



BY HAWLEY SMART.

Author of "Breezie Langton," "At Fault," "Tie and Trick," "Long Odds," "Without Love or Licence," &c., &c.

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CHAPTER III.—BLUE BEARD'S CHAMBER.



MISS Smerdon had become a great favourite with the Doctor, and his daughter would often say jestingly that Frances could turn him round her finger. Indeed, Nellie sometimes affected to be jealous, and declared that she believed her friend would wind up by becoming her mamma. This, however, was the merest badinage; still the young lady was undoubtedly a great favourite with the Doctor, and could coax him into pretty nearly what she pleased. On one point only was the Doctor inflexible; he would not show her what she denominated "Blue Beard's chamber." She had asked to see it in the first instance in the idlest spirit of curiosity. It was a wet day. She felt dull, or something of that sort. The Doctor parried her request in good-humoured fashion. He read her a lecture on the sin of being inquisitive, but he did not show her his den. This only stimulated the girl's desire to see the inside of the laboratory. She returned to the charge again and again, and though Frances was always assured the Doctor could refuse her nothing, she discovered that he could, and most decidedly too. Francis Smerdon said nothing; she did not even tell her friend, but she registered a vow in her own breast that if she ever got the opportunity, she would investigate the laboratory pretty thoroughly. She questioned Nellie as to whether she had ever been inside it, and the girl's reply was only once, and then for a very few minutes. "I never was in any other laboratory, but I suppose they are all much alike. A sort of cooking-range, a small furnace, and all sorts of queer-shaped bottles."

Miss Smerdon considered. She also had never seen a laboratory.

"I recollect," she murmured, "hearing a gentleman say, it was with regard to invitations, that he always went everywhere he was asked, once, on the same principle that you should see everything once; of course, therefore, it's my business to see a laboratory once if I can." However an opportunity to get inside the Doctor's den did not seem likely to present itself. She had coaxed him, and pledged herself not to be frightened at anything she might see inside, even skeletons; but it was no use; the Doctor was inflexible. She enquired of Nellie if anybody was ever admitted there.

"A few pupils of chemistry who come to him from the outside and whom I never see, and also Phybbs, the housemaid, but Phybbs' visits are rare, and are only made under my father's immediate superintendence."

From that instant Phybbs became invested with considerable interest in the eyes of Miss Smerdon,

as one versed in the Asian mysteries. She even condescended to converse with Phybbs on the subject, which was quite contrary to Miss Smerdon's usual habits, as though considerate she was given to keeping a stiff upper lip with servants. It was odd that her curiosity should be so excited about such a trifle, but she was a rather spoilt young woman, accustomed to have her own way in everything, and moreover it is just about these very trifles we do become so painfully exercised. What she had gathered from Nellie and Phybbs ought to have satisfied her but it did not. The Doctor spent a great deal of his time in his laboratory, and Frances Smerdon pictured him as perpetually transmuting baser metals into gold, seeking for the philosopher's stone, or indulging in the darker mysteries of the Rosicrucians. Who were these pupils that Nellie spoke of? Disciples, of course, she ought to have called them; for, gifted with a vivid imagination, Miss Smerdon was rapidly investing the Doctor with supernatural powers, and believing him to be the head of a sect. She was a girl with a very romantic kink in her brain, and had built all these visions in her own mind on the plain prosaic fact that her host was an elderly gentleman, who dabbled in chemistry, and did not want his retorts and machinery meddled with.

However, Miss Smerdon had not much time to indulge in further imaginings. The embarkation of the troops had caused a feeling through England that she did not perhaps make enough of her soldiers. If we were going to war—and practical people said we were virtually at war at that very time, although, perhaps, not a shot would be fired—still it behoved the nation to send forth her army handsomely. There might be bitter tears to shed, even over victories, should real fighting ever begin; but at the present moment there was a deal of "Rule Britannia" about, "Britons never, never shall be slaves," and all that sort of thing. It was right that our young heroes should be feasted before going into the lists—destined to be heroes in real earnest, too, whether in life or death, many of them. But all this was in futurity. At present the banners waved, the bands played, the crowd cheered, the officers dined and danced, and war was apparently one of the most light-hearted of pastimes. There had been much talk of giving a great ball to the regiment which the —th had relieved, but soldiers get scant warning on these occasions, and unfortunately the proposed guests were packed off to the East a little before the date fixed for the entertainment. "What was to be done?" said the committee. "We have excited society in Manchester, and society must be satisfied. Postpone the ball we may, to put it off altogether is impossible." Then arose in that committee a hard, practical man, who opined that one regi-

ment was as good as another—in his heart he considered they were all expensive encumbrances. As long as the Manchester ladies got their ball they would be content. As long as their partners have red coats, girls don't trouble their heads about who is inside of them. Ask the new regiment instead of the old, it will all come to the same thing. And so it came about that no sooner had they appeared in Manchester than the —th found themselves fêted in all directions. It was necessary, of course, to make the acquaintance of the new-comers before the ball, given in their honour, took place. The young ladies of the city were most positive on this point, and the result was the humblest subaltern of the —th found himself committed to as many engagements as in these days falls to the lot of an African explorer.

"I tell you what, old man," exclaimed Byng, as he lounged in the ante-room one morning after parade, "it's well for you that you hadn't two or three weeks in Manchester before you backed yourself for your big walk. They can't mean us for active service, or they would never have sent us to such a Capua as this. Last night's the fifth night I've dined out this week. Do you? Well, if turtle, champagne, punch—"

"Are little comforts you will find Government don't provide on active service," exclaimed Fleming, laughing.

"No," returned the other. "By the way, I took into dinner a very nice-looking girl, who manifested an undue interest in your worthy self—Miss Lynden."

"Don't know her—never even heard of her," replied Hugh Fleming, sententiously.

"Well, you needn't crow, young man. She never saw you but once, and whatever you may think of your personal appearance, you weren't looking your best then."

"When was that?" asked Hugh.

"She saw you finish your match," replied Byng. "Didn't look much of it myself just then, but you—a shambling, broken-down tramp was the only possible description of you."

"Don't be personal, man," rejoined Hugh. "I've a hazy recollection of passing a carriage with some ladies in it. I wonder how she knew my name?"

"Oh, she was staying with the Smerdons. She often stays with them, and you were a local celebrity for a few days, remember. Miss Smerdon was there last night. Everyone was raving about this ball. I tell you what, my children," continued Byng, addressing the little knot of officers in the ante-room, "soldiers are up, they've touched about the top price they've ever been at since I've been in service. Manchester is popularly supposed to abound in heiresses—obvious deduction. Take