

**MARY ELIZABETH  
BRADDON**



**THE DOCTOR'S  
WIFE**

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# **The Doctor's Wife**

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# **Chapter 1.**

## **A Young Man from the Country.**

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There were two surgeons in the little town of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, in pretty pastoral Midlandshire,—Mr. Pawlkatt, who lived in a big, new, brazen-faced house in the middle of the queer old High Street; and John Gilbert, the parish doctor, who lived in his own house on the outskirts of Graybridge, and worked very hard for a smaller income than that which the stylish Mr. Pawlkatt derived from his aristocratic patients.

John Gilbert was an elderly man, with a young son. He had married late in life, and his wife had died very soon after the birth of this son. It was for this reason, most likely, that the surgeon loved his child as children are rarely loved by their fathers—with an earnest, over-anxious devotion, which from the very first had been something womanly in its character, and which grew with the child's growth. Mr. Gilbert's mind was narrowed by the circle in which he lived. He had inherited his own patients and the parish patients from his father, who had been a surgeon before him, and who had lived in the same house, with the same red lamp over the little old-fashioned surgery-door, for eight-and-forty years, and had died, leaving the house, the practice, and the red lamp to his son.

If John Gilbert's only child had possessed the capacity of a Newton or the aspirations of a Napoleon, the surgeon would nevertheless have shut him up in the surgery to compound aloes and conserve of roses, tincture of rhubarb

and essence of peppermint. Luckily for the boy, he was only a common-place lad, with a good-looking, rosy face; clear grey eyes, which stared at you frankly; and a thick stubble of brown hair, parted in the middle and waving from the roots. He was tall, straight, and muscular; a good runner, a first-rate cricketer, tolerably skilful with a pair of boxing-gloves or single-sticks, and a decent shot. He wrote a fair business-like hand, was an excellent arithmetician, remembered a smattering of Latin, a random line here and there from those Roman poets and philosophers whose writings had been his torment at a certain classical and commercial academy at Wareham. He spoke and wrote tolerable English, had read Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, and infinitely preferred the latter, though he made a point of skipping the first few chapters of the great novelist's fictions in order to get at once to the action of the story. He was a very good young man, went to church two or three times on a Sunday, and would on no account have broken any one of the Ten Commandments on the painted tablets above the altar by so much as a thought. He was very good; and, above all, he was very good-looking. No one had ever disputed this fact: George Gilbert was eminently good-looking. No one had ever gone so far as to call him handsome; no one had ever presumed to designate him plain. He had those homely, healthy good looks which the novelist or poet in search of a hero would recoil from with actual horror, and which the practical mind involuntarily associates with tenant-farming in a small way, or the sale of butcher's meat.

I will not say that poor George was ungentlemanly, because he had kind, cordial manners, and a certain instinctive Christianity, which had never yet expressed itself in any very tangible form, but which lent a genial flavour to

every word upon his lips, to every thought in his heart. He was a very trusting young man, and thought well of all mankind; he was a Tory, heart and soul, as his father and grandfather had been before him; and thought especially well of all the magnates round about Wareham and Graybridge, holding the grand names that had been familiar to him from his childhood in simple reverence, that was without a thought of meanness. He was a candid, honest, country-bred young man, who did his duty well, and filled a small place in a very narrow circle with credit to himself and the father who loved him. The fiery ordeal of two years' student-life at St. Bartholomew's had left the lad almost as innocent as a girl; for John Gilbert had planted his son during those two awful years in the heart of a quiet Wesleyan family in the Seven-Sisters Road, and the boy had enjoyed very little leisure for disporting himself with the dangerous spirits of St. Bartholomew's. George Gilbert was two-and-twenty, and in all the course of those two-and-twenty years which made the sum of the young man's life, his father had never had reason to reproach him by so much as a look. The young doctor was held to be a model youth in the town of Graybridge; and it was whispered that if he should presume to lift his eyes to Miss Sophronia Burdock, the second daughter of the rich maltster, he need not aspire in vain. But George was by no means a coxcomb, and didn't particularly admire Miss Burdock, whose eyelashes were a good deal paler than her hair, and whose eyebrows were only visible in a strong light. The surgeon was young, and the world was all before him; but he was not ambitious; he felt no sense of oppression in the narrow High Street at Graybridge. He could sit in the little parlour next the surgery reading Byron's fiercest poems, sympathizing in his own way with Giaours and Corsairs; but with no passionate



yearning stirring up in his breast, with no thought of revolt against the dull quiet of his life.

George Gilbert took his life as he found it, and had no wish to make it better. To him Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne was all the world. He had been in London, and had felt a provincial's brief sense of surprised delight in the thronged streets, the clamour, and the bustle; but he had very soon discovered that the great metropolis was a dirty and disreputable place as compared to Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, where you might have taken your dinner comfortably off any doorstep as far as the matter of cleanliness is concerned. The young man was more than satisfied with his life; he was pleased with it. He was pleased to think that he was to be his father's partner, and was to live and marry, and have children, and die at last in the familiar rooms in which he had been born. His nature was very adhesive, and he loved the things that he had long known, because they were old and familiar to him; rather than for any merit or beauty in the things themselves.

The 20th of July, 1852, was a very great day for George Gilbert, and indeed for the town of Graybridge generally; for on that day an excursion train left Wareham for London, conveying such roving spirits as cared to pay a week's visit to the great metropolis upon very moderate terms. George had a week's holiday, which he was to spend with an old schoolfellow who had turned author, and had chambers in the Temple, but who boarded and lodged with a family at Camberwell. The young surgeon left Graybridge in the maltster's carriage at eight o'clock upon that bright summer morning, in company with Miss Burdock and her sister Sophronia, who were going up to London on a visit to an aristocratic aunt in Baker Street, and who had been confided to George's care during the journey.



The young ladies and their attendant squire were in very high spirits. London, when your time is spent between St. Bartholomew's Hospital and the Seven-Sisters Road, is not the most delightful city in the world; but London, when you are a young man from the country, with a week's holiday, and a five-pound note and some odd silver in your pocket, assumes quite another aspect. George was not enthusiastic; but he looked forward to his holiday with a placid sense of pleasure, and listened with untiring good humour to the conversation of the maltster's daughters, who gave him a good deal of information about their aunt in Baker Street, and the brilliant parties given by that lady and her acquaintance. But, amiable as the young ladies were, George was glad when the Midlandshire train steamed into the Euston Terminus, and his charge was ended. He handed the Misses Burdock to a portly and rather pompous lady, who had a clarence-and-pair waiting for her, and who thanked him with supreme condescension for his care of her nieces. She even went so far as to ask him to call in Baker Street during his stay in London, at which Sophronia blushed. But, unhappily, Sophronia did not blush prettily; a faint patchy red broke out all over her face, even where her eyebrows ought to have been, and was a long time dispersing. If the blush had been Beauty's bright, transient glow, as brief as summer lightning in a sunset sky, George Gilbert could scarcely have been blind to its flattering import; but he looked at the young lady's emotion from a professional point of view, and mistook it for indigestion.

"You're very kind, ma'am," he said. "But I'm going to stay at Camberwell; I don't think I shall have time to call in Baker Street."

The carriage drove away, and George took his portmanteau and went to find a cab. He hailed a hansom,

and he felt as he stepped into it that he was doing a dreadful thing, which would tell against him in Graybridge, if by any evil chance it should become known that he had ridden in that disreputable vehicle. He thought the horse had a rakish, unkempt look about the head and mane, like an animal who was accustomed to night-work, and indifferent as to his personal appearance in the day. George was not used to riding in hansoms; so, instead of balancing himself upon the step for a moment while he gave his orders to the charioteer, he settled himself comfortably inside, and was a little startled when a hoarse voice at the back of his head demanded "Where to, sir?" and suggested the momentary idea that he was breaking out into involuntary ventriloquism.

"The Temple, driver; the Temple, in Fleet Street," Mr. Gilbert said, politely.

The man banged down a little trap-door and rattled off eastwards.

I am afraid to say how much George Gilbert gave the cabman when he was set down at last at the bottom of Chancery Lane; but I think he paid for five miles at eightpence a mile, and a trifle in on account of a blockade in Holborn; and even then the driver did not thank him.

George was a long time groping about the courts and quadrangles of the Temple before he found the place he wanted, though he took a crumpled letter out of his waistcoat-pocket, and referred to it every now and then when he came to a standstill.

Wareham is only a hundred and twenty miles from London; and the excursion train, after stopping at every station on the line, had arrived at the terminus at half-past two o'clock. It was between three and four now, and the sun

was shining upon the river, and the flags in the Temple were hot under Mr. Gilbert's feet.

He was very warm himself, and almost worn out, when he found at last the name he was looking for, painted very high up, in white letters, upon a black door-post,—“4th Floor: Mr. Andrew Morgan and Mr. Sigismund Smith.”

It was in the most obscure corner of the dingiest court in the Temple that George Gilbert found this name. He climbed a very dirty staircase, thumping the end of his portmanteau upon every step as he went up, until he came to a landing, midway between the third and fourth stories; here he was obliged to stop for sheer want of breath, for he had been lugging the portmanteau about with him throughout his wanderings in the Temple, and a good many people had been startled by the aspect of a well-dressed young man carrying his own luggage, and staring at the names of the different rows of houses, the courts and quadrangles in the grave sanctuary.

George Gilbert stopped to take breath; and he had scarcely done so, when he was terrified by the apparition of a very dirty boy, who slid suddenly down the baluster between the floor above and the landing, and alighted face to face with the young surgeon. The boy's face was very black, and he was evidently a child of tender years, something between eleven and twelve, perhaps; but he was in nowise discomfited by the appearance of Mr. Gilbert; he ran up-stairs again, and placed himself astride upon the slippery baluster with a view to another descent, when a door above was suddenly opened, and a voice said, “You know where Mr. Manders, the artist, lives?”

“Yes, sir;—Waterloo Road, sir, Montague Terrace, No. 2.”

“Then run round to him, and tell him the subject for the next illustration in the ‘Smuggler's Bride.’ A man with his

knee upon the chest of another man, and a knife in his hand. You can remember that?"

"Yes, sir."

"And bring me a proof of chapter fifty-seven."

"Yes, sir."

The door was shut, and the boy ran down-stairs, past George Gilbert, as fast as he could go. But the door above was opened again, and the same voice called aloud,—“Tell Mr. Manders the man with the knife in his hand must have on top-boots.”

“All right, sir,” the boy called from the bottom of the staircase.

George Gilbert went up, and knocked at the door above. It was a black door, and the names of Mr. Andrew Morgan and Mr. Sigismund Smith were painted upon it in white letters as upon the door-post below.

A pale-faced young man, with a smudge of ink upon the end of his nose, and very dirty wrist-bands, opened the door.

“Sam!”

“George!” cried the two young men simultaneously, and then began to shake hands with effusion, as the French playwrights say.

“My dear old George!”

“My dear old Sam! But you call yourself Sigismund now?”

“Yes; Sigismund Smith. It sounds well; doesn’t it? If a man’s evil destiny makes him a Smith, the least he can do is to take it out in his Christian name. No Smith with a grain of spirit would ever consent to be a Samuel. But come in, dear old boy, and put your portmanteau down; knock those papers off that chair—there, by the window. Don’t be frightened of making ’em in a muddle; they can’t be in a worse muddle than they are now. If you don’t mind just

amusing yourself with the 'Times' for half an hour or so, while I finish this chapter of the 'Smuggler's Bride,' I shall be able to strike work, and do whatever you like; but the printer's boy is coming back in half an hour for the end of the chapter."

"I won't speak a word," George said, respectfully. The young man with the smudgy nose was an author, and George Gilbert had an awful sense of the solemnity of his friend's vocation. "Write away, my dear Sam; I won't interrupt you."

He drew his chair close to the open window, and looked down into the court below, where the paint was slowly blistering in the July sun.

## Chapter 2.

# A Sensation Author.

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Mr. Sigismund Smith was a sensation author. That bitter term of reproach, “sensation,” had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms, and people wrote sensation novels as unconsciously as Monsieur Jourdain talked prose. Sigismund Smith was the author of about half-a-dozen highly-spiced fictions, which enjoyed an immense popularity amongst the classes who like their literature as they like their tobacco—very strong. Sigismund had never in his life presented himself before the public in a complete form; he appeared in weekly numbers at a penny, and was always so appearing; and except on one occasion when he found himself, very greasy and dog’s-eared at the edges, and not exactly pleasant to the sense of smell, on the shelf of a humble librarian and newsvendor, who dealt in tobacco and sweetstuff as well as literature, Sigismund had never known what it was to be bound. He was well paid for his work, and he was contented. He had his ambition, which was to write a great novel; and the archetype of this *magnum opus* was the dream which he carried about with him wherever he went, and fondly nursed by night and day. In the meantime he wrote for his public, which was a public that bought its literature in the same manner as its pudding—in penny slices.

There was very little to look at in the court below the window; so George Gilbert fell to watching his friend, whose rapid pen scratched along the paper in a breathless way,

which indicated a dashing and Dumas-like style of literature, rather than the polished composition of a Johnson or an Addison. Sigismund only drew breath once, and then he paused to make frantic gashes at his shirt-collar with an inky bone paper-knife that lay upon the table.

"I'm only trying whether a man would cut his throat from right to left, or left to right," Mr. Smith said, in answer to his friend's look of terror; "it's as well to be true to nature; or as true as one can be, for a pound a page—double-column pages, and eighty-one lines in a column. A man would cut his throat from left to right: he couldn't do it in the other way without making perfect slices of himself."

"There's a suicide, then, in your story?" George said, with a look of awe.

"A suicide!" exclaimed Sigismund Smith; "a suicide in the 'Smuggler's Bride!' why, it teems with suicides. There's the Duke of Port St. Martin's, who walls himself up alive in his own cellar; and there's Leonie de Pasdebasque, the ballet-dancer, who throws herself out of Count Cæsar Maraschetti's private balloon; and there's Lilia, the dumb girl,—the penny public like dumb girls,—who sets fire to herself to escape from the—in fact, there's lots of them," said Mr. Smith, dipping his pen in his ink, and hurrying wildly along the paper.

The boy came back before the last page was finished, and Mr. Smith detained him for five or ten minutes; at the end of which time he rolled up the manuscript, still damp, and dismissed the printer's emissary.

"Now, George," he said, "I can talk to you."

Sigismund was the son of a Wareham attorney, and the two young men had been schoolfellows at the Classical and Commercial Academy in the Wareham Road. They had been schoolfellows, and were very sincerely attached to each



other. Sigismund was supposed to be reading for the Bar; and for the first twelve months of his sojourn in the Temple the young man had worked honestly and conscientiously; but finding that his legal studies resulted in nothing but mental perplexity and confusion, Sigismund beguiled his leisure by the pursuit of literature.

He found literature a great deal more profitable and a great deal easier than the study of Coke upon Lyttleton, or Blackstone's Commentaries; and he abandoned himself entirely to the composition of such works as are to be seen, garnished with striking illustrations, in the windows of humble newsvendors in the smaller and dingier thoroughfares of every large town. Sigismund gave himself wholly to this fascinating pursuit, and perhaps produced more sheets of that mysterious stuff which literary people call "copy" than any other author of his age.

It would be almost impossible for me adequately to describe the difference between Sigismund Smith as he was known to the very few friends who knew anything at all about him, and Sigismund Smith as he appeared on paper.

In the narrow circle of his home Mr. Smith was a very mild young man, with the most placid blue eyes that ever looked out of a human head, and a good deal of light curling hair. He was a very mild young man. He could not have hit any one if he had tried ever so; and if you had hit him, I don't think he would have minded—much. It was not in him to be very angry; or to fall in love, to any serious extent; or to be desperate about anything. Perhaps it was that he exhausted all that was passionate in his nature in penny numbers, and had nothing left for the affairs of real life. People who were impressed by his fictions, and were curious to see him, generally left him with a strong sense of disappointment, if not indignation.

Was this meek young man the Byronic hero they had pictured? Was this the author of “Colonel Montefiasco, or the Brand upon the Shoulder-blade?” They had imagined a splendid creature, half magician, half brigand, with a pale face and fierce black eyes, a tumbled mass of raven hair, a bare white throat, a long black velvet dressing-gown, and thin tapering hands, with queer agate and onyx rings encircling the flexible fingers.

And then the surroundings. An oak-panelled chamber, of course—black oak, with grotesque and diabolic carvings jutting out at the angles of the room; a crystal globe upon a porphyry pedestal; a mysterious picture, with a curtain drawn before it—certain death being the fate of him who dared to raise that curtain by so much as a corner. A mantel-piece of black marble, and a collection of pistols and scimitars, swords and yataghans—especially yataghans—glimmering and flashing in the firelight. A little show of eccentricity in the way of household pets: a bear under the sofa, and a tame rattlesnake coiled upon the hearth-rug. This was the sort of thing the penny public expected of Sigismund Smith; and, lo, here was a young man with perennial ink-smudges upon his face, and an untidy chamber in the Temple, with nothing more romantic than a waste-paper basket, a litter of old letters and tumbled proofs, and a cracked teapot simmering upon the hob.

This was the young man who described the reckless extravagance of a Montefiasco’s sumptuous chamber, the mysterious elegance of a Diana Firmiani’s dimly-lighted boudoir. This was the young man in whose works there were more masked doors, and hidden staircases, and revolving picture-frames and sliding panels, than in all the old houses in Great Britain; and a greater length of vaulted passages than would make an underground railway from the Scottish

border to the Land's End. This was the young man who, in an early volume of poems—a failure, as it is the nature of all early volumes of poems to be—had cried in passionate accents to some youthful member of the aristocracy, surname unknown—“Lady Mable, Lady May, no pæan in your praise I'll sing;

My shattered lyre all mutely tells  
The tortured hand that broke the string.  
Go, fair and false, while jangling bells  
Through golden waves of sunshine ring;  
Go, mistress of a thousand spells:  
But know, midst those you've left forlorn,  
*One, lady, gives you scorn for scorn.*”

“Now, George,” Mr. Smith said, as he pushed away a very dirty inkstand, and wiped his pen upon the cuff of his coat, —“now, George, I can attend to the rights of hospitality. You must be hungry after your journey, poor old boy! What'll you take?”

There were no cupboards in the room, which was very bare of furniture, and the only vestiges of any kind of refreshment were a brown crockery-ware teapot upon the hob, and a roll and pat of butter upon a plate on the mantel-piece.

“Have something!” Sigismund said. “I know there isn't much, because, you see, I never have time to attend to that sort of thing. Have some bread and marmalade?”

He drew out a drawer in the desk before which he was sitting, and triumphantly displayed a pot of marmalade with a spoon in it.

“Bread and marmalade and cold tea's capital,” he said; “you'll try some, George, won't you? and then we'll go home to Camberwell.”

Mr. Gilbert declined the bread and marmalade; so Sigismund prepared to take his departure.

"Morgan's gone into Buckinghamshire for a week's fishing," he said, "so I've got the place to myself. I come here of a morning, you know, work all day, and go home to tea and a chop or a steak in the evening. Come along, old fellow."

The young men went out upon the landing. Sigismund locked the black door and put the key in his pocket. They went down-stairs, and through the courts, and across the quadrangles of the Temple, bearing towards that outlet which is nearest Blackfriars Bridge.

"You'd like to walk, I suppose, George?" Mr. Smith asked.

"Oh, yes; we can talk better walking."

They talked a great deal as they went along. They were very fond of one another, and had each of them a good deal to tell; but George wasn't much of a talker as compared to his friend Sigismund. That young man poured forth a perpetual stream of eloquence, which knew no exhaustion.

"And so you like the people at Camberwell?" George said.

"Oh yes, they're capital people; free and easy, you know, and no stupid stuck-up gentility about them. Not but what Sleaford's a gentleman; he's a barrister. I don't know exactly where his chambers are, or in what court he practises when he's in town; but he *is* a barrister. I suppose he goes on circuit sometimes, for he's very often away from home for a long time together; but I don't know what circuit he goes on. It doesn't do to ask a man those sort of questions, you see, George; so I hold my tongue. I don't think he's rich, that's to say not rich in a regular way. He's flush of money sometimes, and then you should see the Sunday dinners—salmon and cucumber, and duck and green peas, as if they were nothing."

"Is he a nice fellow?"

"Oh yes; a jolly, out-spoken sort of a fellow, with a loud voice and black eyes. He's a capital fellow to me, but he's not fond of company. He seldom shows if I take down a friend. Very likely you mayn't see him all the time you stay there. He'll shut himself up in his own room when he's at home, and won't so much as look at you."

George seemed to be rather alarmed at this prospect.

"But if Mr. Sleaford objects to my being in the house," he began, "perhaps I'd better—"

"Oh, he doesn't object, bless you!" Sigismund cried, hastily; "not a bit of it. I said to Mrs. Sleaford the other morning at breakfast, 'A friend of mine is coming up from Midlandshire; he's as good a fellow as ever breathed,' I said, 'and good-looking into the bargain,'—don't you blush, George, because it's spooney,—and I asked Mrs. S. if she could give you a room and partially board you,—I'm a partial boarder, you know,—for a week or so. She looked at her husband,—she's very sharp with all of *us*, but she's afraid of *him*,—and Sleaford said yes; my friend might come and should be welcome, as long as he wasn't bothered about it. So your room's ready, George, and you come as my visitor; and I can get orders for all the theatres in London, and I'll give you a French dinner in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square every day of your life, if you like; and we'll fill the cup of dissipation to the highest top sparkle."

It was a long walk from the Temple to Camberwell; but the two young men were good walkers, and as Sigismund Smith talked unceasingly all the way, there were no awkward pauses in the conversation. They walked the whole length of the Walworth Road, and turned to the left soon after passing the turn-pike. Mr. Smith conducted his friend by mazy convolutions of narrow streets and lanes, where

there were pretty little villas and comfortable cottages nestling amongst trees, and where there was the perpetual sound of clattering tin pails and the slopping of milk, blending pleasantly with the cry of the milkman. Sigismund led George through these shady little retreats, and past a tall stern-looking church, and along by the brink of a canal, till they came to a place where the country was wild and sterile in the year 1852. I dare say that railways have cut the neighbourhood all to pieces by this time, and that Mr. Sleaford's house has been sold by auction in the form of old bricks; but on this summer afternoon the place to which Sigismund brought his friend was quite a lonely, countrified spot, where there was one big, ill-looking house, shut in by a high wall, and straggling rows of cottages dwindling away into pigsties upon each side of it.

Standing before a little wooden door in the wall that surrounded Mr. Sleaford's garden, George Gilbert could only see that the house was a square brick building, with sickly ivy straggling here and there about it, and long narrow windows considerably obscured by dust and dirt. It was not a pleasant house to look at, however agreeable it might be as a habitation; and George compared it unfavourably with the trim white-walled villas he had seen on his way,—those neat little mansions at five-and-thirty pounds a year; those cosy little cottages, with shining windows that winked and blinked in the sunshine by reason of their cleanliness; those dazzling brass plates, which shone like brazen shields upon the vivid green of newly-painted front doors. If Mr. Sleaford's house had ever been painted within Mr Sleaford's memory, the barrister must have been one of the oldest inhabitants of that sterile region on the outskirts of Camberwell; if Mr. Sleaford held the house upon a repairing lease, he must have anticipated a prodigious claim for dilapidations at the

expiration of his tenancy. Whatever could be broken in Mr. Sleaford's house was broken; whatever could fall out of repair had so fallen. The bricks held together, and the house stood; and that was about all that could be said for the barrister's habitation.

The bell was broken, and the handle rattled loosely in a kind of basin of tarnished brass, so it was no use attempting to ring; but Sigismund was used to this. He stooped down, put his lips to a hole broken in the wood-work above the lock of the garden-door, and gave a shrill whistle.

"They understand that," he said; "the bell's been broken ever since I've lived here, but they never have anything mended."

"Why not?"

"Because they're thinking of leaving. I've been with them two years and a half, and they've been thinking of leaving all the time. Sleaford has got the house cheap, and the landlord won't do anything; so between them they let it go. Sleaford talks about going to Australia some of these days."

The garden-door was opened while Mr. Smith was talking, and the two young men went in. The person who had admitted them was a boy who had just arrived at that period of life when boys are most obnoxious. He had ceased to be a boy pure and simple, and had not yet presumed to call himself a young man. Rejected on one side by his juniors, who found him arrogant and despotic, mooted strange and unorthodox theories with regard to marbles, and evincing supreme contempt for boys who were not familiar with the latest vaticinations of the sporting prophets in "Bell's Life" and the "Sunday Times;" and flouted on the other hand by his seniors, who offered him halfpence for the purchase of hardbake, and taunted him with base insinuations when he was seized with a sudden fancy for

going to look at the weather in the middle of a strong cheroot,—the hobbledehoy sought vainly for a standing-place upon the social scale, and finding none, became a misanthrope, and wrapped himself in scorn as in a mantle. For Sigismund Smith the gloomy youth cherished a peculiar hatred. The young author was master of that proud position to obtain which the boy struggled in vain. He was a man! He could smoke a cigar to the very stump, and not grow ashy pale, or stagger dizzily once during the operation; but how little he made of his advantages! He could stay out late of nights, and there was no one to reprove him, *He* could go into a popular tavern, and call for gin-and-bitters, and drink the mixture without so much as a wry face, and slap his money upon the pewter counter, and call the barmaid “Mary;” and there was no chance of *his* mother happening to be passing at that moment, and catching a glimpse of his familiar back-view through the half-open swinging door, and rushing in, red and angry, to lead him off by the collar of his jacket, amid the laughter of heartless bystanders. No; Sigismund Smith was a MAN. He might have got tipsy if he had liked, and walked about London half the night, ringing surgeons’ bells, and pulling off knockers, and being taken to the station-house early in the morning, to be bailed out by a friend by-and-by, and to have his name in the Sunday papers, with a sensational heading, “Another tipsy swell,” or “A modern spring-heeled Jack.”

Yes; Horace Sleaford hated his mother’s partial boarder; but his hatred was tempered by disdain. What did Mr. Smith make of all his lofty privileges? Nothing; absolutely nothing. The glory of manhood was thrown away upon a mean-spirited cur, who, possessed of liberty to go where he pleased, had never seen a fight for the championship of England, or the last grand rush for the blue riband of the



turf; and who, at four-and-twenty years of age, ate bread and marmalade openly in the face of contemptuous mankind. Master Sleaford shut the door with a bang, and locked it. There was one exception to the rule of no repairs in Mr. Sleaford's establishment, the locks were all kept in excellent order. The disdainful boy took the key from the lock, and carried it indoors on his little finger. He had warts upon his hands, and warts are the stigmata of boyhood; and the sleeves of his jacket were white and shiny at the elbows, and left him cruelly exposed about the wrists. The knowledge of his youth, and that shabby frouziness of raiment peculiar to middle-class hobbledehoyhood, gave him a sulky fierceness of aspect, which harmonized well with a pair of big black eyes and a tumbled shock of blue-black hair. He suspected everybody of despising him, and was perpetually trying to look-down the scorn of others with still deeper scorn. He stared at George Gilbert, as the young man came into the garden, but did not deign to speak. George was six feet high, and that was in itself enough to make *him* hateful.

"Well, Horace!" Mr. Smith said, good-naturedly.

"Well, young 'un," the boy answered, disdainfully, "how do *you* find yourself?"

Horace Sleaford led the way into the house. They went up a flight of steps leading to a half-glass door. It might have been pretty once upon a time, when the glass was bright, and the latticed porch sheltered by clustering roses and clematis; but the clematis had withered, and the straggling roses were choked with wild convolvulus tendrils, that wound about the branches like weedy serpents, and stifled buds and blossoms in their weedy embrace.

The boy banged open the door of the house, as he had banged-to the door of the garden. He made a point of doing

every thing with a bang; it was one way of evincing his contempt for his species.

"Mother's in the kitchen," he said; "the boys are on the common flying a kite, and Izzie's in the garden."

"Is your father at home?" Sigismund asked.

"No, he isn't, Clever; you might have known that without asking. Whenever is he at home at this time of day?"

"Is tea ready?"

"No, nor won't be for this half-hour," answered the boy, triumphantly; "so, if you and your friend are hungry, you'd better have some bread and marmalade. There's a pot in your drawer up-stairs. I haven't taken any, and I shouldn't have seen it if I hadn't gone to look for a steel pen; so, if you've made a mark upon the label, and think the marmalade's gone down lower, it isn't *me*. Tea won't be ready for half-an-hour; for the kitchen-fire's been smokin', and the chops can't be done till that's clear; and the kettle ain't on either; and the girl's gone to fetch a fancy loaf,—so you'll have to wait."

"Oh, never mind that," Sigismund said; "come into the garden, George; I'll introduce you to Miss Sleaford."

"Then I shan't go with you," said the boy; "I don't care for girls' talk. I say, Mr. Gilbert, you're a Midlandshire man, and you ought to know something. What odds will you give me against Mr. Tomlinson's brown colt, Vinegar Cruet, for the Conventford steeple-chase?"

Unfortunately Mr. Gilbert was lamentably ignorant of the merits or demerits of Vinegar Cruet.

"I'll tell you what I'll do with you, then," the boy said; "I'll take fifteen to two against him in fourpenny-bits, and that's one less than the last Manchester quotation."

George shook his head. "Horse-racing is worse than Greek to me, Master Sleaford," he said.

The "Master" goaded the boy to retaliate.

"Your friend don't seem to have seen much life," he said to Sigismund. "I think we shall be able to show him a thing or two before he goes back to Midlandshire, eh, Samuel?"

Horace Sleaford had discovered that fatal name, Samuel, in an old prayer-book belonging to Mr. Smith; and he kept it in reserve, as a kind of poisoned dart, always ready to be hurled at his foe.

"We'll teach him a little life, eh, SAMUEL?" he repeated, "Haw, haw, haw!"

But his gaiety was cut suddenly short; for a door in the shadowy passage opened, and a woman's face, thin and vinegary of aspect, looked out, and a shrill voice cried:

"Didn't I tell you I wanted another penn'orth of milk fetched, you young torment? But, law, you're like the rest of them, that's all! I may slave my life out, and there isn't one of you will as much as lift a finger to help me."

The boy disappeared upon this, grumbling sulkily; and Sigismund opened a door leading into a parlour.

The room was large, but shabbily furnished and very untidy. The traces of half-a-dozen different occupations were scattered about, and the apartment was evidently inhabited by people who made a point of never putting anything away. There was a work-box upon the table, open, and running over with a confusion of tangled tapes, and bobbins, and a mass of different-coloured threads, that looked like variegated vermicelli. There was an old-fashioned desk, covered with dusty green baize, and decorated with loose brass-work, which caught at people's garments or wounded their flesh when the desk was carried about; this was open, like the work-box, and was littered with papers that had been blown about by the summer breeze, and were scattered all over the table and the floor beneath it. On a

rickety little table near the window there was a dilapidated box of colours, a pot of gum with a lot of brushes sticking up out of it, half-a-dozen sheets of Skelt's dramatic scenes and characters lying under scraps of tinsel, and fragments of coloured satin, and neatly-folded packets of little gold and silver dots, which the uninitiated might have mistaken for powders. There were some ragged-looking books on a shelf near the fire-place; two or three different kinds of inkstands on the mantel-piece; a miniature wooden stage, with a lop-sided pasteboard proscenium and greasy tin lamps, in one corner of the floor; a fishing-rod and tackle leaning against the wall in another corner; and the room was generally pervaded by copy-books, slate-pencils, and torn Latin grammars with half a brown-leather cover hanging to the leaves by a stout drab thread. Everything in the apartment was shabby, and more or less dilapidated; nothing was particularly clean; and everywhere there was the evidence of boys.

I believe Mr. Sleaford's was the true policy. If you have boys, "cry havoc, and let loose the dogs of war;" shut your purse against the painter and the carpenter, the plumber and glazier, the upholsterer and gardener; "let what is broken, so remain,"—reparations are wasted labour and wasted money. Buy a box of carpenter's tools for your boys, if you like, and let them mend what they themselves have broken; and, if you don't mind their sawing off one or two of their fingers occasionally, you may end by making them tolerably useful.

Mr. Sleaford had one daughter and four sons, and the sons were all boys. People ceased to wonder at the shabbiness of his furniture and the dilapidation of his house, when they were made aware of this fact. The limp chintz curtains that straggled from the cornice had been torn

ruthlessly down to serve as draperies for Tom when he personated the ghost in a charade, or for Jack when he wanted a sail to fasten to his fishing-rod, firmly planted on the quarter-deck of the sofa. The chairs had done duty as blocks for the accommodation of many an imaginary Anne Boleyn and Marie Antoinette, upon long winter evenings, when Horace decapitated the sofa-pillow with a smoky poker, while Tom and Jack kept guard upon the scaffold, and held the populace—of one—at bay with their halberds—the tongs and shovel. The loose carpets had done duty as raging oceans on many a night, when the easy-chair had gone to pieces against the sideboard, with a loss of two wine-glasses, and all hands had been picked up in a perishing state by the crew of the sofa, after an undramatic interlude of slaps, cuffs, and remonstrances from the higher powers, who walked into the storm-beaten ocean with cruel disregard of the unities. Mr. Sleaford had a room to himself up-stairs—a Bluebeard chamber, which the boys never entered; for the barrister made a point of locking his door whenever he left his room, and his sons were therefore compelled to respect his apartment. They looked through the keyhole now and then, to see if there was anything of a mysterious nature in the forbidden chamber; but, as they saw nothing but a dingy easy-chair and an office-table, with a quantity of papers scattered about it, their curiosity gradually subsided, and they ceased to concern themselves in any manner about the apartment, which they always spoke of as “Pa’s room.”

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Isabel.**

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The garden at the back of Mr. Sleaford's house was a large square plot of ground, with fine old pear-trees sheltering a neglected lawn. A row of hazel-bushes screened all the length of the wall upon one side of the garden; and wherever you looked, there were roses and sweet-brier, espaliered apples, and tall straggling raspberry-bushes, all equally unfamiliar with the gardener's pruning knife; though here and there you came to a luckless bush that had been hacked at and mutilated in some amateur operations of "the boys."

It was an old-fashioned garden, and had doubtless once been beautifully kept; for bright garden-flowers grew up amongst the weeds summer after summer, as if even neglect or cruel usage could not disroot them from the familiar place they loved. Thus rare orchids sprouted up out of beds that were half full of chickweed, and lilies-of-the-valley flourished amongst the ground-sel in a shady corner under the water-butt. There were vines, upon which no grape had ever been suffered to ripen during Mr. Sleaford's tenancy, but which yet made a beautiful screen of verdant tracery all over the back of the house, twining their loving tendrils about the dilapidated Venetian shutters, that rotted slowly on their rusted hinges. There were strawberry-beds, and there was an arbour at one end of the garden in which the boys played at "beggar my neighbour," and "all fours," with greasy, dog's-eared cards in the long summer afternoons; and there were some rabbit-hutches—sure

evidence of the neighbourhood of boys—in a sheltered corner under the hazel-bushes. It was a dear old untidy place, where the odour of distant pigsties mingled faintly with the perfume of the roses; and it was in this neglected garden that Isabel Sleaford spent the best part of her idle, useless life.

She was sitting in a basket-chair under one of the pear-trees when Sigismund Smith and his friend went into the garden to look for her. She was lolling in a low basket-chair, with a book on her lap, and her chin resting on the palm of her hand, so absorbed by the interest of the page before her that she did not even lift her eyes when the two young men went close up to her. She wore a muslin dress a good deal tumbled and not too clean, and a strip of black velvet was tied round her long throat. Her hair was almost as black as her brother's, and was rolled up in a great loose knot, from which a long untidy curl fell straggling on her white throat—her throat was very white, with the dead, yellowish whiteness of ivory.

"I wish that was 'Colonel Montefiasco,'" said Mr. Smith, pointing to the book which the young lady was reading. "I should like to see a lady so interested in one of *my* books that she wouldn't so much as look up when a gentleman was waiting to be introduced to her."

Miss Sleaford shut her book and rose from her low chair, abashed by this reproach; but she kept her thumb between the pages, and evidently meant to go on with the volume at the first convenient opportunity. She did not wait for any ceremonious introduction to George, but held out her hand to him, and smiled at him frankly.

"Yon are Mr. Gilbert, I know," she said. "Sigismund has been talking of you incessantly for the last week. Mamma has got your room ready; and I suppose we shall have tea