

OLD MR. TREDGOLD

BY
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CHAPTER I.

THEY were not exactly of that conventional type which used to be common whenever two sisters had to be described—the one dark and the other fair, the one sunny and amiable, the other reserved and proud; the one gay, the other melancholy, or at least very serious by nature. They were not at all like Minna and Brenda in the “Pirate,” which used to be a contrast dear to the imagination. But yet there was a very distinct difference between them. Katherine was a little taller, a little bigger, a little darker, than Stella. She was three years older but was supposed to look ten. She was not so lively in her movements either of mind or person, and she was supposed to be slow. The one who was all light threw a shadow—which seems contradictory—on the other. They were the two daughters of an old gentleman who had been that mysterious being called a City man in his time. Not that there was anything at all mysterious about old Mr. Tredgold; his daughters and his daughters’ friends were fond of saying that he had come to London with the traditionary half-crown in his pocket; but this was, as in so many cases, fabulous, Mr. Tredgold having in fact come of a perfectly creditable Eastern Counties family, his father being a well-to-do linen draper in Ipswich, whose pride it was to have set forth all his boys comfortably, and done everything for them that a father could do. But perhaps it is easier to own to that half-crown and the myth of an origin sudden and commercially-romantic without antecedents, than to a respectable shop in a respectable town, with a number of relatives installed in other shops, doing well and ready to claim the rights of relationship at inconvenient moments. I do not know at all how fortunes are made “in the City.”

If you dig coals out of the bowels of the earth, or manufacture anything, from cotton to ships, by which money is made, that is a process which comes within the comprehension of the most limited faculties; but making money in the City never seems to mean anything so simple. It means handing about money, or goods which other people have produced, to other third or fourth people, and then handing them back again even to the Scriptural limits of seventy times seven; which is why it appears so mysterious to the simple-minded.

But, indeed, if anybody had investigated the matter, Mr. Tredgold's progress had been quite easy to follow, at least in the results. He had gone from a house in Hampstead to a house in Kensington, and thence to Belgravia, changing also his summer residences from Herne Bay to Hastings, and thence to the wilds of Surrey, and then to the Isle of Wight, where, having retired from the cares of business, he now lived in one of those beautiful places, with one of the most beautiful prospects in the world before him, which so often fall to the lot of persons who care very little about beauty in any shape. The house stood on a cliff which was almost a little headland, standing out from the line of the downs between two of the little towns on the south side of that favoured island. The grounds were laid out quite regardless of expense, so much so that they were a show in the district, and tourists were admitted by the gardeners when the family was absent, to see such a collection of flowering shrubs and rare trees as was not to be found between that point, let us say, and Mr. Hanbury's gardens at Mortola. The sunny platform of the cliff thus adorned to the very edge of the precipice was the most delightful mount of vision, from which you could look along the lovely coast at that spot not much inferior to the Riviera, with its line of sunny towns and villages lying along

the course of the bay on one hand, and the darker cliffs clad with wood, amid all the picturesque broken ground of the Landslip on the other; and the dazzling sea, with the additional glory of passing ships giving it a continual interest, stretching out far into the distance, where it met the circle of the globe, and merged as all life does in the indefinite Heaven beyond—the Heaven, the Hades, the unknown—not always celestial, sometimes dark with storm or wild with wind, a vague and indeterminate distance from which the tempests and all their demons, as well as the angels, come, yet the only thing that gives even a wistful satisfaction to the eyes of those who sway with every movement of this swaying globe in the undiscovered depths of air and sky.

Very little attention, I am sorry to say, was paid to this beautiful landscape by the family who had secured it for their special delectation. The girls would take their visitors “to see the view,” who cast a careless glance at it, and said, “How pretty!” and returned with pleasure to the tennis or croquet, or even tea of the moment. Mr. Tredgold, for his part, had chosen a room for himself on the sheltered side of the house, as was perhaps natural, and shivered at the thought of the view. There was always a wind that cut you to pieces, he said, on that side of the cliff; and, truth to tell, I believe there was, the proverbial softness of the climate of the Isle of Wight being a fond delusion, for the most part, in the minds of its inhabitants. Katherine was the only one who lingered occasionally over the great panorama of the sea and coast; but I think it was when she felt herself a little “out of it,” as people say, when Stella was appropriating everything, and all the guests and all the lovers were circling round that little luminary, and the elder sister was not wanted anywhere—except to fill out tea perhaps, or look after the comforts of the others, which is a *rôle* that may suit a

staid person of forty, but at twenty-three is not only melancholy but bewildering—it being always so difficult to see why another should have all the good things, and yourself all the crosses of life.

In the circumstances of these two girls there was not even that cheap way of relief which ends in blaming some one. Even Providence could not be blamed. Katherine, if you looked at her calmly, was quite as pretty as Stella; she had a great deal more in her; she was more faithful, more genuine and trustworthy; she played tennis as well or better; she had as good a voice and a better ear; in short, it was quite incomprehensible to any one why it was that Stella was the universal favourite and her sister was left in the shade. But so it was. Katherine made up the set with the worst players, or she was kept at the tea-table while the merriest game was going on. She had the reversion of Stella's partners, who talked to her of her sister, of what a jolly girl, or what an incipient angel she was, according to their several modes of speech. The old ladies said that it was because Katherine was so unselfish; but I should not like to brand a girl for whom I have a great regard with that conventional title. She was not, to her own consciousness, unselfish at all. She would have liked very much, if not to have the first place, at least to share it, to have a retinue of her own, and champions and admirers as well as Stella. She did not like the secondary position nor even consent to it with any willingness; and the consequence was that occasionally she retired and looked at the view with anything but happy feelings; so that the appreciation of Nature, and of their good fortune in having their lines thrown in such pleasant places, was very small and scant indeed in this family, which outsiders were sometimes disposed to envy for the beauty of their surroundings and for their wonderful view.

The house which occupied this beautiful situation was set well back in the grounds, so that it at least should not be contaminated by the view, and it was an odd fantastic house, though by no means uncomfortable when you got into the ways of it. A guest, unacquainted with these ways, which consisted of all the very last so-called improvements, might indeed spend a wretched day or night in his or her ignorance. I have indeed known one who, on a very warm evening, found herself in a chamber hermetically sealed to all appearance, with labels upon the windows bearing the words "Close" and "Open," but affording no information as to how to work or move the complicated machinery which achieved these operations; and when she turned to the bell for aid, there was a long cord depending by the wall, at which she tugged and tugged in vain, not knowing (for these were the early days of electrical appliances) that all she had to do was to touch the little ivory circle at the end of the cord. The result was a night's imprisonment in what gradually became a sort of Black Hole of Calcutta, without air to breathe or means of appealing to the outside world. The Tredgolds themselves, however, I am happy to say, had the sense in their own rooms to have the windows free to open and shut according to the rules of Nature.

The whole place was very elaborately furnished, with an amount of gilding and ornament calculated to dazzle the beholder—inlaid cabinets, carved furniture, and rich hangings everywhere, not a door without a *portière*, not a window without the most elaborate sets of curtains. The girls had not been old enough to control this splendour when it was brought into being by an adroit upholsterer; and, indeed, they were scarcely old enough even yet to have escaped from the spell of the awe and admiration into which they had been trained. They felt the flimsiness of the

fashionable mode inspired by Liberty in comparison with their solid and costly things, even should these be in worst taste, and, as in everything a sense of superiority is sweet, they did not attempt any innovations. But the room in which they sat together in the evening was at least the most simply decorated in the house. There was less gold, there were some smooth and simple tables on which the hand could rest without carrying away a sharp impression of carved foliage or arabesques. There were no china vases standing six feet high, and there was a good deal of litter about such as is indispensable to the happiness of girls. Mr. Tredgold had a huge easy-chair placed near to a tall lamp, and the evening paper, only a few hours later than if he had been in London, in his hands. He was a little old man with no appearance to speak of—no features, no hair, and very little in the way of eyes. How he had managed to be the father of two vigorous young women nobody could understand; but vigorous young women are, however it has come about, one of the commonest productions of the age, a fashion like any other. Stella lay back in a deep chair near her father, and was at this moment, while he filled the air of the room with the crinkling of his paper as he folded back a leaf, lost in the utterance of a long yawn which opened her mouth to a preternatural size, and put her face, which was almost in a horizontal position thrown back and contemplating the ceiling, completely out of drawing, which was a pity, for it was a pretty face. Katherine showed no inclination to yawn—she was busy at a table doing something—something very useless and of the nature of trumpery I have no doubt; but it kept her from yawning at least.

“Well, my pet,” Mr. Tredgold said, putting his hand on the arm of Stella’s chair, “very tired, eh—tired of having nothing to do, and sitting with your old father one night?”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty to do,” said Stella, getting over the yawn, and smiling blandly upon the world; “and, as for one night I sit with you for ever, you ungrateful old dad.”

“What is in the wind now? What’s the next entertainment? You never mean to be quiet for two days together?” the old gentleman said.

“It is not our fault,” said Katherine. “The Courtnays have gone away, the Allens are going, and Lady Jane has not yet come back.”

“I declare,” cried Stella, “it’s humiliating that we should have to depend on anybody for company, whether they are summer people or winter people. What is Lady Jane to us? We are as good as any of them. It is you who give in directly, Kate, and think there is nothing to be done. I’ll have a picnic to-morrow, if it was only the people from the hotel; they are better than nobody, and so pleased to be asked. I shan’t spend another evening alone with papa.”

Papa was not displeased by this sally. He laughed and chuckled in his throat, and crinkled his newspaper more than ever. “What a little hussy!” he cried. “Did you ever know such a little hussy, Kate?”

Kate did not pay any attention at all to papa. She went on with her gum and scissors and her trumpery, which was intended for a bazaar somewhere. “The question is, Do you know the hotel people?” she said. “You would not think a picnic of five or six much fun.”

“Oh, five or six!” cried the other with a toss of her head; and she sprang up from her chair with an activity as great as her former

listlessness, and rushed to a very fine ormolu table all rose colour and gold, at which she sat down, dashing off as many notes. "The Setons at the hotel will bring as many as that; they have officers and all kinds of people about," she cried, flinging the words across her shoulder as she wrote.

"But we scarcely know them, Stella; and Mrs. Seton I don't like," said Katherine, with her gum-brush arrested in her hand.

"Papa, am I to ask the people I want, or is Kate to dictate in everything?" cried Stella, putting up another note.

"Let the child have her way, Katie, my dear; you know she has always had her way all her life."

Katherine's countenance was perhaps not so amiable as Stella's, who was radiant with fun and expectation and contradiction. "I think I may sometimes have my way too," she said. "They are not nice people; they may bring any kind of man, there is always a crowd of men about *her*. Papa, I think we are much safer, two girls like us, and you never going out with us, if we keep to people we know; that was always to be the condition when you consented that Stella should send our invitations without consulting you."

"Yes, yes, my dear," said the old gentleman, turning to his elder daughter, "that is quite true, quite true;" then he caught Stella's eye, and added tremulously: "You must certainly have two or three people you know."

"And what do you call Miss Mildmay?" cried Stella, "and Mrs. Shanks?—aren't they people we know?"

“Oh, if she is asking them—the most excellent people and knowing everybody—I think—don’t you think, Katie?—that might do?”

“Of course it will do,” cried Stella gaily. “And old Shanks and old Mildmay are such fun; they always fight—and they hate all the people in the hotels; and only think of their two old faces when they see Mrs. Seton and all her men! It will be the best party we have had this whole year.”

Katherine’s ineffectual remonstrances were drowned in the tinkling as of a cracked bottle of Mr. Tredgold’s laugh. He liked to hear the old ladies called old cats and set to fight and spit at each other. It gave him an agreeable sense of contrast with his own happy conditions; petted and appealed to by the triumphant youth which belonged to him, and of which he was so proud. The inferiority of the “old things” was pleasant to the old man, who was older than they. The cackle of his laugh swept every objection away. And then I think Katherine would have liked to steal away outside and look at the view, and console herself with the sight of the Sliplin lights and all the twinkling villages along the coast; which, it will be seen, was no disinterested devotion to Nature, but only a result of the sensation of being out of it, and not having, which Stella had, her own way.

“Well, you needn’t come unless you like,” cried Stella with defiance, as they parted at the door between their respective rooms, a door which Katherine, I confess, shut with some energy on this particular evening, though it generally stood open night and day.

“I don’t think I will,” Katherine cried in her impatience; but she thought better of this before day.

CHAPTER II.

STELLA had always been the spoilt child of the Tredgold family. Her little selfishnesses and passions of desire to have her own way, and everything she might happen to want, had been so amusing that nobody had chidden or thought for a moment (as everybody thought with Katherine) of the bad effect upon her character and temper of having all these passions satisfied and getting everything she stormed or cried for. Aunt after aunt had passed in shadow, as it were, across the highly lighted circle of Mr. Tredgold's home life, all of them breaking down at last in the impossibility of keeping pace with Stella, or satisfying her impetuous little spirit; and governess after governess in the same way had performed a sort of processional march through the house. Stella's perpetual flow of mockery and mimicry had all the time kept her father in endless amusement. The mockery was not very clever, but he was easily pleased and thought it capital fun. There was so much inhumanity in his constitution, though he was a kind man in his way and very indulgent to those who belonged to him, that he had no objection to see his own old sister (though a good creature) outrageously mimicked in all her peculiarities, much less the sisters of his late wife. Little Stella, while still under the age of sixteen, had driven off all these ladies and kept her father in constant amusement. "The little hussy!" he said, "the little vixen!" and chuckled and laughed till it was feared he might choke some time, being afflicted with bronchitis, in those convulsions of delight. Katherine, who was the champion of the aunts, and wept as one after the other departed, amused him greatly too. "She is an old maid born!" he said, "and she sticks up for her kind, but Stella

will have her pick, and marry a prince, and take off the old cats as long as she lives.”

“But if she lives,” said a severe governess who for some time kept the household in awe, “she will become old too, and probably be an old cat in the opinion of those that come after her.”

“No fear,” cried the foolish old man—“no fear.” In his opinion Stella would never be anything but pretty and young, and radiant with fun and fascination.

And since the period when the girls “came out” there had been nothing but a whirl of gaiety in the house. They did not come out in the legitimate way, by being presented to Her Majesty and thus placed on the roll of society in the usual meaning of the word, but only by appearing at the first important ball in the locality, and giving it so to be understood that they were prepared to accept any invitations that might come in their way. They had come out together, Stella being much too masterful and impatient to permit any such step on Katherine’s part without her, so that Katherine had been more than nineteen while Stella was not much over sixteen when this important step took place. Three years had passed since that time. Stella was twenty, and beginning to feel like a rather *blasé* woman of the world; while Katherine at twenty-three was supposed to be stepping back to that obscurity which her father had prophesied for her, not far off from the region of the old cats to which she was supposed to belong. Curiously enough, no prince had come out of the unknown for the brighter sister. The only suitor that had appeared had been for Katherine, and had been almost laughed out of countenance, poor man, before he took his dismissal, which was, indeed, rather given by the household in general than by the person chiefly concerned. He was an Indian

civilian on his way back to some blazing station on the Plains, which was reason enough why he should be repulsed by the family; but probably the annoying thought that it was Katherine he wanted and not her sister had still more to do with it.

“It was a good thing at least that he had not the audacity to ask for you, my pet,” Mr. Tredgold said.

“For me!” said Stella, with a little shriek of horror, “I should very soon have given him his answer.” And Katherine, too, gave him his answer, but in a dazed and bewildered way. She was not at all in love with him, but it did glance across her mind that to be the first person with some one, to have a house of her own in which she should be supreme, and a man by her side who thought there was nobody like her—— But, then, was it possible that any man should really think that? or that any house could ever have this strange fascination of home which held her fast she could not tell how or why? She acquiesced accordingly in Mr. Stanford’s dismissal. But when she went out to look at the view in her moments of discouragement her mind was apt to return to him, to wonder sometimes what he was doing, where he was, or if he had found some one to be his companion, and of whom he could think that there was nobody like her in the world?

In the meantime, however, on the morning which followed the evening already recorded, Katherine had too much to do in the way of providing for the picnic to have much time to think. Stella had darted into her room half-dressed with a number of notes in her hand to tell her that everybody was coming. “Mrs. Seton brings six including her husband and herself—that makes four fresh new men besides little Seton, whom you can talk to if you like, Kate; and

there's three from the Rectory, and five from the Villa, and old Mildmay and Shanks to do propriety for papa's sake."

"I wish you would not speak of them in that way by their names. It does not take much trouble to say Miss Mildmay and Mrs. Shanks."

"I'll say the old cats, if you like," Stella said with a laugh, "that's shorter still. Do stir up a little, and be quick and let us have a good lunch."

"How am I to get cold chickens at an hour's notice?" said Katherine. "You seem to think they are all ready roasted in the poultry yard, and can be put in the hampers straight off. I don't know what Mrs. Pearson will say."

"She will only say what she has said a hundred times; but it always comes right all the same," cried Stella, retreating into her own room to complete her toilette. And this was so true that Kate finished hers also in comparative calm. She was the housekeeper *de jure*, and interviewed Mrs. Pearson every morning with the profoundest gravity as if everything depended upon her; but at bottom Katherine knew very well that it was Mrs. Pearson who was the housekeeper *de facto*, and that she, like everyone else, managed somehow that Miss Stella should have her way.

"You know it's just impossible," said that authority a few minutes later. "Start at twelve and tell me at nine to provide for nearly twenty people! Where am I to get the chickens, not to speak of ham and cold beef and all the rest? Do ye think the chickens in the yard are roasted already?" cried the indignant housekeeper, using Katherine's own argument, "and that I have only to set them out in the air to cool?"

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