

A House in Bloomsbury

By
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**A HOUSE IN
BLOOMSBURY.**

CHAPTER I.

“FATHER,” said Dora, “I am going upstairs for a little, to see Mrs. Hesketh, if you have no objection.”

“And who is Mrs. Hesketh, if I might make so bold as to ask?” Mr. Mannering said, lifting his eyes from his evening paper.

“Father! I told you all about her on Sunday—that she’s all alone all day, and sometimes her husband is so late of getting home. She is so lonely, poor little thing. And she is such a nice little thing! Married, but not so big as me.”

“And who is—— her husband?” Mr. Mannering was about to say, but he checked himself. No doubt he had heard all about the husband too. He heard many things without hearing them, being conscious rather of the pleasant voice of Dora running on than of everything she said.

This had, no doubt, been the case in respect to the young couple upstairs, of whose existence he had become dimly sensible by reason of meeting one or other of them on the stairs. But there was nothing in the appearance of either which had much attracted him. They appeared to him a commonplace couple of inferior kind; and perhaps had he been a man with all his wits keenly about him, he would not have allowed his child to run wild about the little woman upstairs. But Mr. Mannering did not keep his wits about him sharpened to any such point.

Dora was a child, but also she was a lady, proof against any contamination of acquaintance which concerned only the letters of the alphabet. Her “h’s” could take care of themselves, and so could

her "r's". As for anything else, Mr. Mannering's dreamy yet not unobservant eyes had taken in the fact that the young woman, who was not a lady, was an innocent and good little woman; and it had never occurred to him to be afraid of any chance influence of such a kind for his daughter. He acquiesced, accordingly, with a little nod of his head, and return of his mild eyes to his paper.

These two were the best of companions; but he was not jealous of his little girl, nor did he desire that she should be for ever in his sight. He liked to read his paper; sometimes he had a book which interested him very much. The thought that Dora had a little interest in her life also, special to herself, pleased him more than if she had been always hanging upon him for her amusement and occupation. He was not afraid of the acquaintance she might make, which was a little rash, perhaps, especially in a man who had known the world, and knew, or ought to have known, the mischief that can arise from unsuitable associates.

But there are some people who never learn; indeed, few people learn by experience, so far as I have ever seen. Dora had been an independent individuality to her father since she was six years old. He had felt, as parents often feel with a curious mixture of feelings, half pleasure, half surprise, half disappointment (as if there could be three halves! the reader will say; but there are, and many more), that she was not very much influenced by himself, who was most near to her. If such things could be weighed in any balance, he was most, it may be said, influenced by her. She retained her independence. How was it possible then that, conscious of this, he should be much alarmed by any problematical influence that could be brought to bear upon her by a stranger? He was not, indeed, the least afraid.

Dora ran up the stairs, which were dark at the top, for Mrs. Simcox could not afford to let her lodgers who paid so low a rent have a light on their landing; and the landing itself was encumbered by various articles, between which there was need of wary steering. But this little girl had lived in these Bloomsbury lodgings all her life, and knew her way about as well as the children of the house. Matters were facilitated, too, by the sudden opening of a door, from which the light and, sad to say, something of the smell of a paraffin lamp shone out, illuminating the rosy face of a young woman, with a piece of sewing in her hand, who looked out in bright expectation, but clouded over a little when she saw who it was. "Oh, Miss Dora!" she said; and added in an undertone, "I thought it was Alfred home a little sooner than usual," with a little sigh.

"I made such a noise," said Dora, apologetically. "I couldn't help it. Jane will leave so many things about."

"Oh, it's me, Miss Dora. I does my rooms myself; it saves a deal on the rent. I shouldn't have left that crockery there, but it saves trouble, and I'm not that used to housework."

"No," said Dora, seating herself composedly at the table, and resisting, by a strong exercise of self-control, her impulse to point out that the lamp could not have been properly cleaned, since it smelt so. "One can see," she added, the fact being incontestable, "that you don't know how to do many things. And that is a pity, because things then are not so nice."

She seemed to cast a glance of criticism about the room, to poor little Mrs. Hesketh's excited fancy, who was ready to cry with vexation. "My family always kep' a girl," she said in a tone of

injury subdued. But she was proud of Dora's friendship, and would not say any more.

"So I should have thought," said Dora, critical, yet accepting the apology as if, to a certain extent, it accounted for the state of affairs.

"And Alfred says," cried the young wife, "that if we can only hold on for a year or two, he'll make a lady of me, and I shall have servants of my own. But we ain't come to that yet—oh, not by a long way."

"It is not having servants that makes a lady," said Dora. "We are not rich." She said this with an ineffable air of superiority to all such vulgar details. "I have never had a maid since I was quite a little thing." She had always been herself surprised by this fact, and she expected her hearer to be surprised. "But what does that matter?" she added. "One is oneself all the same."

"Nobody could look at you twice," said the admiring humble friend. "And how kind of you to leave your papa and all your pretty books and come up to sit with me because I'm so lonely! It is hard upon us to have Alfred kep' so late every night."

"Can't he help it?" said Dora. "If I were you, I should go out to meet him. The streets are so beautiful at night."

"Oh, Miss Dora!" cried the little woman, shocked. "He wouldn't have me go out by myself, not for worlds! Why, somebody might speak to me! But young girls they don't think of that. I sometimes wish I could be taken on among the young ladies in the mantle department, and then we could walk home together.

But then," she added quickly, "I couldn't make him so comfortable, and then——"

She returned to her work with a smile and a blush. She was always very full of her work, making little "things," which Dora vaguely supposed were for the shop. Their form and fashion threw no light to Dora upon the state of affairs.

"When you were in the shop, were you in the mantle department?" she asked.

"Oh, no. My figure isn't good enough," said Mrs. Hesketh; "you have to have a very good figure, and look like a lady. Some of the young ladies have beautiful figures, Miss Dora; and such nice black silks—as nice as any lady would wish to wear—which naturally sets them off."

"And nothing to do?" said Dora, contemptuously. "I should not like that."

"Oh, you! But they have a deal to do. I've seen 'em when they were just dropping down with tiredness. Standing about all day, and putting on mantles and things, and pretending to walk away careless to set them off. Poor things! I'd rather a deal stand behind the counter, though they've got the best pay."

"Have you been reading anything to-day?" said Dora, whose attention was beginning to flag.

Mrs. Hesketh blushed a little. "I've scarcely sat down all day till now; I've been having a regular clean-out. You can't think how the dust gets into all the corners with the fires and all that. And I've just been at it from morning till night. I tried to read a little bit

when I had my tea. And it's a beautiful book, Miss Dora, but I was that tired."

"It can scarcely take a whole day," said Dora, looking round her, "to clean out this one little room."

"Oh, but you can't think what a lot of work there is, when you go into all the corners. And then I get tired, and it makes me stupid."

"Well," said Dora, with suppressed impatience, "but when you become a lady, as you say, with servants to do all you want, how will you be able to take up a proper position if you have never read anything?"

"Oh, as for that," said Mrs. Hesketh in a tone of relief, "that can't be for a long time yet; and you feel different when you're old to what you do when you're young."

"But I am young," said Dora. She changed the subject, however, more or less, by her next question. "Are you really fond of sewing?" she said in an incredulous tone; "or rather, what are you most fond of? What should you like best to do?"

"Oh!" said the little wife, with large open eyes and mouth—she fell off, however, into a sigh and added, "if one ever had what one wished most!"

"And why not?" said inexperienced Dora. "At least," she added, "it's pleasant to think, even if you don't have what you want. What should you like best?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Hesketh again, but this time with a long-drawn breath of longing consciousness, "I should like that we might have

enough to live upon without working, and Alfred and me always to be together,—that’s what I should like best.”

“Money?” cried Dora with irrepressible scorn.

“Oh, Miss Dora, money! You can’t think how nice it would be just to have enough to live on. I should never, never wish to be extravagant, or to spend more than I had; just enough for Alfred to give up the shop, and not be bound down to those long hours any more!”

“And how much might that be?” said Dora, with an air of grand yet indulgent magnificence, as if, though scorning this poor ideal, she might yet perhaps find it possible to bestow upon her friend the insignificant happiness for which she sighed.

“Oh, Miss Dora, when you think how many things are wanted in housekeeping, and one’s dress, and all that—and probably more than us,” said Mrs. Hesketh, with a bright blush. She too looked at the girl as if it might have been within Dora’s power to give the modest gift. “Should you think it a dreadful lot,” said the young woman, “if I said two hundred a year?”

“Two hundred pounds a year?” said Dora reflectively. “I think,” she added, after a pause, “father has more than twice as much as that.”

“La!” said Mrs. Hesketh; and then she made a rapid calculation, one of those efforts of mental arithmetic in which children and simple persons so often excel. “He must be saving up a lot,” she said admiringly, “for your fortune. Miss Dora. You’ll be quite an heiress with all that.”

This was an entirely new idea to Dora, who knew of heiresses only what is said in novels, where it is so easy to bestow great fortunes. "Oh no, I shall not be an heiress," she said; "and I don't think we save up very much. Father has always half a dozen pensioners, and he buys books and—things." Dora had a feeling that it was something mean and bourgeois—a word which Mr. Mannering was rather apt to use—to save up.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Hesketh again, with her countenance falling. She was not a selfish or a scheming woman; but she had a romantic imagination, and it was so easy an exercise of fancy to think of this girl, who had evidently conceived such a friendship for herself, as "left" rich and solitary at the death of her delicate father, and adopting her Alfred and herself as companions and guardians. It was a sudden and passing inspiration, and the young woman meant no harm, but there was a visionary disappointment in her voice.

"But," said Dora, with the impulse of a higher cultivation, "it is a much better thing to work than to do nothing. When father is at home for a few days, unless we go away somewhere, he gets restless; and if he were always at home he would begin some new study, and work harder than ever."

"Ah, not with folks like us, Miss Dora," said Mrs. Hesketh. Then she added: "A woman has always got plenty to do. She has got her house to look after, and to see to the dinner and things. And when there are children——" Once more she paused with a blush to think over that happy prospect. "And we'd have a little garden," she said, "where Alfred could potter about, and a little trap that we could drive about in, and take me to see places, and oh, we'd be as happy as the day was long!" she cried, clasping her hands. The

clock struck as she spoke, and she hastily put away her sewing and rose up. "You won't mind, Miss Dora, if I lay the table and get things ready for supper? Alfred will soon be coming now."

"Oh, I like to see you laying the table," said Dora, "and I'll help you—I can do it very well. I never let Jane touch our nice clean tablecloths. Don't you think you want a fresh one?" she said, looking doubtfully at the somewhat dingy linen. "Father always says clean linen is the luxury of poor people."

"Oh!" said little Mrs. Hesketh. She did not like criticism any more than the rest of us, nor did she like being identified with "poor people". Mr. Mannering's wise yet foolish aphorism (for how did he know how much it cost to have clean linen in Bloomsbury—or Belgravia either, for that matter?) referred to persons in his own condition, not in hers; but naturally she did not think of that. Her pride and her blood were up, however; and she went with a little hurry and vehemence to a drawer and took out a clean tablecloth. Sixpence was the cost of washing, and she could not afford to throw away sixpences, and the other one had only been used three or four times; but her pride, as I have said, was up.

"And where are the napkins?" said Dora. "I'll lay it for you. I really like to do it: and a nicely-laid table, with the crystal sparkling, and the silver shining, and the linen so fresh and smooth, is a very pretty object to look at, father always says."

"Oh dear! I must hurry up," cried Mrs. Hesketh; "I hear Alfred's step upon the stairs."

Now Dora did not admire Alfred, though she was fond of Alfred's wife. He brought a sniff of the shop with him; which was disagreeable to the girl, and he called her "miss," which Dora

hated. She threw down the tablecloth hurriedly. "Oh, I'll leave you then," she cried, "for I'm sure he does not like to see me here when he comes in."

"Oh, Miss Dora, how can you think such a thing?" cried her friend; but she was glad of the success of her expedient when her visitor disappeared. Alfred, indeed, did not come in for half an hour after; but Mrs. Hesketh was at liberty to make her little domestic arrangements in her own way. Alfred, like herself, knew that a tablecloth cost sixpence every time it went to the wash—which Dora, it was evident, did not do.

Dora found her father reading in exactly the same position as she had left him; he had not moved except to turn a leaf. He raised his head when she came in, and said: "I am glad you have come back, Dora. I want you to get me a book out of that bookcase in the corner. It is on the third shelf."

"And were you so lazy, father, that you would not get up to find it yourself?"

"Yes, I was so lazy," he said, with a laugh. "I get lazier and lazier every day. Besides, I like to feel that I have some one to do it for me. I am taking books out of shelves and putting them back again all the day long."

Dora put her arm on her father's shoulder, as she put down the book on the table before him. "But you like it, don't you, father? You are not tired of it."

"Of the Museum?" he said, with a laugh and a look of surprise. "No; I am not tired of it—any more than I am of my life."

This was an enigmatical reply, but Dora did not attempt to fathom it. "What the little people upstairs want is just to have money enough to live on, and nothing to do," she said.

"The little people? And what are you, Dora? You are not so very big."

"I am growing," said Dora, with confidence; "and I shouldn't like to have nothing to do all my life."

"There is a great deal to be said for that view of the question," said Mr. Mannering. "I am not an enthusiast for mere work, unless there is something to come out of it. 'Know what thou canst work at' does not apply always, unless you have to earn your living, which is often a very fortunate necessity. And even that," he said, with a smile, "has its drawbacks."

"It is surely far better than doing nothing," cried Dora, with her young nose in the air.

"Well, but what does it come to after all? One works to live, and consumes the fruits of one's work in the art of living. And what better is that than if you had never been? The balance would be much the same. But this is not the sort of argument for little girls, even though they are growing," Mr. Mannering said.

"I think the Museum must have been very stuffy to-day, father," was the remark which Dora made.

CHAPTER II.

THE Mannerings lived in a house in that district of Bloomsbury which has so long meant everything that is respectable, mediocre, and dull,—at least, to that part of the world which inhabits farther West. It is possible that, regarded from the other side of the compass, Bloomsbury may be judged more justly as a city of well-sized and well-built houses, aired and opened up by many spacious breathing-places, set with stately trees. It is from this point of view that it is regarded by many persons of humble pretensions, who find large rooms and broad streets where in other districts they would only have the restricted space of respectable poverty, the weary little conventionality of the suburban cottage, or the dingy lodging-house parlours of town.

Bloomsbury is very much town indeed, surrounded on all sides by the roar of London; but it has something of the air of an individual place, a town within a town.

The pavements are wide, and so are the houses, as in the best quarter of a large provincial city. The squares have a look of seclusion, of shady walks, and retired leisure, which there is nothing to rival either in Belgravia or Mayfair. It is, or was—for it is many years since the present writer has passed over their broad pavements, or stood under the large, benignant, and stately shadow of the trees in Russell Square—a region apart, above fashion, a sober heart and centre of an older and steadier London, such as is not represented in the Row, and takes little part in the rabble and rout of fashion, the decent town of earlier days.

I do not mean to imply by this that the Mannerings lived in Russell Square, or had any pretensions to be regarded among the magnates of Bloomsbury; for they were poor people, quite poor, living the quietest life; not rich enough even to have a house of their own; mere lodgers, occupying a second floor in a house which was full of other lodgers, but where they retained the importance and dignity of having furnished their own rooms. The house was situated at the corner of a street, and thus gave them a glimpse of the trees of the Square, a view over the gardens, as the landlady described it, which was no small matter, especially from the altitude of the second floor. The small family consisted of a father and daughter—he, middle-aged, a quiet, worn, and subdued man, employed all day in the British Museum; and she, a girl very young, yet so much older than her years that she was the constant and almost only companion of her father, to whom Dora was as his own soul, the sharer of all his thoughts, as well as the only brightness in his life.

She was but fifteen at the time when this chapter of their history begins, a creature in short frocks and long hair slightly curling on her shoulders; taller, if we may state such a contradiction in words, than she was intended to be, or turned out in her womanhood, with long legs, long neck, long fingers, and something of the look of a soft-eyed, timid, yet playfully daring colt, flying up and down stairs as if she had wings on her shoulders, yet walking very sedately by the side of her father whenever they went out together, almost more steady and serious than he.

Mr. Mannerling had the appearance of being a man who had always done well, yet never succeeded in life; a man with a small income, and no chance of ever bettering himself, as people say, or advancing in the little hierarchy of the great institution which he

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