

## Chapter 1: A Verbal Invitation

Because Edith had not been feeling very well, that seemed no reason why she should be the centre of interest; and Bruce, with that jealousy of the privileges of the invalid and in that curious spirit of rivalry which his wife had so often observed, had started, with enterprise, an indisposition of his own, as if to divert public attention. While he was at Carlsbad he heard the news. Then he received a letter from Edith, speaking with deference and solicitude of Bruce's rheumatism, entreating him to do the cure thoroughly, and suggesting that they should call the little girl Matilda, after a rich and sainted – though still living – aunt of Edith's. It might be an advantage to the child's future (in every sense) to have a godmother so wealthy and so religious. It appeared from the detailed description that the new daughter had, as a matter of course (and at two days old), long golden hair, far below her waist, sweeping lashes and pencilled brows, a rosebud mouth, an intellectual forehead, chiselled features and a tall, elegant figure. She was a magnificent, regal-looking creature and was a superb beauty of the classic type, and yet with it she was dainty and winsome. She had great talent for music. This, it appeared, was shown by the breadth between the eyes and the timbre of her voice.

Overwhelmed with joy at the advent of such a paragon, and horrified at Edith's choice of a name, Bruce had replied at once by wire, impulsively:

'Certainly not Matilda I would rather she were called Aspasia.'

Edith read this expression of feeling on a colourless telegraph form, and as she was, at Knightsbridge, unable to hear the ironical tone of the message she took it literally.

She criticised the name, but was easily persuaded by her mother-in-law to make no objection. The elder Mrs Ottley pointed out that it might have been very much worse.

'But it's not a pretty name,' objected Edith. 'If it wasn't to be Matilda, I should rather have called her something out of Maeterlinck – Ygraine, or Yselyn – something like that.'

'Yes, dear, Mygraine's a nice name, too,' said Mrs Ottley, in her humouring way, 'and so is Vaselyn. But what does it really matter? I shouldn't hold out on a point like this. One gets used to a name. Let the poor child be called Asparagus if he wishes it, and let him feel he has got his own way.'

So the young girl was named Aspasia Matilda Ottley. It was characteristic of Edith that she kept to her own point, though not aggressively. When Bruce returned after his after-cure, it was too late to do anything but pretend he had meant it seriously.

Archie called his sister Dilly.

Archie had been rather hurt at the – as it seemed to him – unnecessary excitement about Dilly. Not that he was jealous in any way. It was rather that he was afraid it would spoil her to be made so much of at her age; make her, perhaps, egotistical and vain. But it was not Archie's way to show these fears openly. He did not weep loudly or throw things about as many boys might have done. His methods were more roundabout, more subtle. He gave hints and suggestions of his views that should have been understood by the intelligent. He said one morning with some indirectness:

'I had such a lovely dream last night, Mother.'

'Did you, pet? How sweet of you. What was it?'

'Oh, nothing much. It was all right. Very nice. It was a lovely dream.'

I dreamt I was in heaven.'

'Really! How delightful. Who was there?'

This is always a woman's first question.

'Oh, you were there, of course. And father. Nurse, too. It was a lovely dream. Such a nice place.'

'Was Dilly there?'

'Dilly? Er – no – no – she wasn't. She was in the night nursery, with Satan.'