

**МАРГАРЕТ
ОЛИФАНТ**

A HOUSE IN
BLOOMSBURY

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A House in Bloomsbury

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A House in Bloomsbury:

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Mrs. Oliphant

A House in Bloomsbury

CHAPTER I

“Father,” said Dora, “I am going upstairs for a little, to see Mrs. Hesketh, if you have no objection.”

“And who is Mrs. Hesketh, if I might make so bold as to ask?” Mr. Mannering said, lifting his eyes from his evening paper.

“Father! I told you all about her on Sunday—that she’s all alone all day, and sometimes her husband is so late of getting home. She is so lonely, poor little thing. And she is such a nice little thing! Married, but not so big as me.”

“And who is—her husband?” Mr. Mannering was about to say, but he checked himself. No doubt he had heard all about the husband too. He heard many things without hearing them, being conscious rather of the pleasant voice of Dora running on than of everything she said.

This had, no doubt, been the case in respect to the young couple upstairs, of whose existence he had become dimly sensible by reason of meeting one or other of them on the stairs. But there was nothing in the appearance of either which had much attracted him. They appeared to him a commonplace couple of inferior kind; and perhaps had he been a man with all

his wits keenly about him, he would not have allowed his child to run wild about the little woman upstairs. But Mr. Mannering did not keep his wits about him sharpened to any such point.

Dora was a child, but also she was a lady, proof against any contamination of acquaintance which concerned only the letters of the alphabet. Her "h's" could take care of themselves, and so could her "r's". As for anything else, Mr. Mannering's dreamy yet not unobservant eyes had taken in the fact that the young woman, who was not a lady, was an innocent and good little woman; and it had never occurred to him to be afraid of any chance influence of such a kind for his daughter. He acquiesced, accordingly, with a little nod of his head, and return of his mild eyes to his paper.

These two were the best of companions; but he was not jealous of his little girl, nor did he desire that she should be for ever in his sight. He liked to read his paper; sometimes he had a book which interested him very much. The thought that Dora had a little interest in her life also, special to herself, pleased him more than if she had been always hanging upon him for her amusement and occupation. He was not afraid of the acquaintance she might make, which was a little rash, perhaps, especially in a man who had known the world, and knew, or ought to have known, the mischief that can arise from unsuitable associates.

But there are some people who never learn; indeed, few people learn by experience, so far as I have ever seen. Dora had been an independent individuality to her father since she was six years old. He had felt, as parents often feel with a curious mixture

of feelings, half pleasure, half surprise, half disappointment (as if there could be three halves! the reader will say; but there are, and many more), that she was not very much influenced by himself, who was most near to her. If such things could be weighed in any balance, he was most, it may be said, influenced by her. She retained her independence. How was it possible then that, conscious of this, he should be much alarmed by any problematical influence that could be brought to bear upon her by a stranger? He was not, indeed, the least afraid.

Dora ran up the stairs, which were dark at the top, for Mrs. Simcox could not afford to let her lodgers who paid so low a rent have a light on their landing; and the landing itself was encumbered by various articles, between which there was need of wary steering. But this little girl had lived in these Bloomsbury lodgings all her life, and knew her way about as well as the children of the house. Matters were facilitated, too, by the sudden opening of a door, from which the light and, sad to say, something of the smell of a paraffin lamp shone out, illuminating the rosy face of a young woman, with a piece of sewing in her hand, who looked out in bright expectation, but clouded over a little when she saw who it was. "Oh, Miss Dora!" she said; and added in an undertone, "I thought it was Alfred home a little sooner than usual," with a little sigh.

"I made such a noise," said Dora, apologetically. "I couldn't help it. Jane will leave so many things about."

"Oh, it's me, Miss Dora. I does my rooms myself; it saves a

deal on the rent. I shouldn't have left that crockery there, but it saves trouble, and I'm not that used to housework."

"No," said Dora, seating herself composedly at the table, and resisting, by a strong exercise of self-control, her impulse to point out that the lamp could not have been properly cleaned, since it smelt so. "One can see," she added, the fact being incontestable, "that you don't know how to do many things. And that is a pity, because things then are not so nice."

She seemed to cast a glance of criticism about the room, to poor little Mrs. Hesketh's excited fancy, who was ready to cry with vexation. "My family always kep' a girl," she said in a tone of injury subdued. But she was proud of Dora's friendship, and would not say any more.

"So I should have thought," said Dora, critical, yet accepting the apology as if, to a certain extent, it accounted for the state of affairs.

"And Alfred says," cried the young wife, "that if we can only hold on for a year or two, he'll make a lady of me, and I shall have servants of my own. But we ain't come to that yet—oh, not by a long way."

"It is not having servants that makes a lady," said Dora. "We are not rich." She said this with an ineffable air of superiority to all such vulgar details. "I have never had a maid since I was quite a little thing." She had always been herself surprised by this fact, and she expected her hearer to be surprised. "But what does that matter?" she added. "One is oneself all the same."

“Nobody could look at you twice,” said the admiring humble friend. “And how kind of you to leave your papa and all your pretty books and come up to sit with me because I’m so lonely! It is hard upon us to have Alfred kep’ so late every night.”

“Can’t he help it?” said Dora. “If I were you, I should go out to meet him. The streets are so beautiful at night.”

“Oh, Miss Dora!” cried the little woman, shocked. “He wouldn’t have me go out by myself, not for worlds! Why, somebody might speak to me! But young girls they don’t think of that. I sometimes wish I could be taken on among the young ladies in the mantle department, and then we could walk home together. But then,” she added quickly, “I couldn’t make him so comfortable, and then—”

She returned to her work with a smile and a blush. She was always very full of her work, making little “things,” which Dora vaguely supposed were for the shop. Their form and fashion threw no light to Dora upon the state of affairs.

“When you were in the shop, were you in the mantle department?” she asked.

“Oh, no. My figure isn’t good enough,” said Mrs. Hesketh; “you have to have a very good figure, and look like a lady. Some of the young ladies have beautiful figures, Miss Dora; and such nice black silks—as nice as any lady would wish to wear—which naturally sets them off.”

“And nothing to do?” said Dora, contemptuously. “I should not like that.”

“Oh, you! But they have a deal to do. I’ve seen ’em when they were just dropping down with tiredness. Standing about all day, and putting on mantles and things, and pretending to walk away careless to set them off. Poor things! I’d rather a deal stand behind the counter, though they’ve got the best pay.”

“Have you been reading anything to-day?” said Dora, whose attention was beginning to flag.

Mrs. Hesketh blushed a little. “I’ve scarcely sat down all day till now; I’ve been having a regular clean-out. You can’t think how the dust gets into all the corners with the fires and all that. And I’ve just been at it from morning till night. I tried to read a little bit when I had my tea. And it’s a beautiful book, Miss Dora, but I was that tired.”

“It can scarcely take a whole day,” said Dora, looking round her, “to clean out this one little room.”

“Oh, but you can’t think what a lot of work there is, when you go into all the corners. And then I get tired, and it makes me stupid.”

“Well,” said Dora, with suppressed impatience, “but when you become a lady, as you say, with servants to do all you want, how will you be able to take up a proper position if you have never read anything?”

“Oh, as for that,” said Mrs. Hesketh in a tone of relief, “that can’t be for a long time yet; and you feel different when you’re old to what you do when you’re young.”

“But I am young,” said Dora. She changed the subject,

however, more or less, by her next question. "Are you really fond of sewing?" she said in an incredulous tone; "or rather, what are you most fond of? What should you like best to do?"

"Oh!" said the little wife, with large open eyes and mouth—she fell off, however, into a sigh and added, "if one ever had what one wished most!"

"And why not?" said inexperienced Dora. "At least," she added, "it's pleasant to think, even if you don't have what you want. What should you like best?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Hesketh again, but this time with a long-drawn breath of longing consciousness, "I should like that we might have enough to live upon without working, and Alfred and me always to be together,—that's what I should like best."

"Money?" cried Dora with irrepressible scorn.

"Oh, Miss Dora, money! You can't think how nice it would be just to have enough to live on. I should never, never wish to be extravagant, or to spend more than I had; just enough for Alfred to give up the shop, and not be bound down to those long hours any more!"

"And how much might that be?" said Dora, with an air of grand yet indulgent magnificence, as if, though scorning this poor ideal, she might yet perhaps find it possible to bestow upon her friend the insignificant happiness for which she sighed.

"Oh, Miss Dora, when you think how many things are wanted in housekeeping, and one's dress, and all that—and probably more than us," said Mrs. Hesketh, with a bright blush. She too

looked at the girl as if it might have been within Dora's power to give the modest gift. "Should you think it a dreadful lot," said the young woman, "if I said two hundred a year?"

"Two hundred pounds a year?" said Dora reflectively. "I think," she added, after a pause, "father has more than twice as much as that."

"La!" said Mrs. Hesketh; and then she made a rapid calculation, one of those efforts of mental arithmetic in which children and simple persons so often excel. "He must be saving up a lot," she said admiringly, "for your fortune. Miss Dora. You'll be quite an heiress with all that."

This was an entirely new idea to Dora, who knew of heiresses only what is said in novels, where it is so easy to bestow great fortunes. "Oh no, I shall not be an heiress," she said; "and I don't think we save up very much. Father has always half a dozen pensioners, and he buys books and—things." Dora had a feeling that it was something mean and bourgeois—a word which Mr. Mannering was rather apt to use—to save up.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Hesketh again, with her countenance falling. She was not a selfish or a scheming woman; but she had a romantic imagination, and it was so easy an exercise of fancy to think of this girl, who had evidently conceived such a friendship for herself, as "left" rich and solitary at the death of her delicate father, and adopting her Alfred and herself as companions and guardians. It was a sudden and passing inspiration, and the young woman meant no harm, but there was a visionary disappointment

in her voice.

“But,” said Dora, with the impulse of a higher cultivation, “it is a much better thing to work than to do nothing. When father is at home for a few days, unless we go away somewhere, he gets restless; and if he were always at home he would begin some new study, and work harder than ever.”

“Ah, not with folks like us, Miss Dora,” said Mrs. Hesketh. Then she added: “A woman has always got plenty to do. She has got her house to look after, and to see to the dinner and things. And when there are children—” Once more she paused with a blush to think over that happy prospect. “And we’d have a little garden,” she said, “where Alfred could potter about, and a little trap that we could drive about in, and take me to see places, and oh, we’d be as happy as the day was long!” she cried, clasping her hands. The clock struck as she spoke, and she hastily put away her sewing and rose up. “You won’t mind, Miss Dora, if I lay the table and get things ready for supper? Alfred will soon be coming now.”

“Oh, I like to see you laying the table,” said Dora, “and I’ll help you—I can do it very well. I never let Jane touch our nice clean tablecloths. Don’t you think you want a fresh one?” she said, looking doubtfully at the somewhat dingy linen. “Father always says clean linen is the luxury of poor people.”

“Oh!” said little Mrs. Hesketh. She did not like criticism any more than the rest of us, nor did she like being identified with “poor people”. Mr. Mannering’s wise yet foolish aphorism

(for how did he know how much it cost to have clean linen in Bloomsbury—or Belgravia either, for that matter?) referred to persons in his own condition, not in hers; but naturally she did not think of that. Her pride and her blood were up, however; and she went with a little hurry and vehemence to a drawer and took out a clean tablecloth. Sixpence was the cost of washing, and she could not afford to throw away sixpences, and the other one had only been used three or four times; but her pride, as I have said, was up.

“And where are the napkins?” said Dora. “I’ll lay it for you. I really like to do it: and a nicely-laid table, with the crystal sparkling, and the silver shining, and the linen so fresh and smooth, is a very pretty object to look at, father always says.”

“Oh dear! I must hurry up,” cried Mrs. Hesketh; “I hear Alfred’s step upon the stairs.”

Now Dora did not admire Alfred, though she was fond of Alfred’s wife. He brought a sniff of the shop with him; which was disagreeable to the girl, and he called her “miss,” which Dora hated. She threw down the tablecloth hurriedly. “Oh, I’ll leave you then,” she cried, “for I’m sure he does not like to see me here when he comes in.”

“Oh, Miss Dora, how can you think such a thing?” cried her friend; but she was glad of the success of her expedient when her visitor disappeared. Alfred, indeed, did not come in for half an hour after; but Mrs. Hesketh was at liberty to make her little domestic arrangements in her own way. Alfred, like herself,

knew that a tablecloth cost sixpence every time it went to the wash—which Dora, it was evident, did not do.

Dora found her father reading in exactly the same position as she had left him; he had not moved except to turn a leaf. He raised his head when she came in, and said: “I am glad you have come back, Dora. I want you to get me a book out of that bookcase in the corner. It is on the third shelf.”

“And were you so lazy, father, that you would not get up to find it yourself?”

“Yes, I was so lazy,” he said, with a laugh. “I get lazier and lazier every day. Besides, I like to feel that I have some one to do it for me. I am taking books out of shelves and putting them back again all the day long.”

Dora put her arm on her father’s shoulder, as she put down the book on the table before him. “But you like it, don’t you, father? You are not tired of it.”

“Of the Museum?” he said, with a laugh and a look of surprise. “No; I am not tired of it—any more than I am of my life.”

This was an enigmatical reply, but Dora did not attempt to fathom it. “What the little people upstairs want is just to have money enough to live on, and nothing to do,” she said.

“The little people? And what are you, Dora? You are not so very big.”

“I am growing,” said Dora, with confidence; “and I shouldn’t like to have nothing to do all my life.”

“There is a great deal to be said for that view of the question,”

said Mr. Mannering. "I am not an enthusiast for mere work, unless there is something to come out of it. 'Know what thou canst work at' does not apply always, unless you have to earn your living, which is often a very fortunate necessity. And even that," he said, with a smile, "has its drawbacks."

"It is surely far better than doing nothing," cried Dora, with her young nose in the air.

"Well, but what does it come to after all? One works to live, and consumes the fruits of one's work in the art of living. And what better is that than if you had never been? The balance would be much the same. But this is not the sort of argument for little girls, even though they are growing," Mr. Mannering said.

"I think the Museum must have been very stuffy to-day, father," was the remark which Dora made.

CHAPTER II

The Mannerings lived in a house in that district of Bloomsbury which has so long meant everything that is respectable, mediocre, and dull,—at least, to that part of the world which inhabits farther West. It is possible that, regarded from the other side of the compass, Bloomsbury may be judged more justly as a city of well-sized and well-built houses, aired and opened up by many spacious breathing-places, set with stately trees. It is from this point of view that it is regarded by many persons of humble pretensions, who find large rooms and broad streets where in other districts they would only have the restricted space of respectable poverty, the weary little conventionality of the suburban cottage, or the dingy lodging-house parlours of town.

Bloomsbury is very much town indeed, surrounded on all sides by the roar of London; but it has something of the air of an individual place, a town within a town.

The pavements are wide, and so are the houses, as in the best quarter of a large provincial city. The squares have a look of seclusion, of shady walks, and retired leisure, which there is nothing to rival either in Belgravia or Mayfair. It is, or was—for it is many years since the present writer has passed over their broad pavements, or stood under the large, benignant, and stately shadow of the trees in Russell Square—a region apart, above fashion, a sober heart and centre of an older and steadier London,

such as is not represented in the Row, and takes little part in the rabble and rout of fashion, the decent town of earlier days.

I do not mean to imply by this that the Mannerings lived in Russell Square, or had any pretensions to be regarded among the magnates of Bloomsbury; for they were poor people, quite poor, living the quietest life; not rich enough even to have a house of their own; mere lodgers, occupying a second floor in a house which was full of other lodgers, but where they retained the importance and dignity of having furnished their own rooms. The house was situated at the corner of a street, and thus gave them a glimpse of the trees of the Square, a view over the gardens, as the landlady described it, which was no small matter, especially from the altitude of the second floor. The small family consisted of a father and daughter—he, middle-aged, a quiet, worn, and subdued man, employed all day in the British Museum; and she, a girl very young, yet so much older than her years that she was the constant and almost only companion of her father, to whom Dora was as his own soul, the sharer of all his thoughts, as well as the only brightness in his life.

She was but fifteen at the time when this chapter of their history begins, a creature in short frocks and long hair slightly curling on her shoulders; taller, if we may state such a contradiction in words, than she was intended to be, or turned out in her womanhood, with long legs, long neck, long fingers, and something of the look of a soft-eyed, timid, yet playfully daring colt, flying up and down stairs as if she had wings on

her shoulders, yet walking very sedately by the side of her father whenever they went out together, almost more steady and serious than he.

Mr. Mannering had the appearance of being a man who had always done well, yet never succeeded in life; a man with a small income, and no chance of ever bettering himself, as people say, or advancing in the little hierarchy of the great institution which he served meekly and diligently in the background, none of its promotions ever reaching him.

Scarcely any one, certainly none out of that institution, knew that there had been a period in which this gentle and modest life had almost been submerged under the bitterest wave, and in which it had almost won the highest honours possible to a man of such pursuits. This was an old story, and even Dora knew little of it. He had done so much at that forgotten and troubled time, that, had he been a rich man like Darwin, and able to retire and work in quiet the discoveries he had made, and the experiences he had attained, Robert Mannering's name might have been placed in the rolls of fame as high as that of his more fortunate contemporary.

But he was poor when he returned from the notable wanderings during the course of which he had been given up as dead for years, poor and heartbroken, and desiring nothing but the dimmest corner in which to live out his broken days, and just enough to live upon to bring up his little daughter, and to endure his existence, his duty to God and to Dora forbidding him to

make an end of it.

It would be giving an altogether false idea of the man with whom this book is to be much occupied, to say that he had continued in this despairing frame of mind. God and Dora—the little gift of God—had taken care of that. The little girl had led him back to a way which, if not brilliant or prosperous, was like a field-path through many humble flowers, sweet with the air and breath of nature. Sooth to say, it was no field-path at all, but led chiefly over the pavements of Bloomsbury; yet the simple metaphor was not untrue.

Thus he lived, and did his work dutifully day by day. No headship of a department, no assistant keepership for him; yet much esteem and consideration among his peers, and a constant reference, whenever anything in his special sphere was wanted, to his boundless information and knowledge. Sometimes a foreign inquirer would come eager to seek him, as the best and highest authority on this subject, to the consternation of the younger men in other branches, who could not understand how anybody could believe “old Mannering” to be of consequence in the place; but generally his life was as obscure as he wished it to be, yet not any hard or painful drudgery; for he was still occupied with the pursuit which he had chosen, and which he had followed all his life; and he was wise enough to recognise and be thankful for the routine which held his broken existence together, and had set up again, after his great disaster, his framework as a man.

Dora knew nothing of any disaster; and this was good for him

too, bringing him back to nature. "A cheerful man I am in life," he might have said with Thackeray, who also had good reason for being sad enough. A man who has for his chief society a buoyant, curious, new spirit, still trailing clouds of glory from her origin, still only making acquaintance with things of earth, curious about everything, asking a thousand penetrating questions, awakening a mood of interest everywhere, can scarcely be otherwise than cheerful.

The second floor at the corner of the Square which was inhabited by this pair consisted of three rooms, all good-sized and airy; the sitting-room being indeed spacious, larger than any two which could have been found in a fashionable nook in Mayfair. It was furnished, in a manner very unexpected by such chance visitors as did not know the character of the inhabitants, with furniture which would not have been out of place in Belgravia, or in a fine lady's drawing-room anywhere, mingled strangely with certain plain pieces put in for evident use.

A square and sturdy table occupied the portion of the room which was nearest to the door, with the clearest utility, serving for the meals of the father and daughter, while the other part of the room, partially separated by a stamped leather screen, had an air of subdued luxury, a little faded, yet unmistakable. The curtains were of heavy brocade, which had a little lost their colour, or rather gained those shadings and reflections which an artist loves; but hung with the softness of their silken fabric, profoundly unlike the landlady's nice fresh crimson rep which

adorned the windows of the first floor. There was an Italian inlaid cabinet against the farther wall, which held the carefully prepared sheets of a herbarium, which Mr. Mannering had collected from all the ends of the earth, and which was of sufficient value to count for much in the spare inheritance which he meant for his only child. The writing-table, at which Dora had learned to make her first pothooks, was a piece of beautiful *marqueterie*, the oldest and most graceful of its kind.

But I need not go round the room and make a catalogue of the furniture. It settled quite kindly into the second floor in Bloomsbury, with that grace which the nobler kind of patrician, subdued by fortune, lends to the humblest circumstances, which he accepts with patience and goodwill. Mr. Mannering himself had never been a handsome man; and all the colour and brightness of youth had died out of him, though he was still in the fulness of middle age. But the ivory tone of his somewhat sharply cut profile and the premature stoop of his shoulders suited his surroundings better than a more vigorous personality would have done.

Dora, in her half-grown size and bigness, with her floating hair and large movements, seemed to take up a great deal more space than her father; and it was strange that she did not knock down more frequently the pretty old-fashioned things, and the old books which lay upon the little tables, or even those tables themselves, as she whisked about; but they knew Dora, and she knew them. She had spent a great part of every day alone

with them, as long as she could remember, playing with those curiosities that lay upon them, while she was a child, in the long, silent, dreamy hours, when she was never without amusement, though as constantly alone.

Since she had grown older, she had taken pleasure in dusting them and arranging them, admiring the toys of old silver, and the carved ivories and trifles of all kinds, from the ends of the earth. It was her great pleasure on the Sunday afternoons, when her father was with her, to open the drawers of the cabinet and bring out the sheets of the herbarium so carefully arranged and classified. Her knowledge, perhaps, was not very scientific, but it was accurate in detail, and in what may be called locality in the highest degree. She knew what family abode in what drawer, and all its ramifications. These were more like neighbours to Dora, lodged in surrounding houses, than specimens in drawers. She knew all about them, where they came from, and their genealogy, and which were the grandparents, and which the children; and, still more interesting, in what jungle or marsh her father had found them, and which of them came from the African deserts in which he had once been lost.

By degrees she had found out much about that wonderful episode in his life, and had become vaguely aware, which was the greatest discovery of all, that it contained many things which she had not found out, and perhaps never would. She knew even how to lead him to talk about it, which had to be very skilfully done—for he was shy of the subject when assailed openly, and often

shrank from the very name of Africa as if it stung him; while on other occasions, led on by some train of thought in his own mind, he would fall into long lines of recollections, and tell her of the fever attacks, one after another, which had laid him low, and how the time had gone over him like a dream, so that he never knew till long after how many months, and even years, he had lost.

Where was the mother all this time, it may be asked? Dora knew no more of this part of her history than if she had come into the world without need of any such medium, like Minerva from her father's head.

It is difficult to find out from the veiled being of a little child what it thinks upon such a subject, or if it is aware at all, when it has never been used to any other state of affairs, of the strange vacancy in its own life. Dora never put a single question to her father on this point; and he had often asked himself whether her mind was dead to all that side of life which she had never known, or whether some instinct kept her silent; and had satisfied himself at last that, as she knew scarcely any other children, the want in her own life had not struck her imagination. Indeed, the grandchildren of Mrs. Simcox, the landlady, were almost the only children Dora had ever known familiarly, and they, like herself, had no mother, they had granny; and Dora had inquired of her father about her own granny, who was dead long ago.

"You have only me, my poor little girl," he had said. But Dora had been quite satisfied.

"Janie and Molly have no papa," she answered, with a little

pride. It was a great superiority, and made up for everything, and she inquired no more. Nature, Mr. Mannering knew, was by no means so infallible as we think her. He did not know, however, what is a still more recondite and profound knowledge, what secret things are in a child's heart.

I have known a widowed mother who wondered sadly for years why her children showed so little interest and asked no questions about their father; and then found out, from the lips of one grown into full manhood, what visions had been wrapt about that unknown image, and how his portrait had been the confidant of many a little secret trouble hidden even from herself. But Dora had not even a portrait to give embodiment to any wistful thoughts. Perhaps it was to her not merely that her mother was dead, but that she had never been. Perhaps—but who knows the questions that arise in that depth profound, the heart of a child?

It was not till Dora was fifteen that she received the great shock, yet revelation, of discovering the portrait of a lady in her father's room.

Was it her mother? She could not tell. It was the portrait of a young lady, which is not a child's ideal of a mother. It was hidden away in a secret drawer of which she had discovered the existence only by a chance in the course of some unauthorised investigations among Mr. Mannering's private properties.

He had lost something which Dora was intent on surprising him by finding; and this was what led her to these investigations. It was in a second Italian cabinet which was in his bedroom,

an inferior specimen to that in the drawing-room, but one more private, about which her curiosity had never been awakened. He kept handkerchiefs, neckties, uninteresting items of personal use in it, which Dora was somewhat carelessly turning over, when by accident the secret spring was touched, and the drawer flew open. In this there was a miniature case which presented a very strange spectacle when Dora, a little excited, opened it. There seemed to be nothing but a blank at first, until, on further examination, Dora found that the miniature had been turned face downwards in its case. It may be imagined with what eager curiosity she continued her investigations.

The picture, as has been said, was that of a young lady—quite a young lady, not much older, Dora thought, than herself. Who could this girl be? Her mother? But that girlish face could not belong to any girl's mother. It was not beautiful to Dora's eyes; but yet full of vivacity and interest, a face that had much to say if one only knew its language; with dark, bright eyes, and a tremulous smile about the lips. Who was it; oh, who was it? Was it that little sister of papa's who was dead, whose name had been Dora too? Was it —

Dora did not know what to think, or how to explain the little shock which was given her by this discovery. She shut up the drawer hastily, but she had not the heart to turn the portrait again as it had been turned, face downwards. It seemed too unkind, cruel almost. Why should her face be turned downwards, that living, smiling face? "I will ask papa," Dora said to herself; but

she could not tell why it was, any more than she could explain her other sensations on the subject, that when the appropriate moment came to do so, she had not the courage to ask papa.

CHAPTER III

There was one remarkable thing in Dora Mannering's life which I have omitted to mention, which is, that she was in the habit of receiving periodically, though at very uncertain intervals, out of that vast but vague universe surrounding England, which we call generally "abroad," a box. No one knew where it came from, or who it came from; at least, no light was ever thrown to Dora upon that mystery. It was despatched now from one place, now from another; and not a name, or a card, or a scrap of paper was ever found to identify the sender.

This box contained always a store of delights for the recipient, who, though she was in a manner monarch of all she surveyed, was without many of the more familiar pleasures of childhood. It had contained toys and pretty knick-knacks of many quaint foreign kinds when she was quite a child; but as she grew older, the mind of her unknown friend seemed to follow her growth with the strangest certainty of what would please these advancing youthful years.

The foundation of the box, if that word may be employed, was always a store of the daintiest underclothing, delicately made, which followed Dora's needs and growth, growing longer as she grew taller; so that underneath her frocks, which were not always lovely, the texture, form, and colour being chiefly decided by the dressmaker who had "made" for her as long as

she could remember, Dora was clothed like a princess; and thus accustomed from her childhood to the most delicate and dainty accessories—fine linen, fine wool, silk stockings, handkerchiefs good enough for any fine lady. Her father had not, at first, liked to see these fine things; he had pushed them away when she spread them out to show him her treasures, and turned his back upon her, bidding her carry off her trumpery.

It was so seldom, so very seldom, that Mr. Mannering had an objection to anything done by Dora, that this little exhibition of temper had an extraordinary effect; but the interval between one arrival and another was long enough to sweep any such recollection out of the mind of a child; and as she grew older, more intelligent to note what he meant, and, above all, more curious about everything that happened, he had changed his tone. But he had a look which Dora classified in her own mind as "the face father puts on when my box comes".

This is a sort of thing which imprints itself very clearly upon the mind of the juvenile spectator and critic. Dora knew it as well as she knew the clothes her father wore, or the unchanging habits of his life, though she did not for a long time attempt to explain to herself what it meant. It was a look of intent self-restraint, of a stoical repression. He submitted to having the different contents of the box exhibited to him without a smile on his face or the least manifestation of sympathy—he who sympathised with every sentiment which breathed across his child's facile spirit. He wound himself up to submit to the ordeal, it seemed, with

the blank look of an unwilling spectator, who has not a word of admiration for anything, and, indeed, hates the sight he cannot refuse to see.

“Who can send them, father? oh, who can send them? Who is it that remembers me like this, and that I’m growing, and what I must want, and everything? I was only a child when the last one came. You must know—you must know, father! How could any one know about me and not know you—or care for me?” Dora cried, with a little moisture springing to her eyes.

“I have already told you I don’t know anything about it,” said Mr. Mannering, oh, with such a shut-up face! closing the shutters upon his eyes and drawing down all the blinds, as Dora said.

“Well, but suppose you don’t know, you must guess; you must imagine who it could be. No one could know me, and not know you. I am not a stranger that you have nothing to do with. You must know who is likely to take so much thought about your daughter. Why, she knows my little name! There is ‘Dora’ on my handkerchiefs.”

He turned away with a short laugh. “You seem to have found out a great deal for yourself. How do you know it is ‘she’? It might be some old friend of mine who knew that my only child was Dora—and perhaps that I was not a man to think of a girl’s wants.”

“It may be an old friend of yours, father. It must be, for who would know about me but a friend of yours? But how could it be a man? It couldn’t be a man! A man could never work ‘Dora’—”

“You little simpleton! He would go to a shop and order it to be worked. I daresay it is Wallace, who is out in South America.”

Such a practical suggestion made Dora pause; but it was not at all an agreeable idea. “Mr. Wallace! an old, selfish, dried-up—” Then with a cry of triumph she added: “But they came long, long before he went to South America. No—I know one thing—that it is a lady. No one but a lady could tell what a girl wants. You don’t, father, though you know me through and through; and how could any other man? But I suppose you have had friends ladies as well as men?”

His closed-up lips melted a little. “Not many,” he said; then they shut up fast again. “It may be,” he said reluctantly, with a face from which all feeling was shut out, which looked like wood, “a friend—of your mother’s.”

“Oh, of mamma’s!” The girl’s countenance lit up; she threw back her head and her waving hair, conveying to the man who shrank from her look the impression as of a thing with wings. He had been of opinion that she had never thought upon this subject, never considered the side of life thus entirely shut out from her experience, and had wondered even while rejoicing at her insensibility. But when he saw the light on her face he shrank, drawing back into himself. “Oh,” cried Dora, “a friend of my mother’s! Oh, father, she must have died long, long ago, that I never remember her. Oh, tell me, who can this friend be?”

He had shut himself up again more closely than ever—not only were there shutters at all the windows, but they were bolted

and barred with iron. His face was more blank than any piece of wood. "I never knew much of her friends," he said.

"Mother's friends!" the girl cried, with a half shriek of reproachful wonder. And then she added quickly: "But think, father, think! You will remember somebody if you will only try."

"Dora," he said, "you don't often try my patience, and you had better not begin now. I should like to throw all that trumpery out of the window, but I don't, for I feel I have no right to deprive you of — Your mother's friends were not mine. I don't feel inclined to think as you bid me. The less one thinks the better—on some subjects. I must ask you to question me no more."

"But, father —"

"I have said that I will be questioned no more."

"It wasn't a question," said the girl, almost sullenly; and then she clasped her hands about his arm with a sudden impulse. "Father, if you don't like it, I'll put them all away. I'll never think of them nor touch them again."

The wooden look melted away, his features quivered for a moment. He stooped and kissed her on the forehead. "No," he said, making an effort to keep his lips firmly set as before. "No; I have no right to do that. No; I don't wish it. Keep them and wear them, and take pleasure in them; but don't speak to me on the subject again."

This conversation took place on the occasion of a very special novelty in the mysterious periodical present which she had just received, about which it was impossible to keep silence. The box

—“my box,” as Dora had got to call it—contained, in addition to everything else, a dress, which was a thing that had never been sent before.

It was a white dress, made with great simplicity, as became Dora’s age, but also in a costly way, a semi-transparent white, the sort of stuff which could be drawn through a ring, as happens in fairy tales, and was certainly not to be bought in ordinary English shops. To receive anything so unexpected, so exciting, so beautiful, and not to speak of it, to exhibit it to some one, was impossible. Dora had not been able to restrain herself. She had carried it in her arms out of her room, and opened it out upon a sofa in the sitting-room for her father’s inspection. There are some things which we know beforehand will not please, and yet which we are compelled to do; and this was the consciousness in Dora’s mind, who, besides her delight in the gift, and her desire to be able to find out something about the donor, had also, it must be allowed, a burning desire to make discoveries as to that past of which she knew so little, which had seized upon her mind from the moment when she had found the portrait turned upon its face in the secret drawer of her father’s cabinet. As she withdrew now, again carrying in her arms the beautiful dress, there was in her mind, underneath a certain compunction for having disturbed her father, and sympathy with him so strong that she would actually have been capable of sacrificing her newly-acquired possessions, a satisfaction half-mischievous, half-affectionate, in the discoveries which she had made. They were certainly

discoveries; sorry as she was to “upset father,” there was yet a consciousness in her mind that this time it had been worth the while.

The reader may not think any better of Dora for this confession; but there is something of the elf in most constitutions at fifteen, and she was not of course at all sensible at that age of the pain that might lie in souvenirs so ruthlessly stirred up. And she had indeed made something by them. Never, never again, she promised herself, would she worry father with questions; but so far as the present occasion went, she could scarcely be sorry, for had not she learned much—enough to give her imagination much employment? She carried away her discoveries with her, as she carried her dress, to realise them in the shelter of her own room. They seemed to throw a vivid light upon that past in which her own life was so much involved. She threw the dress upon her bed carelessly, these other new thoughts having momentarily taken the interest out of even so exciting a novelty as that; and arranged in shape and sequence what she had found out. Well, it was not so much, after all. What seemed most clear in it was that father had not been quite friends with mother, or at least with mother’s friends. Perhaps these friends had made mischief between them—perhaps she had cared for them more than for her husband; but surely that was not possible. And how strange, how strange it was that he should keep up such a feeling so long!

As Dora did not remember her mother, it was evident that she must have been dead many, many years. And yet her father

still kept up his dislike to her friends! It threw a new light even upon him, whom she knew better than any one. Dora felt that she knew her father thoroughly, every thought that was in his mind; and yet here it would seem that she did not know him at all. So good a man, who was never hard with anybody, who forgave her, Dora, however naughty she might have been, as soon as she asked pardon; who forgave old Mr. Warrender for contradicting him about that orchid, the orchid that was called *Manneringii*, and which father had discovered, and therefore must know best; who forgave Mrs. Simcox when she swept the dust from the corners upon the herbarium and spoilt some of the specimens; and yet who in all these years had never forgiven the unknown persons, who were mother's friends, some one of whom must be nice indeed, or she never would go on remembering Dora, and sending her such presents. What could he have against this unknown lady,—this nice, nice woman? And how was it possible that he should have kept it up in his mind, and never forgiven it, or forgotten all these years? It made Dora wonder, and feel, though she crushed the feeling firmly, that perhaps father was not so perfect as she had thought.

And then there was this lady to think of—her mother's friend, who had kept on all this time thinking of Dora. She would not have been more than a baby when this benefactress saw her last, since Dora did not remember either mother, or mother's friend; yet she must recollect just how old Dora was, must have guessed just about how tall she was, and kept count how she had grown

from one time to another. The beautiful dress was just almost long enough, almost fitted her in every way. It gave the girl a keen touch of pleasure to think that she was just a little taller and slighter than her unknown friend supposed her to be—but so near; the letting down of a hem, the narrowing of a seam, and it would be a perfect fit. How foolish father must be to think that Mr. Wallace, or any other man, would have thought of that! Her mother's friend—what a kind friend, what a constant friend, though father did not like her!

It overawed Dora a little to think if ever this lady came home, what would happen? Of course, she would wish to see the girl whom she had remembered so long, whom she had befriended so constantly; and what if father would not permit it? It would be unkind, ungrateful, wrong; but what if father objected, if it made him unhappy? Dora did not see her way through this dreadful complication. It was sufficiently hard upon her, a girl at so early an age, to become the possessor of a beautiful dress like this, and have no one to show it to, to talk it over with; nobody even to tell her exactly how it fitted, to judge what was necessary for its perfection, as Dora herself, with no experience, and not even a good glass to see herself in, could scarcely do. To hide a secret of any kind in one's being at fifteen is a difficult thing; but when that secret is a frock, a dress!—a robe, indeed, she felt it ought to be called, it was so exquisite, so poetical in its fineness and whiteness. Dora had no one to confide in; and if she had possessed a thousand confidants, would not have said a word

to them which would seem to involve her father in any blame. She put her pretty dress away, however, with a great sense of discomfiture and downfall. Perhaps he would dislike to see her wear it, even if she had ever any need for a beautiful dress like that. But she never had any need. She never went anywhere, or saw anybody. A whole host of little grievances came up in the train of that greater one. She wondered if she were to spend all her life like this, without ever tasting those delights of society which she had read of, without ever knowing any one of her own age, without ever seeing people dance, or hearing them sing. As for performing in these ways herself, that had not come into Dora's mind. She would like, she thought, to look on and see how they did it, for once, at least, in her life.

When she had come to this point, Dora, who was a girl full of natural sense, began to feel instinctively that she was not in a good way, and that it would be better to do something active to clear away the cobwebs. It was evening, however, and she did not know exactly what to do. To go back to the sitting-room where her father was reading, and to sit down also to read at his side, seemed an ordeal too much for her after the excitement of their previous talk; but it was what probably she would have been compelled to do, had she not heard a heavy step mounting the stairs, the sound of a knock at the door, and her father's voice bidding some one enter.

She satisfied herself presently that it was the voice of one of Mr. Mannering's chief friends, a colleague from the Museum,

and that he was safe for a time not to remark her absence or to have urgent need for her. What now should Dora do? The openings of amusement were small. Mrs. Hesketh had been exhausted for the moment. It must be said that Dora was free of the whole house, and that she used her *petites entrées* in the most liberal and democratic fashion, thinking no scorn of going downstairs sometimes to the funny little room next to the kitchen, which Mrs. Simcox called the breakfast-room, and used as her own sanctum, the family centre where her grandchildren and herself found refuge out of the toils of the kitchen. The kitchen itself remained in the possession of Jane; and Jane, like her mistress, occasionally shared the patronage of Miss Dora. To-night perhaps she wanted solace of another kind from any which could be given her on the basement story. It is not often that a young person in search of entertainment or sympathy has all the gradations of the social system to choose from. The first floor represented the aristocracy in the establishment at Bloomsbury. It was occupied by a Scotch lady, a certain Miss Bethune, a somewhat harsh-featured and angular person, hiding a gentle heart under a grim exterior; but a little intolerant in her moods, and not always sure to respond to overtures of friendship; with a maid not much less unlike the usual denizens of Bloomsbury than herself, but beaming with redness and good humour, and one of Dora's chief worshippers in the house. When the girl felt that her needs required the sympathy of a person of the highest, *i.e.*, her own class, she went either boldly or with strategy to the

drawing-room floor. She had thus the power of drawing upon the fellowship of her kind in whatever way the temper of the time adapted it best for her.

Mrs. Simcox and the girls downstairs, and Mrs. Hesketh above, would have been lost in raptures over Dora's new dress. They would have stared, they would perhaps have touched with a timid finger, they would have opened their eyes and their mouths, and cried: "Oh!" or "La!" or "Well, I never!" But they would not have understood. One's own kind, Dora felt, was necessary for that. But as it was evening, and Miss Bethune was not always gracious, she did not boldly walk up to her door, but lingered about on the stairs, coming and going, until, as was pretty sure to occur, Gilchrist, the maid, with her glowing moon face and her sandy locks, came out of the room. Gilchrist brightened immediately at the sight of the favourite of the house.

"Oh, is that you, Miss Dora? Come in and see my lady, and cheer her up. She's not in the best of spirits to-night."

"Neither am I—in the best of spirits," said Dora.

"You!" cried Gilchrist, with what she herself would have called a "skreigh" of laughter. She added sympathetically: "You'll maybe have been getting a scold from your papaw".

"My father never scolds," said Dora, with dignity.

"Bless me! but that's the way when there's but wan child," said Miss Bethune's maid: "not always, though," she added, with a deep sigh that waved aloft her own cap-strings, and caught Dora's hair like a breeze. The next moment she opened the door and

said, putting her head in: "Here's Miss Dora, mem, to cheer you up a bit: but no' in the best of spirits hersel".

"Bless me!" repeated Miss Bethune from within: "and what is wrong with her spirits? Come away, Dora, come in." Both mistress and maid had, as all the house was aware, curious modes of expressing themselves, which were Scotch, though nobody was aware in Bloomsbury how that quality affected the speech—in Miss Bethune's case at least. The lady was tall and thin, a large framework of a woman which had never filled out. She sat in a large chair near the fire, between which and her, however, a screen was placed. She held up a fan before her face to screen off the lamp, and consequently her countenance was in full shadow. She beckoned to the girl with her hand, and pointed to a seat beside her. "So you are in low spirits, Dora? Well, I'm not very bright myself. Come and let us mingle our tears."

"You are laughing at me, Miss Bethune. You think I have no right to feel anything."

"On the contrary, my dear. I think at your age there are many things that a girl feels—too much; and though they're generally nonsense, they're just as disagreeable as if they were the best of sense. Papa a little cross?"

"Why should you all think anything so preposterous? My father is never cross," cried Dora, with tears of indignation in her eyes.

"The better for him, my dear, much the better for him," said Miss Bethune; "but, perhaps, rather the worse for you. That's not

my case, for I am just full of irritability now and then, and ready to quarrel with the tables and chairs. Well, you are cross yourself, which is much worse. And yet I hear you had one of your grand boxes to-day, all full of bonnie-dies. What a lucky little girl you are to get presents like that!"

"I am not a little girl, Miss Bethune."

"No, I'll allow you're a very big one for your age. Come, Dora, tell me what was in the box this time. It will do you good."

Dora hesitated a little to preserve her dignity, and then she said almost with awe: "There was a dress in it".

"A dress!" cried Miss Bethune, with a little shriek of surprise; "and does it fit you?"

"It's just a very, very little bit too short," said Dora, with pride, "and just a very, very little bit too wide at the waist."

"Run and bring it, and let me see it," cried the lady. "I've no doubt in the world it fits like a glove. Gilchrist, come in, come in, and see what the bairn's got. A frock that fits her like a glove."

"Just a very, very little too short, and a very, very little too wide in the waist," said Dora, repeating her formula. She had flown upstairs after the first moment's hesitation, and brought it back in her arms, glad in spite of herself to be thus delivered from silence and the sense of neglect.

"Eh, mem," cried Gilchrist, "but it must be an awfu', awfu' faithful woman that has minded how a lassie like that grows and gets big, and just how big she gets, a' thae years."

"There ye are with your moral!" cried the mistress; and to

Dora's infinite surprise tears were on her cheeks. "It's just the lassie that makes all the difference," said Miss Bethune. She flung the pretty dress from her, and then she rose up suddenly and gave Dora a hasty kiss. "Put it on and let me see it," she said; "I will wager you anything it just fits like a glove."

CHAPTER IV

“That is a very strange business of these Mannerings, Gilchrist,” said Miss Bethune to her maid, when Dora, excited by praise and admiration, and forgetting all her troubles, had retired to her own habitation upstairs, escorted, she and her dress, by Gilchrist, who could not find it in her heart, as she said, to let a young thing like that spoil her bonnie new frock by not putting it properly away. Gilchrist laid the pretty dress lovingly in a roomy drawer, smoothing out all its creases by soft pats of her accustomed hands, and then returned to her mistress to talk over the little incident of the evening.

Miss Bethune’s spirits were improved also by that little exhibition. What a thing it is to be able to draw a woman softly out of her troubles by the sight of a pretty child in a pretty new dress! Contemptible the love of clothes, the love of finery, and so forth, let the philosophers say. To me there is something touching in that natural instinct which relieves for a moment now and then the heaviest pressure. Dora’s new frock had nothing to do with any gratification of Miss Bethune’s vanity; but it brought a little dawning ray of momentary light into her room, and a little distraction from the train of thoughts that were not over bright. No man could feel the same for the most beautiful youth ever introduced in raiment like the day. Let us be thankful among all our disabilities for a little simple pleasure, now and then, that is

common to women only. Boy or girl, it scarcely matters which, when they come in dressed in their best, all fresh and new, the sight pleases the oldest, the saddest of us—a little unconsidered angel-gift, amid the dimness and the darkness of the every-day world. Miss Bethune to outward aspect was a little grim, an old maid, as people said, apart from the sympathies of life. But the dull evening and the pressure of many thoughts had been made bright to her by Dora's new frock.

“What business, mem?” asked Gilchrist.

“If ever there was a living creature slow at the uptake, and that could not see a pikestaff when it is set before your eyes!” cried Miss Bethune. “What's the meaning of it all, you stupid woman? Who's that away in the unknown that sends all these bonnie things to that motherless bairn?—and remembers the age she is, and when she's grown too big for dolls, and when she wants a frock that will set her off, that she could dance in and sing in, and make her little curtesy to the world? No, she's too young for that; but still the time's coming, and fancy goes always a little before.”

“Eh, mem,” said Gilchrist, “that is just what I have askit mysel'—that's just what I was saying. It's some woman, that's the wan thing; but what woman could be so thoughtful as that, aye minding just what was wanted?” She made a gesture with her hands as if in utter inability to divine, but her eyes were fixed all the time very wistfully on her mistress's face.

“You need not look at me like that,” the lady said.

“I was looking at you, mem, not in any particklar way.”

“If you think you can make a fool of me at the present period of our history, you’re far mistaken,” said Miss Bethune. “I know what you were meaning. You were comparing her with me, not knowing either the one or the other of us—though you have been my woman, and more near me than anybody on earth these five-and-twenty long years.”

“And more, mem, and more!” cried Gilchrist, with a flow of tears, which were as natural to her as her spirit. “Eh, I was but a young, young lass, and you a bonnie —”

“Hold your peace!” said Miss Bethune, with an angry raising of her hand; and then her voice wavered and shook a little, and a tremulous laugh came forth. “I was never a bonnie—anything, ye auld fool! and that you know as well as me.”

“But, mem—”

“Hold your peace, Gilchrist! We were never anything to brag of, either you or me. Look in your glass, woman, if you don’t believe me. A couple of plain women, very plain women, mistress and maid.”

This was said with a flash of hazel eyes which gave a half-humorous contradiction at the same moment to the assertion. Gilchrist began to fold hems upon the apron with which she had just dried her tears.

“I never said,” she murmured, with a downcast head, “a word about mysel’,—that’s no’ a woman’s part. If there’s nobody that speaks up for her she has just to keep silence, if she was the

bonniest woman in the world.”

“The auld fool! because there was once a silly lad that had nobody else to come courting to! No, Gilchrist, my woman, you were never bonnie. A white skin, I allow, to go with your red hair, and a kind of innocent look in your eyes,—nothing, nothing more! We were both plain women, you and me, not adapted to please the eyes of men.”

“They might have waited long afore we would have tried, either the wan or the other of us,” cried Gilchrist, with a flash of self-assertion. “No’ that I would even mysel’ to you, mem,” she added in an after breath.

“As for that, it’s a metaphysical question,” said Miss Bethune. “I will not attempt to enter into it. But try or no’, it is clear we did not succeed. And what it is that succeeds is just more than I can tell. It’s not beauty, it’s a kind of natural attraction.” She paused a moment in this deep philosophical inquiry, and then said quickly: “All this does not help us to find out what is this story about the Mannerings. Who is the woman? Is it somebody that loves the man, or somebody that loves the girl?”

“If you would take my opinion, mem, I would say that the man—if ye call Mr. Mannering, honest gentleman, the man, that has just every air of being a well-born person, and well-bred, and not a common person at all—”

“You haveral! The king himself, if there was a king, could be no more than a man.”

“I would say, mem, that it was not for him—oh, no’ for him,

except maybe in opposition, if you could fancy that. Supposing,” said Gilchrist, raising her arm in natural eloquence, “supposin’ such a thing as that there should be a bonnie bairn like Miss Dora between two folk that had broken with one another—and it was the man, not the woman, that had her. I could just fancy,” said the maid, her brown eyes lighting, her milky yet freckled complexion flushing over,—“I could just fancy that woman pouring out everything at the bairn’s feet—gold and silver and grand presents, and a’ the pomps of this world, partly out of an adoration for her hersel’, partly just to make the man set his teeth at her that was away—maybe, in the desert—unknown!”

Gilchrist stood like a sibyl making this picture flash and gleam before her own inward vision with a heat and passion that seemed quite uncalled for in the circumstances. What was Hecuba to her, or she to Hecuba, that she should be so inspired by the possibilities of a mystery with which she had nothing to do? Her eloquence brought a corresponding glow, yet cloud, over the countenance of her mistress, who sat and listened with her head leaning on her hand, and for some time said nothing. She broke the silence at last with a laugh in which there was very little sound of mirth.

“You are a limited woman,” she said—“a very limited woman. You can think of no state of affairs but one, and that so uncommon that perhaps there never was a case in the world like it. You will never be done, I know that, taking up your lesson out of it—all to learn one that has neither need to learn nor wish to

learn—a thing that is impossible. Mind you what I say, and be done with this vain endeavour. Whatever may be the meaning of this Mannering business, it has no likeness to the other. And I am not a person to be schooled by the like of you, or to be taught in parables by my own woman, as if I was a person of no understanding, and her a mistress of every knowledge.”

Miss Bethune rose hurriedly from her seat, and made a turn about the room with an air of high excitement and almost passion. Then she came and stood before the fire, leaning on the mantelpiece, looking down upon the blaze with a face that seemed to be coloured by the reflection. Finally, she put out a long arm, caught Gilchrist by the shoulders, who stood softly crying, as was her wont, within reach, and drew her close. “You’ve been with me through it all,” she said suddenly; “there’s nobody that knows me but you. Whatever you say, it’s you only that knows what is in my heart. I bear you no ill-will for any word you say, no’ for any word you say; and the Lord forgive me if maybe all this time it is you that has been right and me that has been wrong!” Only a moment, scarcely so much, Miss Bethune leant her head upon Gilchrist’s shoulder, then she suddenly pushed her away. And not a second too soon, for at that moment a knock came to the door. They both started a little; and Miss Bethune, with the speed of thought, returned to the chair shaded by a screen from the lamplight and firelight in which she had been sitting, “not in good spirits,” at the time of the interruption of Dora. “Go and see who it is,” she said, half in

words, half by the action of her hand. Nothing could have been more instantaneous than this rapid change.

When Gilchrist, scarcely less rapid though so much heavier than her mistress, opened the door, there stood before it a little man very carefully dressed, though in morning costume, in a solemn frock coat, with his hat in his hand. Though professional costume no longer exists among us, it was impossible not to feel and recognise in a moment that nothing but a medical man, a doctor to the tips of his fingers, could have appeared in just that perfect neatness of dress, so well brushed, so exactly buttoned, so gravely clothed in garments which, though free of any peculiarity of art or colour, such as that which distinguishes the garb of a clergyman, were yet so completely and seriously professional. His whiskers, for it was in the days when these ornaments were still worn, his hair, brown, with a slight crisp and upturning, like lining, of grey, the watch-chain that crossed his waistcoat, as well as the accurate chronometer of a watch to which so many eager and so many languid pulses had beat, were all in perfect keeping; even his boots—but we must not pursue too far this discussion of Dr. Roland's personal appearance. His boots were not the polished leather of the evening; but they were the spotless boots of a man who rarely walked, and whose careful step from his carriage to a patient's door never carried in any soil of the outside to the most delicate carpet. Why, being one of the inhabitants of this same house in Bloomsbury, he should have carried his hat in his hand when he came to the door of Miss Bethune's drawing-

room from his own sitting-room downstairs, is a mystery upon which I can throw no light.

The ideas of a man in respect to his hat are indeed unfathomable. Whether he carries it as a protection or a shield of pretence, whether to convey to you that he is anxiously expected somewhere else, and that you are not to calculate upon anything but a short appearance upon your individual scene, whether to make it apparent by its gloss and sheen how carefully he has prepared for this interview, whether it is to keep undue familiarity at arm's length, or provide a becoming occupation for those hands with which many persons, while in repose, do not know what to do, it is impossible to tell. Certain it is that a large number of men find consolation and support in the possession of that article of apparel; and though they may freely abuse it in other circumstances, cling to it on social occasions as to an instrument of salvation. Dr. Roland held it fast, and bowed over it with a little formality, as he came into his neighbour's presence. They met on the stairs or in the hall sometimes three or four times in a day, but they were not the less particular in going through all the forms of civility when the doctor came to pay a call, as if they had not seen each other for a week before. He was a man of very great observation, and he did not miss a single particular of the scene. The screen drawn round the lady, defending her not only from the fire but from inspection, and a slight glistening upon the cheek of Gilchrist, which, as she did not paint or use any cosmetic, had but one explanation. That

he formed a completely wrong conclusion was not Dr. Roland's fault. He did so sometimes from lack of material on which to form his judgment, but not often. He said to himself, "There has been a row," which, as the reader is aware, was not the case; but then he set himself to work to smooth down all agitation with a kindness and skill which the gentlest reader, knowing all about it, could not have surpassed.

"We have just been doing a very wrong thing, Gilchrist and me," said Miss Bethune; "a thing which you will say, doctor, is the way of ladies and their maids; but that is just one of your generalisings, and not true—except now and then. We have been wondering what is the strange story of our bonnie little Dora and that quiet, learned father of hers upstairs."

"Very natural, I should say," said the doctor. "But why should there be any story at all? I don't wonder at the discussion, but why should there be any cause for it? A quiet, learned man, as you say, and one fair daughter and no more, whom he loves passing well."

"Ah, doctor," said Miss Bethune, "you know a great deal about human nature. You know better than that."

The doctor put down his hat, and drew his chair nearer the fire. "Should you like to hear the story of poor Mannering?" he said.

CHAPTER V

There is nothing more usual than to say that could we but know the life history of the first half-dozen persons we meet with on any road, we should find tragic details and unexpected lights and shadows far beyond the reach of fiction, which no doubt is occasionally true: though probably the first half-dozen would be found to gasp, like the knife-grinder: "Story? Lord bless you! I have none to tell, sir." This, to be sure, would be no argument; for our histories are not frequently unknown to, or, at least, unappreciated by ourselves, and the common human sense is against any accumulation of wonders in a small space. I am almost ashamed to say that the two people who inhabited one above the other two separate floors of my house in Bloomsbury, had a certain singularity and unusualness in their lives, that they were not as other men or women are; or, to speak more clearly, that being as other men and women are, the circumstances of their lives created round them an atmosphere which was not exactly that of common day. When Dr. Roland recounted to Miss Bethune the story of Mr. Mannering, that lady shut her lips tight in the partial shadow of the screen, to restrain the almost irrepressible murmurs of a revelation equally out of the common which belonged to herself. That is, she was tempted to utter aloud what she said in her soul, "Oh, but that is like me!" "Oh, but I would never have done that!"—comparing the secret in her own

life, which nobody in this place suspected, with the secret in her neighbour's, which, at least to some few persons, was known.

Poor Mr. Mannering! there was a strange kind of superiority and secret satisfaction in pitying his fate, in learning all the particulars of it, in assuring herself that Dora was quite ignorant, and nobody in the house had the least suspicion, while at the same time secure in the consciousness that she herself was wrapt in impenetrable darkness, and that not even this gossip of a doctor could divine her. There is an elation in knowing that you too have a story, that your own experiences are still more profound than those of the others whom you are called upon to pity and wonder over, that did they but know!—which, perhaps, is not like the more ordinary elation of conscious superiority, but yet has its sweetness. There was a certain dignity swelling in Miss Bethune's figure as she rose to shake hands with the doctor, as if she had wrapped a tragic mantle round her, as if she dismissed him like a queen on the edge of ground too sacred to be trodden by any vulgar feet. He was conscious of it vaguely, though not of what it was. He gave her a very keen glance in the shadow of that screen: a keener observer than Dr. Roland was not easily to be met with,—but then his observations were generally turned in one particular way, and the phenomena which he glimpsed on this occasion did not come within the special field of his inquiries. He perceived them, but he could not classify them, in the scientific narrowness of his gaze.

Miss Bethune waited until the well-known sound of the

closing of Dr. Roland's door downstairs met her ear; and then she rang violently, eagerly for her maid. What an evening this was, among all the quiet evenings on which nothing happened,—an evening full of incidents, of mysteries, and disclosures! The sound of the bell was such that the person summoned came hurrying from her room, well aware that there must be something to be told, and already breathless with interest. She found her mistress walking up and down the room, the screen discarded, the fan thrown down, the very shade on the lamp pushed up, so that it had the tipsy air of a hat placed on one side of the head. "Oh, Gilchrist!" Miss Bethune cried.

Dr. Roland went, as he always went, briskly but deliberately downstairs. If he had ever run up and down at any period of his life, taking two steps at a time, as young men do, he did it no longer. He was a little short-sighted, and wore a "pince-nez," and was never sure that between his natural eyes, with which he looked straight down at his feet, and his artificial ones, which had a wider circle, he might not miss a step, which accounted for the careful, yet rapid character of his movements. The door which Miss Bethune waited to hear him close was exactly below her own, and the room filled in Dr. Roland's life the conjoint positions of waiting-room, dining-room, and library. His consulting-room was formed of the other half looking to the back, and shut off from this by folding-doors and closely-drawn curtains. All the piles of *Illustrated News*, *Graphic*, and other picture papers, along with various well-thumbed pictorial

volumes, the natural embellishments of the waiting-room, were carefully cleared away; and the room, with Dr. Roland's chair drawn near a cheery blazing fire, his reading-lamp, his book, and his evening paper on his table, looked comfortable enough. It was quite an ordinary room in Bloomsbury, and he was quite an ordinary man. Nothing remarkable (the reader will be glad to hear) had ever happened to him. He had gone through the usual studies, he had knocked about the world for a number of years, he had seen life and many incidents in other people's stories both at home and abroad. But nothing particular had ever happened to himself. He had lived, but if he had loved, nobody knew anything about that. He had settled in Bloomsbury some four or five years before, and he had grown into a steady, not too overwhelming practice. His specialty was the treatment of dyspepsia, and other evils of a sedentary life; and his patients were chiefly men, the men of offices and museums, among whom he had a great reputation. This was his official character, not much of a family adviser, but strong to rout the liver fiend and the demons of indigestion wherever encountered. But in his private capacity Dr. Roland's character was very remarkable and his scientific enthusiasm great.

He was a sort of medical detective, working all for love, and nothing for reward, without fee, and in many cases without even the high pleasure of carrying out his views. He had the eye of a hawk for anything wrong in the complexion or aspect of those who fell under his observation. The very postman at the door,

whom Dr. Roland had met two or three times as he went out for his constitutional in the morning, had been divined and cut open, as it were, by his lancet of a glance, and saved from a bad illness by the peremptory directions given to him, which the man had the sense (and the prudence, for it was near Christmas) to obey. In that case the gratuity passed from doctor to patient, not from patient to doctor, but was not perhaps less satisfactory on that account. Then Dr. Roland would seize Jenny or Molly by the shoulders when they timidly brought a message or a letter into his room, look into the blue of their eyes for a moment, and order a dose on the spot; a practice which made these innocent victims tremble even to pass his door.

“Oh, granny, I can’t, I can’t take it up to the doctor,” they would say, even when it was a telegram that had come: little selfish things, not thinking what poor sick person might be sending for the doctor; nor how good it was to be able to get a dose for nothing every time you wanted it.

But most of the people whom he met were less easily manageable than the postman and the landlady’s little granddaughters. Dr. Roland regarded every one he saw from this same medical point of view; and had made up his mind about Miss Bethune, and also about Mr. Mannering, before he had been a week in the house. Unfortunately, he could do nothing to impress his opinion upon them; but he kept his eyes very wide open, and took notes, attending the moment when perhaps his opportunity might occur. As for Dora, he had nothing

but contempt for her from the first moment he had seen her. Hers was a case of inveterate good health, and wholly without interest. That girl, he declared to himself scornfully, would be well anywhere. Bloomsbury had no effect upon her. She was neither anæmic or dyspeptic, though the little things downstairs were both. But her father was a different matter. Half a dozen playful demons were skirmishing around that careful, temperate, well-living man; and Dr. Roland took the greatest interest in their advances and withdrawals, expecting the day when one or other would seize the patient and lay him low. Miss Bethune, too, had her little band of assailants, who were equally interesting to Dr. Roland, but not equally clear, since he was as yet quite in the dark as to the moral side of the question in her case.

He knew what would happen to these two, and calculated their chances with great precision, taking into account all the circumstances that might defer or accelerate the catastrophe. These observations interested him like a play. It was a kind of second sight that he possessed, but reaching much further than the vision of any Highland seer, who sees the winding-sheet only when it is very near, mounting in a day or two from the knees to the waist, and hence to the head. But Dr. Roland saw its shadow long before it could have been visible to any person gifted with the second sight. Sometimes he was wrong—he had acknowledged as much to himself in one or two instances; but it was very seldom that this occurred. Those who take a pessimistic view either of the body or soul are bound to be right in many, if

not in most cases, we are obliged to allow.

But it was not with the design of hunting patients that Dr. Roland made these investigations; his interest in the persons he saw around him was purely scientific. It diverted him greatly, if such a word may be used, to see how they met their particular dangers, whether they instinctively avoided or rushed to encounter them, both which methods they constantly employed in their unconsciousness. He liked to note the accidents (so called) that came in to stave off or to hurry on the approaching trouble. The persons to whom these occurred had often no knowledge of them; but Dr. Roland noted everything and forgot nothing. He had a wonderful memory as well as such excessively clear sight; and he carried on, as circumstances permitted, a sort of oversight of the case, even if it might be in somebody else's hands. Sometimes his interest in these outlying patients who were not his, interfered with the concentration of his attention on those who were—who were chiefly, as has been said, dyspeptics and the like, affording no exciting variety of symptoms to his keen intellectual and professional curiosity. And these peculiarities made him a very serviceable neighbour. He never objected to be called in in haste, because he was the nearest doctor, or to give a flying piece of advice to any one who might be attacked by sudden pain or uneasiness; indeed, he might be said to like these unintentional interferences with other people's work, which afforded him increased means of observation, and the privilege of launching a new prescription at a patient's head

by way of experiment, or confidential counsel at the professional brother whom he was thus accidentally called upon to aid.

On the particular evening which he occupied by telling Miss Bethune the story of the Mannerings,—not without an object in so doing, for he had a strong desire to put that lady herself under his microscope and find out how certain things affected her,—he had scarcely got himself comfortably established by his own fireside, put on a piece of wood to make a blaze, felt for his cigar-case upon the mantelpiece, and taken up his paper, when a knock at his door roused him in the midst of his preparations for comfort. The doctor lifted his head quickly, and cocked one fine ear like a dog, and with something of the thrill of listening with which a dog responds to any sound. That he let the knock be repeated was by no means to say that he had not heard the first time. A knock at his door was something like a first statement of symptoms to the doctor. He liked to understand and make certain what it meant.

“Come in,” he said quickly, after the second knock, which had a little hurry and temerity in it after the tremulous sound of the first.

The door opened; and there appeared at it, flushed with fright and alarm, yet pallid underneath the flush, the young and comely countenance of Mrs. Hesketh, Dora’s friend on the attic floor.

“Oh!” Dr. Roland said, taking in this unexpected appearance, and all her circumstances, physical and mental, at a glance. He had met her also more than once at the door or on the stairs. He

asked kindly what was the little fool frightened about, as he rose up quickly and with unconscious use and wont placed a chair in the best light, where he should be able to read the simple little alphabet of her constitution and thoughts.

“Oh, doctor, sir! I hope you don’t mind me coming to disturb you, though I know as it’s late and past hours.”

“A doctor has no hours. Come in,” he said.

Then there was a pause. The agitated young face disappeared, leaving Dr. Roland only a side view of her shoulder and figure in profile, and a whispering ensued. “I cannot—I cannot! I ain’t fit,” in a hoarse tone, and then the young woman’s eager pleading. “Oh, Alfred dear, for my sake!”

“Come in, whoever it is,” said Dr. Roland, with authority. “A doctor has no hours, but either people in the house have, and you mustn’t stay outside.”

Then there was a little dragging on the part of the wife, a little resistance on the part of the husband; and finally Mrs. Hesketh appeared, more flushed than ever, grasping the sleeve of a rather unwholesome-looking young man, very pink all over and moist, with furtive eyes, and hair standing on end. He had a fluttered clandestine look, as if afraid to be seen, as he came into the full light of the lamp, and looked suspiciously around him, as if to find out whether anything dangerous was there.

“It is my ’usband, sir,” said Mrs. Hesketh. “It’s Alfred. He’s been off his food and off his sleep for I don’t know how long, and I’m not happy about him. I thought perhaps you might give

him a something that would put him all straight.”

“Off his food and off his sleep? Perhaps he hasn’t been off his drink also?” said the doctor, giving a touch to the shade of the lamp.

“I knew,” said the young man, in the same partially hoarse voice, “as that is what would be said.”

“And a gentleman like you ought to know better,” said the indignant wife. “Drink is what he never touches, if it isn’t a ’alf pint to his supper, and that only to please me.”

“Then it’s something else, and not drink,” said the doctor. “Sit down, and let me have a look at you.” He took into his cool grasp a somewhat tremulous damp hand, which had been hanging down by the patient’s side, limp yet agitated, like a thing he had no use for. “Tell me something about him,” said Dr. Roland. “In a shop? Baxter’s?—yes, I know the place. What you call shopman,—no, assistant,—young gentleman at the counter?”

“Oh, no,” said Mrs. Hesketh, with pride; “book-keeper, sir—sits up in his desk in the middle of the costume department, and—”

“Ah, I see,” said the doctor quickly. He gave the limp wrist, in which the pulse had suddenly given a great jump, a grip with his cool hand. “Control yourself,” he said quietly. “Nerves all in a whirl, system breaking down—can you take a holiday?”

“Oh, yes,” said the young man in a sort of bravado, “of course I can take a holiday! and an express ticket for the workhouse after it. How are we to live if I go taking holidays? We can’t afford no

holidays,” he said in his gruff voice.

“There are worse places than the workhouse,” said the doctor, with meaning. “Take this, and to-morrow I’ll give you a note to send to your master. The first thing you want is a good night’s sleep.”

“Oh, that is the truth, however you know it,” cried Mrs. Hesketh. “He hasn’t had a night’s sleep, nor me neither, not for a month back.”

“I’ll see that he has one to-night,” said Dr. Roland, drawing back the curtain of his surgery and opening the folding-doors.

“I won’t take no opiates, doctor,” said the young man, with dumb defiance in his sleepy eyes.

“You won’t take any opiates? And why, if I may ask?” the doctor said, selecting a bottle from the shelf.

“Not a drop of your nasty sleepy stuff, that makes fellows dream and talk nonsense in their sleep—oh, not for me!”

“You are afraid, then, of talking nonsense in your sleep? We must get rid of the nonsense, not of the sleep,” said the doctor. “I don’t say that this is an opiate, but you have got to swallow it, my fine fellow, whether or not.”

“No,” said the young man, setting his lips firmly together.

“Drink!” cried Dr. Roland, fully roused. “Come, I’ll have no childish, wry faces. Why, you’re a man—with a wife—and not a naughty boy!”

“It’s not my doing coming here. She brought me, and I’ll see her far enough—”

“Hold your tongue you young ass, and take your physic! She’s a capital woman, and has done exactly as she ought to have done. No nonsense, I tell you! Sleep to-night, and then to-morrow you’ll go and set yourself right with the shop.”

“Sir!” cried the young man, with a gasp. His pulse gave a jump under the strong cool grip in which Dr. Roland had again taken it, and he fixed a frightened imploring gaze upon the doctor’s face.

“Oh, doctor!” cried the poor wife, “there’s nothing to set right with the shop. They think all the world of Alfred there.”

“They’ll think all the more of him,” said Dr. Roland, “after he has had a good night’s sleep. There, take him off to bed; and at ten o’clock to-morrow morning I expect to see him here.”

“Oh, doctor, is it anything bad? Oh, sir, can’t you make him all right?” she cried, standing with clasped hands, listening to the hurried yet wavering step with which her husband went upstairs.

“I’ll tell you to-morrow morning,” Dr. Roland said.

When the door was closed he went and sat down again by his fire; but the calm of his mind, the pleasure of his cigar, the excitement of his newspaper, had gone. Truth to tell, the excitement of this new question pleased him more than all these things together. “Has he done it, or is he only going to do it?” he asked himself. Could the thing be set right, or could it never be set right? He sat there for perhaps an hour, working out the question in both directions, considering the case in every light. It was a long time since he had met with anything so interesting. He only came to himself when he became conscious that the fire

was burning very low, and the chill of the night creeping into the air. Then Dr. Roland rose again, compounded a drink for himself of a different quality from that which he had given to his patient, and selected out of his bookcase a yellow novel. But after a while he pitched the book from him, and pushed away the glass, and resumed his meditations. What was grog, and what was Gaboriau, in comparison with a problem like this?

CHAPTER VI

The house in Bloomsbury was, however, much more deeply troubled and excited than it would have been by anything affecting Alfred Hesketh, when it was known next morning that Mr. Mannering had been taken ill in the night, and was now unable to leave his bed. The doctor had been sent for early—alas! it was not Dr. Roland—and the whole household was disturbed. Such a thing had not been known for nearly a dozen years past, as that Mr. Mannering should not walk downstairs exactly at a quarter before ten, and close the door behind him, forming a sort of fourth chime to the three-quarters as they sounded from the church clock. The house was put out for the day by this failure in the regularity of its life and movement; all the more that it was very soon known that this prop of the establishment was very ill, that “the fever” ran very high, and that even his life was in danger. Nobody made much remark in these circumstances upon the disappearance of the humble little people on the upper floor, who, after much coming and going between their habitation and that of Dr. Roland downstairs, made a hurried departure, providentially, Mrs. Simcox said—thus leaving a little available room for the nurse who by this time had taken possession of the Mannering establishment, reducing Dora to the position which she had never occupied, of a child, and taking the management of everything. Two of these persons, indeed, had been ordered in

by the doctor—a nurse for the day, and a nurse for the night, who filled the house with that air of redundant health and cheerfulness which seem to belong to nurses, one or other of them being always met on the stairs going out for her constitutional, going down for her meals, taking care of herself in some methodical way or other, according to prescription, that she might be fit for her work. And no doubt they were very fit for their work, and amply responded to the confidence placed in them: which was only not shared by Dora, banished by them out of her father's room—and Miss Bethune, a woman full of prejudices, and Gilchrist, whose soft heart could not resist the cheerful looks of the two fresh young women, though their light-heartedness shocked her a little, and the wrongs of Dora filled her heart with sympathy.

Alas! Dora was not yet sixteen—there was no possibility, however carefully you counted the months, and showed her birthday to be approaching, to get over that fact. And what were her love and anxious desire to be of service, and devotion to her father, in comparison with these few years and the superior training of the women, who knew almost as much as the doctor himself? “Not saying much, that!” Dr. Roland grumbled under his breath, as he joined the anxious circle of malcontents in Miss Bethune's apartment, where Dora came, trying proudly to restrain her tears, and telling how she had been shut out of Mr. Mannering's room—“my own father's room!” the girl cried in her indignation, two big drops, like raindrops, falling, in spite of

her, upon her dress.

“It’s better for you, my bonnie dear,—oh, it’s better for you,” Gilchrist whispered, standing behind her, and drying her own flowing eyes with her apron.

“Dora, my darling,” said Miss Bethune, moved to a warmth of spirit quite unusual to her, “it is quite true what Gilchrist says. I am not fond of these women myself. They shall never nurse me. If I cannot have a hand that cares for me to smooth my pillow, it shall be left unsmoothed, and none of these good-looking hussies shall smile over me when I’m dying—no, no! But it is different; you’re far too young to have that on your head. I would not permit it. Gilchrist and me would have taken it and done every justice to your poor papa, I make no doubt, and been all the better for the work, two idle women as we are—but not you. You should have come and gone, and sat by his bedside and cheered him with the sight of you; but to nurse him was beyond your power. Ask the doctor, and he will tell you that as well as me.”

“I have always taken care of my father before,” said Dora. “When he has had his colds, and when he had rheumatism, and when—that time, Dr. Roland, you know.”

“That was the time,” said the doctor, “when you ran down to me in the middle of the night and burst into my room, like a wise little girl. We had him in our own hands then, and we knew what to do with him, Dora. But here’s Vereker, he’s a great swell, and neither you nor I can interfere.”

It comforted Dora a little to have Dr. Roland placed with

herself among the outsiders who could not interfere, especially when Miss Bethune added: "That is just the grievance. We would all like to have a finger in the pie. Why should a man be taken out of the care of his natural friends and given into the charge of these women, that never saw him in their lives before, nor care whether he lives or dies?"

"Oh, they care—for their own reputation. There is nothing to be said against the women, they'll do their duty," said the doctor. "But there's Vereker, that has never studied his constitution—that sees just the present symptoms, and no more. Take the child out for a walk, Miss Bethune, and let's have her fresh and fair for him, at least, if"—the doctor pulled himself up hastily, and coughed to swallow the last alarming syllable,—“fresh and fair,” he added hastily, “*when* he gets better, which is a period with which no nurses can interfere.”

A colloquy, which was silent yet full of eager interest and feeling, sprang up between two pairs of eyes at the moment that *if*—most alarming of conjectures—was uttered. Miss Bethune questioned; the doctor replied. Then he said in an undertone: “A constitution never very strong,—exhausting work, exhausting emotions, unnatural peace in the latter life.”

Dora was being led away by Gilchrist to get her hat for the proposed walk; and Dr. Roland ended in his ordinary voice.

“Do you call that unnatural peace, with all the right circumstances of his life round him, and—and full possession of his bonnie girl, that has never been parted from him? I don't call

that unnatural.”

“You would if you were aware of the other side of it lopped off—one half of him, as it were, paralysed.”

“Doctor,” said Miss Bethune, with a curious smile, “I ought to take that as a compliment to my sex, as the fools say—if I cared a button for my sex or any such nonsense! But there is yourself, now, gets on very well, so far as I can see, with that side, as you call it, just as much lopped off.”

“How do you know?” said the doctor. “I may be letting concealment, like a worm in the bud, feed on my damask cheek. But I allow,” he said, with a laugh, “I do get on very well: and so, if you will permit me to say it, do you, Miss Bethune. But then, you see, we have never known anything else.”

Something leaped up in Miss Bethune’s eye—a strange light, which the doctor could not interpret, though it did not escape his observation. “To be sure,” she said, nodding her head, “we have never known anything else. And that changes the case altogether.”

“That changes the case. I say nothing against a celibate life. I have always preferred it—it suits me better. I never cared,” he added, again with a laugh, “to have too much baggage to move about.”

“Do not be uncivil, doctor, after being more civil than was necessary.”

“But it’s altogether a different case with poor Mannering. It is not even as if his wife had betrayed him—in the ordinary way.

The poor thing meant no harm.”

“Oh, do not speak to me!” cried Miss Bethune, throwing up her hands.

“I know; it is well known you ladies are always more severe—but, anyhow, that side was wrenched away in a moment, and then there followed long years of unnatural calm.”

“I do not agree with you, doctor,” she said, shaking her head. “The wrench was defeenitive.” Miss Bethune’s nationality betrayed itself in a great breadth of vowels, as well as in here and there a word or two. “It was a cut like death: and you do not call calm unnatural that comes after death, after long years?”

“It’s different—it’s different,” the doctor said.

“Ay, so it is,” she said, answering as it were her own question.

And there was a pause. When two persons of middle age discuss such questions, there is a world lying behind each full of experiences, which they recognise instinctively, however completely unaware they may be of each other’s case.

“But here is Dora ready for her walk, and me doing nothing but haver,” cried Miss Bethune, disappearing into the next room.

They might have been mother and daughter going out together in the gentle tranquillity of use and wont,—so common a thing!—and yet if the two had been mother and daughter, what a revolution in how many lives would have been made!—how different would the world have been for an entire circle of human souls! They were, in fact, nothing to each other—brought together, as we say, by chance, and as likely to be whirled apart

again by those giddy combinations and dissolutions which the head goes round only to think of. For the present they walked closely together side by side, and talked of one subject which engrossed all their thoughts.

“What does the doctor think? Oh, tell me, please, what the doctor thinks!”

“How can he think anything, Dora, my dear? He has never seen your father since he was taken ill.”

“Oh, Miss Bethune, but he knew him so well before. And I don’t ask you what he knows. He must think something. He must have an opinion. He always has an opinion, whatever case it may be.”

“He thinks, my dear, that the fever must run its course. Now another week’s begun, we must just wait for the next critical moment. That is all, Dora, my darling, that is all that any man can say.”

“Oh, that it would only come!” cried Dora passionately. “There is nothing so dreadful as waiting—nothing! However bad a thing is, if you only know it, not hanging always in suspense.”

“Suspense means hope; it means possibility and life, and all that makes life sweet. Be patient, be patient, my bonnie dear.”

Dora looked up into her friend’s face. “Were you ever as miserable as I am?” she said. Miss Bethune was thought grim by her acquaintances and there was a hardness in her, as those who knew her best were well aware; but at this question something ineffable came into her face. Her eyes filled with tears, her lips

quivered with a smile. "My little child!" she said.

Dora did not ask any more. Her soul was silenced in spite of herself: and just then there arose a new interest, which is always so good a thing for everybody, especially at sixteen. "There," she cried, in spite of herself, though she had thought she was incapable of any other thought, "is poor Mrs. Hesketh hurrying along on the other side of the street."

They had got into a side street, along one end of which was a little row of trees.

"Oh, run and speak to her, Dora."

Mrs. Hesketh seemed to feel that she was pursued. She quickened her step almost into a run, but she was breathless and agitated and laden with a bundle, and in no way capable of outstripping Dora. She paused with a gasp, when the girl laid a hand on her arm.

"Didn't you hear me call you? You surely could never, never mean to run away from me?"

"Miss Dora, you were always so kind, but I didn't know who it might be."

"Oh, Mrs. Hesketh, you can't know how ill my father is, or you would have wanted to ask for him. He has been ill a month, and I am not allowed to nurse him. I am only allowed to go in and peep at him twice a day. I am not allowed to speak to him, or to do anything for him, or to know—"

Dora paused, choked by the quick-coming tears.

"I am so sorry, miss. I thought as you were happy at least:

but there's nothing, nothing but trouble in this world," cried Mrs. Hesketh, breaking into a fitful kind of crying. Her face was flushed and heated, the bundle impeding all her movements. She looked round in alarm at every step, and when she saw Miss Bethune's tall figure approaching, uttered a faint cry. "Oh, Miss Dora, I can't stay, and I can't do you any good even if I could; I'm wanted so bad at home."

"Where are you going with that big bundle? You are not fit to be carrying it about the streets," said Miss Bethune, suddenly standing like a lion in the way.

The poor little woman leant against a tree, supporting her bundle. "Oh, please," she said, imploring; and then, with some attempt at self-defence, "I am going nowhere but about my own business. I have got nothing but what belongs to me. Let me go."

"You must not go any further than this spot," said Miss Bethune. "Dora, go to the end of the road and get a cab. Whatever you would have got for that where you were going, I will give it you, and you can keep your poor bits of things. What has happened to you? Quick, tell me, while the child's away."

The poor young woman let her bundle fall at her feet. "My husband's ill, and he's lost his situation," she said, with piteous brevity, and sobbed, leaning against the tree.

"And therefore you thought that was a fine time to run away and hide yourself among strangers, out of the reach of them that knew you? There was the doctor, and there was me. Did you think we would let harm happen to you? You poor feckless little

thing!”

“The doctor! It was the doctor that lost Alfred his place,” cried the young woman angrily, drying her eyes. “Let me go—oh, let me go! I don’t want no charity,” she said.

“And what would you have got for all that?”

“Perhaps ten shillings—perhaps only six. Oh, lady, you don’t know us except just to see us on the stairs. I’m in great trouble, and he’s heartbroken, and waiting for me at ’ome. Leave me alone and let me go.”

“If you had put them away for ten shillings they would have been of no further use to you. Now, here’s ten shillings, and you’ll take these things back; but you’ll mind that they’re mine, though I give you the use of them, and you’ll promise to come to me, or to send for me, and to take no other way. What is the matter with your husband? Let him come to the doctor, and you to me.”

“Oh, never, never, to that doctor!” Mrs. Hesketh cried.

“The doctor’s a good man, and everybody’s friend, but he may have a rough tongue, I would not say. But come you to me. We’ll get him another place, and all will go well. You silly little thing, the first time trouble comes in your way, to fall into despair! Oh, this is you, Dora, with the cab. Put in the bundle. And now, here’s the money, and if you do not come to me, mind you will have broken your word.”

“Oh, ma’am! Oh, Miss Dora!” was all the poor little woman could say.

“Now, Dora,” said Miss Bethune cheerfully, “there’s

something for you to do—Gilchrist and you. You'll give an account to me of that poor thing, and if you let her slip through your fingers I'll never forgive you. There's something wrong. Perhaps he drinks, or perhaps he does something worse—if there's anything worse: but whatever it is, it is your responsibility. I'm an idle, idle person; I'm good for nothing. But you're young, and Gilchrist's a tower of strength, and you'll just give an account of that poor bit creature, soul and body, to me."

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Mannering's illness ran on and on. Week after week the anxious watchers waited for the crisis which did not come. It was evident now that the patient, who had no violence in his illness any more than in his life, was yet not to be spared a day of its furthest length. But it was allowed that he had no bad symptoms, and that the whole matter turned on the question whether his strength could be sustained. Dr. Roland, not allowed to do anything else for his friend, regulated furtively the quality and quantity of the milk, enough to sustain a large nursery, which was sent upstairs. He tested it in every scientific way, and went himself from dairy to dairy to get what was best; and Mrs. Simcox complained bitterly that he was constantly making inroads into "my kitchen" to interfere in the manufacture of the beef tea. He even did, which was against every rule of medical etiquette, stop the great Dr. Vereker on the stairs and almost insist upon a medical consultation, and to give his own opinion about the patient to this great authority, who looked him over from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot with undisguised yet bewildered contempt. Who was this man who discoursed to the great physician about the tendencies and the idiosyncrasies of the sick man, whom it was a matter of something like condescension on Dr. Vereker's part to attend at all, and whom this little person evidently believed himself to understand better?

“If Mr. Mannering’s friends wish me to meet you in consultation, I can have, of course, no objection to satisfy them, or even to leave the further conduct of the case in your hands,” he said stiffly.

“Nothing of the kind—nothing of the kind!” cried poor Dr. Roland. “It’s only that I’ve watched the man for years. You perhaps don’t know—”

“I think,” said Dr. Vereker, “you will allow that after nearly six weeks’ attendance I ought, unless I am an ignoramus, to know all there is to know.”

“I don’t deny it for a moment. There is no practitioner in London certainly who would doubt Dr. Vereker’s knowledge. I mean his past—what he has had to bear—the things that have led up—”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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