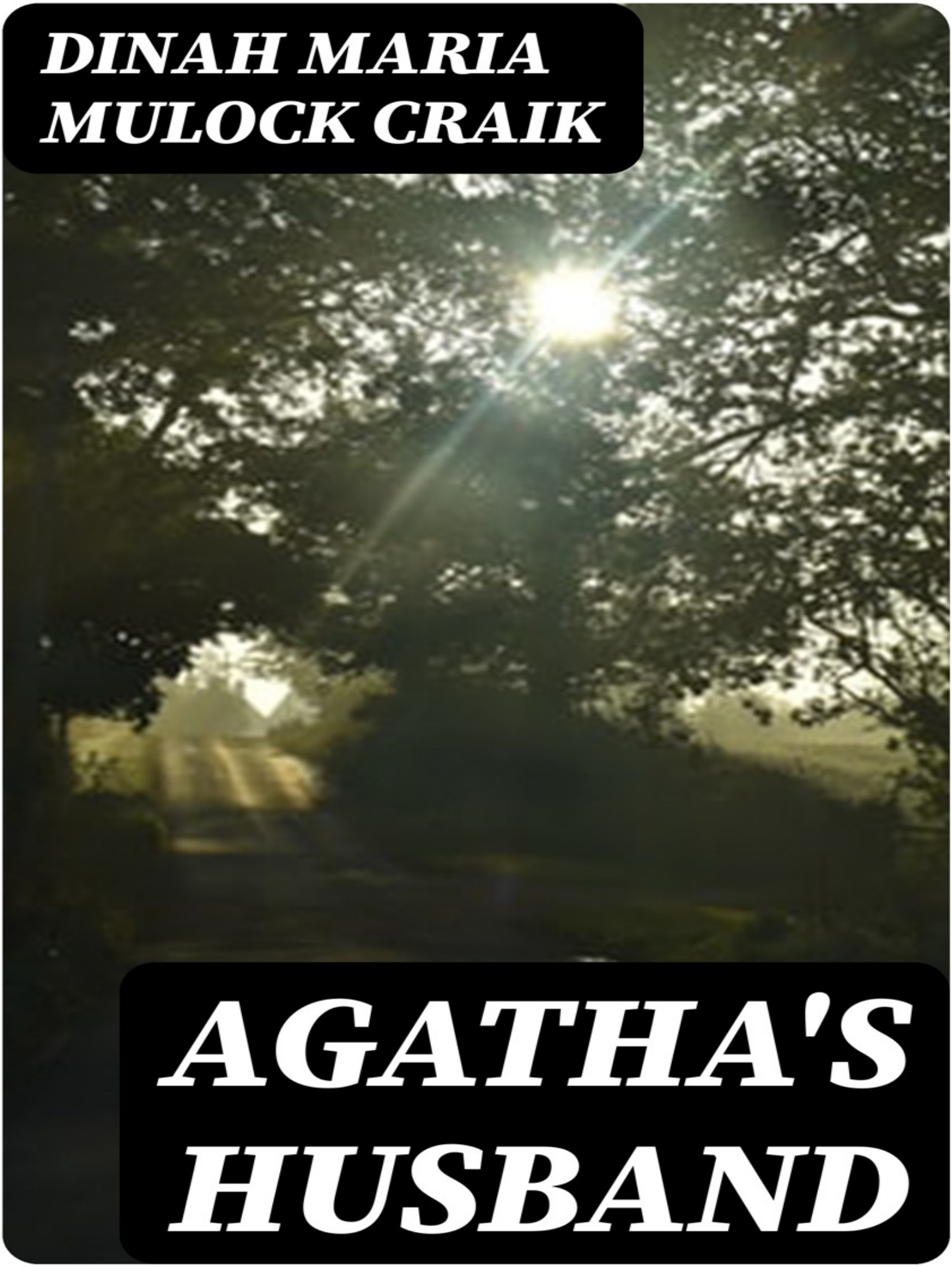
DINAH MARIA
MULOCK CRAIK
AGATHA'S
HUSBAND

Dinah Maria Mulock Craik

Agatha's Husband

A Novel

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AGATHA'S HUSBAND.

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CHAPTER I.

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—If there ever was a woman thoroughly like her name, it was Agatha Bowen. She was good, in the first place—right good at heart, though with a slight external roughness (like the sound of the g in her name), which took away all sentimentalism. Then the vowels—the three broad rich a's—which no one can pronounce with nimini-pimini closed lips—how thoroughly they answered to her character!—a character in the which was nothing small, mean, cramped, or crooked.

But if we go on unfolding her in this way, there will not be the slightest use in writing her history, or that of one in whom her life is beautifully involved and enclosed—as every married woman's should be—

He was still in clouded mystery—an individual yet to be; and two other individuals had been “talking him over,” feminine-fashion, in Miss Agatha Bowen's drawing-room, much to that lady's amusement and edification. For, being moderately rich, she had her own suite of rooms in the house where she boarded; and having no mother—sorrowful lot for a girl of nineteen!—she sometimes filled her drawing-room with very useless and unprofitable acquaintances. These two married ladies—one young, the other old—Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Thornycroft—had been for the last half-hour vexing their very hearts out to find Agatha a husband—a weakness which, it must be confessed, lurks in the heart of almost every married lady.

Agatha had been laughing at it, alternately flushing up or looking scornful, as her mouth had a natural propensity for looking; balancing herself occasionally on the arm of the sofa, which, being rather small and of a light figure, she could do with both impunity and grace; or else rushing to the open window, ostensibly to let her black kitten investigate street-sights from its mistress's shoulder. Agatha was very much of a child still, or could be when she chose.

Mrs. Hill had been regretting some two or three “excellent matches” of which she felt sure Miss Bowen had thrown away her chance; and young Mrs. Thornycroft had tried hard to persuade her dearest Agatha how very much happier she would be in a house of her own, than as a boarder even in this excellent physician's family. But Agatha only laughed on, and devoted herself more than ever to the black kitten.

She was, I fear, a damsel who rather neglected the *bienséances* of life. Only, in her excuse, it must be allowed that her friends were doing what they had no earthly business to do; since; if there is one subject above all upon which a young woman has a right to keep her thoughts, feelings, and intentions to herself, and to exact from others the respect of silence, it is that of marriage. Possibly, Agatha Bowen was of this opinion.

“Mrs. Hill, you are a very kind, good soul: and Emma Thornycroft, I like you very much; but if—(Oh! be quiet, Tittens!)—if you could manage to let me and 'my Husband' alone.”

These were the only serious words she said—and they were but half serious; she evidently felt such an irresistible

propensity to laugh.

“Now,” continued she, turning the conversation, and putting on a dignified aspect, which occasionally she took it into her head to assume, though more in playfulness than earnest—“now let me tell you who you will meet here at dinner to-day.”

“Major Harper, of course.”

“I do not see the 'of course' Mrs. Thornycroft,” returned Agatha, rather sharply; then, melting into a smile, she added: “Well, 'of course,' as you say; what more likely visitor could I have than my guardian?”

“Trustee, my dear; guardians belong to romances, where young ladies are always expected to hate, or fall in love with them.”

Agatha flushed slightly. Now, unlike most girls, Miss Bowen did not look pretty when she blushed; her skin being very dark, and not over clear, the red blood coursing under it dyed her cheek, not “celestial, rosy red,” but a warm mahogany colour. Perhaps a consciousness of this deepened the unpleasant blushing fit, to which, like most sensitive people at her age, she was always rather prone.

“Not,” continued Mrs. Thornycroft, watching her,—“not that I think any love affair is likely to happen in your case; Major Harper is far too much of a settled-down bachelor, and at the same time too old.”

Agatha pulled a comical face, and made a few solemn allusions to Methuselah. She had a peculiarly quick, even abrupt manner of speaking, saying a dozen words in the time most young ladies would take to drawl out three; and

possessing, likewise, the rare feminine quality of never saying a word more than was necessary.

“Agatha, how funny you are!” laughed her easily-amused friend. “But, dear, tell me who else is coming?” And she glanced doubtfully down on a gown that looked like a marriage-silk “dyed and renovated.”

“Oh, no ladies—and gentlemen never see whether one is dressed in brocade or sackcloth,” returned Agatha, rather maliciously;—“only, 'old Major Harper' as you are pleased to call him, and”——

“Nay, I didn't call him very old—just forty, or thereabouts—though he does not look anything like it. Then he is so handsome, and, I must say, Agatha, pays you such extreme attention.”

Agatha laughed again—the quick, light-hearted laugh of nineteen—and her brown eyes brightened with innocent pleasure.

Young Mrs. Thornycroft again looked down uneasily at her dress—not from overmuch vanity, but because her hounded mind recurred instinctively from extraneous or large interests to individual and lesser ones.

“Is there really any one particular coming, my dear? Of course, *you* have no trouble about evening dress; mourning is such easy comfortable wear.” (Agatha turned her head quickly aside.) “That handsome silk of yours looks quite well still; and mamma there,” glancing at the contentedly knitting Mrs. Hill—“old ladies never require much dress; but if you had only told me to prepare for company”——

“Pretty company! Merely our own circle—Dr. Ianson, Mrs. Ianson, and Miss Ianson—you need not mind outshining her

now”——

“No, indeed! I am married.”

“Then the 'company' dwindles down to two besides yourselves; Major Harper and his brother.”

“Oh! What sort of a person is the brother?”

“I really don't know; I have never seen him. He is just come home from Canada; the youngest of the family—and I hate boys,” replied Agatha, running the sentences one upon the other in her quick fashion.

“The youngest of the family—how many are there in all?” inquired the elder lady, her friendly anxiety being probably once more on matrimonial thoughts intent.

“I am sure, Mrs. Hill, I cannot tell. I have never seen any of them but Major Harper, and I never saw him till my poor father died; all which circumstances you know quite well, and Emma too; so there is no need to talk a thing twice over.”

From her occasional mode of speech, some people might say, and did say, that Agatha Bowen “had a temper of her own.” It is very true, she was not one of those mild, amiable heroines who never can give a sharp word to any one. And now and then, probably from the morbid restlessness of unsatisfied youth—a youth, too, that fate had deprived of those home-ties, duties, and sacrifices, which are at once so arduous and so wholesome—she had a habit of carrying, not only the real black kitten, but the imaginary and allegorical “little black dog,” on her shoulder.

It was grinning there invisibly now; shaking her curls with short quick motion, swelling her rich full lips—those sort of

lips which are glorious in smiles, but which in repose are apt to settle into a gravity not unlike crossness.

She was looking thus—not her best, it must be allowed—when a servant, opening the drawing-room door, announced “Visitors for Miss Bowen.”

The first who entered, very much in advance of the other, appeared with that easy, agreeable air which at once marks the gentleman, and one long accustomed to the world in all its phases, especially to the feminine phase; for he bowed over Agatha's hand, and smiled in Agatha's now brightening face, with a sort of tender manliness, that implied his being used to pleasing women, and having an agreeable though not an ungenerous consciousness of the fact.

“Are you better—really better? Are you quite sure you have no cold left? Nothing to make your friends anxious about you?” (Agatha shook her head smilingly.) “That's right; I am so glad.”

And no doubt Major Harper was; for a true kind-heartedness, softened even to tender-heartedness, was visible in his handsome face. Which face had been for twenty years the admiration of nearly every woman in every drawing-room he entered: a considerable trial for any man. Now and then some independent young lady, who had reasons of her own for preferring rosy complexions, turn-up noses, and “runaway” chins, might quarrel with the Major's fine Roman profile and jet-black moustache and hair; but—there was no denying it—he was, even at forty, a remarkably handsome man; one of the old school of Chesterfield perfection, which is fast dying out.

Everybody liked him, more or less; and some people—a few men and not a few women, had either in friendship or in warmer fashion—deeply loved him. Society in general was quite aware of this; nor, it must be confessed, did Major Harper at all attempt to disprove or ignore the fact. He wore his honours—as he did a cross won, no one quite knew how, during a brief service in the Peninsula—neither pompously nor boastingly, but with the mild indifference of conscious desert.

All this could be at once discerned in his face, voice, and manner; from which likewise a keen observer might draw the safe conclusion that, though a decided man of fashion, and something of a dandy, he was above either puppyism or immorality. And Agatha's rich Anglo-Indian father had not judged foolishly when he put his only child and her property in the trust of, as he believed, that rare personage, an honest man.

If the girl Agatha, who took honesty as a matter of course in every gentleman, endowed this particular one with a few qualities more than he really possessed, it was an amiable weakness on her part, for which, as Major Harper would doubtless have said with a seriously troubled countenance, “no one could possibly blame *him.*”

In speaking of the Major we have taken little notice—as little, indeed, as Agatha did—of the younger Mr. Harper.

“My brother, Miss Bowen. He came home when my sister Emily died.” The brief introduction terminated in a slight fall of voice, which made the young lady look sympathisingly at the handsome face that took shades of sadness as easily as shades of mirth. In her interest for the Major she merely

bowed to his brother; just noticed that the stranger was a tall, fair “boy,” not at all resembling her own friend; and after a polite speech or two of welcome, to which Mr. Harper answered very briefly, she hardly looked at him again until she and her guests adjourned to the family drawing-room of Dr. Ianson.

There, the Major happening to be engrossed by doing earnest politeness to Mrs. Thornycroft and her mother, Agatha had to enter side by side with the younger brother, and likewise to introduce him to the worthy family whose inmate she was.

She did so, making the whole circuit of the room towards Miss Jane Ianson, in the hope that he would cast anchor, or else be grappled by that young lady, and so she should get rid of him. However, fate was adverse; the young gentleman showed no inclination to be thus put aside, and Miss Bowen, driven to despair, was just going to extinguish him altogether with some specimen of the unceremonious manner which she occasionally showed to “boys,” when, observing him more closely, she discovered that he could not exactly come under this category.

His fair face, fair hair, and thin, stripling-like figure, had deceived her. Investigating deeper, there was a something in his grave eye and firmly-set mouth which bespoke the man, not the boy. Agatha, who, treating him with a careless womanly superiority that girls of nineteen use, had asked “how long he had been in Canada?” and been answered “Fifteen years,”—hesitated at her next intended question—the very rude and malicious one—“How old he was when he left home?”

“I was, as you say, very young when I quitted England,” he answered, to a less pointed remark of Miss Ianson's. “I must have been a lad of nine or ten—little more.”

Agatha quite started to think of the disrespectful way in which she had treated a gentleman twenty-five years old! It made her shy and uncomfortable for some minutes, and she rather repented of her habit of patronising “boys.”

However, what was even twenty-five? A raw, uncouth age. No man was really good for anything until he was thirty. And, as quickly as courtesy and good feeling allowed her, she glided from the uninteresting younger brother to the charmed circle where the elder was talking away, as only Major Harper could talk, using all the weapons of conversation by turns, to a degree that never can be truly described. Like Taglioni's *entrechats*, or Grisi's melodious notes, such extrinsic talent dies on the senses of the listener, who cannot prove, scarcely even explain, but only say that it was so. Nevertheless, with all his power of amusing, a keen observer might have discerned in Major Harper a want of depth—of reading—of thought; a something that marked out the man of society in contradiction to the man of intellect or of letters. Had he been an author—which he was once heard to thank Heaven he was not—he would probably have been one of those shallow, fashionable sentimentalists who hang like Mahomed's coffin between earth and heaven, an eyesore unto both. As it was, his modicum of talent made him a most pleasant man in his own sphere—the drawing-room.

“Really,” whispered the good, corpulent Dr. Ianson, who had been laughing so much that he quite forgot dinner was

behind time, “my dear Miss Bowen, your friend is the most amusing, witty, delightful person. It is quite a pleasure to have such a man at one's table.”

“Quite a pleasure, indeed,” echoed Mrs. Ianson, deeply thankful to anything or anybody that stood in the breach between herself, her husband, and the dilatory cook.

Agatha looked gratified and proud. Casting a shy glance towards where her friend was talking to Emma Thomycroft and Miss Ianson, she met the eye of the younger brother. It expressed such keen, though grave observance of her, that she felt her cheeks warm into the old, unbecoming, uncomfortable blush.

It was rather a satisfaction that, just then, they were summoned to dinner; Major Harper, in his half tender, half paternal manner, advancing to take her downstairs; which was his custom, when, as frequently happened, Agatha Bowen was the woman he liked best in the room. This was indeed his usual way in all societies, except when out of kindliness of heart he now and then made a temporary sacrifice in favour of some woman who he thought liked *him* best. Though even in this case, perhaps, he would not have erred, or felt that he erred, in offering his arm to Agatha.

She looked happy, as any young girl would, in receiving the attentions of a man whom all admired; and was quite contented to sit next to him, listening while he talked cheerfully and brilliantly, less for her personal, entertainment than that of the table in general. Which she thought, considering the dulness of the Ianson circle, and that even her own kind-hearted, long-known friend, Emma Thomycroft, was not the most intellectual woman in the

world,—showed great good nature on the part of Major Harper.

Perhaps the most silent person at table was the younger brother, whose Christian name Agatha did not know. However, hearing the Major call him once or twice by an odd-sounding word, something like “Beynell” or “Ennell,” she had the curiosity to inquire.

“Oh, it is N. L.—his initials; which I call him by, instead of the very ugly name his cruel godfathers and godmothers imposed upon him as a life-long martyrdom.”

“What name is that?” asked Agatha, looking across at the luckless victim of nomenclature, who seemed to endure his woes with great equanimity.

He met her eye, and answered for himself, showing he had been listening to her all the time. “I am called Nathanael—it is an old family name—Nathanael Locke Harper.”

“You don't look very like a Nathanael,” observed his neighbour, Mrs. Thornycroft, doubtless wishing to be complimentary.

“I think he does,” said Agatha, kindly, for she was struck by the infinitely sweet and “good” expression which the young man's face just then wore. “He looks like the Nathanael of Scripture, 'in whom there was no guile.'”

A pause—for the Iansons were those sort of religious people who think any Biblical allusions irreverent. But Major Harper said, heartily, “That's true!” and cordially, nay affectionately, pressed Agatha's hand. Nathanael slightly coloured, as if with pleasure, though he made no answer of

any kind. He was evidently unused to bandy either jests or compliments.

If anything could be objected to in a young man so retiring and unobtrusive as he, it was a certain something the very opposite of his brother's cheerful frankness. His features, regular, delicate, and perfectly colourless; his hair long, straight, and of the palest brown, without any shadow of what painters would call a “warm tint,” auburn or gold, running through it; his slow, quiet movements, rare speech, and a certain passive composure of aspect, altogether conveyed the impression of a nature which, if not positively repellant, was decidedly cold.

Agatha felt it, and though from the rule of opposites, this species of character awoke in her a spice of interest, yet was the interest of too faint and negative a kind to attract her more than momentarily.

In her own mind she set down Nathanael Harper as “a very odd sort of youth”—(*a youth* she still persisted in calling him)—and turned again to his brother.

They had dined late,—and the brief evening bade fair to pass as after-dinner evenings do. Arrived in the drawing-room, old Mrs. Hill went to sleep; Miss Ianson, a pale young woman, in delicate health, disappeared; Mrs. Ianson and Mrs. Thornycroft commenced a low-toned, harmless conversation, which was probably about “servants” and “babies.” Agatha being at that age when domestic affairs are very uninteresting, and girlish romance has not yet ripened into the sweet and solemn instincts of motherhood, stole quietly aside, and did the very rude thing of taking up a book and beginning to read “in company.” But, as before

stated, Miss Agatha had a will of her own, which she usually followed out, even when it ran a little contrary to the ultra-refined laws of propriety.

The book not being sufficiently interesting, she was beginning, like many another clever girl of nineteen, to think the society of married ladies a great bore, and to wonder when the gentlemen would come up-stairs'. Her wish was shortly gratified by the door's opening—but only to admit the “youth” Nathanael.

However, partly for civility, and partly through lack of entertainment, Agatha smiled upon even him, and tried to make him talk.

This was not an easy matter, since in all qualities he seemed to be his elder brother's opposite. Indeed, his reserve and brevity of speech emulated Agatha's own; so they got on together ill enough, until by some happy chance they lighted on the subject of Canada and the Backwoods. Where is there boy or girl of romantic imagination who did not, at some juvenile period of existence, revel in descriptions of American forest-life? Agatha had scarcely passed this, the latest of her various manias; and on the strength of it, she and Mr. Harper became more sociable. She even condescended to declare “that it was a pleasure to meet with one who had absolutely seen, nay, lived among red Indians.'”

“Ay, and nearly died among them too,” added Major Harper, coming up so unexpectedly that Agatha had not noticed him. “Tell Miss Bowen how you were captured, tied to the stake, half-tomahawked, etc.—how you lived Indian fashion for a whole year, when you were sixteen. Wonderful

lad! A second Nathaniel Bumppo!” added he, tapping his brother's shoulder.

The young man drew back, merely answered “that the story would not interest Miss Bowen,” and retired, whether out of pride or shyness it was impossible to say.

The conversation, taken up and led, as usual, by Major Harper, became a general disquisition on the race of North American Indians. Accidentally, or not, the elder brother drew from the younger many facts, indicating a degree of both information and experience which made every one glance with surprise, respect, and a little awe, on the delicate, boyish-looking Nathanael.

Once, too, Agatha took her turn as an object of interest to the rest They were all talking of the distinctive personal features of that strange race, which some writers have held to be the ten lost tribes of Israel. Agatha asked what were the characteristics of an Indian face, often stated to be so fine?

“Look in the mirror, Miss Bowen,” said Nathanael, joining in the conversation.

“What do you mean?”

I mean, that were you not an Englishwoman, I should have thought you descended from a Pawnee Indian—all except the hair. The features are exact—long, almond-shaped eyes, aquiline nose, mouth and chin of the rare classic mould, which these children of nature keep, long after it has almost vanished out of civilised Europe. Then your complexion, of such a dark ruddy brown—your”——

“Stop—stop!” cried the Major, heartily laughing. “Miss Bowen will think you have learnt every one of her physical

peculiarities off by heart already. I had not the least idea you were gifted with so much observation."

"Nay, do let him go on; it amuses me," cried the young girl, laughing, though she could not help blushing a' little also.

But Nathanael had "shrunk into his shell," as his brother humorously whispered to Agatha, and was not to be drawn out for the remainder of the evening.

The Harpers left early, thus affording great opportunity for their characters being discussed afterwards. Every lady in the room had long since declared herself "in love" with the elder brother; the fact was now repeated for the thousandth time, together with one or two remarks about the younger Harper, who they agreed was rather nice-looking, but so eccentric!

Miss Bowen scarcely thought about Nathanael at all; except that, after she was in bed, a comical recollection floated through other more serious ones, and she laughed outright at the notion of being considered like a Pawnee Indian!

CHAPTER II.

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Of all the misfortunes incidental to youth (falling in love included), there are few greater than that of having nothing to do. From this trial, Agatha Bowen, being unhappily a young lady of independent property, suffered martyrdom every day. She had no natural ties, duties, or interests, and was not sufficiently selfish to create the like in and about her own personality. She did not think herself handsome enough to be vain, so had not that sweet refuge of feminine idleness—dress. Nor, it must be dolefully confessed, was she of so loving a nature as to love anybody or everybody, as some women can.

Kind to all, and liking many, she was apparently one of those characters who only really *love* two or three people in the whole course of their existence. To such, life is a serious, perilous, and often terrible journey.

“Well, Tittens, I don't know, really, what we are to do with ourselves this morning,” said Agatha, talking aloud to her Familiar, the black kitten, who shared the solitude of her little drawing-room. “You'd like to go and play downstairs, I dare say? It's all very nice for you to be running after Mrs. Ianson's wools, but I can't see anything amusing in fancy-work. And as for dawdling round this square and Russell Square with Jane Ianson and Fido—pah! I'd quite as soon be changed into a lapdog, and led along by a string. How stupid London is! Oh, Tittens, to think that you and I have never lived in the country since we were born. Wouldn't you like to go? Only, then we should never see anybody”——

The foolish girl paused, and laughed, as if she did not like to soliloquise too confidentially, even to a kitten.

“Which of them did you like the best last night, Tittens? One was not over civil to you; but Nathanael—yes, certainly you and that juvenile are great friends, considering you have met but four evenings. All in one week, too. Our house is getting quite gay, Miss Tittens; only it is so much the duller in the mornings. Heigho!

“Life's a weary, weary, weary, Life's a weary coble o' care.”

“What's the other verse? And she began humming:

“Man's a steerer, steerer, steerer, Man's a steerer—life is a pool.”

“I wonder, Tittens, how you and I shall steer through it? and whether the pool will be muddy or clear?”

Twisting her fingers in and about her pet's jetty for, Agatha sat silent, until slowly there grew a thoughtful shadow in her eyes, a forewarning of the gradual passing away of that childishness, which in her, from accidental circumstances, had lasted strangely long.

“Come, we won't be foolish, Tittens,” cried she, suddenly starting up. “We'll put on our bonnets, and go out—that is, one of us will, and the other may take to Berlin wool and Mrs. Ianson.”

The bonnet was popped on quickly and independently—Miss Bowen scorned to indulge in the convenience or annoyance of a lady's-maid. Crossing the hall, the customary question, “Whether she would be home to dinner?” stopped her.

“I don't know—I am not quite sure. Tell Mrs. Ianson not to wait for me.”

And she passed out, feeling keener than usual the consciousness that nobody would wait for her, or look for her, or miss her; that her comings in and goings out were perfectly indifferent to every human being in the house, called by courtesy her “home.” Perhaps this was her own fault, but she could not help it. It was out of her nature to get up an interest among ordinary people, where interests there were none.

Little more had she in the house whither she was going to pay one of her extempore visits; but then there was the habit of old affection, begun before characters develop themselves into the infinite variety from which mental sympathy is evolved. She could not help liking Emma Thornycroft, her sole childish acquaintance, whose elder sister had been Agatha's daily governess, until she died.

“I know Emma will be glad to see me, which is something; and if she does tire me with talk about the babies, why, children are better than Berlin wool. And there is always the piano. Besides, I must walk out, or I shall rust to death in this horrible Bedford Square.”

She walked on, rather in a misanthropic mood, a circumstance to her not rare. But she had never known mother, sister, or brother; and the name of father was to her little more than an empty sound. It had occasionally come mistily over the Indian Ocean, in the shape of formal letters —the only letters that ever visited the dull London house where she spent her shut-up childhood, and acquired the accomplishments of her teens. Mr. Bowen died on the high

seas: and when his daughter met the ship at Southampton, a closed black coffin was all that remained to her of the name of father. That bond, like all others, was destined to be to her a mere shadow. Poor Agatha!

Quick exercise always brings cheerfulness when one is young, strong, and free from any real cares; Agatha's imaginary ones, together with the vague sentimentalisms into which she was on the verge of falling, yet had not fallen, vanished under the influence of a cheerful walk on a sunny summer's day. She arrived at Mrs. Thornycroft's time enough to find that admirable young matron busied in teaching to her eldest boy the grand mystery of dining; that is, dining like a Christian, seated at a real table with a real silver knife and fork. These latter Master James evidently preferred poking into his eyes and nose, rather than his mouth, and evinced far greater anxiety to sit on the table than on the chair.

“Agatha, dear—so glad to see you!” and Emma's look convinced even Agatha that this was true. “You will stay, of course! Just in time to see James eat his first dinner, like a man! Now Jemmie, wipe his pretty mouth, and then give Auntie Agatha a sweet kiss.”

Agatha submitted to the kiss, though she did not quite believe in the adjective; and felt a certain satisfaction in knowing that the title of “Auntie” was a mere compliment. She did not positively dislike children, else she would have been only half a woman, or a woman so detestable as to be an anomaly in creation; but her philoprogenitiveness was, to say the least, dormant at present; and her sense of infantile

beauty being founded on Sir Joshua's and Murillo's cherubs, she had no great fancy for the ugly little James.

She laid aside her bonnet, and smoothing her curls in the nursery mirror, looked for one minute at her Pawnee-Indian face, the sight of which now often made her smile. Then she sat down to lunch with Emma and the children; being allowed, as a great favour, to be placed next Master James, and drink with him out of his silver mug. Miss Bowen accepted the offered honour calmly, made no remark, but—went thirsty.

For an hour or two she sat patiently listening to what had gone on in the house since she was there—-how baby had cut two more teeth, and James had had a new braided frock—(which was sent for that she might look at it)—how Missy had been to her first children's party, and was to learn dancing at Midsummer, if papa could be coaxed to agree.

“How is Mr. Thornycroft?” asked Agatha.

“Oh, very well—papa is always well. I only wish the little ones took after him in that respect.”

Agatha, who was old enough to remember Emma engaged, and Emma newly married, smiled to think how entirely the lover beloved and the all-important young husband had dwindled into a mere “Papa;” liked and obeyed in a certain fashion, for Emma was a good wife, but evidently made a very secondary consideration to “the children.”

The young girl—as yet neither married, nor in love—wondered if this were always so. She often had such wonderings and speculation when she came to Emma's house.

She was growing rather tired of so much domestic information, and had secretly taken out her watch to see how many hours it would be to dinner and to Mr. Thornycroft, a sensible, intelligent man, who from love to his wife had been always very kind to his wife's friends—when there came the not unwelcome sound of a knock at the hall-door.

“Bless me; that is surely the Harpers. I had quite forgotten Major Harper and the bears.”

“An odd conjunction,” observed Agatha, smiling.

“Major Harper, who yesterday, for the fifth time, promised to take Missy to the Zoological Gardens to see the bears. He has remembered it at last.”

No, he had not remembered it; it would have been a very remarkable circumstance if he had; being a person so constantly full of engagements, for himself and others. The visitor was only his younger brother, who had often daundered in at Mrs. Thornycroft's house, possibly from a liking to Emma's friendly manner, or because, cast astray for a fortnight on the wide desert of London, he had, like Agatha, “nothing to do.”

If Nathanael had other reasons, they, of course, never came near the surface, but lay buried under the silent waters of his quiet mind.

Agatha was half pleased, half disappointed at seeing him. Mrs. Thornycroft, good soul, was always charmed to have a visitor, for her society did not attract many. Only betraying, as usual, what was uppermost in her simple thoughts, she could not long conceal her regret concerning little Missy and the bears.

To Agatha's great surprise, Mr. Harper, who she thought, in his dignified gravity, would never have condescended to such a thing, volunteered to assume his brother's duty.

“For,” said he, with a slight smile, “I have had too many perilous encounters with wild bears in America, not to feel some curiosity in seeing a few captured ones in England.”

“That will be charming,” cried Mrs. Thornycroft, looking at him with a mixture of respect and maternal benignity. “Then you can tell Missy all those wonderful stories, only don't frighten her.”

“Perhaps I might She seems rather shy of me.” And the adventurous young gentleman eyed askance a small be-ribboned child, who was creeping about the room and staring at him. “Would it not be better if”——

“If mamma went?”

“There, Missy, don't cry; mamma will go, and Agatha, too, if she would like it?”

“Certainly,” Miss Bowen answered, with a mischievous glance at Nathanael. “I ought to investigate bears, if only to prove myself descended from a Pawnee Indian.”

So, once more, the heavy nut-brown curls were netted up into the crown of her black bonnet, and her shawl pinned on carelessly—rather too carelessly for a young woman; since that gracious adornment, neatness, rarely increases with years. Agatha was quickly ready. In the ten minutes she had to wait for Mrs. Thornycroft, she felt, more than once, how much merrier they would have been with the elder than the younger brother. Also—for Agatha was a conscientious girl—she thought, seriously, what a pity it was that so pleasant

and kind a man as Major Harper had such an unfortunate habit of forgetting his promises.

Yet she regretted him—regretted his flow of witty sayings that attracted the humorous half of her temperament, and his touches of seriousness or sentiment which hovered like pleasant music round the yet-closed portals of her girlish heart. Until suddenly—conscientiousness again!—she began to be aware she was thinking a deal too much of Major Harper; so, with a strong effort, turned her attention to his brother and the bears.

She had leant on Mr. Harper's offered arm all the way to the Regent's Park, yet he had scarcely spoken to her. No wonder, therefore, that she had had time for meditation, or that her comparison between the two brothers should be rather to Nathanael's disadvantage. The balance of favour, however, began to right itself a little when she saw how kind he was to Emma Thornycroft, who alternately screamed at the beasts, and made foolish remarks concerning them; also, how carefully he watched over little Missy and James, the latter of whom, with infantile pertinacity, would poke his small self into every possible danger.

At the sunken den, where the big brown bear performs gymnastic exercises on a centre tree, Master Jemmie was quite in his glory. He emulated Bruin by climbing from his feet into nurse's arms—thence into mamma's, and lastly, much to her discomfiture, into Miss Bowen's. The attraction being that she happened to stand close to the railing and next to Mr. Harper, who, with a bun stuck on the end of his long stick, had coaxed Bruin up to the very top of the tree.

There the creature swayed awkwardly, his four unwieldy paws planted together, and his great mouth silently snapping at the cakes. Agatha could hardly help laughing; she, as well as the children, was so much amused at the monster.

“Mr. Harper, give Missy your cane. Missy would like to feed bear,” cried the mamma, now very bold, going with her eldest pet to the other side of the den, and attracting the animal thither.

At which little James, who could not yet speak, setting up a scream of vexation, tried to stretch after the creature; and whether from his own impetuosity or her careless hold, sprang—oh, horror!—right out of Agatha's arms. A moment the little muslin frock caught on the railing—caught—ripped; then the sash, with its long knotted ends, which some one snatched at—nothing but the sash held up the shrieking child, who hung suspended half way over the pit, in reach of the beast's very jaws.

The bear did not at once see it, till startled by the mother's frightful cries. Then he opened his teeth—it looked almost like a grin—and began slowly to descend his tree, while, as slowly, the poor child's sash was unloosing with its weight.

A murmur of horror ran through the people near; but not a man among them offered help. They all slid back, except Nathanael Harper.

Agatha felt his sudden gripe. “Hold my hand firm. Keep me in my balance,” he whispered, and throwing himself over to the whole extent of his body, and long right arm, managed to catch hold of James, who struggled violently.