

# MORE LEAVES FROM A LIFE

## CHAPTER I

### AN UGLY DUCKLING

WHEN I hear the male creature soundly abused and roundly lectured for his abominably selfish attitude towards the female sex, I go if I can to the ugly commonplace grave of Basil Hodges, and placing as many roses as I can afford to buy on that once unkempt surface, I bless his memory, and were I what is called a “believer” would utter a prayer, a real and heartfelt prayer for the repose of that gallant soul! As to his body, I trust it has long since been absorbed into Mother Earth and nourished the big rose-tree I planted myself, because no one else cared to do so and because the rose in all its many gradations from the mere hedge blossom, up to the most splendid one on the lists was his favourite flower. Why, I wonder, was such a large brain, such a great spirit placed in such a small and fragile body, and born into such an utterly commonplace family? Did his soul slip

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by mistake on the way to some other home to become incarnated in a frame that belonged to the youngest member of the most ordinary everyday yet excellent family that ever selected Bayswater in the sixties for its residence? Now I am the last person to sneer at Bayswater, for I too was born and brought up there, in the near neighbourhood of the squares and gardens and of the very "Grove" itself, and in our day at least, Bayswater was a delight. Nowhere else were there such dear little gardens, nowhere else were the neighbours so neighbourly, nor the houses so well managed and the children so happy and numerous, so good and in some cases so clever. What are fads nowadays were ideas in Bayswater, and though food and clothes were plain enough, yet they were absolutely sensible and allowed both mind and body to grow in a decent manner! How we ever got to know the Hodges family I can't think, for while we were in a distinctly artistic *milieu*, the Hodges were commercial to the backbone and looked upon all artists, authors and actors, much as nowadays these lucky folk regard the submerged tenth of the population. As my first recollection of Basil is at the dancing school, I fancy we must have met there and from that neutral ground progressed towards the fastness of the Hodges schoolroom. We had in those days one of the primmest and most particular governesses that could be procured, with claims to gentility that we never disputed but that she waved before any one who would listen to

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her in season as well as out. She had, moreover, been some years in France: could talk that language in a fluent manner that impressed every one who heard her and who at the same time had no ear for the niceties of correct pronunciation, and as she threw in as much French as gentility into her talk, I think Mrs. Hodges must have been impressed by her and hoped that if she took us to tea with the little Hodges, they might in some mysterious way learn French too, or at any rate hear of those superior circles in which Miss Wright had so frequently moved. The elder members of the Hodges school-room party were much older than I was and I honestly confess never appealed to me as did the small, pale, trembling, shrinking Basil. All through life I have never yearned after the friendship of very prosperous folk, they can do without me, they want nothing from me and I most certainly want nothing from them. But the “under dog” appeals to me at once, and I go to his or her rescue, quite convinced that here I can be of service; here I shall be able to be of some little good in the fight. When I first saw Basil, clad in a shepherd’s plaid tunic, belted at the waist above the stiff white drawers that were then a small boy’s first advance towards trousers, he was weeping in the sad constrained manner that tells one at once that tears and the child who sheds them are well acquainted. He was then eight years old and consumed with a desperate passion for the dancing-master’s daughter whom we all intensely envied and disliked; first,

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because she wore real silk stockings and satin shoes which she brought in a bag and donned before our eyes, and, secondly, because her most irascible old father held her up to us as an example of all that was most perfect in deportment and conduct. Indeed, he often stopped our performance that Marilda (what a name!) might show us first how foolish we looked, by imitating our uncouth gambols; and then by elegantly dancing the steps we found so impossible to perform, denote how dull we were, because what was so easy to her was to us out of the question entirely. We did not mind being laughed at by Marilda, if she could dance of course she was “born so,” and I had even then no doubt that she suffered in secret as we did in public from her father’s pleasant ways. But to be laughed at by Marilda was death to Basil, that she should love and admire him was his object in life; that this could never be, nearly broke his heart, and he sobbed out his secret on my twelve year old shoulder, and from that moment to the day he laid down and died I was his true and faithful friend. He was a dear tiny boy, and if Marilda did not love him I did, and bore many a scornful look and snub from both families, his and mine, because of my affection for the “small sickly brat.” It would have been “kid” nowadays, but children were not called kids in the sixties, and, indeed, I do not quite know when that odious appellation came into force. He was small: so needed my protection; he was sickly, well, did I not know how to sympathise

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there, for both our households were run on purely Spartan lines, and woe betide that girl or boy who should confess to a headache or not feeling well! Such poor-spirited conduct at once was severely treated, and we both of us suffered a good deal rather than mention the fact to either parents or governess. As all fourteen of the Hodges and the whole of our ten grew to man's estate, I suppose we must have been among the fittest who are supposed to survive all ills; all the same I would not wish a cat to suffer as Basil and I all too often did. He from an impaired digestion and what would now be called nerves, but what was then termed temper and treated as such, I from continual earache, headache and backache that I dare not speak of and all of which I bore as nowadays not the scrubbiest kitchen-maid in the basement would stand a mere bad finger or a temporary "pain in her chest." "I am not at all strong" is one of the first recommendations a maid gives herself when she applies for a place at present; let us hope the detestable Compensation Act may bring home to the would-be domestic how detrimental to her chances such a remark may be! We had to consider ourselves as hard as nails, and I should really love to see Mrs. Hodges' face had she survived to the present era and had any servant dared to suggest for one moment that she was not equal to all, aye, and even more than might have been required of her. Basil's blue bow and my white muslin shoulder were alike wet through

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before he ceased to weep over Marilda's cruel sneers. By that time we were fast friends and once more bidden to stand up to take part in the Lancers before the awful "chassée" that ended the afternoon's horrors. The dancing class was held in a boys' school, and in consequence we and the female Hodges were much in demand as we were the only girls allowed to join in; and the announcement of a new dance meant often a free fight for our fair hands. All the same I kept to Basil and even supported his feeble steps as we chasséed round those horrible rooms; never knowing when Mr. King's fiddle might not rap our elbows or our toes; or when he might not rush at us fiddle in hand, drag us out of the circle and bid us stand there until Marilda had time to show us how really the chassée should be done. Poor long, lean, sandy, hungry Mr. King! Should we have dreaded him less had we known his life, the weary struggle with inelegant little boys and girls; the physical fatigue it must have caused him to fiddle and instruct at the same time; the sick wife at home always pining for change of air and dainties she could not have, and the dread that consumed him of losing Marilda, his one help and stand-by? I think I should, I am not sure, he did rap my toes so hard and he did insist that I could dance if I chose when I never could, and all through my ballroom days hated the amusement as much as I loved to be let alone, and look on with some one congenial soul. All the same his woes were real enough, as real as those he

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caused us, and I am glad to think that before he died Marilda fulfilled his dearest hopes, and not only married well a most prosperous dancing master, but became in her turn a celebrated ballet mistress whose name was a household word, and who died wept over and famous to the end not so very many years ago. I hope she and Basil may have met in some other world and exchanged recollections of the days when she made him so wretched without ever knowing the passion she had instilled in his infant heart. Personally I lived my life as a child and a young girl in a species of internecine warfare with my surroundings and the higher powers generally and I think that caused me to understand Basil better than I otherwise could have done. I always had a perfect passion for real things; conventionalities bore me even now. I would not say “thank you” for something I did not want even if it were given me with the very kindest possible intentions. I would not pretend to be pleased when I was not, and above all I scorned and derided the girlish members of both families whose one idea was to fall in love, to sentimentalise over the people who passed daily on the top of the omnibuses to their work; and who did fancy work, played the piano, and arranged their garments as the sole means of passing the time until “He” arrived on the scene; the wedding-bells rang and the curtain came down on the one and only recognised ending to a girl’s life—“and so they married and were happy ever after.” Both Basil and I had other,

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loftier thoughts than these. Once introduced to my father's painting-room the shy small lad became another creature. He and I could always keep still; besides that I often read to him and my father for hours while he painted and he and Basil listened. Ah! they are painting the next house but one as I write, how the smell of the paint takes me back to those long dead days, and I see Basil still in the shepherd's plaid tunic leaning against my chair gazing at every stroke of the brush, while now and then my father steps back to look at his picture, gives us a humorous glance over his glasses, and then once more sets to work! The model on the "throne" yawns portentously; the light changes, she is dismissed, but we remain while the palette is cleaned and the brushes given their first bath of turpentine; then we are told to "cut off" and take the brushes to Wall to wash, while my father hums to himself, looks at the picture this way and that, lights a monstrous cigar and gets ready for the unfailing walk that takes him away from us—alas!—from the time his day's work is done until he returns to dress for dinner. Basil used to listen when I read him the terrible stories and verses with which my desk was filled, and prophesied always that I should be a celebrated author; but he never at that time told me of his own dreams. I am glad he did not; very glad, as had he done so the matter might have slipped out, and then I do not think he would ever have had the happy years that, despite all the later sorrows, were

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most undoubtedly his, for I am sure if they had had sufficient warning the Hodges would have managed in some way to scotch his career. I was fond of old Mr. Hodges and really sympathised often enough with him, for he loved his business, and used later on to talk to me about it in a manner that in a measure denoted from whence Basil obtained some of his dreamy ways. Can there be any romance about a great warehouse in the City? Yes, indeed there can, and I could wish some one would write the romance of that vast building (now given place to a block of model dwellings) but which then was the very love of old Mr. Hodges' life. I am glad to remember that he once took me down to the business with him when I was about fifteen, and seeing I was keenly interested in it conducted me all over it from department to department, and then in time told me the history of the vast and prosperous place. At first it consisted of only one big house, that was in his grandfather's time. I think if it had not been for Mrs. Hodges and his daughters he would have told me the truth, that it was a shop. He showed me the room where his grandparents and parents lived and where he was born and the bridge where he and his two sisters walked with their nurse because the toll-gate made it safer than most places for children. He showed me the old nursery with the bars still on the windows and where the cot stood where his little sister died. "She always wanted to live in the country," he said, "but she never even saw it, and when she died she was buried

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with the old people in a vault under one of the aged city churches. Long after that the church was pulled down: and then the little coffin was moved and buried in a sweet country churchyard. "She reached the country at last," he added. "Such a bright day in early summer it was too: she has been dead now sixty years, but she is still my little sister and when my time comes I mean to be laid beside her in that place." Then Mr. Hodges sighed, opened another door, and we came into an atmosphere of the dutch cheeses and vast stores of provisions with which he made the income that kept up the Bayswater palace and the carriage and pair which were the Hodges girls' delight. Over his mantelpiece a marvellous piece of oak carving, now adorning some country mansion, hung a crude picture of a vessel in full sail; the first ship the Hodges firm had owned, and the foundation of the fortunes of the house. Here was the same chair his grandfather and father had sat in, and which he now occupied himself as Master; and the glass screen on the left allowed him to see the stool always occupied by the heir before he succeeded to the business. That screen portioned off, first the length of the room for a clerk, an old confidential clerk, and the stool; and the clerk was always asking, "when one of the young gents was a-coming down?" Fourteen was the age Mr. Hodges was put to work, surely by now some one was coming along to begin to learn. But—alas!—the older Hodges boys had all determined for themselves on