

XV

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

THE stage was very late that day and did not bring the letter after all. But Hillery Kibbey, just turning his horses to drive away from the post-office, called out to tell Arabella that he felt almost certain the letter would come in the next mail. She nodded in cheerful confidence being quite sure of it. Then, bowing and smiling, she made her graceful way through the little crowd which stood back — hat in hand as it always did — and gayly set off to give the invitations to the tea-party.

Drawing near Phœbe's gate she saw the new minister pass through it on his way across the big road. It was close to the time when Mother Rowan usually came out after getting Father Rowan settled for the night. But Arabella knew nothing of the newcomer's habits and went on without warning, and Mother Rowan

Great Expectations

did appear in the front door just as she fluttered up the porch steps. For a cool breeze began to blow now as evening came on, setting all her pink ribbons in lively motion. Shadows were already gathering under the vines too yet there was light enough for her to see the strange, small face looking down upon her in scornful hostility and to notice the tall gaunt figure instantly squaring itself. But she merely wondered mildly without the least idea what the look and motion meant. Discourtesy of any kind was foreign to her own nature, and there was no harshness or bitterness in her heart toward any living creature. Accordingly she now went straight up to Mother Rowan — in a little whirlwind of rosy streamers — and held out her thin hand which looked pathetically like a bird's foot.

"It is a pleasure to see a relation of Phœbe's," she said in her finest, most polished manner. "A very great pleasure."

Mother Rowan stood like a grim image carven in rough stone.

"Do take a seat," said Phœbe in nervous haste, placing a chair. "And you too — please, Mother Rowan."

## The Little Hills

Arabella took the seat saying that it was hardly worth while as she had but a moment to stay. Mother Rowan then dropped into the other chair, as if she did not wish to take any unfair advantage by standing up.

"For I've come only on a pleasing errand," said Arabella in her ingratiating tone. "And I must be getting home before dark. I've come to invite you both to a tea-party on to-morrow evening at four o'clock," she said looking brightly from the grim face to the uneasy one.

"How kind—and nice," Phœbe cried warmly.

A sudden impulse moved Arabella and she turned with a smile to beam at Mother Rowan. "A very simple little entertainment but—if you'll allow me to say so, Madam—it is given especially in honor of your arrival," she said.

"What for?" demanded Mother Rowan—grimly—and naturally enough—since she had never in the whole course of her hard life had anything for nothing and did not expect or wish to have.

"Oh!" gasped Arabella who was also having an entirely new experience. She was so disconcerted that she could not think for a

## Great Expectations

moment. But she managed to gather her wits. "For Phœbe's sake. We are all happy to do anything we can for her. Then it is our custom to show some attention to visitors—"

"So I'm a *visitor*, hey? And *him* too, I suppose!" cried Mother Rowan. "Well it was *my* understanding—and his—that we had come to live here and make this our home."

"Why—of course—of course—" declared Phœbe in alarmed haste. "Mrs. Lightfoot didn't mean that you hadn't. She never thought—"

"Seems to me that no outsider's got any cause to meddle one way or another," retorted Mother Rowan relentlessly. "Whether we're a-visiting or a-living here in this little old house—is nobody's business but mine and yours and his."

In helpless confusion Phœbe mechanically asked Arabella to have a drink of cool water. But the offer was declined almost as hastily as it was made. Arabella still had not the remotest idea why this strange woman was acting so, or what made her eyes snap in that alarming manner, but she did not intend to be left alone with her. Only the promise to Mrs.

## The Little Hills

Pottle kept her from running away at once without saying anything more about the tea-party. And she left just as soon as she had fairly pressed the invitation, and Phœbe had said that they would be delighted to come to the tea-party, glancing meantime rather apprehensively at Mother Rowan.

Dusk was falling by this time and Arabella ran down to the widow Wall's at a rapid pace. She wanted to get there before dark and see whether the blush-roses were yet in full bloom. Those blooming in the widow's little garden were the prettiest and sweetest in the whole country. And Arabella said as much—having set her heart on having a big bowl full of the roses in the center of the tea-table—when the widow Wall met her at the gate. There was a slight chill in that mild lady's greeting but it began to thaw with Arabella's first flattering word. In another moment she was as wax in the flatterer's hands, as many less guileless people became when Arabella exerted herself. For the craft that we live by necessarily becomes more or less of an art. Then the mere mention of the tea-party went to the widow Wall's head as sparkling wine goes

## Great Expectations

to a weak one wholly unused to strong drink. It was not often that anything so intoxicating came her joyless way. She not only offered to give every blush-rose that she had and every bud showing a tinge of pink, but all the rest of her flowers and to loan everything else that she possessed. She was not hurt on learning that she was not the first to be invited. That fact came out through a slight slip of Arabella's supple tongue. But the widow Wall had long ago learned, that those who have little to give must take what is given when they can get it.

And Arabella was most cordial: "You must come early and stay till the last. But I can't stay another minute. It's almost dark now and I've got to run clear back to the parsonage and invite the new minister's aunt. Of course I wasn't going to invite her before I did you, Jane—you may be perfectly certain of that—yet a certain amount of respect is due our pastor's relations no matter how odd they may be. But I must say that the new minister has not given us much encouragement to be friendly."

"He's done better lately," said the widow

### The Little Hills

Wall. "He's certainly doing his duty by Phœbe. And—" with a quick change of tone, "maybe he won't think it right to let you come home by yourself—being as it's so near dark. And I honestly believe there wouldn't be a mite of harm in his walking home with you—so long as he knows all about the captain. If he *should*, don't fail to stop here. Then you can have a big bunch of the blush-roses to take home. But without a gentleman—I wouldn't dare gather them this late for fear of those little garden snakes that always begin to creep as the cool of the evening comes on." She could hardly wait to be alone before hurrying indoors to put on her nicest worked collar with her best breast-pin. And it was not till she saw Arabella's candle shining far down the big road, that this finery was laid aside with a sigh.

The next morning found the whole feminine community up before the sun and in a twitter of delightful excitement. The widow Wall only waited to see Arabella's front door propped open to take over a great basket of the blush-roses. She also offered to stay and help with everything there was to do. But

### Great Expectations

Arabella declined the offer with tact that left no wound. She did not think a great deal of the widow Wall's taste. Then it was not by any means advisable that she—or anybody—should be there the whole time seeing everything that Mandy Pottle sent. She would be sure to notice whether it was all used for the tea-party—maybe whether it was really needed when asked for—and most likely say something about it too. So that the widow Wall was most tactfully sent away, clear up to the parsonage to ask Miss Dale for some asparagus plumes. There was plenty of this exquisite green mist afloat in the gardens nearer by. But Arabella could not think of a more polite way of getting rid of the widow Wall. Nor could she think of anything else to ask Miss Dale for, and everybody must be asked for something, or else feel hurt by being left out. Then there was Phœbe. It was not easy for Arabella to know what to ask from her, who had so little to divide among so many. But she suddenly remembered hearing Phœbe's hens cackle and on a happy thought called after the widow Wall, asking her to ask Phœbe for three or four eggs—very fresh ones—to make

### The Little Hills

the foam snow-white on the top of the floating-island.

Now it happened that Phœbe had put the very last eggs she had — and the freshest — under a sitting hen barely an hour before. She was more than willing to take them out again regardless of the hen's protest, but they had been sat upon long enough to get thoroughly warm. That unluckily made the sending of them rather a delicate question of conscience. Phœbe did not know just what was right to do. She dared not tell the widow Wall exactly how the matter stood, knowing her utter inability to keep anything to herself. And so, leaving her on the porch, she ran indoors and asked Mother Rowan what *she* thought. But that lady merely said shortly that beggars should not be choosers, which did not help Phœbe at all. Finally, however, she compromised by pulling the protesting hen off the nest, and putting the eggs in cold water for a while, before sending them with a scrupulous message that they were the freshest she had, but not quite as fresh as she would have liked them to be.

Meantime Arabella herself had gone all the

### Great Expectations

way down to old Mrs. Crabtree's to borrow her solid silver forks — though she would have preferred, much as she liked elegance, to use some plated ones belonging to another neighbor whom she was not afraid of — just to show that there was no hard feeling anywhere. This tea-party was to be wholly and solely for harmony and she did not shirk anything however difficult. And even old Mrs. Crabtree was unusually amiable, and kind and thoughtful enough to offer a long table-cloth. But one had already been borrowed together with two smaller ones for the side tables, from a lady living at the other end of the big road. Nobody would have thought of borrowing them from her, since she was rather outside the exclusive circle. But she did not intend to stay there and so offered to lend the table-cloths as an entering wedge. For after all human nature was much the same even in this remote corner of the world.

But the great centre of all the delightful excitement was the squire's large white house. There it had broken out while he was eating his breakfast alone. Mrs. Pottle had other things to do than waiting on him that morning.

### The Little Hills

She did not turn her head when he hoped aloud that the fair Arabella could get along and manage the tea-party without his pipe or armchair. He admitted that she would have to have them if she wanted them. He owned quite frankly that he had never made a personal claim to anything in his own house, except the one big nail that he hung his hat on behind the dining-room door. He solemnly promised — rising from the table — that being left in peaceable possession of the rusty nail, he had nothing to say though the house should be stripped from garret to cellar. And so, taking down his hat, he drove off while his wife — disdainingly any reply — went ahead doing exactly as she pleased as she always did. Nor did she hesitate to call two men from their work in the fields — with wagon and team — to haul a barrel of soft water from her cistern over to Arabella, though she did not think that the tea and coffee would be any better than if made with the hard water from Arabella's well. Arabella did not think so either, but she had wanted some soft water for her complexion, and this seemed as good a chance to get it as she was likely to have. The truth

### Great Expectations

was that she made the most of the great opportunity in every respect. Mrs. Pottle knew this perfectly well and considered it fair enough, in view of all that Arabella's giving the entertainment was to do for herself. She appreciated the service so much that she took extra pains to spare Arabella's feelings by covering almost everything that she sent. But of course she could not help the neighbors smelling the large rich cakes which went by still fragrantly hot from the oven. Yet the whole air was filled with appetizing odors and nobody could tell exactly which kitchen they came from. Then there was always more or less mystery about what went on in Arabella's. But the greatest stir followed Mrs. Pottle's handsomest cut-glass bowl because it was so full of floating-island — heaped up like drifted snow — that it could not be covered and flashed far through the dazzling sunshine. The cut-glass cups too had to be set out safely apart and borne very cautiously on a big silver waiter. Altogether the preparations could hardly have been upon a more splendid scale — and it was many and many a day before that famous tea-party was to be forgotten.