

'Mrs. Golding,' groaned Ernest, 'a worldly, hard old woman. Clarinda could never be happy with her. But I need not be alarmed. Her letter will not even be answered.'

But in the course of a few days Mrs. Golding did answer her niece's letter.

'I hear you are pretty and ambitious,' she wrote. 'So come to me when you please. I had almost forgotten your existence when your note arrived. But I'll make up for lost time, and if you are amenable to my wishes, soon settle you in life.'

Clarinda blushed to her eyes. This letter ought to have pleased her, since it fell in so well with her own desires. But somehow it jarred upon her, and her first inclination was to send a scornful refusal to her aunt's invitation. But on second thoughts, she saw how foolish this would be, and she sat down and wrote, as charmingly as possible, announcing her arrival at the end of the week.

Clarinda was a little tearful on saying goodbye to her stepmother and the children, and as Ernest pressed her hand for the hundredth time through the open window of the railway carriage, she thought he had grown suddenly very handsome.

'Clarinda, sweetheart,' he whispered, encouraged by the softening light in her eyes, 'if the world is not what you fancy, come back. My love will be always yours. To make you my wife would be the greatest joy on earth.'

'Ernest, you know—oh! pray, forget me!'

'Never,' he cried, 'never.'

And then the train moved out of the station, and Clarinda was gone.

'Absence, they say,' the girl murmured as she was carried swiftly through the country, but tears dropping upon her cheek, 'makes the heart grow fonder. Shall I come to love kindred, my stepmother, the yellow-haired babies, and Ernest Langton better than anything else? Shall I long for home and rusticity? No, indeed, I hope not. I'm not going to be a goose. I'll send them lovely things and be a sort of fairy god-mother to them—but I'm going out into the world to become a somebody, either by a great marriage or my splendid voice, I'm not sure which.'

Mrs. Golding, a tall, handsome woman, received her niece kindly. She was dressed in a gown of rich texture and beautiful coloring that enchanted Clarinda and helped to rouse her somewhat drooping spirits.

But if Clarinda looked with admiration at her aunt's flowing robe, Mrs. Golding gazed in horror at the short, clumsily-made garment that had been the girl's Sunday best for many months.

'My dear,' she cried, throwing up her hands, 'Madame Frillydill must see you at once. No one, with a shudder, must be allowed to catch sight of you till you are clothed like a lady.'

Clarinda blushed deeply and bit her lip, then laughed at her folly in resenting these remarks.

'I'm a country humpkin so why should I wonder at her horror,' she thought; then looking at her aunt, she said sweetly.

'Thank you, Aunt Tabitha. You are most kind. I'll be delighted to have a new dress.'

Madame Frillydill was a person of marvellous skill and astonishing rapidity, and the very next evening Clarinda entered her aunt's drawing-room a vision of youth and beauty in a soft filmy dress of snowy white, the like of which she had never seen before.

Her success was instantaneous. Everyone in the room admired her, and predicted wonderful things for her future. Mrs. Golding was delighted, and so complimentary and effusive were some of the men of the party that Clarinda went to bed that night, her brain in a whirl, quite intoxicated by their sweet words and flattering glances.

The next few months passed like a dream. There were dinners and balls, receptions, and small dances, and the belle of them all was the young girl from the country.

Clarinda was enchanted. Nothing seemed wanting to complete her happiness. She had crowds of admirers, a variety of beautiful dresses, and plenty of

pocket-money. Her aunt was most generous in that respect, and this was a matter of much rejoicing, for the girl, as it enabled her to help her stepmother and send presents to the children. Nothing delighted her more than to hear that they were pleased, and talked of her as their 'good sweet fairy' from morning till night.

One day as she was busy putting up a parcel of pretty frocks and pinafores that she had spent some hours choosing in Swears and Wells, Mrs. Golding entered the morning room, smiling pleasantly.

'You are looking charming, my dear,' she said, patting the girl softly on the cheek. 'And I feel sure I shall soon hear some very good news from you.'

'Tis fortunate you came to me, heart-whole, Clarinda, otherwise all this would be so much time lost. Now, you have only to hold up your little finger, which you will do, I know, and Samuel Ibbotson is at your feet—yours for ever. My dear, it's splendid. Thirty thousand—'

'But aunt,' cried Clarinda, aghast, 'I don't care for Mr. Ibbotson. He's—'

'Just the man for you. Girls like you cannot afford to pick and choose. But,' breaking off suddenly and gazing in astonishment at the children's things, 'what have you there? Where is the bazaar?'

'There is no bazaar, aunt. These are for my brother Eddy and my sisters Flossy and Clare. Aren't they nice?'

'Very,' dryly. 'But you'll please buy no more things for Mrs. Uttley and her children with my money. When you are Mrs. Samuel Ibbotson,' shrugging her shoulders, 'you can do as you please,' and she walked away.

That evening Clarinda's eyes shone like stars. Her complexion was brilliant, her lips rosy, though slightly tremulous, and all who saw her enter the ball-room at Lady Fane's declared her to be the loveliest girl they had ever seen. But notwithstanding her bright look and her dainty gracefulness, so admirably set off by white satin, chiffon, and pearls, Clarinda's heart was very sore.

'Half the joy of being well off will be gone if I cannot help Maudie and the little ones,' she had told herself that afternoon, as her aunt left her. 'I shan't care nearly so much about anything.'

Then as she sighed over what she had been told must be her last parcel home, a letter from her stepmother was brought to her by the butler. Mrs. Uttley wrote cheerfully. The children were blooming. She was getting on well. A few investments, that she had looked upon as a dead loss, had begun to pay again, and made a nice and useful addition to her income.

'That's good news now that I am forbidden to help the dear things,' Clarinda murmured, much relieved. Then, with a sudden pang and a feeling of deep regret, she read that Ernest Langton had been ill. 'He is better,' wrote Mrs. Uttley, 'but seems immensely changed. He is dull and depressed, and takes little interest in anything. He has had some trouble of mind, people say, and everyone is anxious about him.'

'Trouble of mind? Poor Ernest!' cried Clarinda, with a swelling heart. 'He who was so good and noble and bright. What can it be?'

The idea of Ernest ill, Ernest in trouble, haunted her, and for the first time since her arrival in London she dressed and went out, caring nothing about her looks or the party to which she was going. But her unconsciousness of self, and the look of feeling in her face, only enhanced her beauty, and Mrs. Golding felt a glow of pride as she entered the ball-room with Clarinda by her side.

After a while, under the influence of the music and the excitement of the dance, the girl's spirits revived, and she was consoling herself with the thought that very soon Ernest would be quite himself again, when in the pause of the waltz she heard a voice behind a heavy portiere near which she was standing say:

'Have you seen Mrs. Golding's niece?'

'Yes,' was the reply: 'a remarkably lovely girl. What will be her fate, I wonder?'