

ONLY A TINY THING.

'Twas a tiny, rosewood thing,
Ebon bound and glittering
With its stars of silver white;
Silver tablet, black and bright;
Downy pillowed; satin lined;
That I, loitering chance to find
'Mid the dust and soot and gloom
Of the undertaker's room,
Waiting empty—ah, for whom?

Ah, what love-watched cradle bed
Keeps to-night the nestling head,
Or on what soft pillowed breast,
Is the cherub form at rest,
That ere long, with darkened eye,
Sleeping to no lullaby,
Whitely robed, still and cold,
Pale flowers slipping from its hold,
Shall this dainty couch enfold?

Ah, what bitter tears shall stain
All this satin sheet like rain!
And what towering hopes are hid
'Neath this tiny coffin lid,
Scarcely large enough to bear
Little words that must be there,
Little words cut deep and true,
Bleeding mother's heart anew—
Sweet, pet name, and "Aged Two!"

Oh, can sorrow's hovering plume
Round our pathway cast a gloom,
Chill and darkness as the shade
By an infant's coffin made?
From our arms an angel flies,
And our startled, dazzled eyes,
Weeping round its vacant place,
Cannot rise its path to trace,
Cannot see the angel's face.

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PUBLICANS and SINNERS

A LIFE PICTURE.

BY MISS M. E. BRADDON,

Author of "Lady Audley's Secret," "To The Bitter End," "The Outcasts," &c., &c.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER XIV.

LUCILLE HAS STRANGE DREAMS.

For a few nights, while Lucille's fever was at the worst, Lucius Davoren took up his abode in Cedar House, and established himself in that little room adjoining Mr. Sivewright's bed chamber which had been lately occupied by Lucille. Here he felt himself a sure guardian of his patient's safety. No one could harm the old man while he, Lucius, was on the spot to watch by night, while Mrs. Milderson, the nurse, in whom he had perfect confidence, was on guard by day. His own days must needs be fully occupied out of doors, whatever private cares might gnaw at his heartstrings; but after introducing the ex-policeman and his wife, who came to him with a kind of warranty from Mr. Otranto, and who seemed honest people, he felt tolerably satisfied as to the safety of property in the old house, as well as that more valuable possession—life. He about had locked the door of the room which contained the chief part of Mr. Sivewright's collection, and carried the key about with him in his pocket; but there was still a great deal of very valuable property scattered about the house, as he knew.

One thing troubled him, and that was the existence of the secret staircase, communicating in some manner—which he had been up to this point unable to discover—with Mr. Sivewright's bedroom. He had sounded Homer Sivewright cautiously upon this subject, and the old man's answers had led him to believe that he, so long a tenant of the house, knew absolutely nothing of the hidden staircase: or it might be only an exaggerated caution and a strange passion for secrecy which sealed Homer Sivewright's lips. Once, when his patient was asleep, Lucius contrived to examine the paucelling in front of the masked staircase, but he could discover no means of communication. If there were, as he fully believed, a sliding panel, the trick of it altogether baffled him. This failure worried him exceedingly. He had a morbid horror of that possible entrance to his patient's room, which it was beyond his power to defend by bolt, lock, or bar, since he knew not the manner of its working. For worlds he would not have alarmed Mr. Sivewright, who was still weak as an infant, although wonderfully improved during the last few days. He was therefore compelled to be silent, but he felt that here was the one hitch in his scheme of defence from the hidden enemy.

"After all, there is little need to torment myself about the mystery," he thought sometimes. "It is clear enough that these Winchers were guilty alike of the robbery and the attempt to murder. The greater crime was but a means of saving themselves from the consequences of the lesser; or they may possibly have supposed that

their old master had left them well provided for in his will, and that the way to independence lay across his grave. It is hard to think that human nature can be so vile, but in this case there is scarcely room for doubt."

He thought of that man whom he had seen in the brief glare of the frequent lightning—the man who had raised himself from his crouching attitude to look up at the lighted window on the topmost story, and had then scaled the wall.

"The receiver of stolen goods, the medium by which they disposed of their booty, no doubt," he said to himself; "their crime would have been incomplete without such aid."

Although all his endeavors to find the key belonging to the door of the staircase leading to the upper story had failed, Lucius had not allowed himself to be baffled in his determination to explore those unoccupied rooms. Now that Lucille's prostration and the Wincher's dismissal had made him in a manner master of the house, he sent for a blacksmith and had the lock picked, and then went upstairs to explore, accompanied by the man, whom he ordered to open the doors of the rooms as he had opened the doors of the staircase. There was but little to reward his perseverance in those desolate attic chambers. Most of them were empty; but in one—that room whose door he had seen stealthily opened and stealthily closed on his sole visit to those upper regions—he found some traces of occupation. Two or three articles of battered old furniture—an old stump bedstead of clumsy make, provided with bedding and blankets, which lay huddled upon it as if just as its last occupant had left it—the ashes of a fire in the narrow grate—a table, with an old ink-bottle, a couple of pens, and a sheet of ink-stained blotting-paper—an empty bottle smelling of brandy on the mantelpiece, a bottle which, from its powerful odor, could hardly have been emptied very long ago—a tallow-candle, sorely gnawed by rats or mice, in an old metal candlestick on the window-seat—a scrap of carpet spread before the hearth, a dilapidated armchair drawn up close to it: a room which, to Lucius Davoren's eye, looked as if it had been the lair of some unclean creature—one of those lost wretches in whom the fashion of humanity has sunk to its lowest and vilest phase.

He looked round the room with a shudder. "There has been some one living here lately," he said, thinking aloud.

"Ay, sir," answered the Blacksmith, "it looks like it; some one who wasn't over particular about his quarters, I should think, by the look of the place. But it seems to have had summat to comfort him," added the man, with mild jocosity, pointing to the empty bottle on the chimney-piece.

Some one had occupied that room; but who was that occupant? And had Lucille known this fact when she so persistently denied the evidence of her lover's senses—when she had shown herself so palpably averse to his making any inspection of those rooms?

Who could have been hidden there with her cognisance, with her approval? About whom could she have been thus anxious? For a moment the question confounded him. He could only wonder, in blank dull amazement.

Then in the next moment, the lover's firm faith arose in rebuke of that brief suspicion.

"What, am I going to doubt her again," he said to himself, "while she lies ill and helpless, with utmost need of my affection? Of course she was utterly ignorant of the fact that yonder room was occupied, and therefore ridiculed my statement about the open door. Was it strange if her manner seemed hurried or nervous, when she had just been startled by the sight of her father's portrait? I am a wretch to doubt her, even for a moment."

He went up to the loft, and thoroughly examined that dusty receptacle, but found no living creature there except the spiders, whose webs festooned the massive timbers that sustained the ponderous tiled roof. This upper portion of the house was vacant enough now; of that there could be no doubt. There was as little doubt that the room yonder had been lately occupied. There could but be one solution of the mystery, Lucius decided, after some anxious thought. Mr. Wincher had accommodated his accomplice with a lodging in that room while the two were planning and carrying out their system of plunder.

This examination duly made, and the doors fastened up again in a permanent manner, by the help of the blacksmith, Lucius felt easier in his mind. There was still that uncomfortable feeling about the secret staircase; but with the upper part of the house under lock-and-key, and the lower part carefully guarded, no great harm could come from the mere existence of that hidden communication. In any case, Lucius had done his utmost to make all things secure. His most absorbing anxiety now was about Lucille's illness.

His treatment had been to a considerable extent successful; the delirium had passed away. The sweet eyes recognised him once again; the gentle voice thanked him for his care. But the fever had been followed by extreme weakness. The sick girl lay on her bed from day to day, ministered to by Mrs. Milderson, and had scarcely power to lift her head from the pillow.

This prostration was rendered all the more painful by the patient's feverish anxiety to recover strength. Again and again with a piteous air of entreaty, she asked Lucius when she would be well enough to get up, to go about the house, to attend to her grandfather.

"My dearest," he answered gravely, "we must not talk about that yet awhile. We have sufficient reason for thankfulness in the improvement that has taken place already. We must wait patiently for the return of strength."

"I can't be patient!" exclaimed Lucille, in the feeble voice that had changed so much since her illness. "How can I lie here patiently when I know that I am wanted; that—that everything may be going on wrong without me?"

"Was there ever such ingratitude and distrustfulness," cried the comfortable old nurse, with pretended chiding, "when she knows I'm that watchful of the poor old gentleman, and give him all he wants to the minute; and that you've taken to sleeping in the little room next him, Mr. Davoren, so as to keep guard, as you may say, at night?"

"Forgive me," said Lucille, stretching out her wasted hand to the nurse, and then to the doctor, who bent down to press his lips to the poor little feverish hand. "I daresay I seem very ungrateful; but it isn't that—I only want to be well. I feel so helplessly lying here; it's so dreadful to be a prisoner, bound hand and foot, as it were. Can't you get me well quickly somehow, Lucius? Never mind if I'm ill again by and by; patch me up for a little while."

"Nay, dearest, there shall be no half cure, no patching. With God's help, I hope to restore you to perfect health before very long. But if you are impatient, if you give way to fretfulness, you will lessen your chances of a rapid recovery."

Lucille gave no answer save a long weary sigh. Tears gathered slowly in her sad eyes, and she turned her face to the wall.

"Yes, poor dear," said Nurse Milderson, looking down at her compassionately; "as long as she do fret and worry herself so, she'll keep backarding of her recovery."

Here the nurse beckoned mysteriously to Lucius, and led him out of the room into the corridor, where she unbosomed herself of her cares.

"It isn't as I want to alarm you, Dr. Davoren,"—Lucius held brevet rank in the Shadrack-road,—"far from it; but I feel myself in duty bound to tell you that she's a little wrong in her head still of a night, between sleeping and waking as you may say, and talks and rambles more than I like to hear. And it's always 'father,' rambling and rambling on about loving her father, and trusting him in spite of the world, and standing by him, and suchlike. And last night—it might have been from half-past one to two—say a quarter to two, or perhaps twenty minutes," said Mrs. Milderson, with infinite precision, "I'd been taking forty winks, as you may say, in my chair, being a bit worn out, when she turns every drop of my blood to ice-cold water by crying out sudden, in a voice that pierced me to the marrow—"

"What, nurse? For goodness' sake come to the point," cried Lucius, who thought he was never to hear the end of Mrs. Milderson's personal sensations.

"I was coming to it, sir," replied that lady, with offended dignity, "when you interrupted me; I was only anxious to be exact. 'O,' she cried out, 'not poison! Don't say that—no, not poison! You wouldn't do that—you wouldn't be so wicked as to poison your poor old father.' I think that was enough to freeze anybody's blood, sir. But, for, they do take such queer fancies when they're light-headed. I'm sure, I nursed a poor dear lady in Stevedor-lane, in purple fever—where her husband was in the coal-and-potato line, and gingerbeer and bloaters, and suchlike—and she used to fancy her poor head was turned into a yolk-regent, and beg and pray of me ever so pitiful to cut the eyes out of it. I'm proud to say, tho', as I brought her round, and there isn't a healthier-looking woman between here and the docks."

Lucius was silent. His own suggestion of a possible attempt to poison was sufficient to account for these delirious words of Lucille. It was only strange that she should have associated her father's name with the idea; that in her disturbed dream, he, the father—to whose image she clung with such fond affection—should have appeared to her in the character of a parricide.

"We must try and get back her strength, nurse," said Lucius, after a thoughtful pause; "with returning health all these strange fancies will disappear."

"Yes, sir, with returning health!" sighed Mrs. Milderson, whose cheerfulness seemed somewhat to have deserted her.

This sick-nursing was, as she was wont to remark, much more trying than attendance upon matrons and their new-borns. It lacked the lively element afforded by the baby. "I feel lonesome and down-hearted-like in a sick-room," Mrs. Milderson would remark to her gossips, "and the cryingest, peevishest baby that ever was would be a blessing to me after a fever case."

"You don't think her worse, do you?" asked Lucius, alarmed by that sigh.

"No, sir; but I don't think her no better," answered Mrs. Milderson, with the vagueness of an oracle. "She's that low, there's no cheering of her up. I'm sure, I've sat and told her about some of my regular patients—Mrs. Binks in the West Injaroad, and Mrs. Turvitt down by the Basin—and done all I could think of to enliven her, but she always gives the same impatient sigh, and says, 'I do so long to get well, nurse.' She must have been very low, Dr. Davoren, before she took to her bed."

"Yes," said Lucius, remembering that sudden fainting-fit. "She had allowed herself too little rest in her attendance upon her grandfather."

"She must have worn herself to a shadder, poor dear young creature," said Mrs. Milderson. "But don't you be uneasy, sir," pursued the matron, having done her best to make him so;

"if care and constant watchfulness can bring her round, round she shall be brought."

Thus Lucius Davoren went about his daily work henceforward with a new burden on his mind—the burden of care for that dear patient, for whom, perchance, his uttermost care might be vain.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DAWN OF HOPE.

The glory of the summer had departed from the Shadrack-road. The costermongers no longer bawled their fine fresh "Arline" plums, their "gages" at four pence per quart; cucumbers had grown too yellow and seedy even for the Shadrackites; green apples were exhibited on the stalls and barrows; the cracking of walnuts was heard at every street-corner; and the great bloater season—which was a kind of minor saturnalia in this district—had been inaugurated by the first triumphal cry of "Rale Yarmouths, two for threehalfpence!" The pork-butchers, whose trade had somewhat slackened during the dog-days—though the Shadrackites were always pork-eaters—now began to find demand growing brisker. In a word, autumn was at hand. Not by wide plains of ripening corn, or the swift flight of the scared dove rising from their nest in the long grass, did the Shadrackites perceive the change of seasons, but by the contents of the costermongers' barrows. At this time, also, that raven cry of cholera—generally arising out of the sufferings of those unwary citizens who had indulged too freely in such luxuries as conger-eel or cucumber—dwindled and died away; and the Shadrackites, moved by that gloomy spirit which always beheld clouds upon the horizon, prophesied that the harvest would be a bad one, and bread dear in the coming winter.

Lucius went among them day after day, and ministered to them, and was patient with them and smiled at the little children, and talked cheerily to the old people, despite that growing anxiety in his own breast. He neglected not a single duty, and spent no more of his day in Cedar House than he had done before he took up his quarters there. He ate his frugal meals in his own house, and only went to Mr. Sivewright's dreary old mansion at a late hour in the evening. He had carried some of his medical books there, and often sat in his little bed-room reading, long after midnight. His boy had orders to run on to Cedar House should there be any call for his aid in the dead hours of the night.

He brooded much over that little packet of letters which he counted among his richest treasures—those letters from the man who signed himself "H. G.," and the lady whom he wrote of as Madame Dumarques, the lady whose own delicate signature appeared in clearest characters upon the smooth foreign paper—written with ink that had faded with the lapse of years—Félicie.

Lucius read these letters again and again, and the result of this repeated perusal was the conviction that the writers of those lines were the parents of Lucille. Why should they have been thus deeply interested in Ferdinand Sivewright's child, or how should he have been able to put forward a claim for money on that child's behalf?

Lucius had taken these letters into his custody with the determination to turn them to good account. If it were within the limits of possibility, he would discover the secret to which these letters afforded so slight a clue. That was the resolve he had made when he took the packet from Homer Sivewright's desk—and time in nowise diminished the force of his intention. But he had no heart to begin his search just yet, while Lucille was dangerously ill.

In the mean time he thought the matter over, repeatedly deliberating as to the best means of beginning a task which promised to be difficult. Should he consult Mr. Otranto—should he commit his chances to the wisdom and experience of that famous private detective?

His own answer to his own question was a decided negative. "No," he said to himself, "I will not vulgarise the woman I love by giving the broken links of the story of her birth to a professional spy, leaving him to put them together after his own fashion. If there should be a blot upon her lineage, his worldly eyes shall not be the first to discover the stain. Heaven has given me brains which are perhaps as good as Mr. Otranto's, and constancy of purpose shall stand me in the stead of experience. I will do this thing myself. Directly Lucille is in a fair way to recover, I will begin my task, and it shall go hard with me if I do not succeed."

The days passed slowly enough for the parish doctor's hard-worked brain, which felt weary of all things on earth, or of all those things which made up the sum of his monotonous life. September had begun, and a slight improvement had arisen in Lucille's condition. She was a little stronger, a little more cheerful—had rewarded her doctor's care with just a faint shadow of her once familiar smile. She had been lifted out of her bed too one warm afternoon, and wrapped in her dressing-gown and an old faded Indian shawl that had belonged to Homer Sivewright's Spanish wife, and placed in an easy-chair by the open window to drink tea with Mrs. Milderson. Whereupon there had been a grand tea-drinking, to which Lucius was admitted, and in which there was some touch of the happiness of bygone days.

"Do you remember the first time you gave me a cup of tea, Lucille," said Lucius, "that winter's night, in the parlour down-stairs?"