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The Fire Within

By

Patricia Wentworth

(Mrs. G. F. Dillon)

Author of "A Marriage under the Terror," etc.

"Quench thou the fires of your old gods,
Quench not the fire within."

Matthew Arnold.

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York and London
The Knickerbocker Press
1913

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MOLLY MAKE-BELIEVE

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

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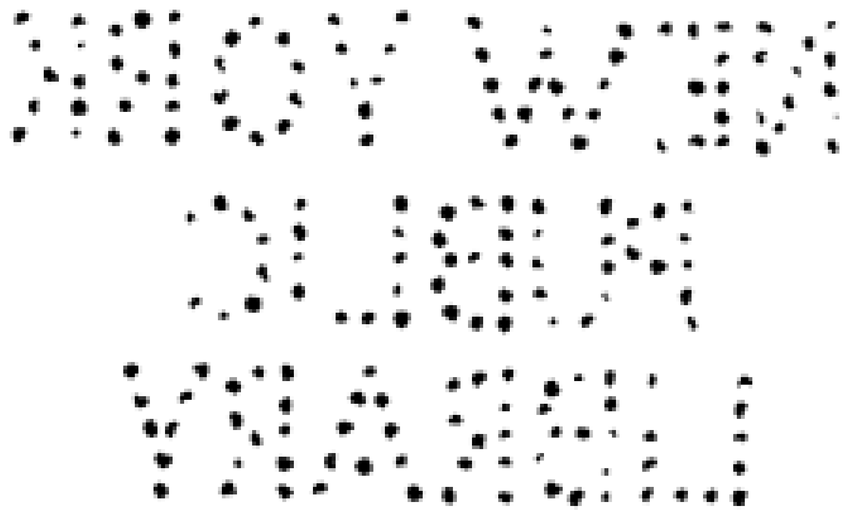

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The Fire Within

CHAPTER I

MR. MOTTISFONT'S OPINION OF HIS NEPHEW

As I was going adown the dale
Sing derry down dale, and derry down dale,
As I was going adown the dale,
Adown the dale of a Monday,
With never a thought of the Devil his tricks,
Why who should I meet with his bundle of sticks,
But the very old man of the Nursery tale.
Sing derry down dale, and derry down dale,
The wicked old man of the Nursery tale
Who gathered his sticks of a Sunday.
Sing derry down, derry down dale.

OLD Mr. Edward Mottisfont looked over the edge of the sheet at David Blake.

"My nephew Edward is most undoubtedly and indisputably a prig—a damned prig," he added thoughtfully after a moment's pause for reflection. As he reflected his black eyes danced from David's face to a crayon drawing which hung on the panelled wall above the mantelpiece.

"His mother's fault," he observed, "it 's not

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so bad in a woman, and she was pretty, which Edward ain't. Pretty and a prig my sister Sarah——"

There was a faint emphasis on the word sister, and David remembered having heard his mother say that both Edward and William Mottisfont had been in love with the girl whom William married. "And a plain prig my nephew Edward," continued the old gentleman. "Damn it all, David, why can't I leave my money to you instead?"

David laughed.

"Because I should n't take it, sir," he said.

He was sitting, most unprofessionally, on the edge of his patient's large four-post bed. Old Mr. Edward Mottisfont looked at him quizzically.

"How much would you take—eh, David? Come now—say—how much?"

David laughed again. His grey eyes twinkled. "Nary penny, sir," he said, swinging his arm over the great carved post beside him. There were cherubs' heads upon it, a fact that had always amused its owner considerably.

"Nonsense," said old Mr. Mottisfont, and for the first time his thin voice was tinged with earnestness. "Nonsense, David. Why! I 've left you five thousand pounds."

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David started. His eyes changed. They were very deep-set eyes. It was only when he laughed that they appeared grey. When he was serious they were so dark as to look black. Apparently he was moved and concerned. His voice took a boyish tone. "Oh, I say, sir—but you must n't —I can't take it, you know."

"And why not, pray?" This was Mr. Mottisfont at his most sarcastic.

David got the better of his momentary embarrassment.

"I shan't forget that you 've thought of it, sir," he said. "But I can't benefit under a patient's will. I have n't got many principles, but that 's one of them. My father drummed it into me from the time I was about seven."

Old Mr. Edward Mottisfont lifted the thin eyebrows that had contrived to remain coal-black, although his hair was white. They gave him a Mephistophelean appearance of which he was rather proud.

"Very fine and highfalutin," he observed. "You 're an exceedingly upright young man, David."

David roared.

After a moment the old gentleman's lips gave way at the corners, and he laughed too.

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"Oh, Lord, David, who 'd ha' thought it of you !" he said. "You won't take a thousand?"

David shook his head.

"Not five hundred?"

David grinned.

"Not five pence," he said.

Old Mr. Mottisfont glared at him for a moment. "Prig," he observed with great conciseness. Then he pursed up his lips, felt under his pillow, and pulled out a long folded paper.

"All the more for Edward," he said maliciously. "All the more for Edward, and all the more reason for Edward to wish me dead. I wonder he don't poison me. Perhaps he will. Oh, Lord, I 'd give something to see Edward tried for murder! Think of it, David—only think of it—Twelve British Citizens in one box—Edward in another—all the British Citizens looking at Edward, and Edward looking as if he was in church, and wondering if the moth was getting into his collections, and if any one would care for 'em when he was dead and gone. Eh, David? Eh, David? And Mary—like Niobe, all tears——"

David had been chuckling to himself, but at the mention of Edward's wife his face changed a little. He continued to laugh, but his eyes hard-

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ened, and he interrupted his patient: "Come, sir, you must n't tire yourself."

"Like Niobe, all tears," repeated Mr. Mottisfont, obstinately. "Sweetly pretty she 'd look too—eh, David? Edward 's a lucky dog, ain't he?"

David's eyes flashed once and then hardened still more. His chin was very square.

"Come, sir," he repeated, and looked steadily at the old man.

"Beast—ain't I?" said old Mr. Mottisfont with the utmost cheerfulness. He occupied himself with arranging the bedclothes in an accurate line across his chest. As he did so, his hand touched the long folded paper, and he gave it an impatient push.

"You 're a damn nuisance, David," he said. "I 've made my will once, and now I 've to make it all over again just to please you. All the whole blessed thing over again, from 'I, Edward Morell Mottisfont,' down to 'I deliver this my act and deed.' Oh, Lord, what a bore."

"Mr. Fenwick," suggested David, and old Mr. Edward Mottisfont flared into sudden wrath.

"Don't talk to me of lawyers," he said violently. "I know enough law to make a will they can't upset. Don't talk of 'em. Sharks and robbers.

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Worse than the doctors. Besides young Fenwick talks—tells his wife things—and she tells her sister. And what Mary Bowden knows, the town knows. Did I ever tell you how I found out? I suspected, but I wanted to be sure. So I sent for young Fenwick, and told him I wanted to make my will. So far, so good. I made it—or he did. And I left a couple of thousand pounds to Bessie Fenwick and a couple more to her sister Mary in memory of my old friendship with their father. And as soon as Master Fenwick had gone I put his morning's work in the fire. Now how do I know he talked? This way. A week later I met Mary Bowden in the High Street, and I had the fright of my life. I declare I thought she 'd ha' kissed me. It was 'I hope you are prudent to be out in this east wind, dear Mr. Mottisfont,' and I must come and see them soon—and oh, Lord, what fools women are! Mary Bowden never could abide me till she thought I 'd left her two thousand pounds."

"Fenwicks are n't the only lawyers in the world," suggested David.

"Much obliged, I 'm sure. I did go to one once to make a will—they say it 's sweet to play the fool sometimes—eh, David? Fool I was sure

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enough. I found a little mottled man, that sat blinking at me, and repeating my words, till I could have murdered him with his own office penknife. He called me Moral too, in stead of Morell. 'Edward Moral Mottisfont,' and I took occasion to inform him that I was n't moral, never had been moral, and never intended to be moral. I said he must be thinking of my nephew Edward, who was damn moral. Oh, Lord, here *is* Edward. I could ha' done without him."

The door opened as he was speaking, and young Edward Mottisfont came in. He was a slight, fair man with a well-shaped head, a straight nose, and as much chin as a great many other people. He wore *pince-nez* because he was short-sighted, and high collars because he had a long neck. Both the *pince-nez* and the collar had an intensely irritating effect upon old Mr. Edward Mottisfont.

"If he had n't been for ever blinking at some bug that was just out of his sight, his eyes would have been as good as mine, and he might just as well keep his head in a butterfly net or a collecting box as where he does keep it. Not that I should have said that Edward *did* keep his head."

"I think you flurry him, sir," said David, "and——"

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"I know I do," grinned Mr. Mottisfont.

Young Edward Mottisfont came into the room and shut the door.

Old Mr. Mottisfont watched him with black, malicious eyes.

For as many years as Edward could remember anything, he could remember just that look upon his uncle's face. It made him uneasy now, as it had made him uneasy when he was only five years old.

Once when he was fifteen he said to David Blake: "You cheek him, David, and he likes you for it. How on earth do you manage it? Does n't he make you feel beastly?"

And David stared and said: "Beastly? Rats! Why should I feel beastly? He 's jolly amusing. He makes me laugh."

At thirty, Edward no longer employed quite the same ingenuous slang, but there was no doubt that he still experienced the same sensations, which fifteen years earlier he had characterised as beastly.

Old Mr. Edward Mottisfont lay in bed with his hands folded on his chest. He watched his nephew with considerable amusement, and waited for him to speak.

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Edward took a chair beside the bed. Then he said that it was a fine day, and old Mr. Mottisfont nodded twice with much solemnity.

"Yes, Edward," he said.

There was a pause.

"I hope you are feeling pretty well," was the unfortunate Edward's next attempt at conversation.

Old Mr. Edward Mottisfont looked across at David Blake. "Am I feeling pretty well—eh, David?"

David laughed. He had moved when Edward came into the room, and was standing by the window looking out. A little square pane was open. Through it came the drowsy murmur of a drowsy, old-fashioned town. Mr. Mottisfont's house stood a few yards back from the road, just at the head of the High Street. Market Harford was a very old town, and the house was a very old house. There was a staircase which was admired by American visitors, and a front door for which they occasionally made bids. From where Mr. Mottisfont lay in bed he could see a narrow lane hedged in by high old houses with red tiles. Beyond, the ground fell sharply away, and there was a prospect of many red roofs. Farther still, beyond the river, he could see the great black

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chimneys of his foundry, and the smoke that came from them. It was the sight that he loved best in the world. David looked down into the High Street and watched one lamp after another spring into brightness. He could see a long ribbon of light go down to the river and then rise again. He turned back into the room when he was appealed to, and said:

"Why, you know best how you feel, sir."

"Oh, no," said old Mr. Mottisfont in a smooth, resigned voice. "Oh, no, David. In a private and unofficial sort of way, yes; but in a public and official sense, oh, dear, no. Edward wants to know when to order his mourning, and how to arrange his holiday so as not to clash with my funeral, so it is for my medical adviser to reply, ain't it, Edward?"

The colour ran to the roots of Edward Mottisfont's fair hair. He cast an appealing glance in David's direction, and did not speak.

"I don't think any of us will order our mourning till you 're dead, sir," said David with a chuckle. He commiserated Edward, but, after all, Edward was a lucky dog—and to see one's successful rival at a disadvantage is not an altogether unpleasant experience. "You 'll outlive some of us young

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ones yet," he added, but old Mr. Mottisfont was frowning.

"Seen any more of young Stevenson, Edward?" he said, with an abrupt change of manner.

Edward shook his head rather ruefully.

"No, sir, I have n't."

"No, and you ain't likely to," said old Mr. Mottisfont. "There, you 'd best be gone. I 've talked enough."

"Then good-night, sir," said Edward Mottisfont, getting up with some show of cheerfulness.

The tone of Mr. Mottisfont's good-night was not nearly such a pleasant one, and as soon as the door had closed upon Edward he flung round towards David Blake with an angry "What 's the good of him? What 's the good of the fellow? He 's not a business man. He 's not a man at all; he 's an entomologiac—a lepidoptofool—a damn lepidoptofool."

These remarkable epithets followed one another with an extraordinary rapidity.

When the old gentleman paused for breath David inquired, "What 's the trouble, sir?"

"Oh, he 's muddled the new contract with Stevenson. Thinking of butterflies, I expect. Pretty things, butterflies—but there—I don't see

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that I need distress myself. It ain't me it 's going to touch. It 's Edward's own look-out. My income ain't going to concern me for very much longer."

He was silent for a moment. Then he made a restless movement with his hand.

"It won't, will it—eh, David? You did n't mean what you said just now? It was just a flam? I ain't going to live, am I?"

David hesitated and the old man broke in with an extraordinary energy.

"Oh, for the Lord's sake, David, I 'm not a girl—out with it! How long d' ye give me?"

David sat down on the bed again. His movements had a surprising gentleness for so large a man. His odd, humorous face was quite serious.

"Really, sir, I don't know," he said, "I really don't. There 's no more to be done if you won't let me operate. No, we won't go over all that again. I know you 've made up your mind. And no one can possibly say how long it may be. You might have died this week, or you may die in a month, or it may go on for a year—or two—or three. You 've the sort of constitution they don't make nowadays."

" Three years," said old Mr. Edward Mottis-

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font—"three years, David—and this damn pain all along—all the time—gettin' worse——"

"Oh, I think we can relieve the pain, sir," said David cheerfully.

"Much obliged, David. Some beastly drug that 'll turn me into an idiot. No, thank ye, I 'll keep my wits if it 's all the same to you. Well, well, it 's all in the day's work, and I 'm not complaining, but Edward 'll get mortal tired of waiting for my shoes if I last three years. I doubt his patience holding out. He 'll be bound to hasten matters on. Think of the bad example I shall be for the baby—when it comes. Lord, David, what d' ye want to look like that for? I suppose they 'll have babies like other folk, and I 'll be a bad example for 'em. Edward 'll think of that. When he 's thought of it enough, and I 've got on his nerves a bit more than usual, he 'll put strychnine or arsenic into my soup. Oh, Edward 'll poison me yet. You 'll see."

"Poor old Edward, it 's not much in his line," said David with half a laugh.

"Eh? What about Pellico's dog then?"

"Pellico's dog, sir?"

"What an innocent young man you are, David —never heard of Pellico's dog before, did you?

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Pellico's dog that got on Edward's nerves same as I get on his nerves, and you never knew that Edward dosed the poor brute with some of his bug-curing stuff, eh? To be sure you did n't think I knew, nor did Edward. I don't tell everything I know, and how I know it is my affair and none of yours, Master David Blake, but you see Edward 's not so unhandy with a little job in the poisoning line."

David's face darkened. The incident of Pellico's dog had occurred when he and Edward were schoolboys of fifteen. He remembered it very well, but he did not very much care being reminded of it. Every day of his life he passed the narrow turning, down which, in defiance of parental prohibitions, he and Edward used to race each other to school. Old Pellico's dirty, evil-smelling shop still jutted out of the farther end, and the grimy door-step upon which his dog used to lie in wait for their ankles was still as grimy as ever. Sometimes it was a trouser-leg that suffered. Sometimes an ankle was nipped, and if Pellico's dog occasionally got a kick in return, it was not more than his due. David remembered his own surprise when it first dawned upon him that Edward minded—yes, actually minded these en-

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counters. He recalled the occasion when Edward, his face of a suspicious pallor, had denied angrily that he was afraid of any beastly dog, and then his sudden wincing confession that he did mind—that he minded horribly—not because he was afraid of being bitten—Edward explained this point very carefully—but because the dog made such a beastly row, and because Edward dreamed of him at night, only in his dreams, Pellico's dog was rather larger than Pellico himself, and the lane was a cul-de-sac with a wall at the end of it, against which he crouched in his dream whilst the dog came nearer and nearer.

"What rot," was David's comment, "but if I felt like that, I jolly well know I 'd knock the brute on the head."

"Would you?" said Edward, and that was all that had passed. Only, when a week later Pellico's dog was poisoned, David was filled with righteous indignation. He stormed at Edward.

"You did it—you know you did it. You did it with some of that beastly bug-killing stuff that you keep knocking about."

Edward was pale, but there was an odd gleam of triumph in the eyes that met David's.

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"Well, you said you 'd do for him—you said it yourself. So then I just did it."

David stared at him with all a schoolboy's crude condemnation of something that was "not the game."

"I 'd have knocked him on the head under old Pellico's nose—but poison—poison 's *beastly*."

He did not reason about it. It was just instinct. You knocked on the head a brute that annoyed you, but you did n't use poison. And Edward had used poison. That was the beginning of David's great intimacy with Elizabeth Chantrey. He did not quarrel with Edward, but they drifted out of an inseparable friendship into a relationship of the cool, go-as-you-please order. The thing rankled a little after all these years. David sat there frowning and remembering. Old Mr. Mottisfont laughed.

"Aha, you see I know most things," he said, "Edward 'll poison me yet. You see, he 's in a fix. He hankers after this house same as I always hankered after it. It 's about the only taste we have in common. He 's got his own house on a seven years' lease, and here 's Nick Anderson going to be married, and willing to take it off his hands. And what 's Edward to do? It 's a

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terrible anxiety for him not knowing if I 'm going to die or not. If he does n't accept Nick's offer and I die, he 'll have two houses on his hands. If he accepts it and I don't die, he 'll not have a house at all. It 's a sad dilemma for Edward. That 's why he would enjoy seeing about my funeral so much. He 'd do it all very handsomely. Edward likes things handsome. And Mary, who does n't care a jot for me, will wear a black dress that don't suit her, and feel like a Christian martyr. And Elizabeth won't wear black at all, though she cares a good many jots, and though she 'd look a deal better in it than Mary—eh, David?"

But David Blake was exclaiming at the lateness of the hour, and saying good-night, all in a breath.

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CHAPTER II

DAVID BLAKE

Grey, grey mist
  Over the old grey town,
A mist of years, a mist of tears,
  Where ghosts go up and down;
And the ghosts they whisper thus, and thus,
Of the days when the world went with us.

A MINUTE or two later Elizabeth Chantrey came into the room. She was a very tall woman, with a beautiful figure. All her movements were strong, sure, and graceful. She carried a lighted lamp in her left hand. Mr. Mottisfont abominated electric light and refused obstinately to have it in the house. When Elizabeth had closed the door and set down the lamp, she crossed over to the window and fastened a heavy oak shutter across it. Then she sat down by the bed.

"Well," she said in her pleasant voice.

"H'm," said old Mr. Mottisfont, "well or ill 's all a matter of opinion, same as religion, or the cut of a dress." He shut his mouth with a snap,

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and lay staring at the ceiling. Presently his eyes wandered back to Elizabeth. She was sitting quite still, with her hands folded. Very few busy women ever sit still at all, but Elizabeth Chantrey, who was a very busy woman, was also a woman of a most reposeful presence. She could be unoccupied without appearing idle, just as she could be silent without appearing either stupid or constrained. Old Edward Mottisfont looked at her for about five minutes. Then he said suddenly:

"What 'll you do when I 'm dead, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth made no protest, as her sister Mary would have done. She had not been Edward Mottisfont's ward since she was fourteen for nothing. She understood him very well, and she was perhaps the one creature whom he really loved. She leaned her chin in her hand and said:

"I don't know, Mr. Mottisfont."

Mr. Mottisfont never took his eyes off her face.

"Edward 'll want to move in here as soon as possible. What 'll you do?"

"I don't know," repeated Elizabeth, frowning a little.

"Well, if you don't know, perhaps you 'll listen to reason, and do as I ask you."

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"If I can," said Elizabeth Chantrey.

He nodded.

"Stay here a year," he said, "a year is n't much to ask—eh?"

"Here?"

"Yes—in this house. I 've spoken about it to Edward. Odd creature, Edward, but, I believe, truthful. Said he was quite agreeable. Even went so far as to say he was fond of you, and that Mary would be pleased. Said you 'd too much tact to obtrude yourself, and that of course you 'd keep your own rooms. No, I don't suppose you 'll find it particularly pleasant, but I believe you 'll find it worth while. Give it a year."

Elizabeth started ever so slightly. One may endure for years, and make no sign, to wince at last in one unguarded moment. So he knew—had always known. Again Elizabeth made no protest.

"A year," she said in a low voice, "a year—I 've given fifteen years. Is n't fifteen years enough?"

Something fierce came into old Edward Mottisfont's eyes. His whole face hardened. "He 's a damn fool," he said.

Elizabeth laughed.

"Of course he must be," and she laughed again.

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The old man nodded.

"Grit," he said to himself, "grit. That 's the way—laugh, Elizabeth, laugh—and let him go hang for a damn fool. He ain't worth it—no man living 's worth it. But give him a year all the same."

If old Mr. Mottisfont had not been irritated with David Blake for being as he put it, a damn fool, he would not have made the references he had done to his nephew Edward's wife. They touched David upon the raw, and old Mr. Mottisfont was very well aware of it. As David went out of the room and closed the door, a strange mood came upon him. All the many memories of this house, familiar to him from early boyhood, all the many memories of this town of his birth and upbringing, rose about him. It was a strange mood, but yet not a sad one, though just beyond it lay the black shadow which is the curse of the Celt. David Blake came of an old Irish stock, although he had never seen Ireland. He had the vein of poetry—the vein of sadness, which are born at a birth with Irish humour and Irish wit.

As he went down the staircase, the famous staircase with its carved newels, the light of a moving lamp came up from below, and at the turn

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of the stair he stood aside to let Elizabeth Chantrey pass. She wore a grey dress, and the lamp-light shone upon her hair and made it look like very pale gold. It was thick hair—very fine and thick, and she wore it in a great plait like a crown. In the daytime it was not golden at all, but just the colour of the pale thick honey with which wax is mingled. Long ago a Chantrey had married a wife from Norway with Elizabeth's hair and Elizabeth's dark grey eyes.

"Good-night, David," said Elizabeth Chantrey. She would have passed on, but to her surprise David made no movement. He was looking at her.

"This is where I first saw you, Elizabeth," he said in a remembering voice. "You had on a grey dress, like that one, but Mary was in blue, because Mr. Mottisfont would n't let her wear mourning. Do you remember how shocked poor Miss Agatha was?—'and their mother only dead a month!' I can hear her now." Mary—yes, he remembered little Mary Chantrey in her blue dress. He could see her now—nine years old—in a blue dress—with dark curling hair and round brown eyes, holding tightly to Elizabeth's skirts, and much too shy to speak to the big strange boy who was Edward's friend.

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Elizabeth watched him. She knew very well that he was not thinking of her, although he had remembered the grey dress. And yet—for five years—it was she and not Mary to whom David came with every mood. During those five years, the years between fourteen and nineteen, it was always Elizabeth and David, David and Elizabeth. Then when David was twenty, and in his first year at hospital, Dr. Blake died suddenly, and for four years David came no more to Market Harford. Mrs. Blake went to live with a sister in the north, and David's vacations were spent with his mother. For a time he wrote often—then less often—finally only at Christmas. And the years passed. Elizabeth's girlhood passed. Mary grew up. And when David Blake had been nearly three years qualified, and young Dr. Ellerton was drowned out boating, David bought from Mrs. Ellerton a share in the practice that had been his father's, and brought his mother back to Market Harford. Mrs. Blake lived only for a year, but before she died she had seen David fall headlong 'n love, not with her dear Elizabeth, but with Mary—pretty little Mary—who was turning the heads of all the young men, sending Jimmy Larkin with a temporarily broken heart to India, Jack

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Webster with a much more seriously injured one to the West Coast of Africa, and enjoying herself mightily the while. Elizabeth had memories as well as David. They came at least as near sadness as his. She thought she had remembered quite enough for one evening, and she set her foot on the stair above the landing.

"Poor Miss Agatha!" she said. "What a worry we were to her, and how she disliked our coming here. I can remember her grumbling to Mr. Mottisfont, and saying, 'Children make such a work in the house,' and Mr. Mottisfont——"

Elizabeth laughed.

"Mr. Mottisfont said, 'Don't be such a damn old maid, Agatha. For the Lord's sake, what 's the good of a woman that can't mind children?'"

David laughed too. He remembered Miss Agatha's fussy indignation.

"Good-night, David," said Elizabeth, and she passed on up the wide, shallow stair.

The light went with her. From below there came only a glimmer, for the lamp in the hall was still turned low. David went slowly on. As he was about to open the front door, Edward Mottisfont came out of the dining-room on the left.

"One minute, David," he said, and took him

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by the arm. "Look here—I think I ought to know. Is my uncle likely to live on indefinitely? Did you mean what you said upstairs?"

It was the second time that David Blake had been asked if he meant those words. He answered a trifle irritably.

"Why should I say what I don't mean? He may live three years or he may die to-morrow. Why on earth should I say it if I did n't think it?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Edward. "You might have been saying it just to cheer the old man up."

There was a certain serious simplicity about Edward Mottisfont. It was this quality in him which his uncle stigmatised as priggishness. Your true prig is always self-conscious, but Edward was not at all self-conscious. From his own point of view he saw things quite clearly. It was other people's points of view which had a confusing effect upon him. David laughed.

"It did n't exactly cheer him up," he said. "He is n't as set on living as all that comes to."

Edward appeared to be rather struck by this statement.

"Is n't he?" he said.

He opened the door as he spoke, but suddenly

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closed it again. His tone altered. It became eager and boyish.

"David, I *say*—you know Jimmy Larkin was transferred to Assam some months ago? Well, I wrote and asked him to remember me if he came across anything like specimens. Of course his forest work gives him simply priceless opportunities. He wrote back and said he would see what he could do, and last mail he sent me——"

"What—a package of live scorpions?"

"No—not specimens—oh, if he could only have sent the specimen—but it was the next best thing—a drawing—you remember how awfully well Jimmy drew—a coloured drawing of a perfectly new slug."

Edward's tone became absolutely ecstatic. He began to rumple up his fair hair, as he always did when he was excited. "I can't find it in any of the books," he said, "and they 'd never even heard of it at the Natural History Museum. Five yellow bands on a black ground—what do you think of that?"

"I should say it was Jimmy, larking," murmured David, getting the door open and departing hastily, but Edward was a great deal too busy wondering whether the slug ought in justice to be

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