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Chapter 2 - Juliet Asks Questions

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"Any place," the girl exclaimed as she entered, "more unlike a solicitor's office, I never saw! Flowers outside and flowers on your desk, Mr. Pengarth! Don't you have to apologize to your clients for your surroundings? There's absolutely nothing, except the brass plate outside, to show that this isn't an old-fashioned farmhouse, stuck down in the middle of a village. Fuchsias in the window sill, too!"

He placed a chair for her, and laid down the deed which he had been examining, with a little sigh of relief. It really was very hard work pretending to be busy.

"You see, Miss Juliet," he explained with twinkling eyes, "my clients are all country folk, and it makes them feel more at home to find a lawyer's office not very different from their own parlor."

She nodded.

"What would the great man say?" she inquired, pointing to the rows of black tin boxes which lined the walls.

"Sir Wingrave Seton is never likely to come here again, I am afraid," he answered. "If he did, I don't think he'd mind. To tell you the truth, I'm rather proud of my office, young lady!"

She looked around.

"They are nice," she said decidedly, "but unbusinesslike."

"You're going to put up the pony and stay to lunch, of course?" he said. "I'll ring for the boy."

She stopped him.

"Please don't!" she exclaimed. "I have come to see you--on business!"

Mr. Pengarth, after his first gasp of astonishment, was a different man. He fumbled about on the desk, and produced a pair of gold spectacles, which he adjusted with great nicety on the edge of his very short nose.

"On business, my dear!" he repeated. "Well, well! To be sure! Is it Miss Harrison who has sent you?"

Mr. Pengarth's visitor looked positively annoyed. She leaned across the table towards him so that the roses in her large hat almost brushed his forehead. Her wonderful brown eyes were filled with reproach.

"Mr. Pengarth," she said, "do you know how old I am?"

"How old, my dear? Why, let me see!" he exclaimed. "Fourteen and--why, God bless my soul, you must be eighteen!"

"I am nineteen years old, Mr. Pengarth," the young lady announced with dignity. "Perhaps you will be kind enough to treat me now--er--with a little more respect."

"Nineteen!" he repeated vaguely. "God bless my--nineteen years old?"

"I consider myself," she repeated, "of age. I have come to see you about my affairs!"

"Yes, yes!" he said. "Quite natural."

"For four years," she continued, "I seem to have been supported by some relative of my father, who has never vouchsafed to send me a single line or message except through you. I have written letters which I have given to you to forward. There has been no reply. Have you sent on those letters, Mr. Pengarth?"

"Why certainly, my dear, certainly!"

"Can you tell me how it is that I have had no answer?"

Mr. Pengarth coughed. He was not at all comfortable.

"Your guardian, Miss Juliet, is somewhat eccentric," he answered, "and he is a very busy man."

"Can you tell me, Mr. Pengarth, exactly what relation he is to me?"

There was a dead silence. Mr. Pengarth found the room suddenly warm, and mopped his forehead with a large silk handkerchief.

"I have no authority," he declared, "to answer any questions."

"Then can you tell me of your own accord," she said, "why there is all this mystery? Why may I not know who he is, why may I not write to him? Am I anything to be ashamed of, that he will not trust me even with his name? I am tired of accepting so much and not being able to offer even my thanks in return. It is too much like charity! I have made up my mind that if this is to go on, I will go away and earn my own living! There, Mr. Pengarth!"

"Rubbish!" he exclaimed briskly. "What at?"

"Painting!" she declared triumphantly. "I have had this in my mind for some time, and I have been trying to see what I can do best. I have quite decided, now, to be an artist."

"Pictures," he declared sententiously, "don't sell!"

"Mine do," she answered, smiling. "I have had a check for three guineas from a shop in London for a little sea piece I did in two afternoons!"

He regarded her admiringly.

"You are a wonderful child!" he exclaimed.

"I am not a child at all," she interrupted warmly, "and you can just sit down and write to your silly client and tell him so."

"I will certainly write to him," he affirmed. "I will do so today. You will not do anything rash until I have had time to get a reply?"

"No!" she answered graciously. "I will wait for a week. After that--well, I might do anything!"

"You wouldn't leave Tredowen, Miss Juliet!" he protested.

"It would break my heart, of course," she declared, "but I would do it and trust to time to heal it up again. Tredowen seems like home to me, but it isn't really, you know. Some day, Sir Wingrave Seton may want to come back and live there himself. Are you quite certain, Mr. Pengarth, that he won't be angry to hear that we have been living at the house all this time?"

"Certain," Mr. Pengarth declared firmly. "He left everything entirely in my hands. He did not wish me to let it, but he did not care about its being altogether uninhabited. The arrangement I was able to make with your guardian was a most satisfactory one."

"But surely he will come back himself some time?" she asked,

The lawyer shook his head sorrowfully.

"I am afraid," he said, "that Sir Wingrave has no affection for the place whatever."

"No affection for Tredowen," she repeated wonderingly. "Do you know what I think, Mr. Pengarth? I think that it is the most beautiful house in the world!"

"And yet you talk of leaving it."

"I don't want to go," she answered, "but I don't want to be accepting things all my life from someone whose name even I do not know."

"Well, well," he said, "you must wait until I have written my letter. Time enough to talk about that later on. Now, if you won't stay to lunch, you must come and see Rachael and have some cake and a glass of wine."

"How sweet of you," she exclaimed. "I'm frightfully hungry. Can I do anything to stop growing, Mr. Pengarth? I'm getting taller and taller!"

She stood up. She was head and shoulders taller than the little lawyer, slim as a lath, and yet wonderfully graceful. She laughed down at him and made a little grimace.

"I'm a giraffe, am I not?" she declared; "and I'm still growing. Do show me your garden, Mr. Pengarth. I want to see your hollyhocks. Everyone is talking about them."

They were joined in a few minutes by a prim, dignified little lady, ridiculously like Mr. Pengarth, whom he called sister, and she Miss Rachael. Juliet walked down the garden between them.

"Sister," Mr. Pengarth said, "Juliet has come today to see me on business. In effect, she has come to remind me that she is grown up."

"Grown up," Miss Rachael protested vigorously, "rubbish!"

"I am nineteen years old," Juliet declared.

"And what if you are," Miss Rachael replied briskly. "In my young days we were in the nursery at nineteen."

"Quite so," Mr. Pengarth assented with relief. "You took me by storm just now, Miss Juliet. After all, you are only a child."

"I am old enough to feel and to mean all that I said to you, Mr. Pengarth," she answered gravely. "And that reminds me, too--there was something else I meant to ask you."

"Sister," Mr. Pengarth said, "have you ordered the wine and the cake?"

"Bless me, no!" Miss Rachael declared. "It shall be ready in five minutes."

She entered the house. Mr. Pengarth stooped to pick some lavender.

"The only time I ever saw Sir Wingrave Seton," she said, "was on the day before I was told that a relation of my father had been found, who was willing to take charge of me. There was a younger man with him, someone very, very different from Sir Wingrave. Do you know who he was?"

"A sort of secretary of Sir Wingrave, I believe, dear. I never met him. I was, unfortunately, away at the time they came."

"He was very nice and kind to me," the girl continued, "just as nice as Sir Wingrave was horrid. I suppose it was because they came on that day, but I have always connected him somehow with this mysterious relation of mine. Mr. Aynesworth didn't help to find him, did he?"

"Certainly not!" the lawyer answered. "The instructions I had came first from Mr. Saunders, the vicar of the parish. It was he who appeared to have made the necessary inquiries."

"Horrid old man!" she declared. "He used to make me feel that I wanted to cry every time that I saw him."

"Miss Rachael is calling us," the lawyer declared with obvious relief.

"New cake!" Juliet declared, "I can smell it! Delicious!"