

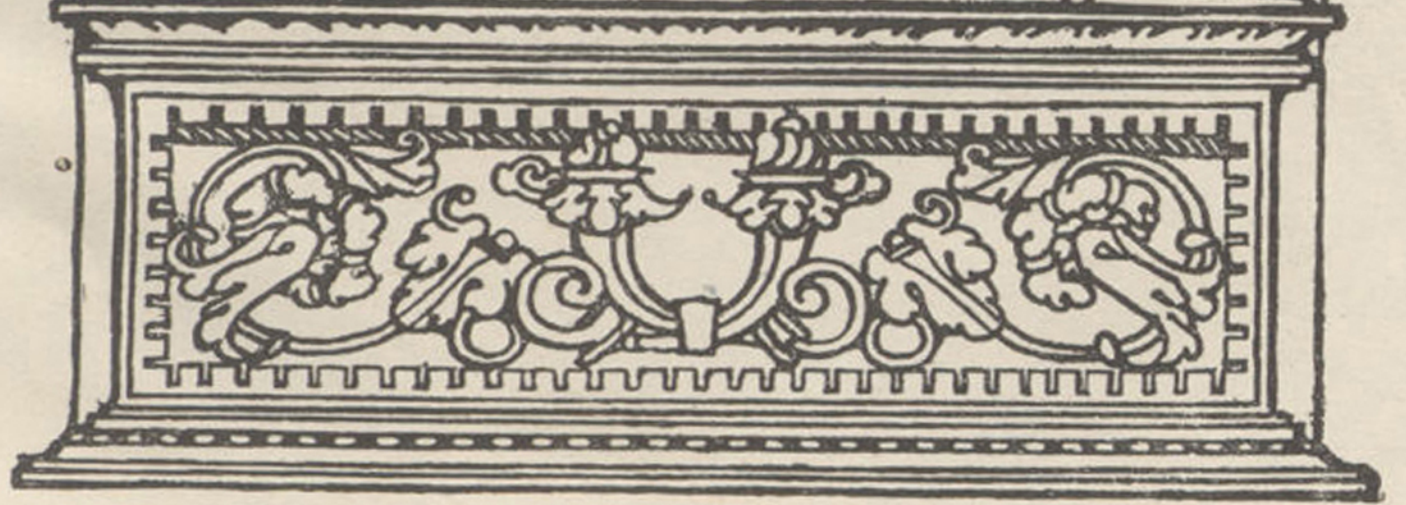


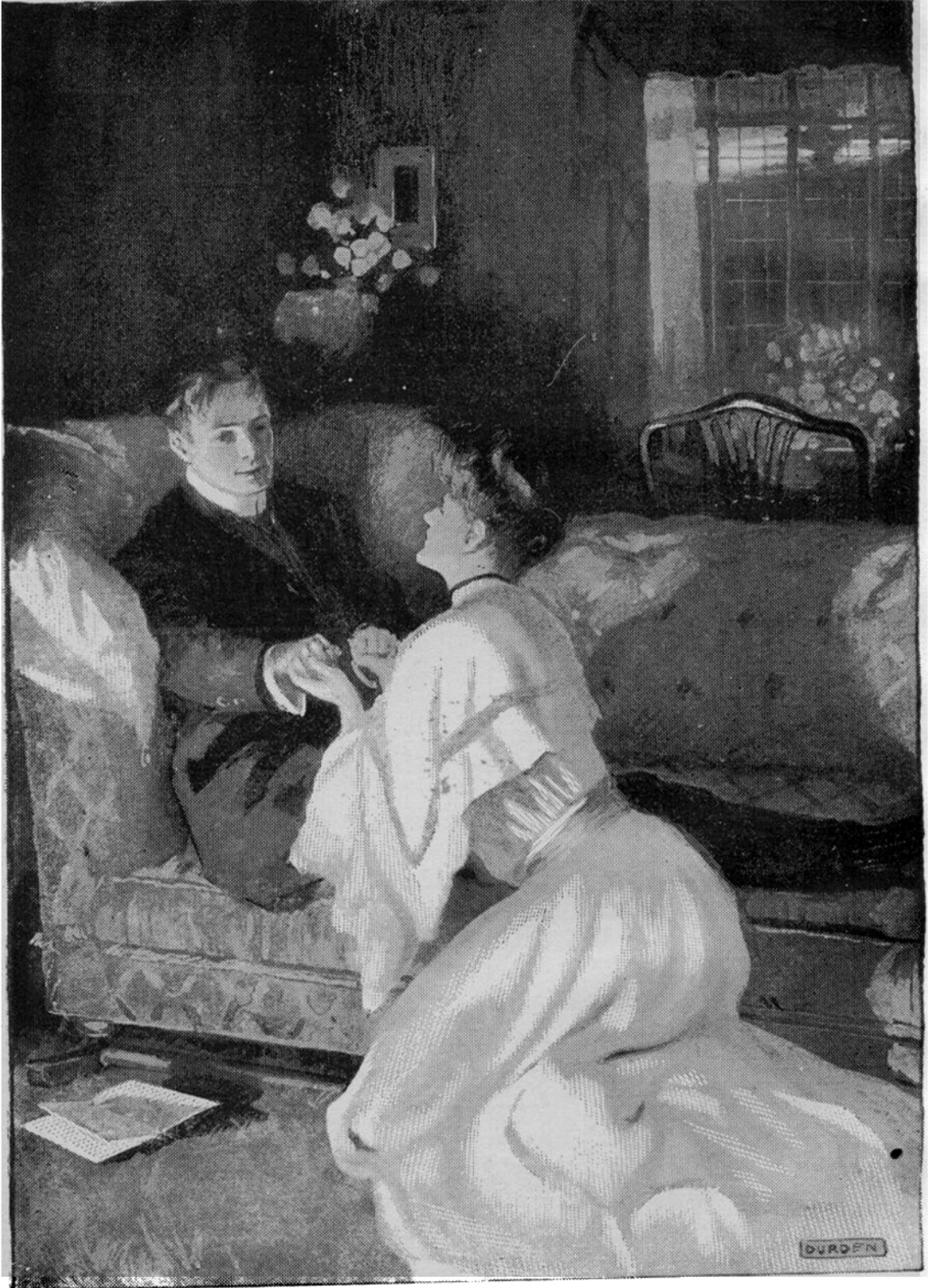
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A
LAME DOG'S
DIARY

S. Macnaughtan

Thomas Nelson and
Sons, London, Edin-
burgh, and New York





“But, Hugo dear,” she said, “why did you not tell me long ago?”



BY THE AUTHOR OF
"A LAME DOG'S DIARY."

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A LAME DOG'S DIARY.

CHAPTER I.

PERHAPS curiosity has never been more keen, nor mystery more baffling, than has been the case during the last few weeks. There have been "a few friends to tea" at almost every house in the village to see if in this way any reasonable conclusions can be arrived at, and even Palestrina is satisfied with the number of people who have taken the trouble to walk up the hill and chat by my sofa in the afternoons. But although each lady who has called has remarked that she is in the secret, but at present is not at liberty to say anything about it, we are inclined to think that this is vain boasting, or at least selfish reticence.

The two Miss Traceys have announced to almost every caller at their little cottage during the last two years that they intend to build.

We have all been naturally a good deal impressed by this statement, and although it was never plainly

said what the structure was to be, we had had for a long time a notion of a detached house on the Common. And surely enough the foundation-stone was laid last year by Miss Ruby Tracey with some ceremony, and the first turf of the garden was cut by Miss Tracey, and only last month the whole of the Fern Cottage furniture was removed in a van to Fairview, as the new house is called—the handsomer pieces placed upon the outside of the van, and the commoner and least creditable of the bedroom furniture within. Every one was at his or her window on the day that the Miss Traceys' furniture, with the best cabinet and the inlaid card-table duly displayed, was driven in state by the driver of the station omnibus through the town. A rumour got abroad that even more beautiful things were concealed from view inside the van, and the Miss Traceys satisfied their consciences by saying, "We did not spread the rumour, and we shall not contradict it."

But the mystery concerns the furniture in quite a secondary sort of way, and it is only important as being the means of giving rise to the much-discussed rumour in the town. For mark, the drawing-room furniture was taken at once and stored in a spare bedroom, and the drawing-room was left unfurnished. This fact might have remained in obscurity, for in winter time, at least, it is not unusual for ladies to

receive guests in the dining-room with an apology, the drawing-room being a cold sitting-room during the frost. But Mrs. Lovekin, the lady who acts as co-hostess at every entertainment in our neighbourhood, handing about her friends' cakes and tea, and taking, we are inclined to think, too much upon herself, did, in a moment of expansion, offer to show the Traceys' house to the Blinds, who happened to call there on the day when she was paying her respects to Miss Tracey. Mrs. Lovekin always removes her bonnet and cloak in every house, and this helps the suggestion that she is in some sort a hostess everywhere.

Palestrina, who was also calling on the Miss Traceys, gave me a full, true, and particular account of the affair the same evening.

"Mind the wet paint," Mrs. Lovekin called from the dining-room window to the Miss Blinds as they came in at the gate, "and I'll open the door," she remarked, as she sailed out into the passage to greet the sisters. Miss Ruby Tracey would rather have done this politeness herself, in order that she might hear the flattering remarks which people were wont to make about the hall paper. It is so well known that she and her sister keep three servants that they never have any hesitation in going to the door themselves. Whereas the Miss Blinds, who have only one

domestic, would seem hardly to know where their front door is situated.

"What an elegant paper!" exclaimed Miss Lydia Blind, stopping awestruck in the little hall. Miss Lydia would, one knows, have something kind to say if she went to pay a call at a Kaffir hut.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lovekin in a proprietary sort of way; "it is one of Moseley's which Smithson got down in his book of patterns. The blue paint is what they call 'eggshell'—quite a new shade. Come this way and have a cup of tea."

"I am sure it is all very simple," said Miss Tracey, in a disparaging manner that showed her good breeding, as they sat down in the dining-room. "How do you like the new carpet, Miss Belinda?"

"Glory, glory, glory!" said Miss Belinda; "glory, glory, glory!"

"Show Miss Lydia the new footstools, Ruby dear," said Miss Tracey; "I am sure she would like to see them." For we all believe—or like to believe—that to praise our property must be Miss Lydia's highest pleasure.

Mrs. Lovekin seized the opportunity to act as tea-maker to the party. She poured cream and sugar into the cups with the remark that there was no one in Stowel whose tastes in these respects she did not know, and she handed a plate of cake to Miss Belinda, saying,—

"There, my dear, you sit comfortable and eat that."

"Glory, glory, glory!" said Miss Belinda.

The Miss Traceys had tea dispensed to them by the same hand, and accepted it with that slight sense of bewilderment which Mrs. Lovekin sometimes makes us feel when she looks after us in our own houses; and Miss Lydia Blind distributed her thanks equally between her and the Miss Traceys.

Nothing was talked of that afternoon but the new house—its sunny aspect and its roomy cupboards in particular commanding the heartiest commendation. Presently the ladies were taken to see all over it, with the exception of one of the spare bedrooms and the drawing-room. They knew these rooms existed, because Miss Tracey paused at the door of each, and said lightly, "This is the drawing-room," and "This is another spare bedroom;" and although, as my sister confided to me, they would have given much to see the interior of the rooms, they could not do so, of course, uninvited.

They paused to admire something at every turn, even saying generously, but playfully, that there were many of Miss Tracey's possessions which they positively coveted for themselves. The Miss Traceys smilingly repudiated their felicitations, while Mrs. Lovekin accepted them and announced the price of everything. She became quite breathless, hurrying

upstairs, while she exhibited stair-rods and carpets, and with shortened breath apostrophized them as being "real brass" or "the best Brussels at five-and-threepence." No one is vulgar in Stowel, but Mrs. Lovekin is, we fear, not genteel.

At the close of the visit, Mrs. Lovekin again ushered the visitors into the hall, and opening, "by the merest accident," as she afterwards said—without, however, gaining any credence for her statement—opening by the merest accident the door of the drawing-room, she peeped in.

The drawing-room was void of furniture. The wild thought came into Mrs. Lovekin's mind—had the Traceys overbuilt themselves, and had the furniture, which had been carried so proudly through the town on the top of the furniture-van, been sold to pay expenses? The suggestion was immediately put aside. The Miss Traceys' comfortable means were so well known that such an explanation could not be seriously contemplated for a moment. No; putting two and two together, a closed spare bedroom and an empty drawing-room, and bringing a woman's instinct to bear upon the question, it all pointed to one thing—the Miss Traceys were going to give a party, probably an evening party, in honour of the new house, and the drawing-room furniture was being stored for safety in the spare bedroom until the rout was over.

Doubtless the first rumour of the Miss Traceys' party was meanly come by, but it was none the less engrossing, all the same. Miss Lydia hoped that no one would believe for a moment that she was in any way connected with the fraudulent intrusion that had been made into Miss Tracey's secret, and Miss Tracey said,—

“I have known Mary Anne Lovekin for thirty years”—this was understating the case, but numbers are not exactly stated as we grow older—“but I never would have believed that she could have done such a thing.”

“Bad butter,” said Miss Belinda, shaking her head in an emphatic fashion; “bad butter, bad butter!”

“I do not want to judge people,” said Miss Tracey; “but there was a want of delicacy about opening a closed door which I for one cannot forgive.” The Miss Traceys' good-breeding is proverbial in Stowel, and it was felt that her uncompromising attitude could not but be excused when it was a matter of her most honourable sensibilities having been outraged.

“*I shall not say what I think,*” said Miss Ruby.

We often find that when Miss Ruby cannot transcend what her sister has said, she has a way of hinting darkly at a possible brilliance of utterance which for some reason she refrains from making.

"Bad butter!" said Miss Belinda; "bad, bad butter!"

Many years ago Miss Belinda Blind, who was then a beautiful young woman, was thrown from a pony carriage. The result of the fall was an injury to the spine, and she was smitten with a paralytic stroke which deprived her of all power of speech. She was dumb for some years, and then two phrases came back to her stammering tongue, "glory," and "bad butter." She understands perfectly what is said to her, but she has no means of replying, save in this very limited vocabulary. And, strangely enough, these words can only be made to correspond with Miss Belinda's feelings. However polite her intentions may be, if at heart she disapproves she can only utter her two words of opprobrium. When a sermon displeases her she sits in her pew muttering softly, and her lips show by their movement the words she is repeating; while a particularly good cup of tea will evoke from her the extravagant phrase, "Glory, glory, glory!"

"Certainly," I said to Miss Lydia on the day succeeding the famous visit to the Traceys, "Mrs. Lovekin's information, if so it may be called, has been wrongly come by, and yet so frail is human nature one cannot help speculating upon it."

"That is what is so sad," said Miss Lydia; "one almost feels as though sharing in Mrs. Lovekin's

deceit by dwelling upon her information, and yet one's mind seems incapable of even partially forgetting such an announcement."

Perhaps some suggestion of what was forming the topic of conversation in the town may have reached the Miss Traceys, and hastened their disclosure of the mystery. For very shortly afterwards, one morning when a flood of April sunshine had called us out of doors to wander on the damp paths of the garden, and watch bursting buds and listen to the song of birds in a very rural and delightful fashion, we were informed by a servant who tripped out in a white cap and apron, quite dazzling in the sunshine, that the Miss Traceys were within.

I appealed to my sister to furnish me with a means of escape. But she replied: "I am afraid they have seen you. Besides, you know I like you to see people." We went indoors, and Miss Ruby apologized for the untimely hour at which she and her sister had come, but explained it by saying, "We wanted to find you alone." And then we knew that the mystery was about to be solved.

"You are the first to hear about it," said Miss Tracey in a manner which was distinctly flattering. The Miss Traceys sit very erect on their chairs, and when they come to call I always apologize for having my leg up on the sofa.

"The fact is," Miss Tracey went on, "that we knew that we could rely upon your good sense and judgment in a matter which is exercising us very seriously at present."

"It is a delicate subject, of course," said Miss Ruby, "but one which we feel certain we may confide to you."

"We always look upon Mr. Hugo as a man of the world," said Miss Tracey, "although he is such an invalid, and we rely upon the sound judgment of you both."

Well, to state the subject without further preamble—but of course it must be understood that everything spoken this morning was to be in strict confidence—would we consider that they, the Miss Traceys, were sufficiently chaperoned if their brother the Vicar were present at the dance, and promised not to leave until the last gentleman had quitted the house?

I do not like to overstate a lady's age, and it is with the utmost diffidence that I suggest that Miss Ruby Tracey, the younger of the two sisters, may be on the other side of forty.

"You see, we have not only our own good name to consider," said Miss Tracey, "but the memory of our dear and ever-respected father must, we feel, be our guide in this matter, and we cannot decide how he would have wished us to act. If our brother were married it would simplify matters very much."

"You would have had your invitation before now," said Miss Ruby, "if we had been able to come to a decision, but without advice we felt that was impossible. I am sure," she went on, giving her mantle a little nervous composing touch, and glancing aside as though hardly liking to face any eye directly—"I am sure the things one hears of unmarried women doing nowadays . . . but of course one would not like to be classed with that sort of person."

Palestrina was the first of us who spoke.

"I think," she said gravely, "that as you are so well known here, nothing could be said."

"You really think so?" said Miss Ruby.

But Miss Tracey still demurred. She said: "But it is the fact of our being so well known here that really constitutes my chief uneasiness. We often feel," she added with a sigh, "that in another place we could have more liberty."

"I assure you," said Miss Ruby, in a tone of playful confession, "that when we go to visit our cousins in London we are really quite shockingly frivolous. I do not know what it is about London; one always seems to throw off all restraint."

"I think you are giving a wrong impression, dear," said Miss Tracey. "There was nothing in the whole of our conduct in London which would not bear repetition in Stowel. Only, in a place like this, one

feels one must often explain one's actions, lest they should give rise to misrepresentations; whereas in London, although behaving, I hope, in a manner just as circumspect, one feels that no apology or explanation is needed."

"There is a sort of cheerful privacy about London," said the other sister, "which I find it hard to explain, but which is nevertheless enjoyable."

To say that there is a dull publicity about the country, was too obvious a retort.

"I think we went out every evening when we were in West Kensington," said Miss Tracey.

"Counting church in the evening," said Miss Ruby.

"Still, those evening services in London almost count as going out," said Miss Tracey; "I mean, they are so lively. I often blame myself for not being able to look upon them more in the light of a religious exercise. I find it as difficult to worship in a strange pew as to sleep comfortably in a strange bed."

The Miss Traceys' morning call lasted until one o'clock, and even then, as they themselves said, rising and shaking out their poplin skirts, there was much left undiscussed which they would still have liked to talk over with us. The ball supper, as they called it, was to be cooked at home, and to consist of nothing which could not be "eaten in the hand."

Claret-cup was, to use Miss Tracey's own figure of

speech, to be "flowing" the whole evening, both in the dining-room with the sandwiches and cakes, and on a tray placed in a recess behind the hall door.

"Gentlemen always seem so thirsty," said Miss Tracey, making the remark as though speaking of some animal of strange habits which she had considered with the bars of its cage securely fixed between herself and it at the Zoo.

"We have bought six bottles of Essence of Claret-cup," said the younger sister, "which we have seen very highly recommended in advertisements; and although it says that three tablespoonfuls will make a quart of the cup, we thought of putting four, and so having it good."

"As regards the music," went on Miss Tracey, "we have come, I think, to a very happy decision. A friend of ours knows a blind man who plays the piano for dances, and by employing him we feel that we shall be giving remunerative work to a very deserving person, as well as ensuring for ourselves a really choice selection of the most fashionable waltzes. Ruby pronounces the floor perfect," said Miss Tracey, glancing admiringly at her younger sister's still neat figure and nimble feet; "she has been practising upon it several times——"

"With the blinds down, dear," amended Miss Ruby, simpering a little. "We understand," she continued,