

'You're all suited now except me,' I said disconsolately. 'And I don't know what to do. I'm not tall, not pretty. I couldn't teach a baby, and I can neither bake nor sew.'

'You might be a lady-help,' suggested Myra. 'You could make beds and dust.'

'Perhaps. But the prospect is not a lively one.'

'Here's an advertisement that doesn't seem bad,' Lucy answered, taking up a number of the *Lady*. 'I'm not sure I wouldn't rather have it than a place as governess. Only I know Lady Dalrymple, and she's so kind, and will treat me well.'

I took the paper and ran my eye over the advertisement:

'Wanted as companion and lady-help to an elderly lady, living in quiet country house, a well educated girl of eighteen or twenty; duties light; salary, £18 a year and washing.'

'I'll answer it,' I cried. 'And if the old lady's reply is fairly promising I'll go to her. And I shall not want many dresses in her quiet country house. I daresay it's a hundred miles from everywhere. But beggars can't be choosers. So I'll go to this old lady if she'll only take me.'

My mother caressed my hair with a trembling hand.

'I'd have liked something more promising for my Brownie,' she said. 'But I am sure your decision is a wise one.'

'I am sure it is,' I answered, trying hard to speak cheerfully. 'And something tells me it will prove a blessed one. My old lady will prove an angel in disguise.'

'You're a brave little soul and deserve to prosper,' whispered my sweet mother in a choking voice. And kissing her silently I ran off to answer the advertisement.

Very promptly came Mrs. Lester's reply to my letter, and even my mother was forced to admit that it was perfectly satisfactory. She was evidently a lady, and every word she wrote showed extreme politeness and delicacy of feeling.

'I feel that I love her already,' I said, my eyes full of tears. 'Since I must leave you, mother, I'm glad to go to her. I'll accept her situation at once.' And I did so without an hour's delay.

All this time little had been seen or heard of Lord Vandeleur. A few days after our father's death he had called and left a card, but since then he had made no sign.

'Was he only a fair-weather friend after all?' I thought, stealing a glance at Mave, lovely and stately in her deep mourning. 'No, I can't believe that. Perhaps she sent him away. Well,' sighing, 'it's no business of mine, and she doesn't seem to mind. But still I'm sorry. He was such a pleasant friend.'

The end of the week saw us all scattered. Saying good-bye to one's nearest and dearest is a terrible ordeal, and I was red-eyed and sick at heart when I at last reached the 'Lodge' on Banstead Common.

Mrs. Lester, a sweet-looking lady just verging on seventy, her snow-hair lying in smooth bands upon her broad forehead, a cap of soft tulle tied with white ribbons under her chin, and a fichu of old lace folded across the bosom of her handsome black silk dress, received me in the kindest manner possible and invited me into the drawing-room to take a cup of tea.

'I—I didn't know lady-helps were treated as friends,' I said, blushing furiously, as she pressed me to eat some cake, and waited on me as though I were an honoured guest. 'You—you are far too kind.'

She smiled and patted my hand softly.

'It is a little unusual, perhaps. But then I am unusual. And you, my dear, are just a little unusual. I think we'll get on together.'

'I'm sure we shall,' I cried. 'But,' half laughing, half crying, 'you must not spoil me and take me out of my place. You must give me work and—'

'Of course I shall. But I want you as a companion more than anything. Your duties, otherwise, you will find very light, and I hope not too irksome.'

'Oh, I don't mind what I do. I am young and strong, and,' blushing, 'not beautiful enough to give myself airs.'

'No.' She examined me a little critically. 'You are not beautiful; but you have a sweet face.'

And she bent down and kissed me.

I was soon perfectly at home at the Lodge. My duties were light, and Mrs. Lester was kindness itself. The days and weeks passed away fairly quickly, and in spite of a little sadness of heart and a feeling of dulness that came over me very strongly at times I was content, almost happy.

My place at the Lodge was really an easy one. I helped Mrs. Lester to dress, kept her clothes in order, and dusted and arranged her room and the drawing-room. I did the marketing and saw that the servants did their work. In the afternoon I walked or drove out with my mistress. In the evening I read to her or sat sewing by her side whilst she played 'Patience' or wrote her letters. All my meals were taken with her, even when she had visitors, and she introduced me to everyone in the sweetest manner as her 'friend, Miss Molly Craven.'

'You're a good girl, to be always so bright and cheerful in such a dull house as this, Molly,' she said one day when I had been with her about three months. 'But by-and-bye we'll be more lively. A nephew of mine is coming for a fortnight at Christmas-time, and he'll wake us up a bit.'

I felt sorry to hear this. I didn't want waking up, and I was sure that a man about a tiny house like the Lodge would be a nuisance. However, I kept my thoughts to myself and did my best to look pleased when the young stranger's visit was talked about.

'I've been most fortunate to find such a place, and such a friend,' I told myself on Christmas Eve, as I dressed to walk across the Heath to do my marketing. 'I cannot expect to have everything my own way. And, after all, this young man may add to our happiness. And if not—well, a week will soon fly over.' And little guessing the joy that lay before me, I tied on my veil and running downstairs, passed out of the house, through the frosty garden, and away at a brisk pace, over the hard, white common.

'I never in my life,' I told myself, 'liked but one man—except, of course, my dear father. But he—ah, well! I never deceived myself. He was kind and pleasant, and—'. But it was not likely that his feelings would ever be any deeper for poor, plain little me, when Mave—tall, beautiful, graceful Mave was about.'

I gave my orders, made my various small purchases, and turned homewards. At the top of the hill, a fly bearing a couple of portmanteaus, a hat-box and a big dressing-bag, passed down the road from the station.

'It's too early,' I thought, 'or I'd think that was—our visitor. I laughed merrily. 'It's very funny, but now I come to think of it, I don't know his name. I don't believe Mrs. Lester ever mentioned it. Well, what matter—I'll know it soon enough.'

On entering the lodge gates I met the fly again. There was no one inside and the luggage had been taken off the top.'

'Why, it is our visitor after all,' I cried in surprise. 'Well, I'll not disturb the aunt and nephew just yet. Mrs. Lester wishes the place to look as Christmassy as possible, so I'll get my scissors and basket and go and cut a lot of holly and ivy. The berries are lovely this year. And—'

In the porch stood Mrs. Lester, smiling and radiant.

'He has come,' she exclaimed. 'Dear Vandeleur looks bronzed and handsome after his stay in Egypt. But what's the matter, child? Are you ill?'

'No, no,' I answered, feeling horribly conscious that my cheeks were changing from white to red. 'I was a little surprised. We knew a Lord Vandeleur at the awful time of my father's death.'

'He told me he knew you well. Vandeleur, you have not been forgotten.'

'I trust not.' And before I had time to recover my dignity and presence of mind Lord Vandeleur caught my hand and looked straight into my eyes.

'Molly, little Molly,' he whispered, 'you are glad to see me?'

'Certainly,' I answered, affecting an indifference I was far from feeling. 'You have been long away.'

'I could not help it. I was obliged to go abroad. When I returned you had all gone; your old home was deserted.'

'Such is life,' I said lightly. 'Nothing but change and—'. But we'll meet again. I have work to do now.' And I sped into the house and up the stairs to my room.

At lunch Lord Vandeleur and Mrs. Lester kept up a lively conversation. The old lady had many questions to ask about absent friends, and seeing that they were happy together I slipped away.

'I can't breathe in the house,' I cried, putting my hands to my burning cheeks. 'I'll get the holly now.'

As I stood on tiptoe trying to break off a branch of holly laden with bright berries a deep voice said in my ear:

'Allow me, Molly,' and in an instant the branch was lying in my basket.

'Thank you,' I said; 'you are very kind.' And I took a step back towards the house.

But Lord Vandeleur sprang to my side.

'Molly, I came here to see you. I heard by accident that you were with my aunt, and I travelled night and day to ask you a question that was often on my lips four months ago. Molly, will you be my wife?'

I grew crimson, then pale.

'But Mave,' I stammered. 'I—I thought you loved Mave.'

'You thought wrong. Mave knew I loved you. But she said you did not care for me, and I feared—'

'She should have allowed me to answer for myself,' I blazed out. 'I—'

'You will do so now. Molly, sweet Molly, do you love me? Will you marry me?'

'A lady-help—your wife!'

I began with a wild attempt at gaiety; then I burst into tears.

'Look up, my darling, and whisper "Hugh, I love you."'

But I could not speak. My heart was too full, and I raised my eyes in silence to his face. What he saw there satisfied him. The mute eloquence told him more than any words, and drawing me gently to his side he murmured:

'God bless you, my love, you have made me very happy.'

CLARA MULHOLLAND, in the *Catholic Fireside*.

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