

Molesworth Mrs.

That Girl in Black; and, Bronzie



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Mrs. Molesworth

That Girl in Black

Chapter One

He was spoilt – deplorably, absurdly spoilt. But, so far, that was perhaps the worst that could fairly be said against him. There was genuine manliness still, some chivalry even, yet struggling spasmodically to make itself felt, and – what was practically, perhaps, of more account as a preservative – some small amount of originality in his character. He had still a good deal to learn, and something too to unlearn before he could take rank as past-master in the stupid worldliness of his class and time. For he was neither so *blasé* nor so cynical as he flattered himself, but young enough to affect being both to the extent of believing his own affectations real.

He was popular; his position and income were fair enough to have secured this to a considerable extent in these, socially speaking, easy-going days, even had he been without the further advantages of good looks and a certain arrogance, not to say insolence of bearing, which, though nothing can be acquired with greater facility and at less expenditure of brain tissue, appears to be the one not-to-be-disputed hall-mark of the period.

Why he went to Mrs Englewood's reception that evening he could scarcely have told, or perhaps he would have vaguely shrunk from owning even to himself the real motives – of sincere though feeble loyalty to old associations, of faintly stirring gratitude for much kindness in the past – which had prompted the effort. For Mrs Englewood was neither very rich, nor very beautiful, nor – worst of “nors” – very fashionable; scarcely, indeed, to be reckoned as of *notre monde* in any very exclusive sense of the words, though kindly, and fairly refined, irreproachable as wife and mother, and so satisfied with her lot as to be uninterestingly free from social ambition.

But her house was commonplace, she herself not specially amusing.

“If she'd be content to ask me there when they're alone – I like talking to her herself well enough,” thought Despard, as he dressed. In his heart, however, he knew that would not do. He was more or less of a lion from Mrs Englewood's point of view; she was not above a certain pride in knowing that for “old sake's sake” she could count upon him for her one party of the season. And for this, as she retained a real affection for the man she had known as that delightful thing – a bright, intelligent, and unspoilt boy, and as she thought of him still far more highly than he deserved to be thought of, her conscience left her unrebuked.

Year after year, it is true, her husband wet-blanketed her innocent pleasure in seeing the young man's name on her invitation list.

“That fellow! In your place, my dear Gertrude!” and an expressive raising of the eyebrows said the rest.

“But, Harry,” she would mildly expostulate, “you forget. I knew him when he was – ”

“So high – at Whipmore. Oh, yes; I know all about it. Well, well, take your way of it; it doesn't hurt me if you invite people who don't want to come.”

“But who always *do* come, you must allow,” she would reply triumphantly.

“And think themselves mighty condescending for doing so,” Mr Englewood put in.

“You don't do Despard justice. It's always the way with men, I suppose.”

“Come now, don't be down upon me about it,” he would say good-naturedly. “I don't stop your asking him. It isn't as if we had daughters. In that case – ” but the rest was left to the imagination.

And this particular year Mrs Englewood had smiled to herself at this point of the discussion.

“One can make plans even though one *hasn't* daughters,” she reflected. “If Harry would let me ask him to dinner now – but I know there's no chance of that. And, after all, a good deal may be

done at an evening party. I should like to do Despard a good turn, and give him a start before any other. If I could give him a hint! But then there's my promise to her father, – and Despard is sure to be sensitive on those points. I might spoil it all. No; I shall appeal to his kindheartedness; that is the best. How tender he used to be to poor Lily when she was a tiny child! How he used to mount her up on his shoulders when she couldn't see the fireworks! I will tell Maisie that story! It is the sort of thing she will appreciate."

It was a hot, close evening. Though only May, there was thunder in the air, people said. Despard's inward dissatisfaction increased.

"Upon my soul it's too bad," he ejaculated while examining the flowers in his button-hole. "Why, when one's made up one's mind to do a disagreeable thing, should everything conspire to make it more odious than it need be, I wonder? I have really – more than half a mind – not to – "

Poor Gertrude Englewood, at that moment smilingly receiving her guests! She little knew how her great interest in the evening was trembling in the balance!

It was late when he arrived. Not that he had specially intended this. He cared too little about it to have considered whether he should be late or early, and, as he slowly made his way through the crowd at the doorway, he was conscious of but one wish – to get himself at once seen by his hostess, and then to make his escape as soon as possible. As to the first part of this little programme there was no difficulty. Scarcely did the first syllables of his name, "Mr Despard Norreys," fall on the ear, before Mrs Englewood's outstretched hand was in his, her pleasant face smiling up at him, her pleasant voice bidding him welcome. Yes, there was something difficult to resist about her; it was refreshing, somehow, and – there lay the secret – it brought back other days, when poor Jack's big sister, Gertrude, had welcomed the orphan schoolboy just as heartily, and when he had glowed with pride and gratification at her notice of him.

Despard's resigned, not to say sulky, expression cleared; it was no wonder Mrs Englewood's old liking for him had suffered no diminution; he did show at his best with her.

"So pleased you've come, so good of you," she was saying simply.

Her words made the young man feel vaguely ashamed of himself.

"Good of me!" he repeated, flushing a little, though the same or a much more fervent greeting from infinitely more exalted personages than Gertrude had often failed to disturb his composure. "No, indeed, very much the reverse. I'm sorry," with a glance round, "to be so late, especially as – "

"No, no, you're not to begin saying you can't stay long, the very moment you've come. Listen, Despard," and she drew him aside a little; "I want you to do something to please me to-night. I have a little friend here – a Miss Fforde – that I want you to be very good to. Poor little thing, she's quite a stranger, knows nobody, never been out. But she's a nice little thing. Will you ask her to dance? or – " for the shadow of a frown on her favourite's forehead became evident even to Mrs Englewood's partial eyes – "if you don't care to dance, will you talk to her a little? Anything, you know, just to please her."

Despard bowed. What else could he do? Gertrude slid her hand through his arm.

"There she is," she said. "That girl in black over there by the fireplace. Maisie, my dear," for a step or two had brought them to the indicated spot, "I want to introduce my old friend, Mr Despard Norreys, to you. Mr Norreys – Miss Fforde;" and as she pronounced the names she drew her hand quietly away, and turned back towards her post at the door.

Despard bowed and, with the very slightest possible instinct of curiosity, glanced at the girl before him. She was of middle height, rather indeed under than above it; she was neither very fair nor very dark; there was nothing very special or striking in her appearance. She was dressed in black; there was nothing remarkable about her attire, rather, as Despard saw in an instant, an absence of style, of finish, which found its epithet at once in his thoughts – "countrified, of course," he said to himself. But before he had time to decide on his next movement she raised her eyes, and for half an instant his attention deepened. The eyes were strikingly fine; they were very blue, but redeemed from the shallowness of very blue eyes by the depth of the eyelashes, both upper and lower. And just now

there was a brightness, an expectancy in the eyes which was by no means their constant expression. For, lashes notwithstanding, Miss Fforde's blue eyes could look cold enough when she chose.

"Good eyes," thought Despard. But just as he allowed the words to shape themselves in his brain, he noticed that over the girl's clear, pale face a glow of colour was quickly spreading.

"Good gracious!" he ejaculated mentally, "she is blushing! What a bread-and-butter miss she must be – to *blush* because a man's introduced to her. And I am to draw her out! It is really too bad of Mrs Englewood;" and he half began to turn away with a sensation of indignation and almost of disgust.

But positive rudeness where a woman was concerned did not come easy to him. He stopped, and muttered something indistinctly enough about "the pleasure of a dance." The girl had grown pale again by this time, and in her eyes a half startled, almost pained expression was replacing the glad expectancy. As he spoke, however, something of the former look returned to them.

"I – I shall be very pleased," she said. "I am not engaged for anything."

"I should think not," he said to himself. "I am *quite* sure you dance atrociously."

But aloud he said with the slow, impassive tone in which some of his admirers considered him so to excel that "Despard's drawl" had its school of followers —

"Shall we say the – the tenth waltz? I fear it is the first I can propose."

"Thank you," Miss Fforde replied. She looked as if she would have been ready to say more had he in the least encouraged it, but he, feeling that he had done his duty, turned away – the more eagerly as at that moment he caught sight in the crowd of a lady he knew.

"Mrs Marrinder! What a godsend!" he exclaimed.

He did not see Miss Fforde's face as he left her, and, had he done so, it would have taken far more than his very average modicum of discernment to have rightly interpreted the varying and curiously intermingling expressions which rapidly crossed it, like cloud shadows alternating with dashes of sunshine on an April morning. She stood for a moment or two where she was, then glancing round and seeing a vacant seat in a corner she quietly appropriated it.

"The tenth waltz," she repeated to herself with the ghost of a smile. "I wonder – " but that was all.

The evening wore on. Miss Fforde had danced once – but only once. It was with a man whom her host himself introduced to her, and, though good-natured and unaffected, he was boyish and commonplace; and she had to put some force on herself to reply with any show of interest to his attempts at conversation. She was engaged for one or two other dances, but it was hot, and the rooms were crowded, and with a scarcely acknowledged reflection – for Miss Fforde was young and inexperienced enough to think it hardly fair to make an engagement even for but a dance, to break it deliberately – that if her partners did *not* find her it would not much matter, the girl withdrew quietly into a corner, where a friendly curtain all but screened her from observation, and allowed her to enjoy in peace the dangerous but delightful refreshment of an open window hard by.

The draught betrayed its source, however. She was scarcely seated when voices approaching caught her ears.

"Here you are – there must be a window open, it is ever so much cooler in this corner. Are you afraid of the draught?" said a voice she thought she recognised.

"No-o – at least – oh, this corner will do beautifully. The curtain will protect me. What a blessing to get a little air!" replied a second speaker – a lady evidently.

"People have no business to cram their rooms so. And these rooms are – well, not spacious. How in the world did you get Marrinder to come?"

The second speaker laughed. "It was quite the other way," she replied. "How did he get me to come? you might ask. He has something or other to do with our host, and made a personal matter of my coming, so, of course, I gave in."

"How angelic!"

"It is a penance; but we're going immediately."

“I shall disappear with you.”

“You! Why you told me a moment ago that you were obliged to dance with some *protégée* of Mrs Englewood’s – that she had made a point of it. And you haven’t danced with her yet, to my certain knowledge,” said the woman’s voice again.

A sort of groan was the reply.

“Why, what’s the matter?” with a light laugh.

“I had forgotten; you might have let me forget and go off with a clear conscience.”

“What is there so dreadful about it?”

“It is that girl in black I have to dance with for my sins. Such a little dowdy. I am convinced she can’t waltz. It was truly putting old friendship to the test to expect it of me. And of all things I do detest a bread-and-butter miss. You can see at a glance that this one has never left a country village before. She – ”

But his further confidences were interrupted by the arrival of Mr Marrinder in search of his wife.

“You don’t care to stay any longer, I suppose?” said the new-comer.

“Oh, – no; I am quite ready. I *was* engaged for this dance – the tenth, isn’t it? But I am tired, and it doesn’t matter. My partner, whoever he was, can find some one else. Good-night, Mr Norreys.”

“Let me go with you to the door at least,” he replied. “I’ll look about for that girl in black on my way, so that if I don’t see her I can honestly feel I have done my duty.”

Then there came a flutter and rustling, and Miss Fforde knew that her neighbours had taken their departure.

She waited an instant, and then came out of her corner.

“He is not likely to come back to look for me in this room,” she thought; “but in case he possibly should, I – I shall not hide myself.”

She had had a moment’s sharp conflict with herself before arriving at this decision; and her usually pale face was still faintly flushed when, slowly making his way in the direction of the sofa where she had now conspicuously placed herself, she descried Mr Norreys.

“Our dance – the tenth – I believe,” he said, with an exaggeration of indifference, sounding almost as if he wished to irritate her into making some excuse to escape.

In her place nine girls out of ten would have done so, and without troubling themselves to hide their indignation. But Maisie Fforde was not one of those nine. She rose quietly from her seat and took his arm.

“Yes,” she said, “it is our dance.”

Something in her voice, or tone, made him glance at her with a shade more attention than he had hitherto condescended to bestow on “Mrs Englewood’s *protégée*” She was looking straight before her; her features, which he now discovered to be delicate in outline, and almost faultlessly regular in their proportions, wore an expression of perfect composure; only the slight, very slight, rose-flush on her cheeks would have told to one who knew her well of some inward excitement.

“By Jove!” thought Despard, “she’s almost pretty – no, pretty’s not the word. I never saw a face quite like it before. I suppose I didn’t look at her, she’s so badly, at least so desperately plainly dressed. I don’t, however, suppose she can talk, and I’d bet any money she can’t dance.”

As regarded the first of his predictions, she gave him at present no opportunity of judging. She neither spoke nor looked at him. He hazarded some commonplace remark about the heat of the rooms; she replied by a monosyllable. Despard began to get angry.

“*Won’t* talk, whether she *can* or not,” he said to himself, when a second observation had met with no better luck. He glanced round the room; all the other couples were either dancing, or smiling and talking. He became conscious of a curious sensation as disagreeable as novel – he felt as if he were looking ridiculous.

He turned again to his partner in a sort of desperation.

“Will you dance?” he said, and his tone was almost rough; it had entirely lost its usual calm, half-insolent indifference.

“Certainly,” she said, while a scarcely perceptible smile faintly curved her lips. “It is, I suppose, what we are standing up here for, is it not?”

Despard grew furious. “She is laughing at me,” he thought. “Impertinent little nobody. Where in Heaven’s name has Gertrude Englewood unearthed her from? Upon my soul, it is the very last time she will see me at her dances!”

And somehow his discomfiture was not decreased by a glance, and almost involuntary glance, at Miss Fforde as they began to dance. She was certainly not striking in appearance; she was middle-sized, barely that indeed; her dress was now, he began to perceive, plain with the plainness of intention, not of ignorance or economy. But yet, with it all – no, he could not honestly feel that he was right; she did not look like “a nobody.”

There was a further discovery in store for him. The girl danced beautifully. Mr Norreys imagined himself to have outlived all enthusiasm on such subjects, but now and then, in spite of the *rôle* which was becoming second nature to him, a bit of the old Despard – the hearty, unspoilt boy – cropped out, so to speak, unawares. This happened just now – his surprise had to do with it.

“You dance perfectly – exquisitely!” he burst out when at last they stopped. It was his second dance that evening only; neither he nor Miss Fforde was the least tired, and the room was no longer so crowded.

She looked up. There was no flush of gratification on her face, only a very slight – the slightest possible – sparkle in the beautiful eyes.

“Yes,” she said quietly; “I believe I can dance well.”

Despard bit his lips. For once in his life he felt absolutely at a loss what to say. Yet remain silent he would not, for by so doing it seemed to him as if he would be playing into the girl’s hands.

“I *will* make her talk,” he vowed internally.

It was not often he cared to exert himself, but he could talk, both intelligently and agreeably, when he chose to take the trouble. And gradually, though very gradually only, Miss Fforde began to thaw. She, too, could talk; though her words were never many, they struck him as remarkably well chosen and to the point. Yet more, they incited him to further effort. There was the restraint of power about them; not her words only, but her tone and expression, quick play of her features, the half-veiled glances of her eyes, were full of a curious fascination, seeming to tell how charming, how responsive a companion she might be if she chose.

But the fascination reacted as an irritant on Mr Norreys. He could not get rid of a mortifying sensation that he was being sounded, and his measure taken by this presumptuous little girl. Yet he glanced at her. No; “presumptuous” was not the word to apply to her. He grew almost angry at last, to the extent of nearly losing his self-control.

“You are drawing me out, Miss Ford,” he said, “in hopes of my displaying my ignorance. You know much more about the book in question, and the subject, than I do. If you will be so good as to tell me all about it, I – ”

She glanced up quickly with, for the first time, a perfectly natural and unconstrained expression on her face.

“Indeed – indeed, no,” she said. “I am very ignorant. In *some* ways I have had little opportunity of learning.”

Despard’s face cleared. There was no question of her sincerity.

“I thought you were playing me off,” he said boyishly.

Miss Fforde burst out laughing, but she instantly checked herself.

“What a pity,” thought Mr Norreys. “I never heard a prettier laugh.” “I did, indeed,” he repeated, exaggerating his tone in hopes of making her laugh again.

But it was no use. Her face had regained the calm, formal composure it had worn at the beginning of the dance.

"She is like three girls rolled into one," thought Despard. "The shy, country-bred miss she seemed at first," and a feeling of shame shot through him at the recollection of his stupid judgment, "then this cold, impassive, princess-like damsel, and by fitful glimpses yet another, with nothing in common with either. And, notwithstanding the *rôle* she has chosen to play, I – I strongly suspect it is *but* a *rôle*," he decided hastily.

The riddle interested him.

"May I – will you not give me another dance?" he said deferentially. For the tenth waltz had come to an end.

"I am sorry I cannot," she replied. The words were simple and girlish, but the tone was regal. "Good-night, Mr Norreys. I congratulate you on your self-sacrifice at the altar of friendship. You may now take your departure with a clear conscience."

He stared. She was repeating some of his own words. Miss Fforde bowed coldly, and turned away. And Despard, bewildered, mortified even, though he would not own it, yet strangely attracted, and disgusted with himself for being so, after a passing word or two with his hostess, left the house.

An hour or two later Gertrude Englewood was bidding her young guest good-night.

"And oh, Maisie!" she exclaimed, "how did you get on with Despard? Is he not delightful?"

Miss Fforde smiled quietly. They were standing in her room, for she was to spend a night or two with her friend.

"I – to tell you the truth, I would *much* rather not speak about him," she said. "He is very good looking, and – well, not stupid, I dare say. But I am not used to men, you know, Gertrude – not to men of the day, at least, of which I suppose he is a type. I cannot say that I care to see more of them. I am happier at home with papa."

She turned away quickly. Gertrude did not see the tears that rose to the girl's eyes, or the rush of colour that overspread her face at certain recollections of that evening. She was nineteen, but it was her first "real" dance, and she felt as if years had passed since the afternoon only two days ago when she had arrived.

Mrs Englewood looked and felt sadly disappointed. She had been so pleased with her own diplomacy.

"It will be different when you are a little more in the way of it," she said. "And – I really don't think your father should insist on your dressing *quite* so plainly. It will do the very thing he wants to avoid – it will make you remarkable."

"No, no," said Maisie, shaking her head. "Papa is quite right. You must allow it had not that effect this evening. No one asked to be introduced to me."

"There was such a crowd – " Gertrude began, but this time Maisie's smile was quite a hearty one as she interrupted her.

"Never mind about that," she said. "But do tell me one thing. I saw Mr Norreys speaking to you for a moment as he went out. You didn't say anything about me to him, I hope?"

"No," said Mrs Englewood, "I did not. I would have liked to do so," she added honestly, "but somehow he looked queer – not exactly bored, but not encouraging. So I just let him go."

"That's right," said Maisie; "thank you. I am so glad you didn't. I do hope I shall never see him again," she added to herself.

Chapter Two

A hope not destined to be fulfilled.

For though Maisie wrote home to “papa” the morning after Mrs Englewood’s dance, earnestly begging for leave to return to the country at once instead of going on to her next visit, and assuring him that she felt she would never be happy in fashionable society, never be happy *anywhere*, indeed, away from him and everything she cared for, papa was inexorable. It was natural she should be homesick at first, he replied; natural, and indeed unavoidable, that she should feel strange and lonely; and, as she well knew, she could not possibly long more, to be with him again, than he longed to have her; but there were all the reasons she knew full well why she should stay in town as had been arranged; the very reasons which had made him send her now made him say she must remain. Her own good sense would show her the soundness of his motives, and she must behave like his own brave Maisie. And the girl never knew what this letter had cost her invalid father, nor how he shrank from opposing her wishes.

“She set off so cheerfully,” he said to himself, “and she has only been there three days. And she seemed rather to have enjoyed her first dinner-party and the concert, or whatever it was, that Gertrude Englewood took her to. What can have happened at the evening party? She dances well, I know; and she is not the sort of girl to expect or care much about ball-room admiration.”

Poor man! it was, so far, a disappointment to him. He would have liked to get a merry, happy letter that morning as he sat at his solitary breakfast. For he had no fear, no shadow of a fear, that his Maisie’s head ever could be turned.

“I have guarded against any dangers of that kind for her, at least,” he said to himself, “provided I have not gone too far and made her too sober-minded. But no; after all, it is erring on the safe side – considering everything.”

Three or four evenings after Mrs Englewood’s dance Despard found himself at a musical party. He was in his own *milieu* this time, and proportionately affable – with the cool, condescending affability which was the nearest approach to making himself agreeable that he recognised. He had been smiled at by the beauty of the evening, much enjoying her discomfiture when he did *not* remain many minutes by her side; he had been all but abjectly entreated by the most important of the dowagers, a very great lady indeed, in every sense of the word, to promise his assistance at her intended theatricals; he had, in short, received the appreciation which was due to him, and was now resting on his oars, comfortably installed in an easy chair, debating within himself whether it was worth while to give Mrs Belmont a fright by engrossing her pretty daughter, and thus causing to retire from her side in the sulks Sir Henry Gayburn, to whom the girl was talking. For Sir Henry was rich, and was known to be looking out for a wife, and Despard had long since been erased from the maternal list of desirable possibilities.

“Shall I?” he was saying to himself as he lay back with a smile, when a voice beside him made him look up. It was that of the son of the house, a friend of his own; the young man seemed annoyed and perplexed.

“Norreys! oh, do me a good turn, will you? I have to look after the lady who has just been singing, and my mother is fussing about a girl who has been sitting all the evening alone. She’s a stranger. Will you be so awfully good as to take her down for an ice or something?”

Despard looked round. He could scarcely refuse a request so couched, but he was far from pleased.

“Where is she? Who is she?” he asked, beginning languidly to show signs of moving.

“There – over by the window – that girl in black,” his friend replied. “Who she is I can’t say. My mother told me her name was Ford. Come along, and I’ll introduce you, that’s a good fellow.”

Despard by this time had risen to his feet.

“Upon my soul!” he ejaculated.

But Mr Leslie was in too great a hurry to notice the unusual emphasis with which he spoke.

And in half a second he found himself standing in front of the girl, who, the last time they met, had aroused in him such unwonted emotions.

“Miss Ford,” murmured young Leslie, “may I introduce Mr Norreys?” and then Mr Leslie turned on his heel and disappeared.

Despard stood there perfectly grave. He would hazard no repulse; he waited for her.

She looked up, but there was no smile on her face – only the calm self-composedness which it seemed to him he knew so well. How was it so? Had he met her before in some former existence? Why did all about her seem at once strange and yet familiar? He had never experienced the like before.

These thoughts – scarcely thoughts indeed – flickered through his brain as he looked at her. They served one purpose at least, they prevented his feeling or looking awkward, could such a state of things have been conceived possible.

Seeing that he was not going to speak, remembering, perhaps, that if *he* remembered the last words she had honoured him with, he could scarcely be expected to do so, she at last opened her lips.

“That,” she said quietly, slightly inclining her head in the direction where young Leslie had stood, “was, under the circumstances, unnecessary.”

“He did not know,” said Despard.

“I suppose not; though I don’t know. Perhaps you told him you had forgotten my name.”

“No,” he replied, “I did not. It would not have been true.”

She smiled very slightly.

“There is no dancing to-night,” she said. “May I ask – ?” and she hesitated.

“Why I ventured to disturb you?” he interrupted. “I was requested to take you downstairs for an ice or whatever you may prefer to that. The farce did not originate with me, I assure you.”

“Do you mean by that that you will *not* take me downstairs?” she said, smiling again as she got up from her seat. “I should like an ice very much.”

Despard bowed without speaking, and offered her his arm.

But when he had piloted her through the crowd, and she was standing quietly with her ice, he broke the silence.

“Miss Ford,” he began, “as the fates have again forced me on your notice, I should like to ask you a question.”

She raised her eyes inquiringly. No – he had not exaggerated their beauty.

“I should like to know the meaning of the strange words you honoured me with as I was leaving Mrs Englewood’s the other evening. I do not think you have forgotten them.”

“No,” she replied, “I have not forgotten them, and I meant them, and I still mean them. But I will not talk about them or explain anything I said.”

There was nothing the least flippant in her tone – only quiet determination. But Despard, watching keenly, saw that her lips quivered a little as she spoke.

“As you choose,” he said. “Of course, in the face of such a very uncompromising refusal, I can say nothing more.”

“Then shall we go upstairs again?” proposed Miss Fforde.

Mr Norreys acquiesced. But he had laid his plans, and he was a more diplomatic adversary than Miss Fforde was prepared to cope with.

“I finished reading the book we were speaking of the other evening,” he began in a matter-of-fact voice; “I mean – ” and he named the book. “At least, I fancy it was you I was discussing it with. The last volume falls off greatly.”

“Oh, *do* you think so?” said the girl in a tone of half-indignant disappointment, falling blindly into the trap. “I, on the contrary, felt that the last volume made amends for all that was unsatisfactory in the others. You see by it what he was driving at all the time, and that the *persiflage*

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