

Doesticks Q. K. Philander

The Witches of New York



Philander Doesticks

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Q. K. Philander Doesticks

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Preface

What the Witches of New York City personally told me, Doesticks, you will find written in this volume, without the slightest exaggeration or perversion. I set out now with no intention of misrepresenting anything that came under my observation in collecting the material for this book, but with an honest desire to tell the simple truth about the people I encountered, and the prophecies I paid for.

So far from desiring to do any injustice to the Fortune Tellers of the Metropolis, I sincerely hope that my labors may avail something towards making their true deservings more widely appreciated, and their fitting reward more full and speedy. I am satisfied that so soon as their character is better understood, and certain peculiar features of their business more thoroughly comprehended by the public, they will meet with more attention from the dignitaries of the land than has ever before been vouchsafed them.

I thank the public for the flattering consideration paid to what I have heretofore written, and respectfully submit that if they would increase the obligation, perhaps the readiest way is to buy and read the present volume.

The Author.

Sept. 20th, 1858.

CHAPTER I. WHICH IS MERELY EXPLANATORY

Which is simply explanatory, so far as regards the book, but in which the author takes occasion to pay himself several merited compliments, on the score of honesty, ability, etc

The first undertaking of the author of these pages will be to convince his readers that he has not set about making a merely funny book, and that the subject of which he writes is one that challenges their serious and earnest attention. Whatever of humorous description may be found in the succeeding chapters, is that which grows legitimately out of certain features of the theme; for there has been no overstrained effort to *make* fun where none naturally existed.

The Witches of New York exert an influence too powerful and too wide-spread to be treated with such light regard as has been too long manifested by the community they have swindled for so many years; and it is to be desired that the day may come when they will be no longer classed with harmless mountebanks, but with dangerous criminals.

People, curious in advertisements, have often read the “Astrological” announcements of the newspapers, and have turned up their critical noses at the ungrammatical style thereof, and indulged the while in a sort of innocent wonder as to whether these transparent nets ever catch any gulls. These matter-of-fact individuals have no doubt often queried in a vague, purposeless way, if there really can be in enlightened New York any considerable number of persons who have faith in charms and love-powders, and who put their trust in the prophetic infallibility of a pack of greasy playing-cards. It may open the eyes of these innocent querists to the popularity of modern witchcraft to learn that the nineteen she-prophets who advertise in the daily journals of this city are visited every week by an average of *sixteen hundred people*, or at the rate of more than a dozen customers a day for each one; and of this immense number probably two-thirds place implicit confidence in the miserable stuff they hear and pay for.

It is also true that although a part of these visitors are ignorant servants, unfortunate girls of the town, or uneducated overgrown boys, still there are among them not a few men engaged in respectable and influential professions, and many merchants of good credit and repute, who periodically consult these women, and are actually governed by their advice in business affairs of great moment.

Carriages, attended by liveried servants, not unfrequently stop at the nearest respectable corner adjoining the abode of a notorious Fortune-Teller, while some richly-dressed but closely-veiled woman stealthily glides into the habitation of the Witch. Many ladies of wealth and social position, led by curiosity, or other motives, enter these places for the purpose of hearing their “fortunes told.” When these ladies are informed of the true character of the houses they have thus entered, and the real business of many of these women whose fortune-telling is but a screen to intercept the public gaze from it, it is not likely that any one of them will ever compromise her reputation by another visit.

People who do not know anything about the subject will perhaps be surprised to hear that most of these humbug sorceresses are now, or have been in more youthful and attractive days, women of the town, and that several of their present dens are vile assignation houses; and that a number of them are professed abortionists, who do as much perhaps in the way of child-murder as others whose names have been more prominently before the world; and they will be astonished to learn

that these chaste sibyls have an understood partnership with the keepers of houses of prostitution, and that the opportunities for a lucrative playing into each other's hands are constantly occurring.

The most terrible truth connected with this whole subject is the fact that the greater number of these female fortune-tellers are but doing their allotted part in a scheme by which, in this city, the wholesale seduction of ignorant, simple-hearted girls, in the lower walks of life, has been thoroughly systematized.

The fortune-teller is the only one of the organization whose operations may be known to the public; the other workers – the masculine go-betweens who lead the victims over the space intervening between her house and those of deeper shame – are kept out of sight and are unheard of. There is a straight path between these two points which is travelled every year by hundreds of betrayed young girls, who, but for the superstitious snares of the one, would never know the horrible realities of the other. The exact mode of proceeding adopted by these conspirators against virtue, the details of their plans, the various stratagems by which their victims are snared and led on to certain ruin, are not fit subjects for the present chapter; but any individual who is disposed to prosecute the inquiry for himself will find in the various police records much matter for his serious cogitation, and may there discover the exact direction in which to continue his investigations with the certainty of demonstrating these facts to his perfect satisfaction.

A few months ago, at the suggestion of the editor of one of the leading daily newspapers of America, a series of articles was written about the fortune-tellers of New York city, and these articles were in due time published in that journal, and attracted no little attention from its readers. These chapters, with such alterations as were requisite, and with many additions, form the bulk of this present volume.

The work has been conscientiously done. Every one of the fortune-tellers described herein was personally visited by the "Individual," and the predictions were carefully noted down at the time, word for word; the descriptions of the necromantic ladies and their surroundings are accurate, and can be corroborated by the hundreds who have gone over the same ground before and since. They were treated in the most fair and frank manner; the same data as to time and date of birth, age, nationality, etc., were given in all cases, and the same questions were put to all, so that the absurd differences in their statements and predictions result from the unmitigated humbug of their pretended art, and from no misinformation or misrepresentation on the part of the seeker after mystic knowledge.

This latter person was perfectly unknown to the worthy ladies of the black art profession; he was to them simply an individual, one of the many-headed public, a cash customer, who paid liberally for all he required, and who, by reason of the dollars he disbursed, was entitled to the very best witchcraft in the market.

And he got it.

He undertook a few short journeys in search of the marvellous; he went on a couple of dozen voyages of discovery without going out of sight of home; he penetrated to the out-of-the-way regions, where the two-and-sixpenny witches of our own time grow. He got his fill of the cheap prophecy of the day, and procured of the oracles in person their oracularest sayings, at the very highest market price. For the business-like seers of this age are easily moved to prophesy by the sight of current moneys of the land, no matter who presents the same; whereas the oracles of the olden time dealt only with kings and princes, and nothing less than the affairs of an entire nation, or a whole territory, served to get their slow prophetic apparatus into working trim. To the necromancers of early days the anxieties of private individuals were as naught, and from the shekels of humble life they turned them contemptuously away.

It is probably a thorough conviction of the necessity of eating and drinking, and a constant contemplation from a Penitentiary point of view of the consequences of so doing without paying

therefor, that induces our modern witches to charge a specific sum for the exercise of their art, and to demand the inevitable dollar in advance.

Whatever there is of Sorcery, Astrology, Necromancy, Prophecy, Fortune-telling, and the Black Art generally, practised at this time by the professional Witches of New York, is here honestly set down.

Should any other individual become particularly interested in the subject, and desire to go back of the present record and make his exploration personally among the Fortune-tellers, he will find their present addresses in the newspapers of the day, and can easily verify what is herein written.

With these remarks as to the intention of this book, the reader is referred by the Cash Customer to the succeeding chapters for further information. And the public will find in the advertisements, appended to the name and number of each mysteriously gifted lady, the pleasing assurance that she will be happy to see, not only the Cash Customer of the present writing, but also any and all other customers, equally cash, who are willing to pay the customary cash tribute.

CHAPTER II. MADAME PREWSTER, No. 373 BOWERY

**Is devoted to the glorification of Madame Prewster
of No. 373 Bowery, the Pioneer Witch of New York**

**The “Individual” also herein bears his
testimony that she is oily and water-proof**

This woman is one of the most dangerous of all those in the city who are engaged in the swindling trade of Fortune Telling, and has been professionally known to the police and the public of New York for about fourteen years. The amount of evil she has accomplished in that time is incalculable, for she has been by no means idle, nor has she confined her attention even to what mischief she could work by the exercise of her pretended magic, but if the authenticity of the records may be relied on, she has borne a principal part in other illicit transactions of a much more criminal nature. She has been engaged in the “Witch” business in this city for more years than has any other one whose name is now advertised to the public.

If the history of her past life could be published, it would astound even this community, which is not wont to be startled out of its propriety by criminal development, for if justice were done, Madame Prewster would be at this time serving the State in the Penitentiary for her past misdoings; but, in some of these affairs of hers, men of so much *respectability* and political influence have been implicated, that, having sure reliance on their counsel and assistance, the Madame may be regarded as secure from punishment, even should any of her many victims choose to bring her into court.

The quality of her Witchcraft, by which she ostensibly lives, and the amount of faith to be reposed in her mystic predictions, may be seen from the history of a visit to her domicile, which is hereunto appended in the very words of the “Individual” who made it.

The “Cash Customer” makes his first Voyage in a Shower, but encounters an Oily and Waterproof Witch at the end of his Journey.

It rained, and it *meant* to rain, and it set about it with a will.

It was as if some “Union Thunderstorm Company” was just then paying its consolidated attention to the city and county of New York; or, as if some enterprising Yankee of hydraulic tendencies, had contracted for a second deluge and was hurrying up the job to get his money; or, as if the clouds were working by the job; or, as if the earth was receiving its rations of rain for the year in a solid lump; or, as if the world had made a half-turn, leaving in the clouds the ocean and rivers, and those auxiliaries to navigation were scampering back to their beds as fast as possible; or, as if there had been a scrub-race to the earth between a score or more full-grown rain storms, and they were all coming in together, neck-and-neck, at full speed.

Despite the juiciness of these opening sentences, the “Individual” does not propose to accompany the account of his heroical setting-forth on his first witch-journey with any inventory of natural scenery and phenomena, or with any interesting remarks on the wind and weather. Those who have a taste for that sort of thing will find in a modern circulating library, elaborate accounts of enough “dew-spangled grass” to make hay for an army of Nebuchadnezzars and a hundred troops of horse – of “bright-eyed daisies” and “modest violets,” enough to fence all creation with a parti-colored hedge – of “early larks” and “sweet-singing nightingales,” enough to make musical pot-

pies and harmonious stews for twenty generations of Heliogabaluses; to say nothing of the amount of twaddle we find in American sensation books about “hawthorn hedges” and “heather bells,” and similar transatlantic luxuries that don’t grow in America, and never did.

And then the sunrises we’re treated to, and the sunsets we’re crammed with, and the “golden clouds,” the “grand old woods,” the “distant dim blue mountains,” the “crystal lakes,” the “limpid purling brooks,” the “green-carpeted meadows,” and the whole similar lot of affected bosh, is enough to shake the faith of a practical man in nature as a natural institution, and to make him vote her an artificial humbug.

So the voyager in pursuit of the marvellous, declines to state how high the thermometer rose or fell in the sun or in the shade, or whether the wind was east-by-north, or sou’-sou’-west by a little sou’.

The “dew on the grass” was not shining, for there was in his vicinity no dew and no grass, nor anything resembling those rural luxuries. Nor was it by any means at “early dawn;” on the contrary, if there be such a commodity in a city as “dawn,” either early or late, that article had been all disposed of several hours in advance of the period at which this chapter begins.

But at midday he set forth alone to visit that prophetess of renown, Madame Prewster. He was fully prepared to encounter whatever of the diabolical machinery of the black art might be put in operation to appal his unaccustomed soul.

But as he set forth from the respectable domicile where he takes his nightly roost, it rained, as aforementioned. The driving drops had nearly drowned the sunshine, and through the sickly light that still survived, everything looked dim and spectral. Unearthly cars, drawn by ghostly horses, glided swiftly through the mist, the intangible apparitions which occupied the drivers’ usual stands hailing passengers with hollow voices, and proffering, with impish finger and goblin wink, silent invitations to ride. Fantastic dogs sneaked out of sight round distant corners, or skulked miserably under phantom carts for an imaginary shelter. The rain enveloped everything with a grey veil, making all look unsubstantial and unreal; the human unfortunates who were out in the storm appeared cloudy and unsolid, as if each man had sent his shadow out to do his work and kept his substance safe at home.

The “Individual” travelled on foot, disdaining the miserable compromise of an hour’s stew in a steaming car, or a prolonged shower-bath in a leaky omnibus. Being of burly figure and determined spirit, he walked, knowing that his “too-solid flesh” would not be likely “to melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,” and firmly believing that he was not born to be drowned.

He carried no umbrella, preferring to stand up and fight it out with the storm face to face, and because he detested a contemptible sneaking subterfuge of an umbrella, pretending to keep him dry, and all the time surreptitiously leaking small streams down the back of his neck, and filling his pockets with indigo colored puddles; and because, also, an umbrella would no more have protected a man against that storm, than a gun-cotton overcoat would have availed against the storm of fire that scorched old Sodom.

He placed his trust in a huge pair of water-proof boots, and a felt hat that shed water like a duck. He thrust his arms up to his elbows into the capacious pockets of his coat, drew his head down into the turned-up collar of that said garment, like a boy-bothered mud-turtle, and marched on.

With bowed head, set teeth, and sturdy step, the cash customer tramped along, astonishing the few pedestrians in the street by the energy and emphasis of his remarks in cases of collision, and attracting people to the windows to look at him as he splashed his way up the street. He minded them no more than he did the gentleman in the moon, but drove forward at his best speed, now breaking his shins over a dry-goods box, then knocking his head against a lamp-post; now getting a great punch in the stomach from an unexpected umbrella, then involuntarily gauging the depth of some unseen puddle, and then getting out of soundings altogether in a muddy inland sea; now swept almost off his feet by a sudden torrent of sufficient power to run a saw-mill, and only recovering

himself to find that he was wrecked on the curbstone of some side street that he didn't want to go to. At length, after a host of mishaps, including some interesting but unpleasant submarine explorations in an unusually large mud-hole into which he fell full-length, he arrived, soaked and savage, at the house of Madame Prewster.

This elderly and interesting lady has long been an oily pilgrim in this vale of tears. The oldest inhabitant cannot remember the exact period when this truly great prophetess became a fixture in Gotham, and began to earn her bread and butter by fortune-telling and kindred occupations. Her unctuous countenance and pinguid form are known to hundreds on whose visiting lists her name does not conspicuously appear, and to whom, in the way of business, she has made revelations which would astonish the unsuspecting and unbelieving world. She is neither exclusive nor select in her visitors. Whoever is willing to pay the price, in good money – a point on which her regulations are stringent – may have the benefit of her skill, as may be seen by her advertisement:

“Card. – Madame Prewster returns thanks to her friends and patrons, and begs to say that, after the thousands, both in this city and Philadelphia, who have consulted her with entire satisfaction, she feels confident that in the questions of astrology, love, and law matters, and books or oracles, as relied on constantly by Napoleon, she has no equal. She will tell the name of the future husband, and also the name of her visitors. No. 373 Bowery, between Fourth and Fifth streets.”

The undaunted seeker after mystic lore rang a peal on the astonished door-bell that created an instantaneous confusion of the startled inmates. There was a good deal of hustling about, and running hither, thither, and to the other place, before any one appeared; meantime, the dainty fingers of the damp customer performed other little solos on the daubed and sticky bell-pull, – and he also amused himself with inspection of, and comments on, the German-silver plate on the narrow panel, which bore the name of the illustrious female who occupied these domains.

At last the door was opened by a greasy girl, and the visitor was admitted to the hall, where he stood for a minute, like a fresh-water merman, “all dripping from the recent flood.”

The juvenile female who had admitted him thus far, evidently took him for a disreputable character, and stood prepared to prevent depredations. She planted herself firmly before him in the narrow hall in an attitude of self-defence, and squaring off scientifically, demanded his business. Astrology was mentioned, whereupon the threatening fists were lowered, the saucy under-jaw was retracted, and the general air of pugnacity was subdued into a very suspicious demeanor, as if she thought he hadn't any money, and wanted to storm the castle under false pretences. She informed him that before matters went any further, he must buy tickets, which she was prepared to furnish, on receipt of a dollar and a half; he paid the money, which transaction seemed to raise him in her estimation to the level of a man who might safely be trusted where there was nothing he could steal. One fist she still kept loaded, ready to instantly repel any attack which might be suddenly made by her designing enemy, the other hand cautiously departed petticoatward, and after groping about some time in a concealed pocket, produced from the mysterious depth a card, too dirty for description, on which these words were dimly visible:

50 cents.	MADAME PREWSTER 411 Grand Street.	No. 1.
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The belligerent girl then led the way through a narrow hall, up two flights of stairs into a cold room, where she desired her visitor to be seated. She then carefully locked one or two doors leading into adjoining rooms, put the keys in her pocket, and departed. Before her exit she made

a sly demonstration with her fists and feet, as if she was disposed to break the truce, commence hostilities, and punch his unprotected head, without regard to the laws of honorable warfare. She departed, however, at last, without violence, though the voyager could hear her pause on each landing, probably debating whether it wasn't best after all to go back and thrash him before the opportunity was lost for ever.

This grand reception-room was an apartment about six feet by eight; it was uncarpeted, and was luxuriously furnished with six wooden chairs, one stove, with no spark of fire, one feeble table, one spittoon, and two coal-scuttles.

The view from the window was picturesque to a degree, being made up of cats, clothes-lines, chimneys, and crockery, and occasionally, when the storm lifted, a low roof near by suggested stables. The odor which filled the air had at least the merit of being powerful, and those to whose noses it was grateful, could not complain that they did not get enough of it. Description must necessarily fall far short of the reality, but if the reader will endeavor to imagine a couple of oil-mills, a Peck-slip ferry-boat, a soap-and-candle manufactory, and three or four bone-boiling establishments being simmered together over a slow fire in his immediate vicinity, he may possibly arrive at a faint and distant notion of the greasy fragrance in which the abode of Madame Prewster is immersed.

For an hour and a half by the watch of the Cash Customer (which being a cheap article, and being alike insensible to the voice of reason and the persuasions of the watchmaker, would take its own time to do its work, and the long hands of which generally succeeded in getting once round the dial in about eighty minutes) was this too damp individual incarcerated in the room by the order of the implacable Madame Prewster.

He would long before the end of that time have forfeited his dollar and a half and beaten an inglorious retreat, but that he feared an ambushade and a pitching-into at the fair hands of the warlike servant.

Finally, this last-named individual came to the rescue, and conducted him by a circuitous route, and with half-suppressed demonstrations of animosity, to the basement. This room was evidently the kitchen, and was fitted up with the customary iron and brazen apparatus.

A feeble child, just old enough to run alone, had constructed a child's paradise in the lee of the cooking-stove, and was seated on a dinner-pot, with one foot in a saucepan; it had been playing on the wash-boiler like a drum, but was now engaged in decorating some loaves of unbaked bread with bits of charcoal and splinters from the broom.

The fighting servant retreated to the far end of the apartment, where she began to wash dishes with vindictive earnestness, stopping at short intervals to wave her dish-cloth savagely as a challenge to instant single combat. There was nothing visible that savored of astrology or magic, unless some tin candlesticks with battered rims could be cabalistically construed.

Madame Prewster, the renowned, sat majestically in a Windsor rocking-chair, extra size, with a large pillow comfortably tucked in behind her illustrious and rheumatic back. Her prophetic feet rested on a wooden stool; her oracular neck was bound with a bright-colored shawl; her necromantic locomotive apparatus was incased in a great number of predictive petticoats, and her whole aspect was portentous. She is a woman who may be of any age from 45 to 120, for her face is so oily that wrinkles won't stay in it; they slip out and leave no trace. She is an unctuous woman, with plenty of material in her – enough, in fact, for two or three. She is adipose to a degree that makes her circumference problematical, and her weight a mere matter of conjecture. Moreover, one instantly feels that she is thoroughly water-proof, and is certain that if she could be induced to shed tears, she would weep lard oil.

Grim, grizzled, and stony-eyed, is this juicy old Sibyl; and she glared fearfully on the hero with her fishy optics, until he wished he hadn't done anything.

She was evidently just out of bed, although it was long past noon, and when she yawned, which she did seven times a minute on a low average, the effect was gloomy and cavernous, and the timid delegate in search of the mysterious trembled in his boots.

At last, he with uncovered head and timid demeanor presented his card entitling him to twelve shillings' worth of witchcraft, and made an humble request to have it honored. He had previously, while pretending to warm himself at the stove, been occupied in making horrible grimaces at the baby, and then sketching it in his hat as it disfigured its own face by frantic screams; and he also took a quiet revenge on the pugnacious servant by making a picture of her in a fighting attitude, with one eye bunged and her jaw knocked round to her left ear.

When the ponderous Witch had got all ready for business, and had taken a very long greasy stare at her customer, as if she was making up her mind what sort of a customer on the whole he might be, she determined to begin her mighty magic. So she took up the cards, which were almost as greasy as she herself, and prepared for business, previously giving one most tremendous yawn, which opened her sacred jaws so wide that only a very narrow isthmus of hair behind her ears connected the top of her respected head with the back of her venerated neck.

She then presented the cards for her customer to cut, and when he had accomplished that feat, which he did in some perturbation, she ran them carelessly over between her fingers, and began to speak very slowly, and without much thought of what she was about, as if it was a lesson she had learned by heart.

Each word slipped smoothly out from her fat lips as if it had been anointed with some patent lubricator, and her speech was as follows: —

“You have seen much trouble, some of it in business, and some of it in love, but there are brighter days in store for you before long — you face up a letter — you face up love — you face up marriage — you face up a light-haired woman, with dark eyes, you think a great deal of her, and she thinks a great deal of you; but then she faces up a dark complexioned man, which is bad for you — you must take care and look out for him, for he is trying to injure you — she likes you the best, but you must look out for the man — you face up better luck in business, you face a change in your business, but be careful, or it will not bring you much money — you do not face up a great deal of money.”

(Here followed a huge yawn which again nearly left the top of her head an island.) Then she resumed, “If you will tell me the number of letters in the lady's name, I will tell you what her name is.”

This demand was unexpected, but her cool and collected customer replied at random, “Four.” The she-Falstaff then referred to a book wherein was written a long list of names, of varying lengths from one syllable to six, and selecting the names with four letters, began to ask.

“Is it Emma?” “No.” “Anna?” “No.” “Ella?” “No?” “Jane?” “No.” “Etta?” “No.” “Lucy?” “No.” “Cora?” “No.” At last, finding that she would run through all the four-letter names in the language, and that he must eventually say something, he agreed to let his “true love's” name be Mary. Then she continued her remarks: “You face up Mary, you love Mary; Mary is a good girl. You will marry Mary at last; but Mary is not now here — Mary is far away; but do not fear, for you shall have Mary.”

Then she proposed to tell the name of our reporter in the same mysterious manner, and on being told that it contains eight letters, the first of which is “M,” she turned to her register and again began to read. It so happens that the proper names answering to the description are very few, and the right one did not happen to be on her list; so in a short time the greasy prophetess became confused, and slipped off the track entirely, and after asking about two hundred names of various dimensions, from Mark to Melchisedek, she gave it up in despair and glared on her twelve-shilling patron as if she thought he was trifling with her, and she would like to eat him up alive for his presumption.

Then she suddenly changed her mode of operation and made the fearful remark: “Now you may wish three wishes, and I will tell whether you will get them or not.”

She then laid out the cards into three piles, and her visitor stated his wishes aloud, and received the gratifying information in three instalments, that he would live to be rich, to marry the light-haired maiden, and to effectually smash the dark-complexioned man.

Then she said: “You may now wish one wish in secret, and I will tell you whether you will get it.” Our avaricious hero instantly wished for an enormous amount of ready money, which she kindly promised, but which he has not yet seen the color of.

He asked about his prospective wives and children, with unsatisfactory results. One wife and four children was, she said, the outside limit. At this juncture she began to wriggle uneasily in her chair, and her considerate patron respected her “rheumatics” and took his leave. This conference, although the results may be read by a glib-tongued person in five minutes, occupied more than three-quarters of an hour – Madame Prewster’s diction being slow and ponderous in proportion to her size.

He now prepared to depart, and with a parting contortion of his countenance, of terrible malignity, at the unfortunate baby, which caused that weird brat to fling itself flat on its back and scream in agony of fear, he informed the Madame with mock deference that he would not wait any longer. He was then attended to the door by the bellicose maiden, who seemed to have fathomed his deep dealings with the infuriate infant, and to be desirous of giving him bloody battle in the hall, but as he had remarked that she had a rolling-pin hidden under her apron, and as he was somewhat awed by the sanguinary look of her dish-cloth, he choked down his blood-thirstiness and ingloriously retreated.

CHAPTER III.

MADAME BRUCE, “THE MYSTERIOUS VEILED LADY,” No. 513 BROOME STREET

Wherein are related divers strange things of Madame Bruce, the “Mysterious Veiled Lady,” of No. 513 Broome Street

The woman who assumes the title of “The Mysterious Veiled Lady,” is much younger in the Black Art trade than Madame Prewster, and has only been publicly known as a “Fortune-Teller” for about six years. The mysterious veil is assumed partly for the very mystery’s sake, and partly to hide a countenance which some of her visitors might desire to identify on after occasions. She confines herself more exclusively to telling fortunes than do many of the others, and has never yet made her appearance in a Police Court to answer to an accusation of a grave crime. She has many customers, and might have a respectable account at the bank if she were disposed to commit her moneys to the care of those careful institutions.

It may be mentioned here, however, as a curious fact, that although all the “witches” profess to be able to “tell lucky numbers,” and will at any time give a paying customer the exact figures which they are willing to prophesy will draw the capital prize in any given lottery, their skill invariably fails them when they undertake to do anything in the wheel-of-fortune way on their own individual behalf. No one of the professional fortune-tellers was ever known to draw a rich prize in a lottery, or to make a particularly lucky “hit” on a policy number, notwithstanding the fact that most of them make large investments in those uncertain financial speculations. Madame Bruce is no exception to this general rule, and the propinquity of the “lottery agency” and the “policy-shop,” just round the corner, must be accepted in explanation of the fact that this gifted lady has no balance in her favor at the banker’s.

The quality of her magic and other interesting facts about her are best set forth in the words of the anxious seeker after hidden lore, who paid her a visit one pleasant afternoon in August.

The “Individual” visits Madame Bruce and has a Conference with that Mysterious Veiled Personage.

A man of strong nerves can recover from the effects of a professional interview with the ponderous Prewster in about a week; delicately organized persons, particularly susceptible to supernatural influences, might be so overpowered by the manifestations of her cabalistic lore as to affect their appetites for a whole lunar month, and have bad dreams till the moon changed; but the daring traveller of this veracious history was convalescent in ten days. It is true, that, even after that time, he, in his dreams, would imagine himself engaged in protracted single combats with the heroine of the rolling-pin, and once or twice awoke in an agony of fear, under the impression that he had been worsted in the fight, and that the conquering fair one was about to cook him in a steamer, or stew him into charity soup, and season him strong with red pepper; or broil him on a gridiron and serve him up on toast to Madame Prewster, like a huge woodcock. In one gastronomic nightmare of a dream he even fancied that the triumphant maiden had tied him, hand and foot, with links of sausages, then tapped his head with an auger, screwed a brass faucet into his helpless skull, and was preparing to draw off his brains in small quantities to suit cannibalistic retail customers.

But he eventually recovered his equanimity, his nocturnal visions of the warlike servant became less terrible, and he gradually ceased to think of her, except with a dim sort of half-way

remembrance, as of some fearful danger, from which many years before he had been miraculously preserved.

When he had reached this state of mind, he was ready to proceed with his inquiries into the mysteries of the cheap and nasty necromancy of the day, and to encounter the rest of the fifty-cent Sybils with an unperturbed spirit. Accordingly, he girded up his loins, and prepared the necessary amount of one dollar bills; for, with a most politic and necessary carefulness, he always made his own change.

[Note of caution to the future observer of these Modern Witches: Never let one of them “break” a large bank-bill for you, and give you small notes in exchange, lest the small bills be much more badly broken than the large one. Not that the witches’ money, like the fairies’ gold, will be likely to turn into chips and pebbles in your pocket, but all these fortune-tellers are expert passers of counterfeit and broken bank-notes and bogus coin; and they never lose an opportunity thus to victimize a customer.]

Fortified with dinner, dessert, and cigars, the cash customer departed on his voyage of discovery in search of “Madame Bruce, The Mysterious Veiled Lady,” who carries on all the business she can get by the subjoined advertisement:

“Astonishing to All. – Madame Bruce, the Mysterious Veiled Lady, can be consulted on all events of life, at No. 513 Broome st., one door from Thompson. She is a second-sight seer, and was born with a natural gift.”

The “Individual,” modestly speaking of himself in the third person, admits that, being then a single man of some respectability, he was at that very period looking out for a profitable partner of his bosom, sorrows, joys, and expenses. He naturally preferred one who could do something towards taking a share of the expensive responsibility of a family off his hands, and was not disposed to object to one who was even afflicted with money; – next to that woman, whom he had not yet discovered, a lady with a “natural gift” for money-making was evidently the most eligible of matrimonial speculations. Whether he really cherished an humble hope that the veil of Madame Bruce might be of semi-transparent stuff, and that she might discover and be smitten by his manly charms, and ask his hand in marriage, and eventually bear him away, a blushing husband, to the altar, or whatever might be hastily substituted for that connubial convenience, will never be officially known to the world. Certain it is that he expected great results of some sort to eventuate from his visit to this obnubilated prophethess, and that he paid extraordinary attention to the decoration of the external homo, and to the administration of encouraging stimuli to the inner individual, probably with a view to submerge, for the time, his characteristic bashfulness, before he set out to visit the fair inscrutable of Broome-street.

The nature of his secret cogitations, as he walked along, was somewhat as follows, though he himself has never before revealed the same to mortal man.

He was of course uncertain as to her personal attractiveness; owing to that mysterious veil there was a doubt as to her surpassing beauty. At any rate he did not regret the time spent on his toilet.

Madame Bruce might be a lady of the most transcendent loveliness, or she might possess a countenance after the style of Mokanna, the Veiled Prophet; in either case, a clean shirt collar and a little extra polish on the boots would be a touching tribute of respect. He thought over the stories of the Oriental ladies, so charmingly and complexly described in the “Arabian Nights’ Entertainments,” and in some strange way he connected Madame Bruce with Eastern associations; he remembered that in Asiatic countries the arts of enchantment are the staple of fashionable female education; that the women imbibe the elements of magic from their wet nurses, and that their power of charming is gradually and surely developed by years and competent instructors, until they are able to go forth into the world, and raise the devil on their own hook.

In this case the veil was of the East, Eastern; and what was more probable than that the “Mysterious Veiled Lady” was that fascinating Oriental young woman whose attainments in magic made her the dire terror of her enemies, most of whom she changed into pigs, and oxen, and monkeys, and other useful domestic animals; who had transformed her unruly grandfather into a cat of the species called Tom; had metamorphosed her vicious aunt into a screech-owl, and had turned an ungentlemanly second-cousin into a one-eyed donkey.

What a treasure, thought the “Individual,” would such an accomplished wife be in republican America, – how exceedingly useful in the case of her husband’s rivals for Custom-house honors, and how invaluable when creditors become clamorous. What a perfect treasure would a wife be who could turn a clamorous butcher into spring lamb, and his brown apron and leather breeches into the indispensable peas and mint-sauce to eat him with; who could make the rascally baker instantly become a green parrot with only power to say, “Pretty Polly wants a cracker;” who could transform the dunning tailor into a greater goose than any in his own shop; who could go to Stewart’s, buy a couple of thousands of dollars’ worth of goods, and then turn the clerks into cockroaches, and scrunch them with her little gaiter if they interfered with her walking off with the plunder; or who, in the event of a scarcity of money, could invite a select party of fifty or sixty friends to a nice little dinner, and then change the whole lot into lions, tigers, giraffes, elephants, and ostriches, and sell the entire batch to Van Amburgh & Co. at a high premium, as a freshly imported menagerie, all very fat and valuable.

Then he came down from this rather elevated flight of fancy, and filled away on another tack. Before he reached the house he had fully made up his mind that Madame Bruce, the Mysterious Veiled Lady, must be a stray Oriental Princess in reduced circumstances, cruelly thrust from the paternal mansion by the infuriated proprietor, her father, and compelled to seek her fortune in a strange land. He had never seen a princess, and he resolved to treat this one with all respect and loyal veneration; to do this, if possible, without compromising his conscience as a republican and a voter in the tenth ward, – but to do it at all hazards.

The immense fortune which would undoubtedly be hers in the event of the relenting of her brutal though opulent father, suggested the feasibility of a future elopement, and a legal marriage, according to the forms of any country that she preferred – he couldn’t bethink him of a Persian justice of the peace, but he did not despair of being able to manage it to her entire and perfect satisfaction.

Her undoubted great misfortunes had touched his tender heart. He would see this suffering Princess – he would tender his sympathy and offer his hand and the fortune he hoped she would be able to make for him. If this was haughtily declined there would still remain the poor privilege of buying a dose of magic, paying the price in current money, and letting her make her own change.

Having matured this disinterested resolve, he proceeded calmly on his journey, wondering as he walked along, whether, in the event of a gracious reception by his Princess, it would be more courtly and correct to kneel on both knees, or to make an Oriental cushion of his overcoat and sit down cross-legged on the floor.

This knotty point was not settled to his entire satisfaction when he reached that lovely portion of fairy-land near the angle of Broome and Thompson streets. The Princess had taken up her temporary residence in the tenant-house No. 513 Broome, which, elegant mansion affords a refuge to about seventeen other families, mostly Hibernian, without very high pretensions to aristocracy.

His ring at the door of the noble mansion was answered by a grizzly woman speaking French very badly broken, in fact irreparably fractured. This grizzly Gaul let him into the house, heard his request to see Madame Bruce, and then she called to a shock-headed boy who was looking over the bannisters, to come and take the visitor in charge.

Two minutes’ observation convinced the distinguished caller that the servants of the Princess were not particular in the matter of dirt.

The walls were stained, discolored, and bedaubed, and the floor had a sufficient thickness of soil for a vegetable garden; at one end of the hall, indeed, an Irish woman was on her knees, making experimental excavations, possibly with a view to planting early lettuce and peppergrass.

A glance at the shock-headed boy showed a peculiarity in his visual organs; his eyes, which were black naturally, had evidently suffered in some kind of a fisticuff demonstration, and one of them still showed the marks; it was twice black, naturally and artificially; it had a dual nigrity, and might, perhaps, be called a double-barrelled black eye. This pleasant young man conducted his visitor to the top of the first flight of stairs, where he said, "Please stop here a minute," and disappeared into the Princess's room, leaving her devoted slave alone in the hall with two aged washtubs and a battered broom. There ensued an immediate flurry in the rooms of the Princess, and the customer thought of the forty black slaves, with jars of jewels on their heads, who, in Oriental countries, are in the habit of receiving princesses' visitors with all the honors. He hardly thought to see the forty black slaves, with the jars of gems, but rather expected the shock-headed youth to presently reappear, with a mug of rubies, or a kettle of sapphires and emeralds, and invite him in courtly language to help himself to a few – or, that that active young man would presently come out with an amethyst snuff-box full of diamond-dust and ask him to take a pinch, and then present him with that expensive article as a slight token of respect from the Princess.

"Not so, not so, my child."

The great shuffling and pitching about of things continued, as if the furniture had been indulging in an extemporaneous jig, and couldn't stop on so short a notice, or else objected to any interruption of the festivities.

Finally the rattling of chairs and tables subsided into a calm, and the boy reappeared. He came, however, without the tea-kettle full of valuables, and minus even the snuff-box; he merely remarked, with an insinuating wink of the lightest-colored eye, "Please to walk this way."

It *did* please his auditor to walk in the designated direction, and he entered the room, when the eye spoke again to a very low accompaniment of the voice, as if he was afraid he might damage that organ by playing on it too loudly.

The anxious visitor looked for the Princess, but not seeing her, or the slaves with the pots of jewels, and observing, also, that the chairs were not too luxuriously gorgeous for people to sit on, he sat down.

A single glance convinced him that the Princess could have had no opportunity to carry off her jewels from her eastern home, or that she must have spent the proceeds before she furnished her present domicile. An iron bedstead, a small cooking-stove, four chairs, and a table, on which the breakfast crockery stood unwashed, was the amount of the furniture. A dirty slatternly young woman of about twenty-three years, with filthy hands and uncombed hair, and whose clothes looked as if they had been tossed on with a pitchfork, seated herself in one of the chairs and commenced conversation – not in Persian. It was one o'clock, P.M., but she attempted an apology for the unmade bed, the unswept room, the unwashed breakfast dishes, and the untidy appearance of everything. Before she had concluded her fruitless explanation, the boy with the variegated eye suddenly came from a closet which the customer had not noticed and was unprepared for, and said, in winning tones, "Please to walk in this room," which was done, with some fear and no little trembling, whereupon the optical youth incontinently vanished.

At last, then, the imaginative visitor stood in the presence of royalty, and beheld the wronged Princess of his heart. He was about to drop on his bended knees to pay his premeditated homage, but a hurried glance at the floor showed that such a course of proceeding would result in the ineffaceable soiling of his best pantaloons; so he stood sturdily erect.

Before he suffered his eyes to rest upon the peerless beauty who, he was convinced, stood before him, he took a survey of the regal apartment.

An unpainted pine table stood in the corner, a gaudily colored shade was at the window, and an iron single bedstead upon which the clothes had been hastily “spread up,” and two chairs, on one of which sat the enchantress, completed the list.

The Princess was attired in deep black, and a thick black veil, reaching from her head to her waist, entirely concealed her features from the beholders who still devoutly believed in her royal birth and cruel misfortunes – nor was this belief dissipated until she spoke; but when she called “Pete” to the double-barrelled youth with the eye, and gave him a “blowing up” in the most emphatic kind of English for not bringing her pocket-handkerchief, then the beautiful Princess of his imagination vanished into the thinnest kind of air, and there remained only the unromantic reality of a very vulgar woman, in a very dirty dress, and who had a very bad cold in her head. There was still a hope that she might be pretty, and her would-be admirer fervently trusted that she might be compelled to lift her veil to blow her nose, but she didn’t do it. Then he offered her his hand, not in marriage, but for her to read his fortune in, and stood, no longer trembling with expectation, but with stony indifference, for as he approached her, a strong odor of an onion-laden breath from beneath the veil, gave the death-blow to the fair creature of his imagination, and convinced him that he had got the wrong – Princess by the fist. She looked at him closely for a couple of minutes, and then spoke these words – the peculiar pronunciation being probably induced by the cold in her head.

“You are a badd who has saw a great beddy chadges add it seebs here as if you was goidg to be bore settled in the future – it seebs here like as if you had sobetibes in your life beed very buch cast dowd, but it seebs here like as if you had always got up agaid. – It seebs here like as if you had saw id your past life sobe lady what you liked very buch add had beed disappointed – it seebs here like as if there was two barriages for you, wud id a very short tibe – wud lady seebs here to stadd very dear to you, add you two bay be barried or you bay dot – if you are dot already barried you will be very sood – it seebs here as if you woulddt have a very large fabily – five childred will be all that you will have – you will have a good deal of buddy (money) id your life – sobe of your relatives what you dever have saw will sood die add leave you sobe property – but you will dot be expectidg it add it seebs here as if you would have trouble id getting it, for there will sobe wud else try to get it away frob you – it seebs as if the lady you will barry will dot be too dark cobplexiod, dor yet too light – dot too tall, dor yet very short, dot too large, dor too thid – she thidks a great deal of you, bore thad you do of her, – you have already saw her id the course of your life, and she loves you very buch. There are people about you id your busidess who are dot so buch your friends as they preted to be – you are goidg to bake sub chadge id your busidess, it will be a good thidg for you add will cub out buch better thad you expect.”

Here she stopped and intimated that she would answer any questions that her customer desired to ask, and in reply to his interrogatories the following important information was elicited:

“You will be lodg lived, add you will have two wives, add will live beddy years with your first wife.”

The “Individual” proclaimed himself satisfied, and paid his money, whereupon Madame Bruce instantly yelled “Pete,” when the Eye-Boy reappeared to show the door, and the Cash Customer departed, leaving the Mysterious Veiled Lady shivering on her stool, and exceedingly desirous of an opportunity to use her pocket-handkerchief.

And this is all there was of the Persian Princess. As the seeker after wisdom went away he made one single audible remark by way of consoling himself for his crushed hopes and blighted anonymous love. It was to this effect. “I believe she squints, and I *know* she’s got bad teeth.”

CHAPTER IV.

MADAME WIDGER, No. 3 FIRST AVENUE

Relates the marvellous performances of Madame Widger, of No. 3, First Avenue, and how she looks into the future through a Paving-Stone

Madame Widger came from Albany to this city about four years ago, and at once set up as an “Astrologer.” She has been a “witch” for a great many years, and has, directly and indirectly, done about as much mischief as it is possible for one person to accomplish in the same length of time. She was a woman of great repute in and about Albany, as a fortune-teller, and was supposed to be conversant with practices more criminal. She at last became so well known as a bad woman, that she found it advisable to leave Albany, after she had settled certain lawsuits in which she had become entangled.

Among other speculations of hers, in that place, she once sued the city to recover indemnifying moneys for certain imaginary damages, alleged to have been done to her property by the unbidden entrance of the river into her private apartments, during one of the periodical inundations with which Albany is favored. By the shrewd management of certain of her lawyer friends with whom she had business dealings, she at last got a judgment against the city, but, owing to some other awkward law complications, it became expedient to change her place of residence before she had collected her money, and the amount remains unpaid to this day.

She then came to this city, and set up in the Sorceress way, and, by dint of advertising, she soon got a good many customers. She now has as much to do as she can easily manage to get along with, is making a good deal of money by “Astrology,” and by other more unscrupulous means; and she is probably worth some considerable property. She is a bold, brazen, ignorant, unscrupulous, dangerous woman. She has some peculiar ways of her own in telling the fortunes of her visitors, and is the only person in the city who professes to read the future through a magic stone, or “second-sight pebble.” Her manner of using this wonderful geological specimen is fully described hereafter.

The “Individual” Visits a Grim Witch, who reads his Future through a Moderate-Sized Paving-Stone.

Disappointed in his fond hope of discovering, in the person of Madame Bruce, an eligible partner, who should bridal him and lead him coyly to the altar, that bourne from which no bachelor returns, the Cash Customer was for many days downcast in his demeanor and neglectful of his person. When he eventually recovered from his strong attack of Madame Bruce, he was not by any means cured of his romantic desire to procure a witch wife. He had carefully figured up the conveniences of such an article, and the sum total was an irresistible argument.

If he could win a witch of the right sort, perhaps she could teach him the secret of the Philosopher’s Stone, and the Elixir of Life, and show him the locality of the Fountain of Youth, so that he could take the wrinkles out of himself and his friends, at the cost of only a short journey by rail-road. A barrel or so of that wonderful water, peddled out by the bottle, would meet a readier sale and pay a larger profit than any Paphian Lotion that was ever advertised on the rocks of Jersey. All this, to say nothing of a family of young wizards and sorcerers, who could, by virtue of the maternal magic, swallow swords from the day of their birth, do mighty feats of legerdemain, such as cutting off the heads of innumerable pigs and chickens, and producing the decapitated animals alive again from the coat-tails of the bystanders, to the astonishment of the crowd and the great emolument of their proud dad. Even if these profitable babies should not be natural necromancers, with the power of second sight, and any quantity of “natural gifts,” they must surely be spirit-rappers of the

most lucrative “sphere,” capable of organizing “circles,” and instructing “mediums,” and otherwise bringing into the family fund large piles of that circulating medium so much to be desired. Or, even failing this popular gift, they *must* all be born with some strong instincts of money-making vagabondism. If the girls failed in fortune-telling they would certainly have a genius for the tight-rope, or a decided talent for the female circus and negro-minstrel business; and the boys would be brought into the world with the power of throwing a miraculous number of consecutive flip-flaps – of putting cocked hats on their juvenile heads while turning somersets over long rows of Arab steeds of the desert – of poisoning their infant bodies on pyramids of bottles, and drinking glasses of molasses and water, under the contemptible subterfuge of wine, to the health of the terror-stricken beholders – or of climbing to the tops of very tall poles without soiling their spangled dresses, and there displaying their anatomy for the admiration of the gazing multitude, in divers attitudes, for the most part extraordinarily wrong side up with very particular care – or, at least, they would be born with the astounding gift of tying their young legs in double bow-knots across the backs of their adolescent necks, and while in that graceful position kissing their little fingers to the bewildered audience.

Under the constant influence of such comfortable and ennobling thoughts, it is not in the elastic nature of the human mind to remain long dejected. In the contemplation of the future glories of his might-be wife and possible family, the “Individual” recovered somewhat of his former gaiety. Remembering that “Care killed a cat,” he resolved that he would not be chronicled as a second victim, so he kicked Care out of doors, so to speak, and warned Despair and Discouragement off the premises.

He attired him in his best, and appeared once more before the world in the joyful garb of a man with Hope in his heart and money in his pantaloons. In fact, so radiant did he appear, that he might have been set down for a person who had just had a new main of joy laid on in his heart, and had turned the cocks of all the pipes, and let on the full head just to see how the new apparatus worked. Or, as if he’d been in a shower-bath of good-nature, and come out dripping.

He also took kindly to that innocuous beverage, lager bier, which was a good sign in itself, inasmuch as he had, for a few days, been drinking as many varieties of strong drinks, as if he’d been brought up on Professor Anderson’s Inexhaustible Bottle, and had never overcome the influences of his infant education.

Seeking out a friend to whom he confided his hopes of a lucrative wife and a profitable progeny, the Cash Customer suggested that they proceed immediately in search of the fair enchantress who was to be his comfort and consolation, for the rest of his respectable life.

Being somewhat disgusted with the result of his visit to the witch with the romantic designation of the “Mysterious Veiled Lady,” he had determined to seek out one on this occasion with the most common-place and every-day cognomen, in the whole list. There being a Madame Widger in that delightful catalogue, of course Widger was the one selected. It is true, she sometimes advertised herself as the “Mysterious Spanish Lady,” but in the judgment of the Individual, the Widger was too much for the Spanish and the mystery.

So Madame Widger was resolved on. Her modest advertisement is given, that the impartial reader may be brought to acknowledge that the inducements to wed the Widger were not of the common order.

“Madame Widger, the Natural-Gifted Astrologist, Second-Sight Seer and Doctress, tells past, present, and future events; love, courtship, marriage, absent friends, sickness; prescribes medicines for all diseases, property lost or stolen, at No. 3 First-av., near Houston-st.”

The slight lack of perspicuity in this announcement seems to be a mysterious peculiarity, common to all the Fortune Tellers, as if they were all imbued with the same commendable contempt for all the rules of English grammar.

The voyager being attired in a captivating costume, and being also provided with pencils and paper to make a life-sketch, with a view to an expansive portrait of his enslaver, whose beauty was with him a foregone conclusion, set out with his faithful friend for the delightful locality mentioned in the advertisement, where the charming Circe, Widger, held her magic court.

He was not aware, at that time, that his intended bride was not a blushing blooming maiden, but an ancient dame, whose very wrinkles date back into the eighteenth century. But of that hereafter.

He was determined to have her tell his “love, courtship, or marriage, absent friends, or sickness,” and to insist that she should “prescribe medicines for property lost or stolen,” according to the exact wording of the advertisement.

The doughty “Individual” trembled somewhat, with an undefined sensation of awe, as though some fearful ordeal was before him – to use his own elegant and forcible language, he felt as though he was going to encounter an earthquake with volcano trimmings.

“It is the fluttering of new-born love in your manly bosom,” remarked his companion.

“Well,” was the reply, “if a baby love kicks so very like a horse of vicious propensities, a full-grown Cupid would be so unmanageable as to defy the very Rarey and all his works.”

Without any noteworthy adventure they kept on their way to the First Avenue, and in due time stood, awe-struck, before the mansion of the enchantress.

After the first impression had worn off, the scene was somewhat stripped of its mysteriousness, and assumed an aspect commonplace, not to say seedy. As soon as the sense of bewilderment with which they at first gazed upon the domicile of the mysterious damsel so favored of the fates, had passed away, they found themselves in a condition to make the observations of the place and its surroundings that are detailed below.

The house, a three-story brick, seemed to have that architectural disease which is a perpetual epidemic among the tenant-houses of the city, and which makes them look as if they had all been dipped in a strong solution of something that had taken the skin off. The paint was blistered and peeling off in flakes; the blinds were hanging cornerwise by solitary hinges; the shingles were starting from their places with a strange air of disquietude, as if some mighty hand had stroked them the wrong way; the door-steps were shaky and crazy in the knees; the door itself had a curious air of debility and emaciation, and the bell-knob was too weak to return to its place after it had feebly done its brazen duty. There was no door-plate, but on a battered tin sign was blazoned, in fat letters, the mystic word “Widger.” The Cash Customer rang the bell, not once merely, or twice, but continuously, in pursuance of a dogma which he laid down as follows:

“It is a mistake to ever stop ringing till somebody comes. The feebler you ring, the more the servants think you’re a dun, and therefore the more they don’t come to let you in – but if you keep it up regularly they’ll think you’re a rich relation and will rush to the rescue.”

So he kept on, and the voice of the bell sharply clattered through the dismal old house, making as much noise as if it suddenly wakened a thousand echoes that had been locked up there for many years without the power to speak till now. If a timid ring denotes a dun, and a boisterous one a rich relation, then must the inhabitants of that cleanly suburb have been convinced that the present performer on the bell not only had no claims as a creditor on the people of the house, but was a rich California uncle, come to give each adult member of that happy family a gold mine or so, and to distribute a cart-load of diamonds among the children.

The door at last was opened by an uncertain old man with very weak eyes, who appeared to have, in a milder form, the same malady which afflicted the house; perhaps he was a twin, and suffered from brotherly sympathy – at any rate the dilapidating disease had touched him sorely;

its ravages were particularly noticeable in the toes of his boots and the elbows of his coat. Violent remedies had evidently been applied in the latter case, but the patches were of different colors, and suggestive of the rag-bag; the boots were past hope of convalescence; his shirt-collar was sunk under a greasy billow of a neckcloth, and only one slender string was visible to show where it had gone down; the nether garment was a ragged wreck, that set a hundred tattered sails to every breeze, but was anchored fast at the shoulder with a single disreputable suspender.

Guided by this equivocal individual the two visitors entered a small shabbily furnished room, and bestowed themselves in a couple of treacherous chairs, in pursuance of an imbecile invitation from the battered old gentleman.

The anticipations of the enthusiastic lover again began to fall, and in five minutes his heart, which so lately was “burning with high hope,” was so cold as to be uncomfortable.

On a seven-by-nine cooking-stove, which three pints of coal would have driven blazing crazy, stood a diminutive iron kettle, in which something was noisily stewing; the something may have been a decoction of magic herbs, or it may have been Madame Widger’s dinner. A tumble-down trunk in a corner of the room did precarious duty for a chair; a faded carpet hid the floor; a cheap rocking-chair in the act of moulting its upholstery spread its luxurious arms invitingly near the dim window; and a table, on which a pack of German playing cards was coyly half concealed by a newspaper, a coal-hod, and a poker, completed the necessary furnishing of the apartment.

The ornaments are soon inventoried; a certificate of membership of the New York State Agricultural Society, given at Albany to Mr. M. G. Bivins, hung in a cheap frame over the table. The other decorations were a few prints of high-colored saints, an engraving of a purple Virgin Mary with a pea-green child, and a picture of a blue Joseph being sold by yellow brethren to a crowd of scarlet merchants who were paying for him with money that looked like peppermint lozenges.

Madame Widger, the “Mysterious Spanish Lady,” was not at first visible to the naked eye, but a loud, shrill, vicious voice, which made itself heard through the partition dividing the reception-room from some apartment as yet unexplored by them, directed the attention of her visitors to her exact locality.

She was “engaged” with another gentleman, said the knight of the ragged inexpressibles.

Had not what he had already seen of the mansion decidedly cooled the passion of the love-lorn customer, this intelligence would have been likely to rouse his ire against the interloping swain, and make him pant for vengeance and fistic damages to the other party; but in his present confused state of mind he received this blow with philosophic indifference.

The old man subsided into a chair, and in a weak sort of way began to talk, evidently with some insane idea of pleasingly filling up the time until the prophetess should be disengaged. His conversation seemed to run to disasters, with a particular partiality to shipwrecks. He accordingly detailed, with wonderful exactness, the perils encountered by a certain canal-boat of his, “loaded principally with butter and cheese,” during a dangerous voyage from Albany to New York, and which was finally brought safely to a secure harbor by the power of the Widger, which circumstance had made him her slave for life.

The shrill voice then ceased, and the person to whom it had been addressed came forth. The lime on his blue jean garments, and the cloudy appearance of his boots, declared him to be something in the mason line. He deported himself with becoming reverence, and departed in apparent awe. He did not look like a dangerous rival, and he was not molested.

A discreditable and disordered head now thrust itself out of the mysterious closet, opened its mouth, and the vicious voice said: “I will see you now, sir.” The sighing swain, with a fluttering heart and unsteady steps, summoned his courage and entered the place, to him as mysterious as was Bluebeard’s golden-keyed closet to his ninth wife. The first glance at Madame Widger at once scattered again all his dreams of love and of happiness with that potent and fearful female.

He encountered a cadaverous bony-looking woman, very tall, very old, though with hair still black; with grey eyes, and false gleaming teeth. She was attired in calico; quality, ten cents a yard; appearance, dirty. Hardly was the door closed, when the vicious voice spitefully remarked, "Sit down, sir;" and a skinny finger pointed to a cane-bottomed chair. While seating himself and taking off his gloves, he took an observation.

The apartment was not large; in an unfurnished state, a moderately-hooped belle might have stood in it without serious damage to her outskirts, but there would be little extra room for any enterprising adventurer to circumnavigate her. In one corner was a small pine light-stand, on which was a sceptical looking Bible, with a very black brass key tied in it; a volume of Cowper bound in full calf; a little lamp with a single lighted wick, and a pile of the Madame's business hand-bills.

She at once showed her experience of human nature and her distrust of her present visitor by her practical and matter-of-fact conduct.

She sat uncomfortably down on the very edge of an angular chair, folded her hands, shut herself half up like a jack-knife, and the vicious voice mentioned this fearful fact: "My terms are a dollar for gentlemen;" and the grey eyes stonily stared until the dollar aforesaid was produced.

The voice then prepared for business by sundry "Ahems!" and when fairly in working order it proceeded: "Give me your hand – your *left* hand."

The Widger took the extended palm in her shrivelled fingers and made four rapid dabs in the middle of it with the forefinger of her other hand, as if she were scornfully pointing out defects in its workmanship; then she opened the drawer of the little stand with a spiteful jerk, and withdrew thence something which she put to her sinister optic, and began rapidly screwing it round with both hands, as if she had got water on the brain and was trying to tap herself in the eye.

Then the vicious voice began, in a loud mechanical manner, to speak with the greatest volubility, running the sentences together, and not thinking of a comma or a period till her breath was exhausted, in a manner that would have fairly distanced Susan Nipper herself, even if that rapid young lady had twenty seconds the start.

"I see by looking in this stone that you was born under two planets one is the planet Mars you will die under the planet Jupiter but it won't be this year or next you have seen a great deal of trouble and misfortune in your past life but better days are surely in store for you you have passed through many things which if written in a book would make a most interesting volume I see by looking more closely in the stone that you are about to receive two letters one a business letter the other a let – "

Here her breath failed, and as soon as it came back the voice continued —

"ter from a friend it is written very closely and is crossed I see by looking more closely in the stone that one of the letters will contain news which will distress you exceedingly for a little while but you need not be troubled for it will all be for your good you are soon to have an interview with a man of light hair and blue eyes who will profess great interest in you but he will get the advantage of you if he can you must beware of him I see by looking more closely in the stone that you will live to be 68 years old but you will die before you are 70." Here was another station where the locomotive voice stopped to take in air, and then instantly dashed ahead at a greater speed than ever. "I see by looking more closely in the stone that good luck will befall you a near friend will die and leave you a fortune I see by looking more closely in the stone that this will happen to you when you are between 32 and 34 years old that is all I see in this stone."

Another grab brought from the little drawer another pebble, which the Madame placed at her eye, the boring operation was recommenced, and the vicious voice once more got up steam.

"I see by looking closely in this stone that you will have two wives one will be blue-eyed and the other will be black-eyed with the first one you will not live long but with the last one you will be happy many years I see by looking more closely in the stone that you will have six children which will be very comfortable the lady who is to be your first wife is at this moment thinking of

you I see by looking more closely in the stone that a man with light hair and blue eyes is trying to get her away from you but she scorns him and turns away I see by looking more closely in the stone that she has a strong feeling for you you need not fear the man with light hair and blue eyes for you will get her you and you only will possess her heart I see by looking more closely in the stone that she is good gentle kind loving affectionate true-hearted and pleasant.”

(The vicious voice resented each one of these good-natured adjectives, as if it had been a gross personal insult to the Widger, and spit them spitefully at her trembling customer, as if they tasted badly in her mouth.)

“and will make you a good wife; you will be rich and happy you will be successful in business you will be hereafter always lucky you will be distinguished you will be eminent you will be good you will be respected you will be beloved honored cherished and will reach a good old age I see by looking in this stone – that is all I see by looking in this stone.”

Here she ceased, and choking down her indignation, which had risen to a fearful pitch during the complimentary peroration, she said, taking up the equivocal Bible with the key tied in it, “Take hold of the key with your finger, I will give you one wish, if the book turns round you will have your wish.” The guest took the key in the required manner, and the Widger closed her eyes and muttered something which may have been either a prayer or a recipe for pickling red cabbage, for he was unable to satisfy himself with any degree of certainty what it was; at the appointed time the book turned and the wish was therefore graciously granted.

Her hearer smiled his grimmest smile, and ventured to inquire if his unknown rival was making any progress in securing the affections of the lady in dispute, and received the satisfying answer, “She scorns him and turns away.” Reassured by this, the susceptible individual mentally and fiercely defied the blue-eyed intruder to do his worst, and with a reverential obeisance left the presence. As he departed, the skinny hand presented him with a handbill, but the vicious voice was silent.

Carefully conning the handbill as they slowly departed from the august realm of the Madame, the seekers of magic for the lowest cash price read the following particulars:

“Madame Widger was born with this wonderful gift of revealing the destinies of man, and she has revealed mysteries that no mortal knew. She states that she advertises nothing but what she can do with entire satisfaction to all who wish to consult her.

“Also, she will scan aright,
Dreams and visions of the night.”

The tender inquirer went away in a desponding mood. The Widger was out of the question as a bride, “for she was old enough,” he said, “to have been grandmother to his father’s uncle.”

CHAPTER V.

MRS. PUGH, No. 102 SOUTH FIRST STREET, WILLIAMSBURGH

Discourses of Mrs. Pugh, of No. 102 South First Street, Williamsburgh, and tells all that Nursing Sorceress communicated to her Cash Customer

It is travelling a little away from home to go to Williamsburgh in search of a witch, but there are some peculiar circumstances about the present case, that give it more than common interest. Mrs. Pugh is not an *advertising* sorceress, but practises all her magic slyly, and generally under a promise of secrecy, which is exacted lest the fame of her fortune-telling should come to the ears of certain respectable families, who employ her as a nurse. She is much resorted to by a number of young persons of both sexes, and has considerable notoriety among the low and ignorant classes as a practiser of the black art. She is by no means the only “nurse” who is given to this reprehensible practice, but very many of the old women who officiate as professional nurses are proficient in telling fortunes with cards, and with the Bible and key, and are always glad of an opportunity to exhibit their pretended skill. Being at times received into families where there are daughters, not grown up, they become most dangerous persons if they are encouraged or permitted to thus practise on the credulity of these young girls.

The mere encouragement of hurtful superstitious notions is a great ill in itself, but is by no means the extent of the evil done by some of these persons. They not unfrequently take an active part in bringing about meetings between unsuspecting girls and evil-disposed men, thus paving the way to the wretchedness and ruin of the former. More than one instance is known, where the going astray of a loved daughter can be traced directly to the mischievous teachings of a fortune-telling nurse.

These are the reasons that give the case of Mrs. Pugh an importance greater than attaches to many others.

It is right that people should know that a certain degree of circumspection ought to be used, with regard to moral character, as well as other qualifications, in the selection of a nurse, lest a person be employed who will work irreparable mischief among the younger members of the family.

The Individual calls on a Nursing Sorceress.

Who shall say that broomstick locomotion is a lost art, and that steam has superseded magic in the matter of travelling? Because no one of us has ever encountered a witch on her basswood steed, shall we presume to assert that witches no longer bestride basswood steeds and make their nocturnal excursions to blasted heaths, there to meet the devil in the social midnight orgie, and kick up their withered heels in the gay diabolical dance with other ancient females of like kidney with themselves? Because no one of us has ever beheld with his own personal optics, an old woman change herself into a black cat, shall we therefore assert that the ancient dames of our own day are unable to accomplish that feline transformation? “Not by no manner of means whatsomdever,” as Mr. Weller would remark.

Let us not then be found without charity for the peculiar and persistent faith of the hero of this book, who, though thrice bitterly disappointed in his matrimonial speculations among the witches, still clung to the fond belief that a bride with supernatural powers of doing things would be a splendid speculation, and that such a spouse could be found if he, her ardent lover, did not give up the chase too soon. Spite of his disappointment with Madame Bruce, and his crushing discomfiture

with Madame Widger, Hope still sprang eternal in the “Individual’s” breast, and he felt, like the immortal Mr. Brown of classic verse, that it would “never do to give it up so.”

He had something of a natural turn for mechanics, and having been of late engaged in some entertaining speculations on steam engines, he came not unnaturally to think of the wonderful advantage the magically-endowed people of old had over the present age in the matter of locomotion. He thought of that wonderful carpet on which a jolly little party had but to seat themselves and wish to be transported to any far-off spot, and presto! change! there they were instant. No collisions to be feared; no running off the track at a speed of ever-so-many unaccountable miles an hour; no cast-iron-voiced conductor at short intervals demanding tickets; no old women with sour babies; no obtrusive boys with double-priced books and magazines; no other boys with peanuts, apples, and pop-corn; nothing, in fact, save one’s own social circle but a civil genie, not of Irish extraction, to fly alongside to mix the juleps and carry the morning paper.

It was very natural to consider whether there wasn’t a yard or two left somewhere of that valuable carpet, and to regret that on the whole probably the original owners had occasion to use the entire piece.

Then the thought was very naturally suggested of the marvellous wooden horse with the pegs in his neck, who soared with his riders a great deal higher than does Mr. Wise in his clumsy balloon, and always came down a great deal easier than ever Mr. Wise did yet. Of course the Cash Customer was from the start perfectly convinced that *that* breed of horses is long since extinct, so long ago that no record of them is now to be found in either the “American Racing Calendar,” or the “English Stud Book.”

Then very naturally came thoughts of the broomstick changes of the more modern witches. Perhaps, he thought, these are the colts of the wooden horse, degenerate, it is true, and lacking in the grace and symmetry of their extraordinary sire, but still perhaps not inferior in speed or in safety of carriage.

The thought was a brilliant one, and it was really worth while to inquire into the matter and pursue this phantom steed until he was fairly hunted down and bridled ready for use.

It needed no long cogitation or extended argument to convince Johannes, the “Individual,” the Cash Customer, of the immense practical value of such a steed, to say nothing of his costing nothing to keep, and of its therefore being utterly impossible for him to “eat his own head off,” and of his never growing old, and of his never having any of the multitudinous diseases that afflict ordinary horses without any intermixture of magic blood, and therefore of it being out of the question for anybody to cheat his owner in a horse-trade.

Why, only think of his value for livery purposes in case his happy proprietor was disposed to let other folks use him for a proper compensation. He could of course be trained to carry double, and no doubt Mr. Rarey, or some other person potent in horse education, could easily break him to go in harness.

It wasn’t likely, Johannes cogitated, that the judges would allow him to enter his ligneous racer at the Fashion Course, so that he’d not get a chance to win any money from Lancet and Flora Temple, still there was a hope, even on that point.

So, in search of the witch wife, whose dower should be the broomstick horse, that should set the fond couple up in business, started the sanguine lover.

Having had some experience of New York fortune-tellers and others in the magic line, and not thinking they were of the sort likely to have so great a treasure, he started for the suburbs, and crossed the ferry to Williamsburgh, in order to pay a visit of inquiry, and if possible to take the initiatory step in courting Mrs. Pugh, of No. 102 South First Street, in that city.

He designed, of course, to buy a “fortune” at a liberal price, for the purpose of setting the lady in good-humor as a necessary preliminary step. He really had hopes that she would prove to be of a slightly different style from some of the New York fortune-tellers, who seem to have mistaken their

profession and to be hardly up to reading the stars with success, although they might be fully equal to all the financial exigencies of an apple and peanut stand, or might win an honorable distinction crying “radishes and lettuce” in the early morning hours; or upon trial, might, perhaps, evince a decided genius for the rag-picking business, or preside over the fortunes of a soap-fat cart with distinguished ability.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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