

THE DOUBLE HOUSE.

"James, the house is let."

"Which?" said Mr. Rivers, never looking up from his dinner—for a dozen patients, scattered over a dozen square miles, were awaiting him.

"The house—the Double House. The one that every body thought would never get a tenant. But it has got one."

"Who?"

"A Dr. Mercheston, a physician; but luckily for us he does not practice. He is a man of large fortune."

"Married?—children?"

"I really don't know. But I should rather think not. Most family men would object to that very inconvenient house. It might suit an eccentric bachelor, who could live alone in the one half, and shut up his domestics in the other, looking the door of communication between. But for a mistress and mother of a family—dear me!—one might as well live in two separate houses. One never could hear the children cry of nights, and the maids might idle as much as they liked with—"

Here I turned round, finding I was talking to the air. My husband had disappeared. It was in vain to attempt to interest him about the Double House, or the people that were coming there.

But as to the rest of our village—speculation ran wild concerning the new-comers. First because a grave, dignified, middle-aged gentleman like Dr. Mercheston—of such composed and quiet manners, too—had chosen to live in this eccentric and uncomfortable mansion; for as before stated, it went by the name of the Double House and consisted of two houses joined together by a covered passage and door of communication, each having its separate entrance and being, in fact a complete dwelling. Secondly because, when the furniture was sent in, it was discovered to be the appointments of two distinct habitations: namely two drawing-rooms, two dining-rooms, two kitchens, and so on. The wonder grew—when Dr. Mercheston, accompanied by an elderly person, "Mrs Mercheston's maid," (there was a Mrs. Mercheston, then!) introduced into the establishment two distinct sets of domestics; two cooks, two housemaids, &c.

And now every body waited for the master, and mistress, who, we learned, had to make a long journey from London by post—for all this happened when I was a young married woman, more than forty years ago. I had my hands empty then—possibly, my head too, for I remember loitering about the whole day, and sitting lazily at parlor windows, just to catch the first sight of my neighbours. Nay, I will confess that when the chaise and four hundred part our house I peeped from under the blind.

In the carriage I saw only the elderly female servant, and a figure leaning back. Dr. Mercheston was certainly not there.

Half an hour afterwards he galloped past in the twilight to his own door, which closed upon him as quickly as it had, a short time before, closed upon the others.

"Well, they are come," said I to James that evening.

"Who?" he ejaculated, most provokingly.

"The Merchestons, of course. And nobody is a bit the wiser."

My husband put on his quaintest smile (a merry man, children, was your grandfather)—

"Never mind—there's Sunday coming."

My hopes revived. I led a dull life in James's long absences, and had been really anxious for a neighbour—a pleasant neighbour—a true gentleman. Yes, of course, we should see the Merchestons at church on Sunday, for a large pew had been taken cushioned and hassocked to perfection; besides, the doctor looked like a respectable church-going gentleman.

And sure enough, when service began, above the high pew, distinct to the eyes of the congregation, rose his tall head and shoulders.

He was in the prime of life, though his hair was already, as we say of a September tree, "a turning." He had a large, well-shaped head, very broad across the crown, just where my grandam tells me lies the bump of conscientiousness; but we never thought of such folly as phrenology in my days. For the face—I do not clearly remember the features, but I know the general impression conveyed was that of a strong will capable of any amount of self-control or self-denial. The eyes, though honest and clear, had at times much restlessness in them; when stately and fixed, they were, I think, the saddest eyes I ever saw. His countenance was stately and pale, though he flushed up once or twice on meeting the universal stare—which stare increased tenfold when he actually repeated audibly and devoutly the responses which the Rubric enjoins on the congregation, and the congregation usually delegates to the charity-boys and the clerk.

Except this we could find nothing extraordinary in Dr. Mercheston's appearance or behaviour. He sat in his pew alone; he went out as he had entered, silently, quietly, and alone. In another pew sat two of the house-servants and Mrs. Mercheston's maid. The lady herself did not come to church at all that day.

It was rather disappointing—since, by Apedale etiquette, no one could call on Mrs. Mercheston until she had appeared at church. But we heard during the week that the Rector had called on Dr. Mercheston.

I tried to persuade Mr. Rivers to do the same—it would be only kind and neighbourly. After half an hour's coaxing, which apparently, was all thrown away, he briefly observed,

"Peggy, I've been."

"O! do tell me all about it, from the very beginning. Which door did you knock at? The one with a brass plate, and 'Dr. Mercheston' on it?"

"Yes."

"And you saw him? You were shown up to the drawing-room or the library—which?"

"Library."

"Was he alone? Was he polite and pleasant? Did you see his wife?"

"Two nods and a shake of the head were all the answer I received to these three questions."

"Dear me! How odd! I hope you is quiet after her? How did her husband say she was?"

"Quite well."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"Well—you are the most provoking man to get any thing out of." And you, my Peggy, are one of those excellent women who will never cease trying hard to get out of a man things which he absolutely does not know."

I laughed; for what was the use of quarrelling? Besides, didn't I know all James's little peculiarities before I married him?

"Just one question more, James. Have they any children?"

"Didn't ask."

So the whole Mercheston affair stood precisely where it was—until the next Sunday. Then, in the afternoon, as I walked to church, I saw a lady come quietly out of the Double House, at the left-hand door—not the one with the brass name-plate—close it after her, and proceed along across the road and down Church-alley.

She paused a moment in the church-yard walk, which was very beautiful in the May afternoon, with the two great trees nesting overhead, and throwing checkers of light and shade on the path leading to the porch. She looked around as if she admired and enjoyed this scene, with its picturesque groups of twos and threes—fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, lingering about and talking till the chime of bells should cease. She looked apparently with a kindly interest in them all, and then, as if suddenly conscious that they looked back inquisitively at her, dropped her veil and hurriedly entered the church. I heard her asking the sexton in a low voice, which seemed to belong to a woman still young, "what was Dr. Mercheston's pew?"

She was shown in, and then—being small of stature—she entirely vanished from my gaze and that of the congregation.

Could it be that this was Mrs. Mercheston?

I do not exaggerate when I say that I had six successive "droppers-in" on the Monday morning—in my great inconvenience, for I was making my cowslip-wine—I should say, my first attempt at this patent liquor—and that the sole subject of conversation was Mrs. Mercheston.

"What a tiny woman!" "How plainly dressed! why, her pelisse was quite old-fashioned." "Yet some body said she was young." "He does not seem above forty, either." "How strange that he should let her go to church alone—the first time of her appearance, too!"

Such were the comments, blended with a small quantum of lately-elicited facts, which reached me concerning my new neighbours.

"Very odd people—exceedingly gossip—ought to be inquired into," was the general conclusion. All the village began to discuss the Double House, the duplicate establishment, and the notable facts that, since their arrival, Dr. Mercheston had been seen every day, Mrs. Mercheston never; that Dr. Mercheston had come to church, Mrs. Mercheston staying at home and *vice versa*.

The result was the Apedale ladies cautiously resolved to defer "visiting" the strangers a little longer, till assured of their respectability, and I being myself a new-comer, having gossip, scandal, and censoriousness, with the virulence of war-hoarded, all credulous youth, inly determined to call next day.

(To be continued.)

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