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THE STEPMOTHER

by Githa Sowerby

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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CHARACTERS

CHARLOTTE GAYDON

MARY

EUSTACE GAYDON

MONICA } His daughters
BETTY }

MR BENNET

MISS LOIS RELPH

CYRIL BENNET

PETER HOLLAND

MRS GEDDES

SCENES

PROLOGUE Scene: A sitting-room in Eustace Gaydon's house at Chilworth.

ACT I: Scene: The same.
(The curtain will be lowered for a few moments between the two scenes.)

ACT II: Scene 1: Lois's private room at Ginevra's.
 Scene 2: A room in Peter Holland's flat in Albany.

ACT III: Scene: Same as Prologue and Act I.

PROLOGUE

A sitting room in EUSTACE GAYDON's house at Chikworth.

There are big windows centre at back, fireplace right and the doors are up left leading into the hall and down right leading to the rest of the house. The room has an old-fashioned look without being ugly. There is a big writing table centre. It is late on a winter afternoon.

CHARLOTTE GAYDON *is sitting, knitting in an armchair by the fire. She is about sixty years of age, with a mild face already old. She carries herself with that gently deprecating air which in her generation seems to have been considered suitable to the lady who failed to justify her existence by marriage. All her life has been devoted to filling the gaps left by other people and the fact that she has never had any business of her own in the world has smoothed down any individual characteristics she might have had to a dead level of adaptability.*

MARY *comes in from the hall. She is carrying a lighted lamp which she puts on the table beside CHARLOTTE.*

CHARLOTTE *(mildly reproving)* You're late, Mary. I've been waiting.

MARY I'm sorry, miss. It's got dark soon tonight.

CHARLOTTE Perhaps I had better have my lamp at five in future, instead of half-past.

MARY *(turning up the lamp)* Very well, miss. It'll be nice when we have the electric light. *(She goes to the windows to draw the curtains)*

CHARLOTTE Electric light?

MARY Mr Gaydon was saying this morning that he was going to have it put in one of these days.

CHARLOTTE (*after a moment*) That will be nice, Mary.

MARY Yes, miss. Most of the big houses in Chilworth have had it this long time. (*She comes back to make up the fire*) Miss Turner's sent home your dress.

CHARLOTTE (*interested*) Oh! Does it look right?

MARY The crêpe's deeper than it was in the pattern.

CHARLOTTE I wanted it deep. I like mourning to look like mourning.

MARY (*doubtfully*) Yes, miss.

CHARLOTTE Do you mean there's something wrong with it, Mary?

MARY Well, it seems to me she's made it look more like a widow than an aunt.

CHARLOTTE (*with gentle dignity*) I'll see about it presently. You might make up the fire while you're here.

MARY (*who has already done so*) Yes, miss. (*She puts the fire irons back in their places – on her way to the door she stops*) Shall I lay dinner for two, or three?

There is a slight pause.

CHARLOTTE For two, Mary. (*She goes on with her knitting*)

MARY (*tentatively*) I thought perhaps Miss Relph might be dining with you and Mr Gaydon.

CHARLOTTE No.

MARY Very good, miss. (*She still lingers*) She always dined with Mrs Brent, the parlourmaid told me.

CHARLOTTE As my poor niece's companion, she naturally would do so. (*She looks up uneasily*) I did ask Mr Gaydon about

her having her meals with us, but he seemed to think it would be unsuitable.

MARY I'll lay for two then.

CHARLOTTE If you please.

MARY *goes to the door.*

Mary!

MARY Yes, miss?

CHARLOTTE There will be no harm in your talking a little to Miss Relph when you take up her dinner, if she seems lonely.

MARY Yes, miss.

She opens the door and meets EUSTACE coming in.

I beg your pardon, sir.

EUSTACE Any letters, Mary?

MARY No, sir.

EUSTACE The post's come?

MARY Yes, sir – there was only one for the servants' hall.

EUSTACE GAYDON is a thin, spare man of forty-five with a jerky manner and a ready laugh. His eyes are keen and as restless as a bird's. There is a touch of the dandy in his dress – just enough to give an extra suggestion of prosperity and well-being. A pleasant, shrewd, rather charming man, with just that something genuine about him wanting – warmth, humanity, whatever your name for it may be – which leaves you wondering why you don't quite like him. The voices of both women have brightened as he comes in.

CHARLOTTE (*smiling at him*) Will you have tea, dear?

EUSTACE Please, Mary.

MARY *goes out.*

(*He warms his hands at the fire*) It's queer there's nothing from Bennet.

CHARLOTTE (*surprised*) Mr Bennet? Are you expecting to hear from him?

EUSTACE Yes – I wrote to him. As a matter of fact I wanted to settle this question of Fanny's will.

CHARLOTTE I thought you'd decided she hadn't left one.

EUSTACE Well, I've searched the house, and there isn't anything at the bank—

CHARLOTTE And surely, dear, she would never have gone to Mr Bennet.

EUSTACE Why shouldn't she?

CHARLOTTE When she knew you'd quarrelled with him?

EUSTACE I'm afraid I can't flatter myself that my opinion carried much weight with Fanny... Besides, I didn't quarrel with Bennet – I simply ceased to employ him as my solicitor.

CHARLOTTE I meant that, dear... What happens if there is no will?

EUSTACE Everything comes to me. That's why I think there is one.

CHARLOTTE (*sighing*) Oh, Eustace!

EUSTACE It's no use blinking matters, Aunt Charlotte. Fanny didn't like me.

CHARLOTTE (*quickly*) She misjudged you.

EUSTACE Perhaps. But the result's the same. What she has probably done is to leave it over my head to my children.

CHARLOTTE If she has – I shall never be able to feel the same about her again – never!

EUSTACE Oh, well. Everybody doesn't think of me as you do, Aunt Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE Everybody doesn't know you as I do.

EUSTACE Fanny had her queer side like the rest of us. And her chief foible was to manage her own affairs in her own way.

CHARLOTTE I can't understand that. A widow alone in the world – with a brother like you ready to take it all off her shoulders – I'm sure I never had a moment's peace till I put everything into your hands.

MARY comes in with tea. CHARLOTTE goes to the table to pour it out. MARY goes out.

EUSTACE (*casually*) I suppose you didn't ever mention to Fanny that you had done that?

CHARLOTTE (*her mind on the tea*) Done what, dear?

EUSTACE Handed your affairs over to me.

CHARLOTTE Of course not – you told me not to.

EUSTACE Did I? Well, I don't think you'll regret it. Though I sometimes wonder if I ought to have let you do it.

CHARLOTTE (*tranquilly, pouring out tea*) My dear Eustace!

EUSTACE That's all very well, but it's a big responsibility for me. Of course, as long as you're content to make your home in my house and take your allowance of pin-money—

CHARLOTTE What more could I ask? (*She hands him his cup*)

EUSTACE (*chaffing her*) Well, I acknowledge the advantage isn't all on my side, eh? You're a brick, Aunt Charlotte – I can say anything to you.

CHARLOTTE (*flattered*) Can you?

EUSTACE Anything. For instance – for the last six months or so haven't you just now and then had a doubt of me at the back of your mind?

CHARLOTTE Doubt of you? Eustace!

EUSTACE I don't mean of me personally. But of – well, the way things were going with me?

CHARLOTTE (*timidly*) Of course, dear, I've guessed that you were – a little short of money. The housekeeping books—

EUSTACE I thought so. Well, I'll tell you now it's over. I've been a bit hard up.

CHARLOTTE But why, dear? How can you be hard up?

EUSTACE One thing and another. Delays. Certain things that ought to have gone well have been hanging fire—

CHARLOTTE (*anxiously*) But it's going to be all right?

EUSTACE Bless you, yes, as right as rain. Everybody has their ups and downs – and I'm glad to say that my financial position at the present time is as sound as it ever was.

CHARLOTTE (*simply*) How much do you suppose Fanny has left?

EUSTACE (*as if she had changed the subject*) Fanny? It's difficult to say. She ought to have had...let me see – twenty-five or thirty thousand – but I'm not counting on that. Though it's queer that Bennet hasn't written...if she has a will.

CHARLOTTE It's a lot of money. I remember once Fanny saying to me—

MONICA and BETTY appear at the door, piloted by MARY. They are pretty children of seven and nine and have evidently had their hair tidied and their spirits suppressed for the ceremony of saying goodnight.

(Her eyes on the children) Years ago, just at the time you broke with Mr Bennet... *(Changing into the spiritless sing-song which some grown-ups still feel the right tone for children)* Well, dears – have you come to say goodnight to Father and Aunt Charlotte?

EUSTACE (*absently*) Bedtime for little girls?

MONICA (*the elder*) Goodnight, Father.

BETTY Goodnight, Father.

EUSTACE (*kissing them mechanically*) Been good children, eh? That's right.

CHARLOTTE Come and say goodnight quietly – Father and Aunt Charlotte are busy.

They cross to her obediently. She is fond of them both, but hugging and kissing of children being outside her scheme of up-bringing, she offers her cheek.

MONICA (*bursting with the news*) Miss Relph's got a silver box on her dressing table.

CHARLOTTE Has she, dear – that's right.

BETTY And a brush with a silver back – Aunt Fanny gave them to her on her birthday.

MONICA Two birthdays, Betty.

BETTY No, it wasn't, it was both together.

MONICA Do people give two birthday presents for the same birthday, Aunt Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE Never mind, we'll talk about it tomorrow. Go to nurse quietly now, like good children.

They go, breaking into a run as they reach the door.

MONICA (*as they disappear*) It was two.

EUSTACE What was it you were saying?

CHARLOTTE Was I saying something?

EUSTACE About Fanny. And Bennet.

CHARLOTTE (*vaguely*) Oh, yes. It was only that she asked me why you had parted with him – when he and his father had been the family solicitors for so long.

EUSTACE Well – you told her, I suppose?

CHARLOTTE I couldn't, dear, I didn't know.

EUSTACE I hope you didn't lead Fanny to suppose there was anything wrong – anything on his part, I mean?

CHARLOTTE (*getting up to close the door which the children had left open*) Oh, no! She had too much faith in him to think that.

EUSTACE (*his manner more jerky than usual*) Bennet's old-fashioned – slow – too slow for me by a long way. Every scheme I put to him was full of dangers and difficulties. I got tired of being held up at last, and I left him, that was all. We're civil enough now – when we meet.

CHARLOTTE (*whose attention has wandered*) Eustace, what are you going to do about Miss Relph?

EUSTACE (*busy with his own thoughts*) I don't know. Why?

CHARLOTTE Something will have to be arranged for her, I suppose.

EUSTACE Plenty of time for that. She's all right as she is for the present. (*He takes up The Times and sits in the armchair beside the fire*)

CHARLOTTE Oh, quite – so long as you don't mind her being here.

EUSTACE Well, to tell the truth, I don't altogether like it.

CHARLOTTE (*standing behind his chair, her hand on the back of it*) I'm sorry, dear – but she seemed so frightened and nervous. She...she was with Fanny when she died. I just felt I couldn't leave her alone in that empty house with no one but the caretaker—

EUSTACE That's all right. I only meant I don't want her to imagine she is going to be provided for indefinitely.

CHARLOTTE Oh, there's no fear of that. She quite understands that she will have to find another situation. I've been thinking. How would it be if she stayed on here for a time... as governess?

EUSTACE Oh, I don't think that would be a good plan.

CHARLOTTE She speaks French. And she's good at making clothes she tells me.

EUSTACE You wouldn't think it, to look at her... No, it's too much like making oneself responsible for her. Giving her a home and all that. After all, she's not my business – poor girl. What is it?

CHARLOTTE (*who has been listening*) I thought I heard a bell.

EUSTACE I didn't. (*He listens a moment, then goes on*) I don't mind giving her a bit to go on with – a month's salary, whatever it was Fanny gave her. And that reminds me, you'd like a cheque.

CHARLOTTE Oh, thank you, dear. Yes. (*He gets up and goes to the writing table, centre*)

EUSTACE Will a hundred see you through for a bit?

CHARLOTTE I'm afraid not, dear.

EUSTACE Why – how much are you behindhand?

CHARLOTTE There are so many outstanding bills—

EUSTACE Well, a hundred and fifty?

CHARLOTTE Yes, that would do for the present.

EUSTACE (*taking his chequebook*) Sorry to have held you up, old lady. It won't happen again.

CHARLOTTE You're always so nice about everything, Eustace. I hate worrying you.

He writes. After a moment MARY comes in, closing the door after her and stands waiting.

EUSTACE (*without looking up*) Well, Mary?

MARY A gentleman to see you, sir. (*She hands him a card*)

There is a pause.

CHARLOTTE Who is it, dear?

EUSTACE Bennet...

CHARLOTTE Mary! You haven't left him standing in the hall?

MARY He won't come in, miss. He's just called to ask Mr Gaydon for an address.

Another pause.

EUSTACE (*getting up*) You'd better go, Aunt Charlotte, if you don't mind.

CHARLOTTE Oh, yes, dear, certainly – Mary...

They gather up her knitting bag and various stray balls of wool. CHARLOTTE flutters out by the door down right, MARY following. EUSTACE goes to the other door and flings it open.

EUSTACE That you, Bennet? Don't stand out there in the cold. Come in here, will you?

He comes back immediately so that BENNET is more or less obliged to follow him.

BENNET (*resenting this*) I told your servant I wouldn't keep you a minute.

EUSTACE That's all right. Sit down, won't you?

BENNET I won't, thanks. I hadn't intended to call but it occurred to me on my way home that it might shorten matters if I did. You aren't on the telephone?

EUSTACE No. I'm always meaning to have it put in... You got my letter?

BENNET (*looks at him*) Haven't you had mine?

EUSTACE No.

BENNET Oh, then – you don't know.

EUSTACE There is a will then?

BENNET *(slowly)* Oh, yes, there's a will...not a very satisfactory one for you, I'm afraid.

EUSTACE Oh? When was it made?

BENNET In nineteen-six. Soon after Miss Relph went to live with your sister.

EUSTACE What has Miss Relph to do with it?

BENNET That depends on whether she was living with your sister at the time of her death.

EUSTACE Supposing she was?

BENNET She gets everything.

There is a silence.

I'm sorry to put it so bluntly, but – well – there it is, I'm afraid. *(He fills up another pause by taking a notebook out of his pocket)*

EUSTACE There it is... Who's executor?

BENNET I am.

EUSTACE And trustee, I suppose?

BENNET There is no trust.

EUSTACE There's no one in it except you and Miss Relph?

BENNET No one. *(His tone indicates that EUSTACE is going a little too far)* In justice to Mrs Brent—

EUSTACE Justice! Thirty thousand pounds to a girl who would have been handsomely dealt with in a legacy with the other servants. If that's your idea of justice—

BENNET I didn't say it was. It isn't a lawyer's business to criticise his clients.

EUSTACE Or to prevent them making fools of themselves.

BENNET Look here, Gaydon, I'm ready to make allowances for you being disappointed—

EUSTACE I'm not disappointed.

BENNET In that case I'm not ready to make allowances.

EUSTACE Come, come, Bennet – I'm sorry if I seem abrupt...
When I say I'm not disappointed, I mean for myself. I expected nothing and I've got nothing. But – well, I think you might have put in a word for my children.

BENNET I can't discuss that. My business was to carry out your sister's instructions—

EUSTACE You had influence with her.

BENNET None whatever. Nor I believe had anyone else.

EUSTACE Except Miss Relph!

BENNET I don't know anything about Miss Relph.

EUSTACE Nobody does. You know how reserved my sister was, always making mysteries out of nothing – not a word could I get out of her beyond that she'd known the girl's mother – picked her up in some hotel abroad – and that she'd died suddenly, leaving this child penniless. And here she is, with thirty thousand pounds to her name—

BENNET (*pulling him up*) Can you give me her address. (*Pause*)

EUSTACE This is her address.

BENNET She's here? In your house?

EUSTACE Yes, my aunt brought her here this morning.

BENNET In that case – could I see her?

EUSTACE What – now?

BENNET If you have no objection.

Pause.

EUSTACE Look here, Bennet, as man to man – is there no way of getting round this will?

BENNET (*who has known this was coming*) No, there isn't.

EUSTACE How about undue influence?

BENNET There's no suggestion of such a thing.

EUSTACE Ah... (*He stands thinking intently*)

BENNET *takes out his watch with an impatient movement.*

BENNET I really must be off. If Miss Relph could spare me a few minutes before I go...

EUSTACE I'm afraid she can't see you tonight.

BENNET Why not?

EUSTACE She's ill.

BENNET Ill?

EUSTACE So my aunt says. My sister's death has been a great shock to her... I really shouldn't like to run the risk of upsetting her – more than she is upset already. (*A silence*) If you care to come and see her here, in a few days, when she's fit again, do by all means.

BENNET (*slowly*) Thanks... I'll write to her.

EUSTACE Just as you please.

BENNET *moves to go.*

How's the boy?

BENNET (*in the same tone*) Cyril? He's very fit, thanks.

EUSTACE Getting on, isn't he? How old is he now?

BENNET (*at the door*) Sixteen. Don't trouble – I'll let myself out. Goodnight.

EUSTACE Goodnight.

BENNET *goes out.*

EUSTACE *stands where he is – half-way to the door – till the front door bangs. Then his face slowly changes. He makes a furious movement.*

(under his breath) Damn you, Fanny! Damn you!

Presently his eyes wander to the writing table. He goes to it, picks up the cheque he had written and tears it up; stands thinking hard. Then crosses to the bell and rings. He stands motionless till MARY comes in.

Where's Miss Relph?

MARY In her room, sir.

EUSTACE Ask her to come and speak to me for a moment.

MARY Yes, sir.

She goes got.

After a time the door re-opens to admit MISS RELPH: a straight little black-clad figure. Her dress and the plain fashion in which she wears her hair do nothing to help her beauty; her face is colourless and her eyes have a wide, strained look. It is difficult to imagine what she would be like if she were happy and natural. She has the look of youth overweighted by association with middle-age; and her manner is between that of a servant and a child who has never played with other children. EUSTACE bows to her. She makes an awkward movement in return.

EUSTACE Good evening.

MISS RELPH Good evening.

EUSTACE I thought it might be as well if you and I had a little talk.

MISS RELPH Thank you, Mr Gaydon.

EUSTACE Sit down, won't you?

She follows his movement to a chair beside the writing table and sits facing the audience with her hands on her lap. He comes to the chair behind the table.

(with a movement of his pipe) You don't mind my smoking?

MISS RELPH *(unaccustomed to this kind of courtesy)* No, thank you.

He sits. There is a silence.

EUSTACE Will you forgive me if I ask an impertinent question?

MISS RELPH I – anything you would like to ask, Mr Gaydon—

EUSTACE How old are you?

MISS RELPH Nineteen.

EUSTACE That makes you fourteen when you went to live in my sister's house... What was your position there?

MISS RELPH My position?

EUSTACE She had some sort of arrangement with you, I presume.

MISS RELPH There was no arrangement.

EUSTACE You simply lived with her as companion or secretary or whatever it was...with some sort of a salary, of course—

MISS RELPH I had no salary.

Slight pause.

EUSTACE But, my dear Miss Relph, do you really mean to tell me that my sister accepted your services without payment of any kind?

MISS RELPH *(looks at him)* Oh, no – I didn't mean that! She – gave me things. Everything I had in the world came from her.

EUSTACE I see... It didn't occur to you that that was rather to my sister's advantage?

MISS RELPH Oh, you don't understand – Mrs Brent was good to me – she—

EUSTACE In a sense she was. You were an orphan and penniless, and she took you into her house and fed and clothed you. That was one side of the bargain. Being a business man I see another. I don't want to say anything that may seem like criticism of my sister now she's gone, but... I think she might have thought of you a little.

MISS RELPH She was very kind to me.

EUSTACE I mean, as to your future.

MISS RELPH Oh, that was all settled.

He looks quickly at her.

EUSTACE But you tell me there was no arrangement between you.

MISS RELPH No arrangement about money. *(A pause)*

EUSTACE *(coldly)* Perhaps you would prefer not to discuss this, Miss Relph?

MISS RELPH *(distressed)* Oh, no – it's only too kind of you to—

EUSTACE *(with growing feeling)* Of course, if you'd rather keep things to yourself—

MISS RELPH Oh, please, Mr Gaydon—

EUSTACE Then won't you tell me in what way my sister had provided for your future?

MISS RELPH *(eagerly)* I was to live with her.

EUSTACE But afterwards? When she wasn't there for you to live with?

MISS RELPH She never spoke of that. We were to go on just as we were for always.

EUSTACE *(slowly)* And the end of it is that you find yourself cut adrift, without money or a home. *(She makes no reply)* That is so...isn't it?

MISS RELPH Yes.