

Literature.

THE CRACK IN THE WALL.

The last stitch was set, and the tired worker, as she slipped her thimble into the work-box standing on a bracket fixed to the wall, sighed, and sank into a chair that was conveniently near. "Thank goodness, that's finished," she said, "and I may go to bed early, and make up for last night's vigil. How glad I shall be when Kitty and Liz are able to come back and release me! I don't mind a reasonable amount of work, but really these last three days I have been overwhelmed with it." And so she really felt, though Mary Lester was an energetic little creature, and had cheerfully resigned her excellent situation as maid to Lady Alicia Grandon, that she might hurry to the aid of her sisters. They were children's dressmakers, and in their airy, cheerful room at the top of a house in Bowden Square, they supported themselves very comfortably by making the charming costumes in which the tiny darlings of aristocratic mammas may be daily seen in Kensington Gardens. But an attack of influenza, followed by congestion of the lungs, left Kitty Lester so prostrate, that the doctor ordered her off to sea. She could not go without her faithful nurse Lizzie, and was hesitating what to do when the younger sister threw herself into the breach, and not only offered to leave Lady Alicia, and keep up the dressmakers' connection with her equally active, tasteful fingers, but did it promptly, arriving a few hours after the note that announced her intentions. But Lady Alicia had refused to part entirely with the maid who suited her so well. Mary might stay away as long as she felt it her duty to do so, but her place should not be filled up in Earl Grandon's establishment. "You must come back to me, Molly Malone, as soon as you can," said the Earl's sprightly daughter. "And, till you do, mamma's maid, Grigsby, has agreed to look after this unlucky head of mine, and put my drawers straight whenever the 'muddles' get too much for me." And so away went Mary Lester, to stitch and feather, stitch, and cover little skirts with silken platings and embroideries, toiling all the more ardently lest anything should go wrong during the absence of her sisters. In this she was cheered by good news of Kitty's progress, and substantial tokens of sympathy from her friends in Belgravia; some of the old port wine from the Earl's cellar, and a hamper of good things for an invalid, being packed by the housekeeper under the direct supervision of the good natured but indolent countess. Mary Lester had lived the life of a hermit at Bowden Square for the last fortnight, but was getting on, to use her own phrase, "swimmingly," when a large box, and a note from Lady Alicia were brought to her. "Baron Downing's reception takes place tomorrow night, and I am in a rage." Thus wrote her ladyship. "As you will see, Madame has sent home my dress, trimmed with blue—odious blue—and my lovely sortie-du-bal lined ditto. How could she make such a frightful mistake? She ought to know by this time that teint-du-ciel makes me sallow, and I told her, when she fitted me, that I had set my heart on the exquisite shade of old-rose, of which I had sent her a pattern. "I will not go to the reception a fright, nor trust Madame again. So, Molly, you best of Molliess, you must—MUST, MUST re-trim my gown, and re-line my wrap. I send you plenty of silk and ribbon—lovely, isn't it?—and be sure you bring them home yourself tomorrow evening in time to dress me. I have been a horror to behold ever since you left us. My room is a chaos, and I have fallen out with Grigsby." "It was just like thoughtless, though warm-hearted, Lady Alicia to expect impossibilities," Mary protested with a pout. "With three satin frocks to finish, how could she undertake such a troublesome job as this would be? There was nothing for it but to tell her plainly that it could not be done." Then Mary thought of the young lady's disappointment, and her heart softened toward her. By giving up a few hours of the night, all her tasks might, nay, should be accomplished. So she fortified herself with strong tea, and worked, with few and brief intervals, till she had tacked the last bow on Lady Alicia's gauzy skirts, and slipped them on herself—mistress and maid were about the same height, and equally slender—to ascertain whether the effect was satisfactory. There was only to fold and restore them to their box, when the weary girl sat down to rest, leaning her head against the wall, or, rather, the partition separating this apartment from one of two at the back of the house, which were tenanted by a couple of gentlemanly-looking men. Brothers they called themselves, and the name they had given the landlord was Smith. Mary did not like either of these men, and with good reason. She could not reach the stairs without

passing the door of their sitting room, and one of them had a habit of lounging at it, and attempting to draw her into conversation every time he saw her, accompanying these threats with such boldly admiring glances; that she was quite annoyed. The other, and elder man, had a furtive, scowling aspect, and if they met on the landing or the stairs, he would glare at poor Mary from under his overhanging brows so suddenly and fiercely that she disliked him almost as much as his brother; and, to avoid the pair, quitted her own apartments as seldom as possible. But this did not altogether put an end to the annoyance, for the younger Smith would often rap with his knuckles at her door, to make some frivolous request—the loan of a book, the correct time, a button for his wristband, or, five minutes afterwards, a needle wherewith to sew it on. And on each of these occasions he evinced a provoking tendency to linger, though Mary was almost curdled in her brevity, and on the excuse of being too busy to stop talking would literally shut her door in his face. Sleep now overpowered her as she sat against the wall, her head gradually slipping down till her face lay on a pile of Kitty's books. Half an hour might have elapsed ere the pain of her cramped position awoke her, nor could she tell whether it was that which put a sudden end to her slumbers, or these words, spoken or so it seemed, close to her ear: "Be careful—be careful! We don't want an explosion before the time." Had she really heard some one say this? Before she could rouse herself sufficiently to move, the same voice, in more suppressed tones, became audible again, and now she discovered that she had accidentally dislodged a couple of the books, and her ear was close to a rent in the paper—a rent that betrayed a crack in the panelling of the partition. It was only just wide enough to enable her to discern a gleam of lamplight, but she could hear the rustle of paper. The brothers Smith were packing a parcel, but of what description? "Lend me your knife to cut this string," said the voice of the elder. "There! carried under the folds of the coat thrown carelessly over my arm, who will suspect what I have?" "Take care your nerve does not fail you at the fatal moment," he was cautioned. "Has it ever failed me?" hissed the first speaker, so savagely, that Mary shivered as she listened. "Luck has been against us, or we should have given these boasting sneering Englishmen the lesson they need long ago. But there shall be no failure tonight. I have, as you know, tested our invention too carefully. If tomorrow's sun does not dawn on the ruins of the Parliament House and the bodies of those vaunted lawmakers, call me a traitor to our brotherhood." "That you will never be; but where are you going now?" "To dine at my ease. None but a fool would enter upon an important deed exhausted for lack of food. Your own preparations are made?" "Yes. I shall be at the foot of the bridge, just before midnight, with a cab and our disguises. I have taken berths on board the ship you selected. But before you go I have something to say. You will not raise any objections if I bring a companion with me?" "A female one? The dressmaking girl of whom you are always raving? Pshaw! what folly! what madness! You don't propose taking her into our secrets?" "Of course not," was the hasty reply. "I am neither fool nor madman enough for that. But I cannot bear the idea of leaving England without her." "Has she agreed?" The younger man laughed under his breath, and Mary trembled with horror and disgust as she heard him. "I haven't asked her; she might take it into her head to say 'No.' But, if you raise no objections, I dare say I can prevent her from making any." How? You must not risk a scene. It might draw attention upon us." "Don't fear that," interposed Mary's admirer. "I know what I am about. If she is summoned by telegraph to her sick sister, and I get a cab and ride with her to the station—a little chloroform in my pocket—you understand don't you?" "Anyhow, you mustn't fail me," was the reply. And then the voices ceased, and Mary Lester slid down on her knees, rigid with dread. The closing of a door, the descending of footsteps on the stairs of one at least of the conspirators, made her spring up, her heart beating wildly. Thank heaven she was forewarned, and could escape before the wicked wretch who pretended to love her could put his vile plan into execution. Thrusting her arms into a jacket, and snatching up her hat, she was flying from the room, when a sound outside made her shrink back and listen. He was there; that was his well-known rap. If he suspected what she was meditating! The rap was repeated, and, by an immense effort, Mary Lester assumed the composure she was far from feeling, and answered it. "Who is there?" she demanded, as the

door was roughly shaken. "It is I. Open! I must speak to you!" he cried, imperatively. A pause, and then Mary turned the key, and confronted him, boldly. "Will you do me a favor, Mr. Smith," she asked, ere he could address her. "Will you get me a cab? I must take this dress home to Morton Crescent directly, or lose my sister one of her best customers." "I'll find you a commissionaire who can take it for you," he said. "As if I should trust such costly goods to a stranger!" cried Mary, pettishly. "I am bound to take them home myself, so I'll thank you not to hinder me. Anything you have to say must wait till I come back." "Why should you toil for those bloated, purse-proud aristocrats?" he growled, as she laid Lady Alicia's costume in its box, and, with trembling fingers buckled the straps. "My gloves! I cannot find my gloves!" she exclaimed, without appearing to hear him. "Ah! here they are! Now I can start. I am sadly late, as it is." "But how long shall you be away?" queried Mr. Smith, standing in the doorway, and barring her departure. "Not more than an hour, I hope, for I am tired to death." "You look so. I shall go with you to take care of you," was the startling reply. "We can get a cab at the stand in the next street," and shouldering the box, he ran downstairs with it, the dismayed Mary following, because she knew not what else to do. There was no one near to whom she could appeal for protection. The owners of the house were a couple of feeble old maids; the tenants of the first floor were absent, not even a policeman was visible when she reached the street door, to which Mr. Smith's whistle had already brought a passing cabman. She clasped her hands distractedly, and made use of the only subterfuge that presented itself: "I must go back for my purse! I have left my purse in my work-box!" "What signifies! You can use mine," she was told. "But was there much in it?" "A cheque, a bank note, some gold." Mary saw the covetous eyes glisten. Mr. Smith knew the value of money, and thought it would be prudent to secure this, as well as his own great coat and valise, in the event of his not returning hither. Up the stairs he sprang; and as soon as he was out of sight Mary fled too, in the opposite direction, jumping into the cab, and bidding the cabman drive as fast as he could. She carried with her, tightly hugged to her breast, the street-door key. The lock must be picked before Mr. Smith could follow her, and once under Lord Grandon's roof she should be safe from his machinations. But as Mary's personal alarms died away, others awoke. She remembered what she had overheard. One of those atrocious plots, that on rare occasions startle and horrify the whole community, was about to be carried out this very night, unless she could interfere to prevent it. Lord Grandon—if she divulged what she knew to him? Alas he was a nervous invalid. Her tale must be told to some one with more energy, some person with ability and influence enough to act upon it, and that directly. While one doubted, and another hesitated, time would be speeding on, and the conspirator, with his infernal machine concealed under his great coat— Mary Lester could pursue the dreadful thought no further. A few moments given to wildly distracting thoughts, and her resolution was taken. She pulled the check-string, and bade the driver of the vehicle take her to Baron Downing's; to Whitehall, instead of Tyburnia. He stared, grumbled a little, but obeyed, his astonishment increasing when, as he drew up under the portico of the minister's stately mansion at Whitehall, his fare alighted, arrayed in Lady Alicia's elegant dress, and rose-lined sortie-du-bal. The reception was but just commencing, the first guests only arriving, when Mary Lester boldly entered the house, following on the steps of a party of American diplomats and journalists of both sexes, curious to witness the affair from beginning to end. While the Baroness Downing murmured polite nothings to her American visitors, Mary Lester glided past them, and laid her hand on the Baron's arm. She had remembered, ere it was too late, that in her own character it might be difficult, perhaps impossible, to obtain an interview with the Home Secretary; and when had delays been more dangerous than tonight! Lady Alicia, fretting impatiently at her non appearance, would forgive her when she knew that it was to avert a terrible catastrophe her maid was masquerading in her clothes. The half a dozen words that were whispered in the Baron's ears and his long look at the pale, frank face, upturned to his, made him an attentive auditor to the tale Mary poured into his ears. Drawing her shaking fingers through his arm, he hastily led her to his study. There she had to repeat her strange story

to the detectives hastily summoned from Scotland Yard, and to endure a yet worse ordeal, when in another guise, a lady's cab and ulster, she had to take up a position in one of the lobbies of the house, and point out amongst the strangers waiting for admission, the elder of the Smiths. So quietly was his arrest effected, that few of those present were aware of it, or knew that, but for a young girl's prompt intervention, they might have been the victims of his fiendish scheme. What became of the younger Smith no one ever discovered. He contrived to effect his own escape from England, having left nothing behind him at his lodgings that could give the police a clue by which to trace him. Mary Lester never went back to Bowden Square. At a late hour that evening, she was sent, in Baron Downing's carriage, to Lord Grandon's, arriving there so weary, so exhausted, that the kind Countess sent her to bed, and refused to year any explanations till the morrow. Kitty and Lizzie Lester returned to their old quarters, where they are still flourishing, and Mary visits them when she is in England, which is not often, Lady Alicia, having married a Spanish grandee; but she never enters her sister's rooms without glancing with a thrill and a shudder at the pile of books that once hid a crack in the wall, and reveal to her a conspiracy. ELIZABETH.

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