

## THE DOUBLE HOUSE.

But first, of course, I asked my husband's leave; and gaining it I hazarded a question or two farther, since James, from his professional long standing in the country, knew every body and every thing.

"Who is he, Peg? I know no more than that he is Evan Merchiston M.D. of the University of Glasgow."

"And Mrs. Merchiston?"

"Was Barbara Currie, late of Apedale in this county, who was drowned at sea in seventeen hundred and—"

"Stop, stop! you are like an animated tombstone reading itself aloud. The very stone—I have seen it in our own church-yard. And so she was born at Apedale? That accounts for their coming to settle here."

"Precisely. Any thing more, Peg?"

"No, James?" For I was ashamed of my own doubts, as if that soft mild face I caught a glimpse of under the veil, and the kindly, benevolent head which I had watched the previous Sunday, did not prove despiteful gossip, that the Merchistons were "respectable"—even in my sense of the word, which was wider than that of my neighbours. "A respectable man!"—as James once said when he was courting me—"a respectable man is one who is always worthy of respect, because he always respects both himself and other people."

"Perhaps it was to prove my own 'respectability' in this sense—and justly I might respect myself—namely, the happy woman who was James Rivers's wife—that I dressed myself in my very best muslin gown of my own working and my pretty green silk Spencer and that mother had when I was married, preparatory to calling on Mrs. Merchiston."

At the Double House arose a puzzle. There were two front doors, and which should I knock at? After some doubt, I thought I could not do better than follow in my husband's steps, so I gave a summons at the door with the large plate on it.

A man, half valet, half groom, answered.

"Is Mrs. Merchiston at home?"

"I don't know, ma'm; I will inquire, if you please. Will you be so kind as to knock at the other door?"

Upon which, with some abruptness, he shut this one and left me outside.

"Well," thought I, "what can it signify which door I go in at? though it's rather odd, too."

However, I did as I was bidden, and was shown by a neat maid-servant into a very handsome parlour—drawing-room you would call it now but drawing rooms had not then reached Apedale.

By the appearance of a recently vacated sitting-room you can make a very good guess at its occupant. I soon decided that Mrs. Merchiston was young inclined to elegant tastes, especially music, that she had no children, was left a good deal alone, and probably found herself in the dreariest position for an active mind—that of a lady with nothing to do.

After a considerably long interval she appeared. Her welcome was courteous, even friendly, though not without a slight nervousness and hesitation.

"I certainly had not been her toilet that kept me waiting, for she was in the simplest possible morning gown of muslin, and her hair would not have taken a minute's dressing, as it curled all round her head in natural, wavy curls like a child's. Very childlike, too, were both the figure and face. I could hardly believe that she must be, from the date of her parents' death on the tombstone, nearly, if not quite, thirty years old. She was not exactly pretty, but the expression of her blue eyes was very beautiful, perfectly simple, trusting, guileless, and gay. She was in short, just the sort of woman that I should have expected a grave man like Dr. Merchiston to choose, out from the world of much cleverer and lovelier women, and love deeply, perhaps even madly, to the end of his days."

I was quite satisfied, nay, charmed with her. When we parted, after a much longer chat than etiquette required, I invited her warmly to our house.

"I shall be happy to come in a friendly way, but I believe Dr. Merchiston does not wish for much visiting."

This was the first time the doctor's name had entered into our conversation, so I politely inquired after his health, stating that I had seen him in church, and hoping I should soon have the pleasure of an introduction to him. I expected she would take the hint, send for her husband and perform the desired introduction now.

But Mrs. Merchiston did nothing of the kind; she merely answered my inquiries as briefly as civility allowed, and evaded the subject.

Curiosity was too strong; I could not let it go.

"I hope sincerely that it is not on account of illness that Dr. Merchiston abstains from visiting. My husband thought he looked in rather weak health."

"Does he look so? In weak health? Oh no—oh no!"

All the while was indicated in that start—that flush—that paleness. Yet she had answered indifferently when I inquired after him, and in her conversation and the surroundings of this room there was no more trace of Dr. Merchiston than if he never entered there, or indeed no longer existed. Likewise in her form of speech I had noticed not the habitual happy "we" which most married people learn to use, but the sad involuntarily selfish "I" of spinsters and childless widows. It was incomprehensible.

I hastened to atone for my inadvertence. "Indeed, my dear Mrs. Merchiston, you need not be alarmed. It must be only his natural paleness which strikes a stranger; while you who see him every day—"

"Oh, that is it—that is it," she hurriedly answered, and took me to the window to show me her flowers. Very soon after, I departed.

Some weeks later, she returned my visit, and, of course, I paid a second. Several of our village wives and mothers called likewise. It was always the same story; they had been received with courtesy, were delighted with Mrs. Merchiston, but no one ever saw her husband. And when the fathers of families, one after another, paid their respects to the doctor, they likewise returned well pleased, pronounced him a pleasant, good-hearted gentlemanly fellow, but wondered that he never introduced them to his wife.

Two dinner-parties were made for the new comers, and the invitation

was accepted; but ere the first, Mrs. Merchiston was "slightly indisposed;" and at the second, Dr. Merchiston was "unavoidably absent on business." So that to both dinners each one came alone; nevertheless, the impression they severally left behind was that of "exceedingly nice people."

At this time I did not go out much; and some weeks after, your mother, children, was born. She cost me a long illness, almost my life; but she thrived well, and at last I recovered. Mrs. Merchiston was among my first visitors.

I was glad to see her, for she had been very kind. Many a basket of fruit and flowers had come from the Double House to ours. I thanked her as warmly as I felt.

"And your husband, too—I do believe he has shot half the partridges in the county for my benefit—I have had so many; besides, it was he who rode twelve miles to fetch James that night they thought me dying."

"Was it?"

"Did you not know? Then do tell him Mrs. Merchiston, how much I thank him for his goodness—for the comfort, the help he was to my poor James! Ah! he could understand what a husband feels when his wife is dying."

Mrs. Merchiston stooped over the new cradle with the little one asleep. She did not speak a word.

"But you will tell him," pursued I earnestly in my gratitude. "What an excellent man he must be!"

"He is," she answered, in a tone evidently steadied carefully down even to coldness. "It is always a pleasure to him to do a kindness to any one. May I look at the baby?"

She walked up and down the parlor, lulling it on her arms. It nestled its wee face into her bosom.

"No, I am not your mother, little one. Ah, no!"

"She gave the child back to me and turned away. Her eyes were full of tears."

Then taking a chair by me, and softly stroking baby's fingers, she said, "Children, I believe, are a great responsibility and a heavy care; but I think it is a sadder thing still never to have had a child. There can be no love, no happiness like a mother's; it often atones for the loss of all other love—all other happiness."

"All do you think so?"

"At times. Because motherhood must forever take away the selfishness of grief. How could she indeed know any personal grief at all, if she had a child?"

"You are speaking less as a wife would feel than a widow. And you and I, Mrs. Merchiston, can not, need not, dare not, talk as widows."

(To be continued.)

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