

Wives and Daughters

Compact Editions

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Extract

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CHAPTER I

The Dawn of a Gala Day

To begin with the old rigmarole of childhood. In a country there was a shire, and in that shire there was a town, and in that town there was a house, and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a bed, and in that bed there lay a little girl; wide awake and longing to get up, but not daring to do so for fear of the unseen power in the next room – a certain Betty, whose slumbers must not be disturbed until six o'clock struck. It was June, and the room was full of sunny warmth and light.

On the drawers opposite to the little white dimity bed in which Molly Gibson lay, was a bonnet-stand, on which was hung a bonnet made of solid straw, its only trimming a plain white ribbon. Still, there was a neat little quilling inside, every plait of which Molly knew; for had she not made it herself the evening before, with infinite pains? and was there not a little blue bow in this quilling, the very first bit of such finery Molly had ever had the prospect of wearing?

Six o'clock now! the brisk ringing of the church bells told that; calling everyone to their daily work. Up jumped Molly, and ran across to the window; and let in the sweet morning air. The dew was already off the flowers in the garden below, but still rising from the long hay-grass in the meadows directly beyond. At one side lay the little town of Hollingford, into a street of which Mr Gibson's front door opened; and puffs of smoke were already beginning to rise from many a cottage chimney, where some housewife was already up, and preparing breakfast for the breadwinner of the family.

Molly Gibson saw all this; but all she thought about it was, 'Oh!

it will be a fine day! I was afraid it never would come; or that, if it ever came, it would be a rainy day!' Pleasures in a country town were very simple, and Molly had lived for twelve long years without the occurrence of any event so great as that which was now impending. Poor child! It is true that she had lost her mother, which was a jar to the whole tenour of her life; but that was hardly an event in the sense referred to; and, besides, she had been too young to be conscious of it at the time. The pleasure she was looking forward to today was her first share in a kind of annual festival in Hollingford.

The little straggling town faded away into country on one side, close to the entrance-lodge of a great park, where lived my Lord and Lady Cumnor: 'the earl' and 'the countess', as they were always called by the inhabitants of the town; where a very pretty amount of feudal feeling still lingered. 'The earl' was lord of the manor, and owner of much of the land on which Hollingford was built; he and his household were fed, and doctored, and, to a certain measure, clothed by the good people of the town; their fathers' grandfathers had always voted for the eldest son of Cumnor Towers, and, following in the ancestral track, every man-jack in the place gave his vote to the liege-lord, totally irrespective of such chimeras as political opinions.

This was no unusual instance of the influence of the great land-owners over humbler neighbours in those days before railways, and it was well for a place where the powerful family were of so respectable a character as the Cumnors. The simple worship of the townspeople was accepted by the earl and countess as a right. But they did a good deal for the town, and were often thoughtful and kind in their treatment of their vassals. Lord Cumnor was a forbearing landlord; putting his steward a little on one side sometimes; which meant that occasionally the earl asked his own questions of his own tenants, and used his own eyes and ears in the management of the smaller details of his property. But his tenants liked my lord all the better for this habit of his. Lord Cumnor had certainly a little time for gossip. But, then, the countess made up by her unapproachable dignity for this weakness of the earl's. Once

a year she was condescending. She and the ladies, her daughters, had set up a school of the kind we should call 'industrial', where girls are taught to sew beautifully, to be capital housemaids, and pretty fair cooks, and, above all, to dress neatly – ready curtsies, and 'please, ma'ams', being *de rigueur*.

Now, as the countess was absent from the Towers for a considerable part of the year, she was glad to enlist the sympathy of the Hollingford ladies in this school. And the various unoccupied gentlewomen of the town responded to the call of their liege lady, and gave her their service as required. In return, there was a day of honour set apart every summer, when, with much stately hospitality, Lady Cumnor and her daughters received all the school visitors at the Towers, the great family mansion. The order of this annual festivity was this. About ten o'clock, one of the Towers carriages rolled through the lodge, and drove to different houses, wherein dwelt a woman to be honoured; picking them up by ones or twos, till the loaded carriage drove back again through the ready portals, bowled along the smooth, tree-shaded road, and deposited its covey of smartly dressed ladies on the great flight of steps leading to the ponderous doors of Cumnor Towers. Back again to the town; another picking-up, and another return, and so on, till the whole party were assembled either in the house or in the really beautiful gardens. After the proper amount of exhibition on the one part, and admiration on the other, had been done, there was a collation for the visitors, and some more display and admiration of the treasures inside the house. Towards four o'clock, coffee was brought; this was a signal of the carriage that was to take them back to their own homes; whither they returned with the happy consciousness of a well-spent day, but with some fatigue at the long-continued exertion of behaving their best. Nor were Lady Cumnor and her daughters free from something of the same self-approbation, and something, too, of the fatigue that always follows on conscious efforts to behave as will best please the society you are in.

For the first time, Molly Gibson was to be included among the guests at the Towers. She was much too young to be a visitor

at the school, but it had so happened that, one day when Lord Cumnor was on a 'pottering' expedition, he had met Mr Gibson, *the* doctor of the neighbourhood, coming out of the farm-house my lord was entering; and, having some small question to ask the surgeon (Lord Cumnor seldom passed anyone of his acquaintance without asking a question of some sort – not always attending to the answer), he accompanied Mr Gibson to a ring in the wall to which the surgeon's horse was fastened. Molly was there too, sitting square and quiet on her rough little pony. Her grave eyes opened large and wide at the close neighbourhood and advance of 'the earl'; for to her imagination the grey-haired, red-faced, somewhat clumsy man, was a cross between an archangel and a king.

'Your daughter, eh, Gibson? – nice little girl; how old? Pony wants grooming, though,' patting it as he talked. 'What's your name, my dear? He's sadly behindhand with his rent, as I was saying; but, if he's really ill, I must see after Sheepshanks, who is a hardish man of business. You'll come to our school-scrimmage on Thursday, little girl – what's-your-name? Mind you send her, or bring her, Gibson.' And off the earl trotted.

Mr Gibson mounted, and he and Molly rode off. Then she said, 'May I go, papa?' in rather an anxious little tone of voice.

'Where, my dear?' said he.

'To the Towers – on Thursday, you know. That gentleman' (she was shy of calling him by his title) 'asked me.'

'Would you like it, my dear? It has always seemed to me rather a tiresome piece of gaiety – rather a tiring day, I mean – beginning so early.'

'Oh, papa!' said Molly reproachfully.

'You'd like to go then, would you?'

'Yes; if I may! Don't you think I may?'

'Well! We'll see – yes! I think we can manage it, if you wish it so much, Molly.'

Then they were silent again. By-and-by, Molly said – 'Please, papa – I do wish to go – but I don't care about it.'

'I suppose you mean you don't care to go, if it will be any

trouble to get you there. I can easily manage it, however; so you may consider it settled. You'll want a white frock; you'd better tell Betty you're going, and she'll see after making you tidy.'

Now, there were two or three things to be done by Mr Gibson, before he could feel quite comfortable about Molly's going to the festival at the Towers; so, the next day, he rode over to the Towers, ostensibly to visit some sick housemaid, but, in reality, to throw himself in my lady's way, and get her to ratify Lord Cumnor's invitation to Molly. He chose his time, with a little natural diplomacy; which, indeed, he had often to exercise in his intercourse with the great family. He rode into the stable-yard about twelve o'clock, a little before luncheon-time, and yet after the worry of opening the post-bag and discussing its contents was over. After he had put up his horse, he went in by the back-way to the house; the 'House' on this side, the 'Towers' at the front. He saw his patient, gave his directions to the housekeeper, and then went out, with a rare wild-flower in his hand, to find one of the ladies Tranmere in the garden, where, according to his hope and calculation, he came upon Lady Cumnor too – now talking to her daughter about the contents of an open letter which she held in her hand, now directing a gardener about certain bedding-out plants.

'I was calling to see Nanny, and I took the opportunity of bringing Lady Agnes the plant I was telling her about as growing on Cumnor Moss.'

'Thank you so much, Mr Gibson! Mamma, look! this is the *Drosera rotundifolia* I have been wanting so long.'

'Ah! yes; very pretty, I daresay. Nanny is better, I hope? We can't have anyone laid up next week, for the house will be quite full of people – and here are the Danbys writing to offer themselves as well. One comes down for a fortnight of quiet, at Whitsuntide, and leaves half one's establishment in town; and, as soon as people know of our being here, we get letters without end, longing for a breath of country-air.'

'We shall go back to town on Friday the 18th,' said Lady Agnes, in a consolatory tone.

'Yes! as soon as we have got over the school visitors' affair.'

'By the way!' said Mr Gibson, availing himself of the good opening thus presented, 'I met my lord at the Crosstrees Farm yesterday, and he was kind enough to ask my little daughter, who was with me, to be one of the party here on Thursday; it would give the lassie great pleasure, I believe.'

'Oh, well! if my lord asked her, I suppose she must come; but I wish he was not so amazingly hospitable! Not but what the little girl will be quite welcome; only, you see, he met a younger Miss Browning the other day, of whose existence I had never heard. I knew there was one visitor of the name of Browning; I never knew there were two, but, of course, as soon as Lord Cumnor heard there was another, he must needs ask her; so the carriage will have to go backwards and forwards four times now to fetch them all. So your daughter can come quite easily, Mr Gibson, and I shall be very glad to see her for your sake. She can sit bodkin with the Brownings, I suppose? You'll arrange it all with them; and mind you get Nanny well up to her work next week!'

Just as Mr Gibson was going away, Lady Cumnor called after him, 'Oh! by-the-bye, Clare is here; you remember Clare, don't you? She was a patient of yours, long ago.'

'Clare!' he repeated, in a bewildered tone.

'Miss Clare, our old governess,' said Lady Agnes. 'About twelve years ago, before Lady Cuxhaven was married.'

'Oh, yes!' said he. 'Miss Clare, who had the scarlet fever here; a pretty, delicate girl. But I thought she was married!'

'Yes!' said Lady Cumnor. 'She was a silly little thing, and went and married a poor curate, and became a stupid Mrs Kirkpatrick; but we always kept on calling her "Clare". And now he's dead, and left her a widow, and she is staying here; and we are racking our brains to find out some way of helping her to a livelihood, without parting her from her child. She's somewhere about the grounds, if you like to renew your acquaintance with her.'

'Thank you, my lady. I'm afraid I cannot stop today; I have a long round to go.'

Long as his ride had been that day, he called on the Miss Brownings in the evening, to arrange about Molly's accompany-

ing them to the Towers. They were tall, handsome women, past their first youth, and inclined to be extremely complaisant to the widowed doctor.

'Eh, dear! Mr Gibson, but we shall be delighted to have her with us. You should never have thought of *asking* us such a thing,' said Miss Browning the elder.

'I'm sure I'm hardly sleeping at nights, for thinking of it,' said Miss Phoebe. 'You know I've never been there before. Somehow, though my name has been down on the visitors' list these three years, the countess has never named me in her note; and you know I could not go to such a grand place without being asked; now, could I?'

'I told Phoebe last year,' said her sister, 'that I was sure it was only inadvertence on the part of the countess, and that her ladyship would be as hurt as anyone when she didn't see Phoebe among the school visitors; but Phoebe has got a delicate mind, Mr Gibson, and, for all I could say, she stopped here at home; and it spoilt all my pleasure, I do assure you.'

'I had a good cry after you was gone, Sally,' said Miss Phoebe; 'but for all that, I think I was right in stopping away from where I was not asked. Don't you, Mr Gibson?'

'Certainly,' said he.

'Molly will know she's to put on her best clothes,' said Miss Browning. 'We could perhaps lend her a few beads, or artificials, if she wants them.'

'Molly must go in a clean white frock,' said Mr Gibson, rather hastily; for he did not admire the Miss Brownings' taste in dress, and was unwilling to have his child decked up according to their fancy. Miss Browning had just a shade of annoyance in her tone as she drew herself up, and said, 'Oh! very well.' But Miss Phoebe said, 'Molly will look very nice in whatever she puts on, that's certain.'