

## THE DOUBLE HOUSE.

(Continued).

Her eyes began to shine with joy, and even I took hope.  
"But, Dr. Mercheston, can there be no change? You loved one another once. Love is not yet dead; love never wholly dies. Surely—"

"Madam silence!  
Could it be his voice that spoke; his once calm, low voice? I was now really terrified.

He rose and walked about the room; we two sat trembling. At last he stopped in his old position, with his hands on the mantle-piece.

"Mrs. Rivers my extremely painful position—you will acknowledge it is such—must excuse any thing in me unbecoming, or uncourtous."

I assured him he had my free pardon for any excitement, and I hoped he felt calmer now.

"Perfectly, perfectly; you must see that, do you not?"  
"I do," said I, with a sense of bitterness against the whole race of mankind, who can drive poor woman-kind almost out of their senses, while they themselves preserve the most sublime composure.

"I will now with your permission and in your presence, speak to my wife, Barbara"—in a quiet equal tone as if addressing an ordinary person—"I told you five years ago that it is not I who am inexorable, but fate even if the life we then began to lead should hasten my death. I repeat the same now. Yet for these five years you have been at peace and safe. Safe," he repeated, with a slight pause, "under my roof, where I can shelter and protect you better than any where else."

"Protect her?" And then I told him—how could I help it?—of the slights and outrages to which their manner of life had exposed her. How every idle tongue in the neighbourhood had wagged at her expense and to both their dishonor. It was terrible to see the effect produced on him.

"Hush! tell me no more, or—Barbara, forgive me; forgive me that I ever made you my wife. There is but one atonement; shall I make you my widow?"

"Doctor Mercheston," I cried, catching his arm, "are you mad?"  
He started shuddering, and in a moment had recovered all his self-control.

"Mrs. Rivers, this is a state of things most terrible, of which I was totally ignorant. How is it to be remedied?—Granting as you must grant, the one unalterable necessity?"

I thought a minute, and then proposed, to silence the tongues of all Apedale, that the husband and wife should openly walk to church together every Sunday and kneel together in the house of God. And may He forgive me if in this scheme I had a deeper hope than I betrayed.

"I will do it," said Dr. Mercheston, after a pause. "Barbara, do you consent? Will you come home?"

"I will."  
"But to the old life? In nothing changed—for changed it cannot, must not be?"

"Under any circumstances I will come home."  
"Thank you; God bless you. It is better so."

There was a quiet pause broken only by one or two faint sobs from her. At last they ceased. Dr. Mercheston took his hat to depart; as he was going his wife started up and caught him by the hand.

"Husband one word and I can bear all things. Did—did you ever love me?"

"Love you? Oh my little Barbara!"  
"Do you love me?"

"Yes," in a whisper sharp with intolerable pain; "yes."  
"Then I do not mind any thing. Oh no, thank God! I do not mind."

She burst into hysterical laughter, and threw herself into my arms. It was only my arms she could come to—her husband was gone.

She went home as she had promised and the old life began once more. Without the slightest change, she told me—save that regularly on Sunday mornings he knocked at the door of communication between the double house kept always locked on her side by his desire—that she found him waiting in the hall and they walked arm in arm, as silently and sadly as mourners after a corpse, to the church door. In the same way returning he immediately parted from her, and went his way to his own apartments.

Apedale was quite satisfied and circulated innumerable explanations which had probably as much truth in them as the former accusations.

Dr. Mercheston came as usual to play chess with my husband, and no allusion was ever made to the night which had witnessed so strange a scene in our house.

Mrs. Mercheston improved in health and cheerfulness. To a woman the simple conviction of being loved is support and strength through the most terrible ordeal. Once sure of that her faith is infinite, her consolation complete. After his "Yes," poor little Barbara revived like a flower in the sun.

Not so her husband. Every body noticed that Dr. Mercheston was wasting away to a shadow. On Sundays, especially, his countenance, always sallow and worn, seemed to me to have the ghastly look of one whom you know to be inwardly fighting a great soul-battle. You feel at once the warfare will be won—but the man will die.

And still, as ever, of all the impenetrable mysteries that life can weave that man and his secret were the darkest.

At least to me. Whether it was to my husband, whose reserved habits and wide experience of human nature helped to make him what, thank Heaven, he always was—much wiser than I—I do not know; but I often caught his grave penetrating eye intently fixed on Dr. Mercheston. So much so that more than once the Doctor recoiled from it unawares. But Mr. Rivers redoubled his kindness; in truth, I never knew James who was very undemonstrative and usually engrossed between interest in his patients and his domestic affections, attach

himself so strongly to any male friend out of his own house, as he did to Dr. Mercheston.

He seized every opportunity to allure our neighbour from his morbid solitary in-door life to a more wholesome existence. They rode out together on the medical rounds—James trying to interest him in the many, many opportunities of philanthropy with which a country surgeon's life abounds. Sometimes—one day I especially remember—Dr. Mercheston said he thought Mr. Rivers had familiarized him with every possible aspect of human pain.

"Not all—I have yet to show you—indeed, I thought of doing so this morning—the blackest aspect human suffering can show. And yet, like all suffering a merciful God has not left it without means of alleviation."

"What do you mean? I thought we were going to some hospital. For what diseases?"

"No physical disease. Yet one which I believe, like all other diseases, is capable of prevention and cure—mental insanity."

Dr. Mercheston grew as white as this paper. He said, in a confused manner, which vainly tried to simulate indifference—"You are right. But it is a painful subject—insanity."

I did not wonder that my husband tried to change the conversation, and his morning pal likewise. It was evident that in some way the topic strongly affected our friend. Probably he had had a relative thus afflicted.

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Superintendent,  
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