

# The Storyteller

## THE ELDEST

There were six of them, the eldest aged eleven years. They were gentlefolks, of ancient lineage, but deadily poor; patched and outgrown clothes bearing full testimony to this sad circumstance, if other proof were needed than the fact that they lived in a tall, narrow house in a poor neighborhood, dirty of doorstep, devoid of knocker and letter-box.

It is true that sometimes, after dark, the eldest would surreptitiously 'rub up' the greenish-colored metal, that too often looked as if it had for days been immersed in the worst of London fogs, when once again the idea of brass was suggested to the beholder, whose eye, ungratefully but involuntarily, would be encouraged to rove over the whole house-front in careless expectancy of something moderately attractive. But the brass was not too often subjected to this feverishly administered massage, for the Eldest was shrewdly aware that perfection of cleanliness in this one small matter, which was all she could contrive, would but render her smeary window-cleaning and that bugbear, the doorstep, the more noticeable by contrast.

It was only when, coming home tired in the evening from his long day in the city, or setting forth somewhat wearily in the morning to resume his endless toil, her father's chance glance rested on the neglected appointments of his front door—and the words 'that looks disgraceful' fell upon the shrinking ears of his sensitive little daughter—leather and paste were brought into requisition once more.

Martha, the one maidservant, to give her her due, 'did' the steps every morning in broad daylight, unblushing and in curl papers; and had the family consisted only of the Eldest, her father and the fond but unpractical little mother, who seldom went out, Martha's daily attack would have kept the steps quite presentable. But between the Eldest and her baby sister were four unruly boys, which cause of mixed joy and embarrassment offers full explanation of many things.

Mrs. Desborough, who had married at seventeen, was not but at an age when more affluent young women enjoy youthful pleasures, and are still designated 'girls.' She was born 'in the lap of luxury,' and on the day that she took Philip Desborough 'for richer, for poorer,' no one among the wedding guests had dreamed how very much 'for poorer,' so far as money was concerned, it was to prove. Within two years of their marriage, Philip Desborough, through no fault of his own, had lost all the worldly goods with which he had endowed his wife. But when poverty came in at the door, love did not so much as glance at the window. Nothing could dispossess their hearts of the love they bore one to the other, nor rob them of the deep happiness they found in their children. Good health, too, had always attended them, so that the wife retained much of the cheerfulness natural to her age and disposition, while the husband, though too often careworn and depressed, being indeed burdened with anxiety, was yet in the main courageous and hopeful.

It was upon the Eldest that poverty sat heaviest—it was her strenuous little nature that it most overtaxed. To her mother a small house meant of necessity a want of cleanliness, an ill-furnished larder, a slatternly maidservant. She openly acknowledged her utter inability to cope with these somewhat squalid conditions, her forte being the ordering of order ready-made, so to say. But the Eldest, albeit the child had known no life other than one of struggle and privation, felt an ever-present sense of shame and dissatisfaction that her father, with the refined features and noble bearing of his race, should fare no better than the obscure clerk and his family opposite.

It was torture to this very much disguised princess to witness occasional meetings between this same clerk and her father, and see the two continue their walk down the street together, even while her nice perception told her that the one looked like a prince, despite his shabbiness, and the other, though perhaps the better dressed of the two, still a clerk.

Then there were the two vulgar, showy daughters of a retired butcher, named Jones—girls of some twelve and fourteen years respectively, who lived in the big house at the corner, and who said 'nursemaid,' in a very loud whisper, when they met the Eldest pushing her baby sister in the perambulator, and giggled on Sundays when the Eldest had on her best hat.

There was one family dwelling in the long gaunt street with whom the Eldest felt deep sympathy, a family not unlike her own, she thought, in number and cir-

cumstances, with nice-looking but seldom-seen parents, the little tribe of children being generally marshalled by a somewhat weary-looking girl of about her own age.

The two children would steal a quick glance at one another in passing, the Eldest bringing all her power of observation—no small amount—to bear, that one brief look. Soon timid smiles were exchanged; then came a day when they spoke.

The first time, the Eldest, with a great effort and a fast-beating heart, merely remarked that it was very cold; to which the other agreed, with a little shy shiver, and strove to pull the sleeves of her out-grown jacket over her red little wrists.

Upon the second occasion the Eldest inquired whether the baby in the perambulator was a girl or a boy, mentioning at the same time that hers was a girl.

At the third encounter she ascertained that between this chance acquaintance and herself there was indeed reason for the mutual liking.

'Are you the eldest?' she had asked.

'Yes,' the other had replied, 'are you?'

And the Eldest nodded.

'What a miserable looking girl that is who passes here so often,' Mrs. Desborough once observed to her daughter. It was of the child's new acquaintance that she spoke.

'I don't think she is unhappy, but she is an Eldest,' the other made answer simply.

'What do you mean, dear?' the mother asked, somewhat absent-mindedly, mildly puzzled.

'She is the eldest of the family,' her daughter amended, and the opening of the door and the beckoning of a grimy finger, belonging to Martha, the maid, saved her from the possible embarrassment of further explanation.

It was a full hard life, being the Eldest; but it had its privileges and compensations. It was a great joy to be capable of helping father and mother, thus saving the serious expense of a second servant, as undoubtedly she did. Then it repaid the Eldest for many an unsuspected little sacrifice and for much really hard work when her sweet young mother kissed her more warmly than was her wont, and said she was a great help. And then her father, her dearly loved father, would sometimes call her a 'little brick'—the heart of the Eldest would glow for days after that.

But when the children were intractable or disobedient and when her mother would reproach her before them for not, as the Eldest, having more authority over them, it was very hard. And when the baker's and butcher's bills were heavy, and her mother's pretty eyes were red after laborious poring over them, the Eldest's little heart would ache with compassion, and she would have given much to be as carelessly happy as the younger ones, who never noticed mother's eyes, and who did not worry about old or untidy clothes. Then again there were the bitter times of grief and humiliation when some untoward circumstance caused the Eldest to reflect upon her own little life and the rights and wrongs of it. Not that she claimed any rights, even to herself, and she certainly would never have entertained so disloyal a thought as that she was wronged in any way.

But there were periods when she could not help wistfully wishing that the others might take it in turn to be the eldest, so that she could occasionally go to school to learn something; that she might not live in perpetual fear of her ignorance being discovered, as it once was, by a terrible but well-meaning old gentleman, who called upon her mother, and who, after admiring the children, began to play a horrible sort of game—the hearing of a spelling class—in which the Eldest, as the eldest, was given the more difficult words and was put to shame before the younger ones. That night the child had cried herself to sleep; and since then many a leisure moment had been devoted to learning spelling from any odd book or newspaper she could find.

And it was a newspaper that ended it all, ended this uncongenial, unnatural life, unlifting for all concerned, from the aristocratic young father down to the beautiful baby girl.

One dark morning, in the depth of winter, at about seven o'clock, the Eldest entered the kitchen to find Martha somewhat distracted, and very eager to avail herself of the child's proffered aid.

'I've overslept myself,' the handmaid hurriedly announced, 'an' if you'd see to the dining-room fire an' lay the cloth, you'd help me fine, and breakfast won't be so late after all. Dó, there's a love.'

The Eldest considered a moment.

'If the wood is dry I d'ersay. I can manage it, while the water for the children is heating in here,' she said. 'But I must go back to them as soon as it is hot. You see, first I have to wash the three separately, and then I have to give Cyril and Claude my opinion on the way they have washed.'