older than the Hall, for we had a date of 1460 on one of the cross−beams. My father was rather proud of this advantage, for the Hall had no date older than 1554; and I remember his affronting Mrs Dawson, the

house−keeper, by dwelling too much on this circumstance one evening when she came to drink tea with my mother, when Ethelinda and I were mere children. But my mother, seeing that Mrs Dawson would never allow that any house in the parish could be older than the Hall, and that she was getting very warm, and almost insinuating that the Sidebothams had forged the date to disparage the squire's family, and set themselves up as having the older blood, asked Mrs Dawson to tell us the story of old Sir John Morton before we went to bed. I slily reminded my father that jack, our man, was not always so careful as might be in housing the Alderney in good time in the autumn evenings. So he started up, and went off to see after jack; and Mrs Dawson and we drew nearer the fire to hear the story about Sir John.

Sir John Morton had lived some time about the Restoration. The Mortons had taken the right side; so when Oliver Cromwell came into power, he gave away their lands to one of his Puritan followers − a man who had been but a praying, canting, Scotch pedlar till the war broke out; and Sir John had to go and live with his royal master at Bruges. The upstart1s name was Carr, who came to live at Morton Hall; and, I'm proud to say, we − I mean our ancestors − led him a pretty life. He had hard work to get any rent at all from the tenantry, who knew their duty better than to pay it to a Roundhead. If he took the law to them, the law officers fared so badly, that they were shy of coming out to Morton − all along that lonely road I told you of − again. Strange noises were heard about the Hall, which got the credit of being haunted; but, as those noises were never heard before or since that Richard Carr lived there, I leave you to guess if the evil spirits did not know well over whom they had power − over schismatic rebels, and no one else. They durst not trouble the Mortons, who were true and loyal, and were faithful followers of King Charles in word and deed. At last, Old Oliver died; and folks did say that, on that wild and stormy night, his voice was heard high up in the air, where you hear the flocks of wild geese skirl, crying out for his true follower Richard Carr to accompany him in the terrible chase the fiends were giving him before carrying him down to hell. Anyway, Richard Carr died within a week − summoned by the dead or not, he went his way down to his master, and his master's master.

Then his daughter Alice came into possession. Her mother was somehow related to General Monk, who was beginning to come into power about that time. So when Charles the Second came back to his throne, and many of the sneaking Puritans had to quit their ill−gotten land, and turn to the right about, Alice Carr was still left at Morton Hall to queen it there. She was taller than most women, and a great beauty, I have heard. But, for all her beauty, she was a stern, hard woman. The tenants had known her to be hard in her father's lifetime, but now that she was the owner, and had the power, she was worse than ever. She hated the Stuarts worse than ever her father bad done; had calves' head for dinner every thirtieth of January; and when the first twenty−ninth of May came round, and every, mother's son in the village gilded his oak−leaves, and wore them in his hat, she closed the windows of the great hall with her own hands, and sat throughout the day in darkness and mourning. People did not like to go against her by force, because she was a young and beautiful woman. It was said the King got her cousin, the Duke of Albemarle, to ask her to court, just as courteously as if she had been the Queen of Sheba, and King Charles, Solomon, praying her to visit him in Jerusalem. But she would not go; not she! She lived a very lonely life, for now the King had got his own again, no servant but her nurse would stay with her in the Hall; and none of the tenants would pay her any money for all that her father had purchased the lands from the Parliament, and paid the price down in good red gold.

All this time, Sir John was somewhere in the Virginian plantations; and the ships sailed from thence only twice a year: but his royal master had sent for him home; and home he came, that second summer after the restoration. No one knew if Mistress Alice had heard of his landing in England or not; all the villagers and tenantry knew, and were not surprised, and turned out in their best dresses, and with great branches of oak, to welcome him as he rode into the village one July morning, with many gay−looking gentlemen by his side, laughing, and talking, and making merry, and speaking gaily and pleasantly to the village people. They came in on the opposite side to the Drumble Road; indeed Drumble was nothing of a place then, as I have told you. Between the last cottage in the village and the gates to the old Hall, there was a shady part of the road, where the branches nearly met overhead, and made a green gloom. If you'll notice, when many people are talking merrily out of doors in sunlight, they will stop talking for an instant, when they come into the cool green shade, and either be silent for some little time, or

else speak graver, and slower, and softer. And so old people say those gay gentlemen did; for several people followed to see Alice Carr's pride taken down. They used to tell how the cavaliers had to how their plumed hats in passing under the unlopped and drooping boughs. I fancy Sir John expected that the lady would have rallied her friends, and got ready for a sort of battle to defend the entrance to the house; but she had no friends. She had no nearer relations than the Duke of Albemarle, and he was mad with her for having refused to come to court, and so save her estate, according to his advice.

Well, Sir John rode on in silence; the tramp of the many horses' feet, and the clumping sound of the clogs of the village people were all that was heard. Heavy as the great gate was, they swung it wide on its hinges, and up they rode to the Hall steps, where the lady stood, in her close, plain, Puritan dress, her cheeks one crimson flush, her great eyes flashing fire, and no one behind her, or with her, or near her, or to be seen, but the old trembling nurse, catching at her gown in pleading terror. Sir John was taken aback; he could not go out with swords and warlike weapons against a woman; his very preparations for forcing an entrance made him ridiculous in his own eyes, and, he well knew, in the eyes of his gay, scornful comrades too; so he turned him round about, and bade them stay where they were, while he rode close to the steps, and spoke to the young lady; and there they saw him, hat in hand, speaking to her; and she, lofty and unmoved, holding her own as if she had been a sovereign queen with an army at her back. What they said, no one heard; but he rode back, very grave and much changed in his look, though his grey eye showed more hawk−like than ever, as if seeing the way to his end, though as yet afar off. He was not one to be jested with before his face; so when he professed to have changed his mind, and not to wish to disturb so fair a lady in possession, he and his cavaliers rode back to the village inn, and roystered there all day, and feasted the tenantry, cutting down the branches that had incommoded them in their morning's ride, to make a bonfire of on the village green, in which they burnt a figure, which some called Old Noll, and others Richard Carr: and it might do for either, folks said, for unless they had given it the name of a man, most people would have taken it for a forked log of wood. But the lady's nurse told the villagers afterwards that Mistress Alice went in from the sunny Hall steps into the chill house shadow, and sat her down and wept as her poor faithful servant had never seen her do before, and could not have imagined her proud young lady ever doing. All through that summer's day she cried; and if for very weariness she ceased for a time, and only sighed as if her heart was breaking, they heard through the upper windows − which were open because of the heat − the village bells ringing merrily through the trees, and bursts of choruses to gay cavalier songs, all in favour of the Stuarts. All the young lady said was once or twice, 'Oh God! I am very friendless!' − and the old nurse knew it was true, and could not contradict her; and always thought, as she said long after, that such weary weeping showed there was some great sorrow at hand.

I suppose it was the dreariest sorrow that ever a proud woman had; but it came in the shape of a gay wedding. How, the village never knew. The gay gentlemen rode away from Morton the next day as lightly and carelessly as if they had attained their end, and Sir John had taken possession; and, by−and−by, the nurse came timorously out to market in the village, and Mistress Alice was met in the wood walks just as grand and as proud as ever in her ways, only a little more pale, and a little more sad. The truth was, as I have been told, that she and Sir John had each taken a fancy to each other in that parley they held on the Hall steps; she, in the deep, wild way in which she took the impressions of her whole life, deep down, as if they were burnt in. Sir John was a gallant−looking man, and had a kind of foreign grace and courtliness about him. The way he fancied her was very different − a man's way, they tell me. She was a beautiful woman to be tamed, and made to come to his beck and call; and perhaps he read in her softening eyes that she might be won, and so all legal troubles about the possession of the estate come to an end in an easy, pleasant manner. He came to stay with friends in the neighbourhood; he was met in her favourite walks, with his plumed hat in his hand, pleading with her, and she looking softer and far more lovely than ever; and lastly, the tenants were told of the marriage then nigh at hand.

After they were wedded, he stayed for a time with her at the Hall, and then off back to court. They do say that her obstinate refusal to go with him to London was the cause of their first quarrel; but such fierce, strong wills would quarrel the first day of their wedded life. She said that the court was no place for an honest woman; but surely Sir John knew best, and she might have trusted him to take care of her. However, he left her all alone; and at first she

cried most bitterly, and then she took to her old pride, and was more haughty and gloomy than ever. By−and−by she found out hidden conventicles; and, as Sir John never stinted her of money, she gathered the remnants of the old Puritan party about her, and tried to comfort herself with long prayers, snuffled through the nose, for the absence of her husband, but it was of no use. Treat her as he would, she loved him still with a terrible love. Once, they say, she put on her waiting−maid's dress, and stole up to London to find out what kept him there; and something she saw or heard that changed her altogether, for she came back as if her heart was broken. They say that the only person she loved with all the wild strength of her heart, had proved false to her; and if so, what wonder! At the best of times she was but a gloomy creature, and it was a great honour for her father's daughter to be wedded to a Morton. She should not have expected too much.

After her despondency came her religion. Every old Puritan preacher in the country was welcome at Morton Hall. Surely that was enough to disgust Sir John. The Mortons had never cared to have much religion, but what they had, had been good of its kind hitherto. So, when Sir John came down wanting a gay greeting and a tender show of love, his lady exhorted him, and prayed over him, and quoted the last Puritan text she had heard at him; and he swore at her, and at her preachers; and made a deadly oath that none of them should find harbour or welcome in any house of his. She looked scornfully back at him, and said she had yet to learn in what county of England the house he spoke of was to be found; but in the house her father purchased, and she inherited, all who preached the Gospel should be welcome, let kings make what laws, and kings' minions swear what oaths they would. He said nothing to this − the worst sign for her; but he set his teeth at her; and in an hour's time he rode away back to the French witch that had beguiled him.

Before he went away from Morton he set his spies. He longed to catch his wife in his fierce clutch, and punish her for defying him. She had made him hate her with her Puritanical ways. He counted the days till the messenger came, splashed up to the top of his deep leather boots, to say that my lady had invited the canting Puritan preachers of the neighbourhood to a prayer−meeting, and a dinner, and a night's rest at her house. Sir John smiled as he gave the messenger five gold pieces for his pains; and straight took post−horses, and rode long days till he got to Morton; and only just in time; for it was the very day of the prayer−meeting. Dinners were then at one o'clock in the country. The great people in London might keep late hours, and dine at three in the afternoon or so; but the Mortons they always clung to the good old ways, and as the church bells were ringing twelve when Sir John came riding into the village, he knew he might slacken bridle; and, casting one glance at the smoke which came hurrying up as if from a newly−mended fire, just behind the wood, where he knew the Hall kitchen chimney stood, Sir John stopped at the smithy, and pretended to question the smith about his horse's shoes; but he took little heed of the answers, being more occupied by an old serving−man from the Hall, who had been loitering about the smithy half the morning, as folk thought afterwards to keep some appointment with Sir John. When their talk was ended, Sir John lifted himself straight in his saddle; cleared his throat, and spoke out aloud: −

'I grieve to hear your lady is so ill.' The smith wondered at this, for all the village knew of the coming feast at the Hall; the spring−chickens had been bought up, and the cade−lambs killed; for the preachers in those days, if they fasted they fasted, if they fought they fought, if they prayed they prayed, sometimes for three hours at a standing; and if they feasted they feasted, and knew what good eating was, believe me.

'My lady ill?' said the smith, as if he doubted the old prim serving−man's word. And the latter would have chopped in with an angry asseveration (he had been at Worcester and fought on the right side), but Sir John cut him short.

'My lady is very ill, good Master Fox. It touches her here,' continued he, pointing to his head. 'I am come down to take her to London, where the King's own physician shall prescribe for her.' And he rode slowly up to the hall.

The lady was as well as ever she had been in her life, and happier than she had often been; for in a few minutes some of those whom she esteemed so highly would be about her, some of those who had known and valued her father − her dead father, to whom her sorrowful heart turned in its woe, as the only true lover and friend she had

ever had on earth. Many of the preachers would have ridden far, − was all in order in their rooms, and on the table in the great dining parlour? She had got into restless hurried ways of late. She went round below, and then she mounted the great oak staircase to see if the tower bed−chamber was all in order for old Master Hilton, the oldest among the preachers. Meanwhile, the maidens below were carrying in mighty cold rounds of spiced beef, quarters of lamb, chicken pies, and all such provisions, when, suddenly, they knew not how, they found themselves each seized by strong arms, their aprons thrown over their heads, after the manner of a gag, and themselves borne out of the house on to the poultry green behind, where, with threats of what worse might befall them, they were sent with many a shameful word (Sir John could not always command his men, many of whom had been soldiers in the French wars) back into the village. They scudded away like frightened hares. My lady was strewing the white−headed preacher's room with the last year's lavender, and stirring up the sweet−pot on the dressing−table, when she heard a step on the echoing stairs. It was no measured tread of any Puritan; it was the clang of a man of war coming nearer and nearer, with loud rapid strides. She knew the step; her heart stopped beating, not for fear, but because she loved Sir John even yet; and she took a step forward to meet him, and then stood still and trembled, for the flattering false thought came before her that he might have come yet in some quick impulse of reviving love, and that his hasty step might be prompted by the passionate tenderness of a husband. But when he reached the door, she looked as calm and indifferent as ever.

'My lady,' said he, 'you are gathering your friends to some feast. May I know who are thus invited to revel in my house? Some graceless fellows, I see, from the store of meat and drink below − wine−bibbers and drunkards, I fear.'

But, by the working glance of his eye, she saw that he knew all; and she spoke with a cold distinctness.

'Master Ephraim Dixon, Master Zerubbabel Hopkins, Master Help−me−or−I−perish Perkins, and some other godly ministers, come to spend the afternoon in my house.'

He went to her, and in his rage he struck her. She put up no arm to save herself, but reddened a little with the pain, and then drawing her neckerchief on one side, she looked at the crimson mark on her white neck.

'It serves me right,' she said. 'I wedded one of my father's enemies; one of those who would have hunted the old man to death. I gave my father's enemy house and lands, when he came as a beggar to my door; I followed my wicked, wayward heart in this, instead of minding my dying father's words. Strike again, and avenge him yet more!'

But he would not, because she bade him. He unloosed his sash, and bound her arms tight, − tight together, and she never struggled or spoke. Then pushing her so that she was obliged to sit down on the bed side, −

'Sit there,' he said, 'and hear how I will welcome the old hypocrites you have dared to ask to my house − my house and my ancestors' house, long before your father − a canting pedlar − hawked his goods about, and cheated honest men.'

And, opening the chamber window right above those Hall steps where she had awaited him in her maiden beauty scarce three short years ago, he greeted the company of preachers as they rode up to the Hall with such terrible hideous language (my lady had provoked him past all bearing, you see), that the old men turned round aghast, and made the best of their way back to their own places.

Meanwhile, Sir john's serving−men below had obeyed their master's orders. They had gone through the house, closing every window, every shutter, and every door, but leaving all else just as it was − the cold meats on the table, the hot meats on the spit, the silver flagons on the side−board, all just as if it were ready for a feast; and then Sir john's head−servant, he that I spoke of before, came up and told his master all was ready.

'Is the horse and the pillion all ready? Then you and I must be my lady's tire−women;' and as it seemed to her in mockery, but in reality with a deep purpose, they dressed the helpless woman in her riding things all awry, and strange and disorderly, Sir John carried her down stairs; and he and his man bound her on the pillion; and Sir John mounted before. The man shut and locked the great house−door, and the echoes of the clang went through the empty Hall with an ominous sound. 'Throw the key,' said Sir John, 'deep into the mere yonder. My lady may go seek it if she lists, when next I set her arms at liberty. Till then I know whose house Morton Hall shall be called.'

'Sir John! it shall be called the Devil's House, and you shall be his steward.'

But the poor lady had better have held her tongue; for Sir John only laughed, and told her to rave on. As he passed through the village, with his serving−men riding behind, the tenantry came out and stood at their doors, and pitied him for having a mad wife, and praised him for his care of her, and of the chance he gave her of amendment by taking her up to be seen by the King's physician. But, somehow, the Hall got an ugly name; the roast and boiled meats, the ducks, the chickens had time to drop into dust, before any human being now dared to enter in; or, indeed, had any right to enter in, for Sir John never came back to Morton; and as for my lady, some said she was dead, and some said she was mad, and shut up in London, and some said Sir John had taken her to a convent abroad.

'And what did become of her?' asked we, creeping up to Mrs Dawson.

'Nay, how should I know?'

'But what do you think?' we asked pertinaciously.

'I cannot tell. I have heard that after Sir John was killed at the battle of the Boyne she got loose, and came wandering back to Morton, to her old nurse's house; but, indeed, she was mad then, out and out, and I've no doubt Sir John had seen it coming on. She used to have visions and dream dreams: and some thought her a prophetess, and some thought her fairly crazy. What she said about the Mortons was awful. She doomed them to die out of the land, and their house to be razed to the ground, while pedlars and huxters, such as her own people, her father, had been, should dwell where the knightly Mortons had once lived. One winter's night she strayed away, and the next morning they found the poor crazy woman frozen to death in Drumble meeting−house yard; and the Mr Morton who had succeeded to Sir John had her decently buried where she was found, by the side of her father's grave.'

We were silent for a time. 'And when was the old Hall opened, Mrs Dawson, please?'

'Oh! when the Mr Morton, our Squire Morton's grandfather, came into possession. He was a distant cousin of Sir john's, a much quieter kind of man. He had all the old rooms opened wide, and aired, and fumigated; and the strange fragments of musty food were collected and burnt in the yard; but somehow that old dining−parlour had always a charnel−house smell, and no one ever liked making merry in it − thinking of the grey old preachers, whose ghosts might be even then scenting the meats afar off, and trooping unbidden to a feast, that was not that of which they were baulked. I was glad for one when the squire's father built another dining−room; and no servant in the house will go an errand into the old dining−parlour after dark, I can assure ye.'

'I wonder if the way the last Mr Morton had to sell his land to the people at Drumble had anything to do with old Lady Morton's prophecy,' said my mother, musingly.

'Not at all,' said Mrs Dawson, sharply. 'My lady was crazy, and her words not to be minded. I should like to see the cotton−spinners of Drumble offer to purchase land from the squire. Besides, there's a strict entail now. They can't purchase the land if they would. A set of trading pedlars, indeed!'

I remember Ethelinda and I looked at each other at this word pedlars;' which was the very word she had put into Sir john's mouth when taunting his wife with her father's low birth and calling. We thought, 'We shall see.'

Alas! we have seen.

Soon after that evening our good old friend Mrs Dawson died. I remember it well, because Ethelinda and I were put into mourning for the first time in our lives. A dear little brother of ours had died only the year before, and then my father and mother had decided that we were too young; that there was no necessity for their incurring the expense of black frocks. We mourned for the little delicate darling in our hearts, I know; and to this day I often wonder what it would have been to have had a brother. But when Mrs Dawson died it became a sort of duty we owed to the squire's family to go into black, and very proud and pleased Ethelinda and I were with our new frocks. I remember dreaming Mrs Dawson was alive again, and crying, because I thought my new frock would be taken away from me. But all this has nothing to do with Morton Hall.

When I first became aware of the greatness of the squire's station in life, his family consisted of himself, his wife (a frail, delicate lady), his only son, 'little master,' as Mrs Dawson was allowed to call him, 'the young squire,' as we in the village always termed him. His name was John Marmaduke. He was always called John; and after Mrs Dawson's story of the old Sir John, I used to wish he might not bear that ill−omened name. He used to ride through the village in his bright scarlet coat, his long fair curling hair falling over his lace collar, and his broad black hat and feather shading his merry blue eyes, Ethelinda and I thought then, and I always shall think, there never was such a boy. He had a fine high spirit, too, of his own, and once horsewhipped a groom twice as big as himself who had thwarted him. To see him and Miss Phillis go tearing through the village on their pretty Arabian horses, laughing as they met the west wind, and their long golden curls flying behind them, you would have thought them brother and sister, rather than nephew and aunt; for Miss Phillis was the squire's sister, much younger than himself; indeed, at the time I speak of, I don't think she could have been above seventeen, and the young squire, her nephew, was nearly ten. I remember Mrs Dawson sending for my mother and me up to the Hall that we might see Miss Phillis dressed ready to go with her brother to a ball given at some great lord's house to Prince William of Gloucester, nephew to good old George the Third.

When Mrs Elizabeth, Mrs Morton's maid, saw us at tea in Mrs Dawson's room, she asked Ethelinda and me if we would not like to come into Miss Phillis's dressing−room, and watch her dress; and then she said, if we would promise to keep from touching anything, she would make interest for us to go. We would have promised to stand on our heads, and would have tried to do so too, to earn such a privilege. So in we went, and stood together, hand−in−hand, up in a corner out of the way, feeling very red, and shy, and hot, till Miss Phillis put us at our case by playing all manner of comical tricks, just to make us laugh, which at last we did outright, in spite of all our endeavours to be grave, lest Mrs Elizabeth should complain of us to my mother. I recollect the scent of the mar chale powder with which Miss Phillis's hair was just sprinkled; and how she shook her head, like a young colt, to work the hair loose which Mrs Elizabeth was straining up over a cushion. Then Mrs Elizabeth would try a little of Mrs Morton's rouge; and Miss Phillis would wash it off with a wet towel, saying that she liked her own paleness better than any performer's colour; and when Mrs Elizabeth wanted just to touch her cheeks once more, she hid herself behind the great arm−chair, peeping out, with her sweet, merry face, first at one side and then at another, till we all heard the squire's voice at the door, asking her, if she was dressed, to come and show herself to madam, her sister−in−law; for, as I said, Mrs Morton was a great invalid, and unable to go out to any grand parties like this. We were all silent in an instant; and even Mrs Elizabeth thought no more of the rouge, but how to get Miss Phillis's beautiful blue dress on quick enough. She had cherry−coloured knots in her hair, and her breast−knots were of the same ribbon. Her gown was open in front, to a quilted white silk skirt. We felt very shy of her as she stood there fully dressed − she looked so much grander than anything we had ever seen; and it was like a relief when Mrs Elizabeth told us to go down to Mrs Dawson's parlour, where my mother was sitting all this time.

Just as we were telling how merry and comical Miss Phillis had been, in came a footman. 'Mrs Dawson,' said he, 'the squire bids me ask you to go with Mrs Sidebotham into the west parlour, to have a look at Miss Morton before she goes.' We went, too, clinging to my mother. Miss Phillis looked rather shy as we came in, and stood just by the door. I think we all must have shown her that we had never seen anything so beautiful as she was in our lives before; for she went very scarlet at our fixed gaze of admiration, and, to relieve herself, she began to play all manner of antics − whirling round, and making cheeses with her rich silk petticoat; unfurling her fan (a present from madam, to complete her dress), and peeping first on one side and then on the other, just as she had done upstairs; and then catching hold of her nephew, and insisting that he should dance a minuet with her until the carriage came; which proposal made him very angry, as it was an insult to his manhood (at nine years old) to suppose he could dance. 'It was all very well for girls to make fools of themselves,' he said, 'but it did not do for men.' And Ethelinda and I thought we had never heard so fine a speech before. But the carriage came before we had half feasted our eyes enough; and the squire came from his wife's room to order the little master to bed, and hand his sister to the carriage.

I remember a good deal of talk about royal dukes and unequal marriages that night. I believe Miss Phillis did dance with Prince William; and I have often heard that she bore away the bell at the ball, and that no one came near her for beauty and pretty, merry ways. In a day or two after I saw her scampering through the village, looking just as she did before she had danced with a royal duke. We all thought she would marry some one great, and used to look out for the lord who was to take her away. But poor madam died, and there was no one but Miss Phillis to comfort her brother, for the young squire was gone away to some great school down south; and Miss Phillis grew grave, and reined in her pony to keep by the squire's side, when he rode out on his steady old mare in his lazy, careless way.

We did not hear so much of the doings at the Hall now Mrs Dawson was dead; so I cannot tell how it was; but, by−and−by, there was a talk of bills that were once paid weekly, being now allowed to run to quarter−day; and then, instead of being settled every quarter−day, they were put off to Christmas; and many said they had hard enough work to get their money then. A buzz went through the village that the young squire played high at college, and that he made away with more money than his father could afford. But when he came down to Morton, he was as handsome as ever; and I, for one, never believed evil of him; though I'll allow others might cheat him, and he never suspect it. His aunt was as fond of him as ever; and he of her. Many is the time I have seen them out walking together, sometimes sad enough, sometimes merry as ever. By−and−by, my father heard of sales of small pieces of land, not included in the entail; and, at last, things got so bad, that the very crops were sold yet green upon the ground, for any price folks would give, so that there was but ready money paid. The squire at length gave way entirely, and never left the house; and the young master in London; and poor Miss Phillis used to go about trying to see after the workmen and labourers, and save what she could. By this time she would be above thirty; Ethelinda and I were nineteen and twenty−one when my mother died, and that was some years before this. Well, at last the squire died; they do say of a broken heart at his son's extravagance; and, though the lawyers kept it very close, it began to be rumoured that Miss Phillis's fortune had gone too. Any way, the creditors came down on the estate like wolves. It was entailed, and it could not be sold; but they put it into the hands of a lawyer, who was to get what he could out of it, and have no pity for the poor young squire, who had not a roof for his head. Miss Phillis went to live by herself in a little cottage in the village, at the end of the property, which the lawyer allowed her to have because he could not let it to any one, it was so tumble−down and old. We never knew what she lived on, poor lady; but she said she was well in health, which was all we durst ask about. She came to see my father just before he died, and he seemed made bold with the feeling that he was a dying man; so he asked, what I had longed to know for many a year, where was the young squire? he had never been seen in Morton since his father's funeral. Miss Phillis said he was gone abroad; but in what part he was then, she herself hardly knew; only she had a feeling that, sooner or later, he would come back to the old place; where she should strive to keep a home for him whenever he was tired of wandering about, and trying to make his fortune.

'Trying to make his fortune still?' asked my father, his questioning eyes saying more than his words. Miss Phillis shook her head, with a sad meaning in her face; and we understood it all. He was at some French gaming−table, if he was not at an English one.

Miss Phillis was right. It might be a year after my father's death when he came back, looking old and grey and worn. He came to our door just after we had barred it one winter's evening. Ethelinda and I still lived at the farm, trying to keep it up, and make it pay; but it was hard work. We heard a step coming up the straight pebble walk; and then it stopped right at our door, under the very porch, and we heard a man's breathing, quick and short.

'Shall I open the door?' said I.

'No, wait!' said Ethelinda; for we lived alone, and there was no cottage near us. We held our breaths. There came a knock.

'Who's there?' I cried.

'Where does Miss Morton live − Miss Phillis?'

We were not sure if we would answer him; for she, like us, lived alone.

'Who's there?' again said I.

'Your master,' he answered, proud and angry. 'My name is John Morton. Where does Miss Phillis live?'

We had the door unbarred in a trice, and begged him to come in; to pardon our rudeness. We would have given him of our best, as was his due from us; but he only listened to the directions we gave him to his aunt's, and took no notice of our apologies.

Chapter II

Up to this time we had felt it rather impertinent to tell each other of our individual silent wonder as to what Miss Phillis lived on; but I know in our hearts we each thought about it, with a kind of respectful pity for her fallen low estate. Miss Phillis − that we remembered like an angel for beauty, and like a little princess for the imperious sway she exercised, and which was such sweet compulsion that we bad all felt proud to be her slaves − Miss Phillis was now a worn, plain woman, in homely dress, tending towards old age; and looking − (at that time I dared not have spoken so insolent a thought, not even to myself) − but she did look as if she had hardly the proper nourishing food she required. One day, I remember Mrs Jones, the butcher's wife (she was a Drumble person) saying, in her saucy way, that she was not surprised to see Miss Morton so bloodless and pale, for she only treated herself to a Sunday's dinner of meat, and lived on slop and bread−and−butter all the rest of the week. Ethelinda put on her severe face − a look that I am afraid of to this day − and said, 'Mrs Jones, do you suppose Miss Morton can eat your half−starved meat? You do not know how choice and dainty she is, as becomes one born and bred like her. What was it we had to bring for her only last Saturday from the grand new butcher's, in Drumble, Biddy?' − (We took our eggs to market in Drumble every Saturday, for the cotton−spinners would give us a higher price than the Morton people: the more fools they!)

I thought it rather cowardly of Ethelinda to put the story−telling on me; but she always thought a great deal of saving her soul; more than I did, I am afraid, for I made answer, as bold as a lion, 'Two sweet breads, at a shilling a−piece; and a forequarter of house−lamb, at eighteen−pence a pound.' So off went Mrs Jones, in a huff, saying, 'their meat was good enough for Mrs Donkin, the great mill−owner's widow, and might serve a beggarly Morton any day.' When we were alone, I said to Ethelinda, 'I'm afraid we shall have to pay for our lies at the great day of

account;' and Ethelinda answered, very sharply − (she's a good sister in the main) − 'Speak for yourself, Biddy. I never said a word. I only asked questions. How could I help it if you told lies? I'm sure I wondered at you, how glib you spoke out what was not true. 'But I knew she was glad I told the lies, in her heart.

After the poor squire came to live with his aunt, Miss Phillis, we ventured to speak a bit to ourselves. We were sure they were pinched. They looked like it. He had a bad hacking cough at times; though he was so dignified and proud he would never cough when any one was near. I have seen him up before it was day, sweeping the dung off the roads, to try and get enough to manure the little plot of ground behind the cottage, which Miss Phillis had let alone, but which her nephew used to dig in and till; for, said he, one day, in his grand, slow way, 'he was always fond of experiments in agriculture.' Ethelinda and I do believe that the two or three score of cabbages he raised were all they had to live on that winter, besides the bit of meal and tea they got at the village shop.

One Friday night I said to Ethelinda, 'It is a shame to take these eggs to Drumble to sell, and never to offer one to the squire, on whose lands we were born.' She answered, 'I have thought so many a time; but how can we do it? I, for one, dare not offer them to the squire; and as for Miss Phillis, it would seem like impertinence.' 'I'll try at it,' said I.

So that night I took some eggs − fresh yellow eggs from our own pheasant hen, the like of which there were not for twenty miles round − and I laid them softly after dusk on one of the little stone seats in the porch of Miss Phillis's cottage. But, alas! when we went to market at Drumble, early the next morning, there were my eggs all shattered and splashed, making an ugly yellow pool in the road just in front of the cottage. I had meant to have followed it up by a chicken or so; but I saw now that it would never do. Miss Phillis came now and then to call on us; she was a little more high and distant than she had been when a girl, and we felt we must keep our place. I suppose we had affronted the young squire, for he never came near our house.

Well, there came a hard winter, and provisions rose; and Ethelinda and I had much ado to make ends meet. If it had not been for my sister's good management, we should have been in debt, I know; but she proposed that we should go without dinner, and only have a breakfast and a tea, to which I agreed, you may be sure.

One baking day I had made some cakes for tea − potato−cakes we called them. They had a savoury, hot smell about them; and, to tempt Ethelinda, who was not quite well, I cooked a rasher of bacon. Just as we were sitting down, Miss Phillis knocked at our door. We let her in. God only knows how white and haggard she looked. The heat of our kitchen made her totter, and for a while she could not speak. But all the time she looked at the food on the table as if she feared to shut her eyes lest it should all vanish away. It was an eager stare like that of some animal, poor soul! 'If I durst,' said Ethelinda, wishing to ask her to share our meal, but being afraid to speak out. I did not speak, but handed her the good, hot, buttered cake; on which she seized, and putting it up to her lips as if to taste it, she fell back in her chair, crying.

We had never seen a Morton cry before.' and it was something awful. We stood silent and aghast. She recovered herself, but did not taste the food; on the contrary, she covered it up with both her hands, as if afraid of losing it. 'If you'll allow me,' said she, in a stately kind of way, to make up for our having seen her crying, 'I'll take it to my nephew.' And she got up to go away; but she could hardly stand for very weakness, and had to sit down again; she smiled at us, and said she was a little dizzy, but it would soon go off; but as she smiled, the bloodless lips were drawn far back over her teeth, making her face seem somehow like a death's head. 'Miss Morton,' said I, 'do honour us by taking tea with us this once. The squire, your father, once took a luncheon with my father, and we are proud of it to this day.' I poured her out some tea, which she drank; the food she shrank away from as if the very sight of it turned her sick again. But when she rose to go, she looked at it with her sad, wolfish eyes, as if she could not leave it; and at last she broke into a low cry, and said, 'Oh, Bridget, we are starving! we are starving for want of food! I can bear it; I don't mind; but he suffers − oh, how he suffers! let me take him food for this one night.'

We could hardly speak; our hearts were in our throats, and the tears ran down our cheeks like rain. We packed up a basket, and carried it to her very door, never venturing to speak a word, for we knew what it must have cost her to say that. When we left her at the cottage, we made her our usual deep courtesy, but she fell upon our necks, and kissed us. For several nights after she hovered round our house about dusk, but she would never come in again, and face us in candle or fire light, much less meet us by daylight. We took out food to her as regularly as might be, and gave it to her in silence, and with the deepest courtesies we could make, we felt so honoured. We had many plans now she had permitted us to know of her distress. We hoped she would allow us to go on serving her in some way as became us as Sidebothams. But one night she never came; we stayed out in the cold, bleak wind, looking into the dark for her thin, worn figure; all in vain. Late the next afternoon, the young squire lifted the latch, and stood right in the middle of our houseplace. The roof was low overhead, and made lower by the deep beams supporting the floor above; he stooped as he looked at us, and tried to form words, but no sound came out of his lips. I never saw such gaunt woe; no, never! At last he took me by the shoulder, and led me out of the house.

'Come with me!' he said, when we were in the open air, as if that gave him strength to speak audibly. I needed no second word. We entered Miss Phillis's cottage; a liberty I had never taken before. What little furniture was there, it was clear to be seen were cast−off fragments of the old splendour of Morton Hall. No fire. Grey wood ashes lay on the hearth. An old settee, once white and gold, now doubly shabby in its fall from its former estate. On it lay Miss Phillis, very pale; very still; her eyes shut.

'Tell me!' he gasped. 'Is she dead? I think she is asleep; but she looks so strang − as if she might be − ' He could not say the awful word again. I stooped, and felt no warmth; only a cold chill atmosphere seemed to surround her.

'She is dead!' I replied at length. 'Oh, Miss Phillis! Miss Phillis!' and, like a fool, I began to cry. But he sat down without a tear, and looked vacantly at the empty hearth. I dared not cry any more when I saw him so stony sad. I did not know what to do. I could not leave him; and yet I had no excuse for staying. I went up to Miss Phillis, and softly arranged the grey ragged locks about her face.

'Ay!' said he. 'She must be laid out, Who so fit to do it as you and your sister, children of good old Robert Sidebotham?'

'Oh, my master,' I said, 'this is no fit place for you. Let me fetch my sister to sit up with me all night; and honour us by sleeping at our poor little cottage.'

I did not expect he would have done it; but after a few minutes' silence he agreed to my proposal. I hastened home, and told Ethelinda, and both of us crying, we heaped up the fire, and spread the table with food, and made up a bed in one corner of the floor. While I stood ready to go, I saw Ethelinda open the great chest in which we kept our treasures; and out she took a fine Holland shift that had been one of my mother's wedding shifts; and, seeing what she was after, I went upstairs and brought down a piece of rare old lace, a good deal darned to be sure, but still old Brussels point, bequeathed to me long ago by my god−mother, Mrs Dawson. We huddled these things under our cloaks, locked the door behind us, and set out to do all we could now for poor Miss Phillis. We found the squire sitting just as we left him; I hardly knew if he understood me when I told him how to unlock our door, and gave him the key, though I spoke as distinctly as ever I could for the choking in my throat. At last he rose and went; and Ethelinda and I composed her poor thin limbs to decent rest, and wrapped her in the fine Holland shift; and then I plaited up my lace into a close cap to tie up the wasted features. When all was done we looked upon her from a little distance.

'A Morton to die of hunger!' said Ethelinda solemnly. 'We should not have dared to think that such a thing was within the chances of life. Do you remember that evening, when you and I were little children, and she a merry young lady peeping at us from behind her fan?'

We did not cry any more; we felt very still and awestruck. After a while I said, 'I wonder if, after all, the young squire did go to our house. He had a strange look about him. If I dared I would go and see.' I opened the door; the night was black as pitch; the air very still. 'I'll go,' said I; and off I went, not meeting a creature, for it was long past eleven. I reached our house; the window was long and low, and the shutters were old and shrunk. I could peep between them well, and see all that was going on. He was there, sitting over the fire, never shedding a tear; but seeming as if he saw his past life in the embers. The food we had prepared was untouched. Once or twice, during my long watch (I was more than an hour away), he turned towards the food, and made as though he would have eaten it, and then shuddered back; but at last he seized it, and tore it with his teeth, and laughed and rejoiced over it like some starved animal. I could not keep from crying then. He gorged himself with great morsels; and when he could eat no more, it seemed as if his strength for suffering had come back. He threw himself on the bed, and such a passion of despair I never heard of, much less ever saw. I could not bear to witness it. The dead Miss Phillis lay calm and still. Her trials were over. I would go back and watch with Ethelinda.

When the pale grey morning dawn stole in, making us shiver and shake after our vigil, the squire returned. We were both mortal afraid of him, we knew not why. He looked quiet enough − the lines were worn deep before − no new traces were there. He stood and looked at his aunt for a minute or two. Then he went up into the loft above the room where we were; he brought a small paper parcel down; bade us keep on our watch yet a little time. First one and then the other of us went home to get some food. It was a bitter black frost; no one was out who could stop indoors; and those who were out cared not to stop to speak. Towards afternoon the air darkened, and a great snow−storm came on. We durst not be left only one alone; yet, at the cottage where Miss Phillis had lived, there was neither fire nor fuel. So we sat and shivered and shook till morning. The squire never came that night nor all next day.

'What must we do?' asked Ethelinda, broken down entirely. 'I shall die if I stop here another night. We must tell the neighbours and get help for the watch.'

'So we must,' said I, very low and grieved. I went out and told the news at the nearest house, taking care, you may be sure, never to speak of the hunger and cold Miss Phillis must have endured in silence. It was bad enough to have them come in, and make their remarks on the poor bits of furniture; for no one had known their bitter straits even as much as Ethelinda and me, and we had been shocked at the bareness of the place. I did hear that one or two of the more ill−conditioned had said, it was not for nothing we had kept the death to ourselves for two nights; that, to judge from the lace on her cap, there must have been some pretty pickings. Ethelinda would have contradicted this, but I bade her let it alone; it would save the memory of the proud Mortons from the shame that poverty is thought to be; and as for us, why we could live it down. But, on the whole, people came forward kindly; money was not wanting to bury her well, if not grandly, as became her birth; and many a one was bidden to the funeral who might have looked after her a little more in her life−time. Among others was Squire Hargreaves from Bothwick Hall over the moors. He was some kind of far−away cousin to the Morton's; so when he came he was asked to go chief mourner in Squire Morton's strange absence, which I should have wondered at the more if I had not thought him almost crazy when I watched his ways through the shutter that night. Squire Hargreaves started when they paid him the compliment of asking him to take the head of the coffin.

'Where is her nephew?' asked he.

'No one has seen him since eight o'clock last Thursday morning.'

'But I saw him at noon on Thursday,' said Squire Hargreaves, with a round oath. 'He came over the moors to tell me of his aunt's death, and to ask me to give him a little money to bury her, on the pledge of his gold shirt−buttons. He said I was a cousin, and could pity a gentleman in such sore need; that the buttons were his mother's first gift to him; and that I was to keep them safe, for some day he would make his fortune, and come back to redeem them. He had not known his aunt was so ill, or he would have parted with these buttons sooner, though he held them as more precious than he could tell me. I gave him money; but I could not find in my heart to

take the buttons. He bade me not tell of all this; but when a man is missing it is my duty to give all the clue I can.'

And so their poverty was blazoned abroad! But folk forgot it all in the search for the squire on the moor−side. Two days they searched in vain; the third, upwards of a hundred men turned out, hand−in−hand, step to step, to leave no foot of ground unsearched. They found him stark and stiff, with Squire Hargreaves' money, and his mother's gold buttons, safe in his waistcoat pocket.

And we laid him down by the side of his poor aunt Phillis.

After the squire, John Marmaduke Morton, had been found dead in that sad way, on the dreary moors, the creditors seemed to lose all hold on the property; which indeed, during the seven years they had had it, they had drained as dry as a sucked orange. But for a long time no one seemed to know who rightly was the owner of Morton Hall and lands. The old house fell out of repair; the chimneys were full of starlings' nests; the flags in the terrace in front were hidden by the long grass; the panes in the windows were broken, no one knew how or why, for the children of the village got up a tale that the house was haunted. Ethelinda and I went sometimes in the summer mornings, and gathered some of the roses that were being strangled by the bindweed that spread over all; and we used to try and weed the old flower−garden a little; but we were no longer young, and the stooping made our backs ache. Still we always felt happier if we cleared but ever such a little space. Yet we did not go there willingly in the afternoons, and left the garden always long before the first slight shade of dusk.

We did not choose to ask the common people − many of them were weavers for the Drumble manufacturers, and no longer decent hedgers and ditchers − we did not choose to ask them, I say, who was squire now, or where he lived. But one day, a great London lawyer came to the Morton Arms, and made a pretty stir. He came on behalf of a General Morton, who was squire now, though he was far away in India. He had been written to, and they had proved him heir, though he was a very distant cousin, farther back than Sir John, I think. And now he had sent word they were to take money of his that was in England, and put the house in thorough repair; for that three maiden sisters of his, who lived in some town in the north, would come and live at Morton Hall till his return. So the lawyer sent for a Drumble builder, and gave him directions. We thought it would have been prettier if he had hired John Cobb, the Morton builder and joiner, he that had made the squire's coffin, and the squire's father's before that. Instead, came a troop of Drumble men, knocking and tumbling about in the Hall, and making their jests up and down all those stately rooms. Ethelinda and I never went near the place till they were gone, bag and baggage. And then what a change! The old casement windows, with their heavy leaded panes half overgrown with vines and roses, were taken away, and great staring sash windows were in their stead. New grates inside; all modern, newfangled, and smoking, instead of the brass dogs which held the mighty logs of wood in the old squire's time. The little square Turkey carpet under the dining−table, which had served Miss Phillis, was not good enough for these new Mortons; the dining−room was all carpeted over. We peeped into the old dining−parlour − that parlour where the dinner for the Puritan preachers had been laid out; the flag parlour, as it had been called of late years. But it had a damp, earthy smell, and was used as a lumber−room. We shut the door quicker than we had opened it. We came away disappointed. The Hall was no longer like our own honoured Morton Hall.

'After all, these three ladies are Morrons,' said Ethelinda to me. 'We must not forget that: we must go and pay our duty to them as soon as they have appeared in church.'

Accordingly we went. But we had heard and seen a little of them before we paid our respects at the Hall. Their maid had been down in the village; their maid, as she was called now; but a maid−of−all−work she had been until now, as she very soon let out when we questioned her. However, we were never proud; and she was a good honest farmer's daughter out of Northumberland. What work she did make with the Queen's English! The folk in Lancashire are said to speak broad, but I could always understand our own kindly tongue; whereas, when Mrs Turner told me her name, both Ethelinda and I could have sworn she said Donagh, and were afraid she was an Irishwoman. Her ladies were what you may call past the bloom of youth; Miss Sophronia − Miss Morton, properly − was just sixty; Miss Annabella, three years younger; and Miss Dorothy (or Baby, as they called her

when they were by themselves), was two years younger still. Mrs Turner was very confidential to us, partly because, I doubt not, she had heard of our old connection with the family, and partly because she was an arrant talker, and was glad of anybody who would listen to her. So we heard the very first week how each of the ladies had wished for the east bed−room − that which faced the north−east − which no one slept in in the old squire's days; but there were two steps leading up into it, and, said Miss Sophronia, she would never let a younger sister have a room more elevated than she had herself She was the eldest, and she bad a right to the steps. So she bolted herself in for two days, while she unpacked her clothes, and then came out, looking like a hen that has laid an egg, and defies any one to take that honour from her.

But her sisters were very deferential to her in general; that must be said. They never had more than two black feathers in their bonnets; while she had always three. Mrs Turner said that once, when they thought Miss Annabella had been going to have an offer of marriage made her, Miss Sophronia had not objected to her wearing three that winter; but when it all ended in smoke, Miss Annabella had to pluck it out as became a younger sister. Poor Miss Annabella! She had been a beauty (Mrs Turner said), and great things had been expected of her. Her brother, the general, and her mother had both spoilt her, rather than cross her unnecessarily, and so spoil her good looks; which old Mrs Morton had always expected would make the fortune of the family. Her sisters were angry with her for not having married some great rich gentleman; though, as she used to say to Mrs Turner, how could she help it? She was willing enough, but no rich gentleman came to ask her. We agreed that it really was not her fault; but her sisters thought it was; and now, that she had lost her beauty, they were always casting it up what they would have done if they had had her gifts. There were some Miss Burrells they had heard of, each of whom had married a lord; and these Miss Burrells had not been such great beauties. So Miss Sophronia used to work the question by the rule of three; and put it in this way − If Miss Burrell, with a tolerable pair of eyes, a snub nose, and a wide mouth, married a baron, what rank of peer ought our pretty Annabella to have espoused? And the worst was, Miss Annabella − who had never had any ambition − wanted to have married a poor curate in her youth; but was pulled up by her mother and sisters, reminding her of the duty she owed to her family. Miss Dorothy had done her best − Miss Morton always praised her for it. With not half the good looks of Miss Annabella, she had danced with an honourable at Harrogate three times running; and, even now, she persevered in trying; which was more than could be said of Miss Annabella, who was very broken−spirited.

I do believe Mrs Turner told us all this before we had ever seen the ladies. We had let them know, through Mrs Turner, of our wish to pay them our respects.' so we ventured to go up to the front door, and rap modestly. We had reasoned about it before, and agreed that if we were going in our every−day clothes, to offer a little present of eggs, or to call on Mrs Turner (as she had asked us to do), the back door would have been the appropriate entrance for us. But going, however humbly, to pay our respects, and offer our reverential welcome to the Miss Mortons, we took rank as their visitors, and should go to the front door. We were shown up the wide stairs, along the gallery, up two steps, into Miss Sophronia's room. She put away some papers hastily as we came in. We heard afterwards that she was writing a book, to be called The Female Chesterfield; or, Letters from a Lady of Quality to her Niece. And the little niece sat there in a high chair, with a flat board tied to her back, and her feet in stocks on the tail of the chair; so that she had nothing to do but listen to her aunt's letters; which were read aloud to her as they were written, in order to mark their effect on her manners. I was not sure whether Miss Sophronia liked our interruption; but I know little Miss Cordelia Mannisty did.

'Is the young lady crooked?' asked Ethelinda, during a pause in our conversation. I had noticed that my sister's eyes would rest on the child; although, by an effort, she sometimes succeeded in looking at something else occasionally.

'No! indeed, ma'am,' said Miss Morton. 'But she was born in India, and her backbone has never properly hardened. Besides, I and my two sisters each take charge of her for a week; and their systems of education − I might say non−education − differ so totally and entirely from my ideas, that when Miss Mannisty comes to me, I consider myself fortunate if I can undo the − hem! − that has been done during a fortnight's absence. Cordelia, my dear, repeat to these good ladies the geography lesson you learnt this morning.'

Poor little Miss Mannisty began to tell us a great deal about some river in Yorkshire of which we had never heard, though I dare say we ought to, and then a great deal more about the towns that it passed by, and what they were famous for; and all I can remember − indeed, could understand at the time − was that Pomfret was famous for Pomfret cakes; which I knew before. But Ethelinda gasped for breath before it was done, she was so nearly choked up with astonishment; and when it was ended, she said, 'Pretty dear; it's wonderful!' Miss Morton looked a little displeased, and replied, 'Not at all. Good little girls can learn anything they choose, even French verbs. Yes, Cordelia, they can. And to be good is better than to be pretty. We don't think about looks here. You may get down, child, and go into the garden; and take care you put your bonnet on, or you'll be all over freckles.' We got up to take leave at the same time, and followed the little girl out of the room. Ethelinda fumbled in her pocket.

'Here's a sixpence, my dear, for you. Nay, I am sure you may take it from an old woman like me, to whom you've told over more geography than I ever thought there was out of the Bible.' For Ethelinda always maintained that the long chapters in the Bible which were all names, were geography; and though I knew well enough they were not, yet I had forgotten what the right word was, so I let her alone; for one hard word did as well as another. Little miss looked as if she was not sure if she might take it; but I suppose we had two kindly old faces, for at last the smile came into her eyes − not to her mouth, she had lived too much with grave and quiet people for that − and, looking wistfully at us, she said, −

'Thank you. But won't you go and see aunt Annabella?' We said we should like to pay our respects to both her other aunts if we might take that liberty; and perhaps she would show us the way. But, at the door of a room, she stopped short, and said, sorrowfully, 'I mayn't go in; it is not my week for being with aunt Annabella;' and then she went slowly and heavily towards the garden−door.

'That child is cowed by somebody,' said I to Ethelinda.

'But she knows a deal of geography' − Ethelinda's speech was cut short by the opening of the door in answer to our knock. The once beautiful Miss Annabella Morton stood before us, and bade us enter. She was dressed in white, with a turned−up velvet hat, and two or three short drooping black feathers in it. I should not like to say she rouged, but she had a very pretty colour in her cheeks; that much can do neither good nor harm. At first she looked so unlike anybody I had ever seen, that I wondered what the child could have found to like in her; for like her she did, that was very clear. But, when Miss Annabella spoke, I came under the charm. Her voice was very sweet and plaintive, and suited well with the kind of things she said; all about charms of nature, and tears, and grief, and such sort of talk, which reminded me rather of poetry − very pretty to listen to, though I never could understand it as well as plain, comfortable prose. Still I hardly know why I liked Miss Annabella. I think I was sorry for her; though whether I should have been if she had not put it in my head, I don't know. The room looked very comfortable; a spinnet in a corner to amuse herself with, and a good sofa to lie down upon. By−and−by, we got her to talk of her little niece, and she, too, had her system of education. She said she hoped to develop the sensibilities and to cultivate the tastes. While with her, her darling niece read works of imagination, and acquired all that Miss Annabella could impart of the fine arts. We neither of us quite knew what she was hinting at, at the time; but afterwards, by dint of questioning little miss, and using our own eyes and ears, we found that she read aloud to her aunt while she lay on the sofa. Santo Sebastiano; or, the Young Protector, was what they were deep in at this time; and, as it was in five volumes and the heroine spoke broken English − which required to be read twice over to make it intelligible − it lasted them a long time. She also learned to play on the spinnet; not much, for I never heard above two tunes, one of which was God save the King, and the other was not. But I fancy the poor child was lectured by one aunt, and frightened by the other's sharp ways and numerous fancies. She might well be fond of her gentle, pensive (Miss Annabella told me she was pensive, so I know I am right in calling her so) aunt, with her soft voice, and her never−ending novels, and the sweet scents that hovered about the sleepy room.

No one tempted us towards Miss Dorothy's apartment when we left Miss Annabella; so we did not see the youngest Miss Morton this first day. We had each of us treasured up many little mysteries to be explained by our

dictionary, Mrs Turner.

'Who is little Miss Mannisty?' we asked in one breath, when we saw our friend from the Hall. And then we learnt that there had been a fourth − a younger Miss Morton, who was no beauty, and no wit, and no anything; so Miss Sophronia, her eldest sister, had allowed her to marry a Mr Mannisty, and ever after spoke of her as 'my poor sister Jane.' She and her husband had gone out to India, and both had died there; and the general had made it a sort of condition with his sisters that they should take charge of the child, or else none of them liked children except Miss Annabella.

'Miss Annabella likes children,' said I. 'Then that's the reason children like her.'

'I can't say she likes children; for we never have any in our house but Miss Cordelia; but her she does like dearly.'

'Poor little miss!' said Ethelinda, 'does she never get a game of play with other little girls?' And I am sure from that time Ethelinda considered her in a diseased state from this very circumstance, and that her knowledge of geography was one of the symptoms of the disorder; for she used often to say, 'I wish she did not know so much geography! I'm sure it is not quite right.'

Whether or not her geography was right, I don't know; but the child pined for companions. A very few days after we had called − and yet long enough to have passed her into Miss Annabella's week − I saw Miss Cordelia in a corner of the church green, playing, with awkward humility, along with some of the rough village girls, who were as expert at the game as she was unapt and slow. I hesitated a little, and at last I called to her.

'How do you, my dear?' I said. 'How come you here, so far from home?'

She reddened, and then looked up at me with her large, serious eyes.

'Aunt Annabel sent me into the wood to meditate − and − and − it was very dull − and I heard these little girls playing and laughing − and I had my sixpence with me, and − it was not wrong, was it, ma'am? − I came to them, and told one of them I would give it to her if she would ask the others to let me play with them.'

'But, my dear, they are − some of them − very rough little children, and not fit companions for a Morton.'

'But I am a Mannisty, ma'am!' she pleaded, with so much entreaty in her ways, that if I had not known what naughty, bad girls some of them were, I could not have resisted her longing for companions of her own age. As it was, I was angry with them for having taken her sixpence; but, when she had told me which it was, and saw that I was going to reclaim it, she clung to me, and said, −

'Oh! don't, ma'am − you must not. I gave it to her quite of my own self.'

So I turned away; for there was truth in what the child said. But to this day I have never told Ethelinda what became of her sixpence. I took Miss Cordelia home with me while I changed my dress to be fit to take her back to the Hall. And on the way, to make up for her disappointment, I began talking of my dear Miss Phillis, and her bright, pretty youth, I had never named her name since her death to any one but Ethelinda − and that only on Sundays and quiet times. And I could not have spoken of her to a grown−up person; but somehow to Miss Cordelia it came out quite natural. Not of her latter days, of course; but of her pony, and her little black King Charles's dogs, and all the living creatures that were glad in her presence when first I knew her. And nothing would satisfy the child but I must go into the Hall garden and show her where Miss Phillis's garden had been. We were deep in our talk, and she was stooping down to clear the plot from weeds, when I heard a sharp voice cry out, 'Cordelia! Cordelia! Dirtying your frock with kneeling on the wet grass! It is not my week; but I shall tell your aunt Annabella of you.'

And the window was shut down with a jerk. It was Miss Dorothy. And I felt almost as guilty as poor little Miss Cordelia; for I had heard from Mrs Turner that we had given great offence to Miss Dorothy by not going to call on her in her room that day on which we had paid our respects to her sisters; and I had a sort of an idea that seeing Miss Cordelia with me was almost as much of a fault as the kneeling down on the wet grass. So I thought I would take the bull by the horns.

'Will you take me to your aunt Dorothy, my dear?' said I.

The little girl had no longing to go into her aunt Dorothy's room, as she had so evidently had at Miss Annabella's door. On the contrary, she pointed it out to me at a safe distance, and then went away in the measured step she was taught to use in that house; where such things as running, going upstairs two steps at a time, or jumping down three, were considered undignified and vulgar. Miss Dorothy's room was the least prepossessing of any. Somehow it had a north−east look about it, though it did face direct south; and as for Miss Dorothy herself, she was more like a 'cousin Berry' than anything else; if you know what a cousin Berry is, and perhaps it is too old−fashioned a word to be understood by any one who has learnt the foreign languages: but when I was a girl, there used to be poor crazy women rambling about the country, one or two in a district. They never did any harm that I know of; they might have been born idiots, poor creatures! or crossed in love, who knows? But they roamed the country, and were well known at the farm−houses, where they often got food and shelter for as long a time as their restless minds would allow them to stay in any one place; and the farmer's wife would, maybe, rummage up a ribbon, or a feather, or a smart old breadth of silk, to please the harmless vanity of these poor crazy women; and they would go about so bedizened sometimes that, as we called them always 'cousin Betty,' we made it into a kind of proverb for any one dressed in a fly−away, showy style, and said they were like a cousin Berry. So now you know what I mean that Miss Dorothy was like. Her dress was white, like Miss Annabella's; but, instead of the black velvet hat her sister wore, she had on, even in the house, a small black silk bonnet. This sounds as if it should be less like a cousin Berry than a hat; but wait till I tell you how it was lined − with strips of red silk, broad near the face, narrow near the brim; for all the world like the rays of the rising sun, as they are painted on the public−house sign. And her face was like the sun; as round as an apple; and with rouge on, without any doubt: indeed, she told me once, a lady was not dressed unless she had put her rouge on. Mrs Turner told us she studied reflections a great deal; not that she was a thinking woman in general, I should say; and that this rayed lining was the fruit of her study. She had her hair pulled together, so that her forehead was quite covered with it; and I won't deny that I rather wished myself at home, as I stood facing her in the doorway. She pretended she did not know who I was, and made me tell all about myself; and then it turned out she knew all about me, and she hoped I had recovered from my fatigue the other day.

'What fatigue?' asked I, immovably. Oh! she had understood I was very much tired after visiting her sisters; otherwise, of course, I should not have felt it too much to come on to her room. She kept hinting at me in so many ways, that I could have asked her gladly to slap my face and have done with it, only I wanted to make Miss Cordelia's peace with her for kneeling down and dirtying her frock. I did say what I could to make things straight; but I don't know if I did any good. Mrs Turner told me how suspicious and jealous she was of everybody, and of Miss Annabella in particular, who had been set over her in her youth because of her beauty; but since it had faded, Miss Morton and Miss Dorothy had never ceased pecking at her; and Miss Dorothy worst of all. If it had not been for little Miss Cordelia's love, Miss Annabella might have wished to die; she did often wish she had had the small−pox as a baby. Miss Morton was stately and cold to her, as one who had not done her duty to her family, and was put in the corner for her bad behaviour. Miss Dorothy was continually talking at her, and particularly dwelling on the fact of her being the older sister. Now she was but two years older; and was still so pretty and gentle−looking, that I should have forgotten it continually but for Miss Dorothy.

The rules that were made for Miss Cordelia! She was to eat her meals standing, that was one thing! Another was, that she was to drink two cups of cold water before she had any pudding; and it just made the child loathe cold water. Then there were ever so many words she might not use; each aunt bad her own set of words which were ungenteel or improper for some reason or another. Miss Dorothy would never let her say 'red;' it was always to be

pink, or crimson, or scarlet. Miss Cordelia used at one time to come to us, and tell us she had a 'pain at her chest' so often, that Ethelinda and I began to be uneasy, and questioned Mrs Turner to know if her mother had died of consumption; and many a good pot of currant jelly have I given her, and only made her pain at the chest worse; for − would you believe it? − Miss Morton told her never to say she had got a stomach−ache, for that it was not proper to say so, I had heard it called by a worse name still in my youth, and so had Ethelinda; and we sat and wondered to ourselves how it was that some kinds of pain were genteel and others were not. I said that old families, like the Mortons, generally thought it showed good blood to have their complaints as high in the body as they could − brain−fevers and headaches had a better sound, and did perhaps belong more to the aristocracy. I thought I had got the right view in saying this, when Ethelinda would put in that she had often heard of Lord Toffey having the gout and being lame, and that nonplussed me. If there is one thing I do dislike more than another, it is a person saying something on the other side when I am trying to make up my mind − how can I reason if I am to be disturbed by another person's arguments?

But though I tell all these peculiarities of the Miss Mortons, they were good women in the main: even Miss Dorothy had her times of kindness, and really did love her little niece, though she was always laying traps to catch her doing wrong. Miss Morton I got to respect, if I never liked her. They would ask us up to tea; and we would put on our best gowns; and taking the house−key in my pocket, we used to walk slowly through the village, wishing that people who had been living in our youth could have seen us now, going by invitation to drink tea with the family at the Hall − not in the housekeeper's room, but with the family, mind you. But since they began to weave in Morton, everybody seemed too busy to notice us; so we were fain to be content with reminding each other how we should never have believed it in our youth that we could have lived to this day. After tea, Miss Morton would set us to talk of the real old family, whom they had never known; and you may be sure we told of all their pomp and grandeur and stately ways: but Ethelinda and I never spoke of what was to ourselves like the memory of a sad, terrible dream. So they thought of the squire in his coach−and−four as high sheriff, and madam lying in her morning−room in her Genoa velvet wrapping−robe, all over peacock's eyes (it was a piece of velvet the squire brought back from Italy, when he had been the grand tour), and Miss Phillis going to a ball at a great lord's house and dancing with a royal duke. The three ladies were never tired of listening to the tale of the splendour that had been going on here, while they and their mother had been starving in genteel poverty up in Northumberland; and as for Miss Cordelia, she sat on a stool at her aunt Annabella's knee, her hand in her aunt's, and listened, open−mouthed and unnoticed, to all we could say.

One day, the child came crying to our house. It was the old story; aunt Dorothy had been so unkind to aunt Annabella! The little girl said she would run away to India, and tell her uncle the general, and seemed in such a paroxysm of anger, and grief, and despair, that a sudden thought came over me. I thought I would try and teach her something of the deep sorrow that lies awaiting all at some part of their lives, and of the way in which it ought to be borne, by telling her of Miss Phillis's love and endurance for her wasteful, handsome nephew. So from little, I got to more, and I told her all; the child's great eyes filling slowly with tears, which brimmed over and came rolling down her cheeks unnoticed as I spoke. I scarcely needed to make her promise not to speak about all this to any one. She said, 'I could not − no! not even to aunt Annabella.' And to this day she never has named it again, not even to me; but she tried to make herself more patient, and more silently helpful in the strange household among whom she was cast.

By−and−by, Miss Morton grew pale, and grey, and worn, amid all her stiffness. Mrs Turner whispered to us that for all her stern, unmoved looks, she was ill unto death; that she had been secretly to see the great doctor at Drumble; and he had told her she must set her house in order. Not even her sisters knew this; but it preyed upon Mrs Turner's mind and she told us. Long after this, she kept up her week of discipline with Miss Cordelia; and walked in her straight, soldier−like way about the village, scolding people for having too large families, and burning too much coal, and eating too much butter. One morning she sent Mrs Turner for her sisters; and, while she was away, she rummaged out an old locket made of the four Miss Mortons' hair when they were all children; and, threading the eye of the locket with a piece of brown ribbon, she tied it round Cordelia's neck, and kissing her, told her she had been a good girl, and had cured herself of stooping; that she must fear God and honour the

king; and that now she might go and have a holiday. Even while the child looked at her in wonder at the unusual tenderness with which this was said, a grim spasm passed over her face, and Cordelia ran in affright to call Mrs Turner. But when she came, and the other two sisters came, she was quite herself again. She had her sisters in her room alone when she wished them good−by; so no one knows what she said, or how she told them (who were thinking of her as in health) that the signs of near−approaching death, which the doctor had foretold, were upon her. One thing they both agreed in saying − and it was much that Miss Dorothy agreed in anything − that she bequeathed her sitting−room, up the two steps, to Miss Annabella as being next in age. Then they left her room crying, and went both together into Miss Annabella's room, sitting hand in hand (for the first time since childhood I should think), listening for the sound of the little hand−bell which was to be placed close by her, in case, in her agony, she required Mrs Turner's presence. But it never rang. Noon became twilight. Miss Cordelia stole in from the garden with its long, black, green shadows, and strange eerie sounds of the night wind through the trees, and crept to the kitchen fire. At last Mrs Turner knocked at Miss Morton's door, and hearing no reply, went in and found her cold and dead in her chair.

I suppose that some time or other we had told them of the funeral the old squire had; Miss Phillis's father, I mean. He had had a procession of tenantry half−a−mile long to follow him to the grave. Miss Dorothy sent for me to tell her what tenantry of her brother's could follow Miss Morton's coffin; but what with people working in mills, and land having passed away from the family, we could but muster up twenty people, men and women and all; and one or two were dirty enough to be paid for their loss of time.

Poor Miss Annabella did not wish to go into the room up two steps; nor yet dared she stay behind; for Miss Dorothy, in a kind of spite for not having had it bequeathed to her, kept telling Miss Annabella it was her duty to occupy it; that it was Miss Sophronia's dying wish, and that she should not wonder if Miss Sophronia were to haunt Miss Annabella, if she did not leave her warm room, full of ease and sweet scent, for the grim north−east chamber. We told Mrs Turner we were afraid Miss Dorothy would lord it sadly over Miss Annabella, and she only shook her head; which, from so talkative a woman, meant a great deal. But, just as Miss Cordelia had begun to droop, the general came home, without any one knowing he was coming. Sharp and sudden was the word with him. He sent Miss Cordelia off to school; but not before she had had time to tell us that she loved her uncle dearly, in spite of his quick, hasty ways. He carried his sisters off to Cheltenham; and it was astonishing how young they made themselves look before they came back again. He was always here, there, and everywhere: and very civil to us into the bargain; leaving the key of the Hall with us whenever they went from home. Miss Dorothy was afraid of him, which was a blessing, for it kept her in order, and really I was rather sorry when she died; and, as for Miss Annabella, she fretted after her till she injured her health, and Miss Cordelia had to leave school to come and keep her company. Miss Cordelia was not pretty; she had too sad and grave a look for that; but she had winning ways, and was to have her uncle's fortune some day, so I expected to hear of her being soon snapped up. But the general said her husband was to take the name of Morton; and what did my young lady do but begin to care for one of the great mill−owners at Drumble, as if there were not all the lords and commons to choose from besides? Mrs Turner was dead; and there was no one to tell us about it; but I could see Miss Cordelia growing thinner and paler every time they came back to Morton Hall; and I longed to tell her to pluck up a spirit, and he above a cotton−spinner. One day, not half a year before the general's death, she came to see us, and told us, blushing like a rose, that her uncle had given his consent; and so, although 'he' had refused to take the name of Morton, and had wanted to marry her without a penny, and without her uncle's leave, it had all come right at last, and they were to be married at once; and their house was to be a kind of home for her aunt Annabella, who was getting tired of being perpetually on the ramble with the general.

'Dear old friends!' said our young lady, 'you must like him. I am sure you will; he is so handsome, and brave, and good. Do you know, he says a relation of his ancestors lived at Morton Hall in the time of the Commonwealth.'

'His ancestors,' said Ethelinda. 'Has he got ancestors? That's one good point about him, at any rate. I didn't know cotton−spinners had ancestors.'

'What is his name?' asked I.

'Mr Marmaduke Carr,' said she, sounding each r with the old Northumberland burr, which was softened into a pretty pride and effort to give distinctness to each letter of the beloved name.

'Carr,' said I, 'Carr and Morton! Be it so! It was prophesied of old!' But she was too much absorbed in the thought of her own secret happiness to notice my poor sayings.

He was and is a good gentleman; and a real gentleman, too. They never lived at Morton Hall. just as I was writing this, Ethelinda came in with two pieces of news. Never again say I am superstitious! There is no one living in Morton that knows the tradition of Sir John Morton and Alice Carr; yet the very first part of the Hall the Drumble builder has pulled down is the old stone dining−parlour where the great dinner for the preachers mouldered away − flesh from flesh, crumb from crumb! And the street they are going to build right through the rooms through which Alice Carr was dragged in her agony of despair at her husband's loathing hatred, is to be called Carr Street.

And Miss Cordelia has got a baby; a little girl; and writes in pencil two lines at the end of her husband's note, to say she means to call it Phillis.

Phillis Carr! I am glad he did not take the name of Morton. I like to keep the name of Phillis Morton in my memory very still and unspoken.