

DUCHESS

A BACHELOR'S
DREAM

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A Bachelor's Dream

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Mrs. Hungerford

A Bachelor's Dream

CHAPTER I

"Now what can be done?" said the Doctor. "That's the question. What on earth can I do about it?"

He put this question emphatically, with an energetic blow of his gloved hand upon his knee, and seemed very desirous of receiving an answer, although he was jogging along alone in his comfortable brougham. But the Doctor was perplexed, and wanted some one to help him out of his difficulty. He was a bachelor, and knew therefore that it was of no use letting Patrick drive him home in search of a confidant, for at home the ruling genius of his household was his housekeeper, Mrs. Jessop. She was a most excellent creature, an invaluable manager of the house, the tradespeople, and the maid-servants, and a splendid cook; the Doctor appreciated her highly, but he was not disposed to ask her advice or to invite her consolation.

He beat his knee a little harder, frowned more severely; finally let down the window, put out his head, and called smartly:

"Patrick!"

"Sir." Patrick pulled up the slim, clean-limbed brown horse as quickly as he could in the midst of the hurrying vehicles and hucksters' stalls which are usually to be found in the Essex Road at about seven o'clock on Saturday evening, and looked questioningly down at his master.

"Don't go home. Drive me to Petersham Villa," said Dr. Brudenell.

Patrick obeyed rather sulkily. He did not know what his master could possibly want at Petersham Villa – where he had already been once that day – and he did know that he himself was exceedingly hungry, and desirous of getting home. He gave the brown horse an undeserved cut over the ears with his whip; and when he pulled up he did so with a jerk which he might easily have avoided.

"I sha'n't be many minutes," said the Doctor, alighting in front of a comfortable-looking well-kept house, with red gleams of firelight shining from its parlor windows. "Walk the horse up and down to keep the cold off, but don't go far."

"It's cowl'd enough we'll both be, I'm thinkin'," muttered Patrick, gathering up the reins with a shiver; for it was really a very cold evening indeed, damp and gray, with a biting east wind.

If the Doctor heard this complaint, he did not heed it, his policy being, when his henchman was attacked with a fit of grumbling, to let him recover his good-temper at his leisure. He had hurried up the snow-white flight of steps, given a vigorous knock at the door, and, being admitted by a neat maid-servant, was asking if Mrs. Leslie were at home. Hearing that she was, he crossed the hall with an air of being perfectly at home, and, after tapping at the door, entered the parlor, causing a lady who was making tea to utter an exclamation of surprise, and a young lady who was making toast before the glowing fire to drop a deliciously-browned slice of bread into the cinders.

"Why, Doctor" – the tea-maker extended a plump hand good-naturedly – "you again? You are just in time for a cup of tea. I believe you came on purpose."

"Hardly that; but I shall be glad of one, if I may have it, Mrs. Leslie," the Doctor returned, emulating her light tone as well as he could; and, after shaking hands with the younger lady, who got up from her knees to greet him, he took a seat near the round table, not in the well-worn, cozy arm-chair in the snuggest corner of the snug room, which, with its gorgeous dressing-gown thrown across it and slippers warming before the fire, was evidently sacred to somebody else.

"Of course – although I fancy you rather despise it as a rule. Not a bit like my Tom!"

"Ah, you see I'm not like Tom in having some one to make it for me!"

"Well, that's your fault, I suppose," said the lively woman, vivaciously, as she deftly handled the shining copper kettle. "I told Kate it was your knock; but she wouldn't believe that you could honor us with two visits in one day."

"I thought Doctor Brudenell's time was too valuable," observed Kate, quietly, as she resumed her toasting.

She was not nearly so pretty as her sister, although Mrs. Leslie was the elder of the two by twelve years. Maria Leslie had taken life so easily, and turned such a bright face to all its ups and downs, that time had rewarded her at forty by making her look six or seven years younger. A downright pretty woman she was, bright-eyed, bright-cheeked, bright-haired, and so plump and merry that it was a pleasure to look at her. Kate Merritt was smaller, darker, more grave, and less attractive altogether. Doctor Brudenell liked them both, but he preferred the elder, as most people did. He enjoyed a visit to Petersham Villa – it was almost the only house with whose inhabitants he was upon really easy and familiar terms, for he was by nature a shy and retiring man. He had got into the habit of confiding in cheerful Mrs. Leslie, but he seldom talked to Kate, who was too diffident to make him forget that he also was inclined to be shy. Indeed he thought so little about her that he had not even a suspicion that in her quiet, cool, self-controlled, persistent way, she had made up her mind to marry him. Mrs. Leslie did know it, and often rated her sister soundly on the subject, with even a touch of contempt sometimes.

"You are most absurd to keep that silly notion fixed in your head!" she would declare, impatiently. "He doesn't care a straw for you, child! Haven't you wit enough to see that? If he only knew what a goose you were he'd pay you the compliment of thinking you crazy, I tell you. He's a good fellow – the best fellow in the world after my Tom – but there's something odd about him in that way. Can't you see that he hardly knows one woman from another, you silly child? I don't, for my part, believe that the man has ever been in love in his life at all."

Mrs. Leslie was penetrative, but in this matter she was wrong; for, if George Brudenell had been asked, he would probably have confessed that he had been in love twice. True, his first passion had been conceived at the age of eighteen, its object being the bosom-friend of his only sister, a young lady who owned to six-and-twenty, and who had laughed at him mercilessly when the most startling of valentines had made her aware of the state of things. Then, years after, when he was nearly thirty, he had become very fond of the daughter of his partner, a pretty, gentle, winning creature some half a dozen years younger than himself, who had girlishly adored him. He had been so fond of her and so used to her, he had grieved so sincerely when, a month before what was to have been their wedding-day, she died, that he did not realize in the least that he had reached his present age of forty-three without having been really in love at all.

He was not unhappy. A studious man, cold, taciturn, and self-contained as a rule, caring little for general society and devoted to his profession, the want in his life, the blank in his wifeless and childless home, was not to him what it would have been to a more impulsive, less self-reliant nature. If sometimes he instituted an involuntary comparison between his contracted hopes and interests as contrasted with those of other men, books, his work, his studies, soon consoled him. He hardly knew there was a yearning in his breast – a vague, intangible felling, waiting for a mistress-hand to stir it into activity – the hand of a woman whom he had never seen.

"And what brings you here a second time, Doctor?" asked Mrs. Leslie, brightly, as she poured out a cup of tea and handed it to him. "Are you going to give us some advice gratis?"

"Hardly, Mrs. Leslie; in fact, I want yours."

"Mine?" exclaimed the lady, vivaciously. "It is yours, of course – but upon what subject?"

"This. You recollect that I told you my sister was coming home from India with her children?"

"To be sure – I remember. Well?"

"Well, I have a letter from her announcing that, as she has been out of health for the last month or two, her husband does not wish her to travel yet. But her children are coming to England – they are on their way, in fact, and coming to me."

Doctor Brudenell, in making this statement, did not feel comical, but he looked so, in spite of his grave, refined, scholarly face, and Mrs. Leslie greeted his words with a burst of hearty laughter.

"My dear Doctor, don't look so tragic! The poor little creatures won't eat you. So they are coming to you? Well, what is your difficulty?"

"Merely, what am I to do with them?"

"Why, take care of them, of course!"

The Doctor stirred his tea with an air of helpless bewilderment. He felt that this was all very well as far as it went, and strictly what he meant to do, of course; but it did not go far enough – it was no solution of his difficulty. He felt a distinct sense of injury, too. His sister had got married, which was all very well. She had had eight children, only three of whom were now alive; and it occurred to him that, having the children, it was clearly Laura's duty to look after them. There was an element of coolness in her sending them to him which he found rather disconcerting. It opened a prospect of unending domestic tribulation. Laura herself had been an altogether irrepressible child, loud in voice, restless of movement, tireless of tongue, insatiable in curiosity, unceasing in mischief. What would his quiet house be with three editions of Laura running rampant about it? They would invade his study, disarrange his books, frolic in the drawing-room, make quiet and peace things of the past. What could he do with them? What would Mrs. Jessop say? The Doctor shuddered at the thought; the prospect appalled him.

"You had better get a governess for them," suggested Mrs. Leslie, briskly.

"A governess!" This was a ray of light, but he was not sure that he did not prefer darkness. "Oh – a governess?" he repeated, interrogatively.

"Of course! They will be tiresome, you may be sure – all children are, and Anglo-Indian ones particularly – at least so I should fancy – and you certainly will not want them disturbing you, while it will never do to have them running riot over the house. Get a good, sensible, responsible person, not too young, and you will find that you need hardly be troubled at all."

The Doctor felt that this counsel was good. It was plain, practical, feasible. But there remained a difficulty. How was he to become possessed of the sensible, responsible person who was not too young?

"Advertise," suggested his adviser, tersely.

Of course! How very foolish of him not to have thought of it! The plainest possible way out of the dilemma.

"Thank you, Mrs. Leslie," said the Doctor, rising and taking up his hat. "Thank you. I've no doubt that you're perfectly right. I will advertise."

He shook hands with the ladies – gratefully with the one, indifferently with the other – and bowed himself out, hurrying to the waiting Patrick, who had fulfilled his own prophecy in so far that he was by this time "cowl'd" in every limb, although his temper was exceedingly warm.

From the window Kate Merritt watched the brougham roll away and then turned to her sister angrily, tears in her eyes, a hot flush upon her face. Although she was by nature really obstinate, resolute, and persistent, she often exhibited upon the surface a childish pettishness with which her real self was almost absurdly at variance. She spoke now as a spoiled child might have done.

"How dreadfully disagreeable you are, Maria! It's too bad, I declare! I believe you do it on purpose – there!"

"Do what on purpose? What in the world do you mean?" cried Mrs. Leslie, pausing, sugar-tongs in hand.

"You know what I mean!" exclaimed Kate, scarcely able to suppress a sob.

"I declare I do not. This is some fad about Doctor Brudenell, I suppose," said the elder sister, resignedly. "Do me the favor to be intelligible, at least, Kate. What is it that you mean?"

"Why did you advise him to advertise?" demanded Miss Merritt.

"Because it was the most sensible advice I could give him. Is that the grievance? What objection have you to his advertising?"

"That I know very well what it will come to. He'll take your advice, and advertise, and get some woman into his house who will pet the children and coax and wheedle him until she gets completely round him, and then we know what will happen," cried Kate, with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes.

Mrs. Leslie looked at her, and had some difficulty in restraining a laugh.

"Nonsense, child! Doctor Brudenell will no more fall in love with his governess than he will with anybody else. For goodness' sake do try to be more sensible. A nice opinion of you he would have if he could only hear and see you now, I must say! I should be ashamed, if I were you, to spend my time fretting and crying after a man who didn't care a pin about me, like a love-sick school-girl. Dry your eyes and come to the table. Whoever the poor man gets for a governess, I hope she may have more common sense than you, I am sure. And the sooner he advertises for her the better, if that unruly brood is to be here so soon."

"He would never have thought of advertising but for you," said Kate, resentfully.

"Probably not!" retorted Mrs. Leslie, tartly. "But now he will do it, and quickly, if he is sensible."

Mrs. Leslie was wrong. The Doctor did not advertise for a governess, although when he left he was firmly resolved upon doing so. He drove home quickly to his handsome house in Canonbury, and enjoyed an excellent dinner by the bright fire in his comfortable dining-room, with a renewed appreciation of the excellent Mrs. Jessop. Then he summoned that lady in his presence, and with very little circumlocution broke to her the news of the promised invasion and the suggested panacea. Finding that Mrs. Jessop took the matter on the whole amiably, he felt considerably relieved in mind, and began placidly to smoke his pipe over the Times. The leading article was stupid, soporific, the tobacco soothing, the fire hot; he was just hovering in delicious languor upon the very borders of dreamland when a knock at the door roused him abruptly. Of course, he was called out.

Had the call been from a well-to-do patient who fostered a half-fancied illness, he might have been more put out than he certainly was when, upon turning into the street, he felt the keen east wind nipping his ears; but it was from a poor house lying in the midst of a very labyrinth of squalid back streets and foul courts, and yet but a mere stone's-throw from his own comfortable dwelling.

The Doctor did all that he could for the patient – a disheveled woman, who had fallen, while drunk, and cut her head. He bound up the wound, gave a prescription; and, leaving directions with the voluble Irish charwoman who filled the place of nurse, left the close, evil-smelling room, glad to breathe even the tainted air outside, and as quickly as he could retraced his steps.

He had left the last of the wretched narrow streets behind him, and was turning into a wider road which led by a short cut to the adjacent thoroughfare, when he heard a shriek – a terrible cry of agony or fear – perhaps both – and there, not more than a hundred yards before him, standing out black against the surrounding gray, two figures were frantically struggling – a man and a woman.

George Brudenell, slight and wiry in figure, was active and swift as a boy. He shouted and ran, but, before he could reach the two, the man had violently wrested his arm free and raised it in the air. There was a flash of steel as it descended, a shrill cry that broke off into a moan; and the Doctor, hardly able to check himself, almost stumbled over the woman as she fell at his feet.

CHAPTER II

Doctor Brudenell's first rapid glance about him as he recovered his balance assured him that pursuit would be futile. The man had darted off down a narrow turning which had led into a maze of streets. Already his rapid footsteps had ceased to echo on the pavement; he was lost by this time in the busy restless throng of Saturday night foot-passengers. The Doctor, abandoning any idea of chasing and securing him, lost not a moment in doing what he could. The short street was a new one, having on one side a neglected piece of waste land, where bricks, gravel, and mortar were flung in confusion; upon the other a row of half-finished houses. A curve at its upper end hid the thoroughfare beyond, although the sound of wheels and the hoarse cries of hucksters were audible to him as he dropped upon one knee, and gently raised the inert figure. Blood was upon it; he felt it and knew that it was staining his hand. Had no one heard that dreadful, thrilling cry but himself? It seemed not. He shouted loudly with the full power of his lungs:

"Help, help! Murder! Here – help!"

He was heard, for, as he loudly shouted again, voices answered him; and in a few moments a group of men and women had gathered about him, eager, excited, questioning. Before he could answer them they made way for a sergeant of police whom Doctor Brudenell happened to know. He explained hastily; the knot commented; the sergeant was cool and professional.

"Pity you weren't quick enough to nab him, sir!"

He went down upon his knee and turned the light of his lantern upon the ghastly face.

"H'm! Young, and a spanker to look at, I should say! Wonder if it was robbery? Is she dead, sir?"

"No." The Doctor laid her gently down, his practiced hand over the heart. "No; she's not dead. The blow was aimed at her heart, but something in her dress – a corset, probably – turned the weapon aside. Call me a cab, somebody. You're off duty, I think, sergeant – can you come with me?"

"I am, sir. Always happens so when there's anything doing," muttered the sergeant, discontentedly. "Here's another of our people that ain't, though," as a second sergeant forced his way through the group, followed by a constable. "Baxter, you'd best step round and report this little job, and not lose any time about it, either. It's attempted murder – that's what the game is. Chap made off as if he'd got springs in his heels."

The second officer bent down as the first had done, glanced at the bloodless face, asked a question or two, and started off at a smart pace, the fringe of the crowd hurrying after him.

The Doctor looked at his companion, repeating:

"Can you come with me? I may want assistance."

"With pleasure, sir! You'll take her to the hospital, I suppose?"

"No. My house is nearer; and, unless the wound is looked to at once, I don't answer for the consequences. There is no objection, I suppose?"

The sergeant thought there could be no objection, although the hospital was "the usual thing." The Doctor put aside that consideration contemptuously. From what he could see of the wound, he was prepared to state professionally that any delay would be highly dangerous. The sergeant yielded the point respectfully, but protestingly; and the cab came, bringing an excited crowd in its train.

There was no lack of proffered help; but the Doctor and the sergeant lifted the insensible woman into the cab between them. On arriving at the Doctor's house the two men carried her indoors; then bells rang, maid-servants hurried, exclaimed, and questioned; and soon the door of the library was closed upon all except Mrs. Jessop and the Doctor. The sergeant retired to the dining-room, and meditatively took an inventory of its furniture and appointments, as he awaited further developments. Noticing the Doctor's decanter of choice old port, which was still upon the table where he had left it, the officer helped himself to a glassful, drinking it with evident relish.

Half an hour passed before the Doctor entered. He took his seat thoughtfully by the fire, and motioned to the sergeant to draw his chair nearer.

"The wound is not much – merely a deep flesh-wound," he observed, abruptly.

"Glad to hear it, I'm sure," returned the sergeant, politely.

"She has lost a great deal of blood, will be much weakened, and is totally insensible now," Doctor Brudenell continued; "but no vital part is touched – not the fault of that scoundrel, though, sergeant."

"Ah!" replied the sergeant, intelligently.

The Doctor had motioned to him to help himself to the wine, and he did so now with contemplative deliberation.

"Then you think it is a case of intended murder, I take it, sir?"

"As far as my judgment serves me – yes. I should say the blow was meant to kill her – indeed, only the steel of her corset saved her."

"H'm, I thought as much! Now, as to motive, sir; have you got any theory?"

"Robbery, I suppose. Ah" – as the sergeant shook his head with a wise air – "you don't think so, then!"

"No, I don't, sir. Maybe, of course, but I doubt it. A man don't use a knife when his fists will do, as a rule. And look you here, sir," said the sergeant, leaning forward to place his broad hand for a moment upon the Doctor's knee – "when you find a fine old gentleman with a bald crown or a 'spectable old lady with a bag and umbrella, tipped over neat in a corner, you may put it down to robbery; for you won't find anything in their pockets, I'll wager. But you find a good-looking fellow with a ha'porth of rat poison inside of him that he didn't put there himself, or a young woman stabbed that's as handsome as that one" – jerking his head toward the door – "and you won't go far wrong if you put it down to jealousy."

The Doctor sat silently pondering. The sergeant slowly filled his glass again.

"You've examined her dress, of course, sir? Anything in the pockets?"

"Nothing – absolutely nothing!"

"Nothing torn? No appearance of having been robbed?"

"No. Merely the cut where the blow was given."

"Just so, sir. About the weapon – an ordinary knife, should you say?"

"No; from the appearance and general character of the wound it was caused by a two-edged blade."

"H'm! Sort of dagger – stiletto kind of thing?" queried the sergeant.

"I should say so."

The sergeant gave a prolonged whistle, with an air of intense satisfaction.

"Supports my idea, you see, sir. A man going about with a dagger in his pocket usually means to use it. A case of jealousy – that's what it is! It's surprising, I'm sure, the way a man will put his neck into a rope if there's a woman t'other side of it. You wait till this young woman comes round, and you'll find that that's about the size of it. The work of some hot-headed young fool she's thrown over, I expect; or, maybe, she's bolted from her husband, and it's a case of elopement. Shouldn't wonder, for the handsomer they are the more mischief they get up to. That's my experience."

"I hope you are mistaken," said the Doctor, rising and looking thoughtfully at the fire. "I hope you are, but we shall see. Fill your glass, sergeant!"

"Thank you, sir, I am sure." The sergeant obediently filled his glass for the fourth time, and held it critically between his eye and the light. "Well, we shall see, as you say. When do you fancy you'll be able to speak to her, may I ask?"

"Impossible to say. She may be sensible to-morrow, or the shock may cause a fever, in which case her condition may become highly dangerous. I can't possibly say."

"Pity there isn't something about her by which she might be identified," mused the sergeant, thoughtfully. "But it'll all be in the papers to-morrow, and it will be odd if it doesn't catch the eye of some one who knows her. But she's French, if I don't mistake, or at any rate, not English."

Doctor Brudenell, recalling his impression of the ghastly face as he had seen it, first in the light of the sergeant's lantern, and afterward lying upon a pillow hardly whiter than itself, silently endorsed this opinion. No, decidedly she was not English; but he did not think she was French. The sergeant thoughtfully emptied his glass, and set it down upon the table.

"We'll do all we can, of course, but it strikes me that the chances of nabbing the man don't amount to much unless the young man comes to herself in time to help us. And, if she does, it's about twenty to one that she puts us on a wrong scent. Well, I'm on duty again directly, and I'll be going. Will you step down to the station with me, sir?"

"Certainly, if you think it necessary."

The sergeant thought that "it might be as well," and the Doctor put on his hat and coat, and walked with his companion to the police-station, where the inspector on duty, who had received one report already, listened to his statement, wrote it all down imperturbably, and approved with some warmth of the sergeant's theory as to "jealousy." Fists or a knuckle-duster did well enough for robbery, the inspector observed oracularly; it was only when a man went "a bit off his head" that he took to daggers; and there was more of that sort of thing about – presumably meaning jealousy – than any one would credit. Though, when it came to going it to that extent, the inspector's private opinion was that no woman was worth it.

"Is there much chance of capturing this man, do you think?" Doctor Brudenell asked.

Why, that depended. If the young woman came to herself – say to-morrow – and told the truth, you would know where you were; but if, on the other hand, the young woman chose to put them on an altogether false scent – which was rather more likely than not – why, where would they be?

Feeling that he could not successfully answer this official poser, the Doctor bade the sergeant and the inspector good-night, and, repeating his former assurances of perfect willingness to do whatever he could in the affair, walked out of the police-station. At home, by the dining-room fire, he found the invaluable Mrs. Jessop waiting for him.

"Well, Mrs. Jessop, and how is our patient now?" he inquired, cheerfully.

He did not feel cheerful, but Mrs. Jessop had shown some slight reluctance and resentment at being suddenly called upon to assume the function of nurse to a totally unknown and much too handsome young woman, and he thought it only prudent to conciliate her.

"Pretty much the same, sir – hasn't stirred so much as a finger or opened her eyes; though whether or not it's a natural sleep I couldn't take upon myself to say."

"I'll step up-stairs again with you in a moment. What I fear is fever, consequent on the shock. If we can keep off that, she will most likely awaken sensible enough. I hope so, I am sure, for the sake of catching that cowardly villain, whoever he was."

"He must have meant to murder her, you think, sir?" inquired Mrs. Jessop, smoothing her cap-ribbons, thoughtfully.

"I am afraid so. Poor girl! She is quite young?"

"Yes, sir."

"And most remarkably handsome?"

"No doubt, sir."

"She is a foreigner, I fancy. It is most unfortunate that there is nothing on her by which we can identify her. By the way – I did not notice – did you see if she wore rings?"

"No, sir."

"Not a wedding-ring?" – "No, sir."

"And not a trinket of any kind about her?"

"Not one, sir."

"Nothing whatever?" persisted the Doctor musingly, as he held out his hands to the fire. They were cold, for the February night air was keen.

"There was this, sir," said Mrs. Jessop, abruptly.

She held out to him upon the palm of her plump hand a tiny roll of paper, tied with a wisp of faded red silk.

"Where did you find this?"

"In a little pocket inside the bosom of her gown, sir – it looked as if it had been made for it."

"Have you read it?" – "No, sir. It's gibberish."

The Doctor untied and unrolled the little packet, then looked at it by the gaslight. It was covered with characters of a deep red color, curious and fantastic, and to him absolutely meaningless. It looked strange, uncanny, witch-like. Was it a charm? The Doctor studied it wonderingly for a few moments, and then laughed at the thought of such an absurd fancy assailing him! He rolled up and re-tied the little packet.

"Well, that won't help us much," he said. "As I thought, we must wait for light from her, poor girl. Take care of it, Mrs. Jessop; she may attach some fanciful value to it."

Doctor Brudenell, standing by the bed in the comfortable room, to which the unknown woman had been carried, looked down at her curiously and scrutinizingly. Upon the white pillows he saw a pale face lying – a face that was exquisitely chiseled, the head crowned by a wonderful mass of thick black hair.

"Beautiful!" he muttered, under his breath, and turning away. "I should fancy it was jealousy!"

The next day's papers contained a sufficiently thrilling account of the attempted murder of a lady in Rockmore Street; but, although an elaborate description of the victim's person and attire was given and enlarged upon with due journalistic skill, it brought no anxious troop of friends and relatives to inquire at Doctor Brudenell's door; and the best efforts of the inspector and his subordinates to track the would-be murderer came to ignominious grief, for the only person who could perchance have put them upon his track lay tossing in the delirium of fever.

CHAPTER III

"Hang the brats!" exclaimed Dr. Brudenell, angrily. "If this goes on for long they'll drive me mad, I swear!"

He was annoyed, chafed, irritated, more out of temper than he had ever been before. The preceding week had been to him a period of purgatory; the calm of his house was broken; his study was no longer a sanctuary; the maids were flurried; Mrs. Jessop spoiled the soup. The bachelor, transformed suddenly into a family-man without any preliminary steps, was amazed and bewildered; the sufferings of his married acquaintances filled him with a grotesque feeling of pity, with the sincerest sympathy. He especially commiserated Laura's husband – for the three children had turned out to be three emphatic editions of Laura – with additions.

Just now the uproar which had caused the master of the house to spring up from his dinner was more than usually vociferous. The three had escaped from their extemporized nursery, and had shouted and tumbled tumultuously down the staircase and into the hall. The street door happened to be open, and the consequences were disastrous. One rushed down the steps with a scream of triumph, which changed into a shrill shriek of anger as he was pursued, captured, and brought back by Patrick, in spite of violent kicking and struggling; another, backing unconsciously toward the kitchen staircase, overbalanced, and, descending with a succession of startling bumps, fell into a tray of glasses with a terrific crash; while the third and youngest, not precisely comprehending what was the matter, but being of a highly sympathetic temperament, threw herself upon the devoted Patrick, screaming, kicking, and scratching furiously; which, added to the shouts of the youth whom Patrick carried upside down, and the wails of the unfortunate whom Mrs. Jessop had just rescued from the *débris* of the glasses, swelled the uproar into a chorus that was almost deafening.

The Doctor sat down again, and took up his knife and fork with an energy which sent the gravy flying over the snowy cloth.

"Confound the little wretches! I'll advertise to-morrow!" he said.

The noise outside subsided a little as Mrs. Jessop appeared upon the scene, but the next moment it broke out again, growing louder as the staircase was mounted. Evidently Mrs. Jessop intended to put the rebels to bed – a resolution which did not apparently please them, for Doctor Brudenell distinctly heard his elder nephew threaten to punch the head of that worthy woman, while his brother and sister appeared to be trying to dance upon her toes. Then came a cessation of the hubbub, sudden and soothing, and the Doctor finished his dinner in peace.

Crossing the hall toward his study a little later, with the intention of getting a book to add to the enjoyment of a very fine-flavored cigar, he encountered Mrs. Jessop, somewhat flushed and tumbled, coming down-stairs, and stopped to speak to her.

"Well, Mrs. Jessop, got rid of your charges for to-night – eh?" he said, good-humoredly.

"That I haven't, sir, for to go to bed they wouldn't! I've seen a good many children, but never did I see children so set upon their own way as them children!" declared Mrs. Jessop, emphatically.

The Doctor felt that this was correct; his opinion being that any children in the least degree resembling Laura's luckily did not exist anywhere.

"Oh, spoilt, Mrs. Jessop," he remarked, judicially – "spoilt – that's it! They'll be better, you'll find, when we get a good strict governess for them; and that reminds me, I must certainly advertise for one to-morrow. I don't know how it is that it has slipped my memory for so long. So they're not in bed, the young rogues – eh?"

"No, sir – they're with Miss Boucheafen."

"With her? You should not have allowed it – you should not have let them go in?" said the Doctor, quickly and peremptorily.

"I couldn't help it, sir," returned the housekeeper, stolidly. "They started making such a racket of stamping and screaming outside her door that she heard and opened it to ask what was the matter. Of course, they were for rushing in before I could keep them back, and so she said, Let them stay awhile, and she would keep them still; and so there they are, and she telling them some fairy-tale nonsense."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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