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# DR. RUMSEY'S PATIENT:

A VERY STRANGE STORY.

BY L. T. MEADE AND DR. HALIFAX.

Joint authors of "Stories from the Diary of a Doctor."

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## SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I. & II.—Pretty Hetty Armitage, niece of Mr. and Mrs. Armitage, junkeers at the village of Grandcourt, is admired by two young undergraduates named Horace Frere and Everett, and the first named elicits a promise from her to become his wife. Notwithstanding this promise, however, Hetty, who is a born flirt, is in love with Mr. Robert Armitage, the son of the village, upon whom, however, she is thought to rest the curse of her race, a total absence of memory of the most important events of his life, whilst less significant matters are remembered. Armitage is passing a brook side when Frere asks Hetty to give him a kiss as his affianced wife. She refuses, and as they are struggling, Armitage in terror and takes the girl home, she deems it that she has given any promise to marry. Frere is enraged, and visiting the inn again asks Hetty for her decision between Armitage and himself. She speedily declares for Armitage, much to Frere's chagrin.

CHAPTER III. & IV.—Frere, after this interview with Hetty, rushes out into the night, followed at a distance by Everett, who cannot understand the cause of his agitation. Frere, on Salisbury Plain, meets Armitage, and a quarrel ensues between them. They fight, and Armitage prods Frere through the eye with a short stick which he carries, and while afterwards Frere dies, he finds that Frere is dead. He reaches home and finds a note waiting for him inviting him to a morning picnic on Salisbury Plain to join a young lady, Margaret Douglas, whom he much admires. He returns to rest, and next morning awakes with his memory a blank with regard to his encounter with Frere—the curse of his race has come upon him. He joins in the picnic, and chafes about his knowledge of Frere and Armitage, and wonders if the charge made against Everett, who has been accused of the murder, will be sustained. At the conclusion of the picnic he declares his love for Margaret, and is accepted.

CHAPTER V. & VI.—A witness of the terrible deed was Hetty Armitage, who suggests the facts to Armitage, but his mind is a perfect blank, he remembers nothing of the circumstances of the case, and has an idea that Everett did not himself kill the murderer. Hetty, terrified by this, confesses what she has seen to her aunt under a promise of secrecy.

## CHAPTER VII.

"Sit down, Hetty, and keep yourself quiet," said Mrs. Armitage.

Her manner had completely changed. A stealthy, fearful look crept into her face. She went on tiptoe to the door to assure herself over again that it was locked. She then approached the window, shut it, fastened it and drew a heavy moreen curtain across it.

"When one has secrets," she said, "it is best to be certain there are no cave-dwellers anywhere."

She then lit a candle and placed it on the centre of the little table.

Having done this, she seated herself—she didn't care to look at Hetty. She felt as if in a sort of way she had committed the murder herself. The knowledge of the truth impressed her so deeply that she did not care to encounter any eyes for a few minutes.

"Aunt Fanny, why don't you speak to me?" asked the girl at last.

"You are quite sure, child, that you have told me the truth?" said Mrs. Armitage then.

"Yes—it is the truth—is it likely that I could invent anything so fearful?"

"No, it isn't likely," replied the elder woman, "but I don't intend to trust just to the mere word of a slip of a giddy girl like you. You must swear it—is there a bible in the room?"

"Oh don't ask, I wish you wouldn't."

"Stop that silly whining of yours, Hetty; what do your wishes matter one way or the other? If you've told me the truth an awful thing has happened, but I won't stir in the matter until I know it's gospel truth. Yes, there's your Testament—the Testament will do. Now, Hetty Armitage, hold this book in your hand, and say before God in heaven that you saw Mr. Robert Armitage kill Mr. Horace Frere. Kiss the book, and tell the truth if you don't want to lose your soul."

Hetty trembled from head to foot. Her nature was impassioned—the hour—the terrible excitement she had just lived through—the solemn, frightened expression of her aunt's face, irritated her nerves to the last extent. She had the utmost difficulty in keeping herself from screaming aloud.

"What do you want me to do?" she said, holding the Testament between her limp fingers.

"Say these words: 'I, Hetty Armitage, saw Mr. Robert Armitage kill Mr. Horace Frere on Salisbury Plain last night. This is the truth, so help me God.'"

"I, Hetty Armitage, saw Mr. Robert Armitage kill Mr. Horace Frere on Salisbury Plain last night. This is the truth, so help me God," repeated Hetty, in a mechanical voice.

"Kiss the book now, child," said the aunt. Hetty raised it to her lips.

"Give me the Testament."

Mrs. Armitage took it in her hands.

"Aunt Fanny, what in the world do you mean to do now?" said the girl.

"You are witness, Hetty; you are witness to what I mean to do. It is all for the sake of the family. What are poor folk, like us and our consciences, and our secrets compared to the family? This book has not done its work yet. Now I am going to take an oath on the Testament. 'I, Frances Armitage, swear by the God above, and the bible He has given us, that I will never tell to mortal man the truth about this murder.'"

Mrs. Armitage finished her words by pressing the Testament to her lips.

"Now you swear," she said, giving the book back again to her niece.

Hetty did so. Her voice came out in broken sobs. Mrs. Armitage replaced the Testament on the top shelf of Hetty's little bookcase.

"There, she said, wiping her brow, 'that's done. You saw the murder committed; you and I have sworn that we'll never tell what we know. We needn't talk of it any more. Another man will swing for it. Let him swing. He is a nice fellow, too. He showed me the photograph of his mother one day. She had white hair and eyes like his. Mr. Everett said 'I am her only child, Mrs. Armitage; I'm all she has got. He had a pleasant smile—wonderful, and a good face. Poor lad, if it wasn't the Family I had to be true to I wouldn't let him swing. They say downstairs that the circumstantial evidence is black against him.'"

"Perhaps, after all, they cannot convict him, Aunt."

"What do you know about it? I say they

can and will; but don't let us talk of it any more. The one thing you and I have to do is to be true to the Family. There's not a second thought to be given to the matter. Sit down, Hetty; don't keep hovering about like that. I think I had better send you away from home; only I forgot, you are sure to be called upon as witness. You must see that your face doesn't betray you when you're cross-examined."

"No, it won't," said the girl. "I've got you to help me now. I can talk about it sometimes, and it won't lie so heavily on my heart. Aunt Fanny, do you really think Mr. Armitage forgets?"

"Do I think it? I know it. I don't trouble to think about what I know. It's in their blood. I tell you. The things they ought to remember are wiped out of their brains as clean as if you washed a slate after using it. My mother was cook in the Family, and her mother and her mother before her again. We are Perrys, and the Perrys had always a turn for cooking. We've cooked the dinner up at the Court for close on a hundred years. Don't you suppose I know their ways by this time?"

"Oh, I could tell you of fearful things. There have been dark deeds done before now and the men who did them had no more memory of their own sin than if they were babies of a month old. There was a Squire—two generations back he was—my grandmother knew him—and he had a son. The mother was—I but there—where's the use of going into that? The mother died raving mad and the Squire knew no more what he had done than the babe unborn. Folks call it the curse of God. It's an awful doom, and it always comes on just as it has fallen on the young Squire. There, comes a fit of passion—a desperate deed is done or a desperate sorrow is met, and all is blank. They wither up afterwards just as if the drought was in them. He'll die young, the young Squire will, just like his forefather. What's the good of crying Hetty? Crying won't save him—he'll die young. Blood for blood. God will require that young man's blood at his hands. He can't escape—it's in his race; but at least he shan't hang for it—if you and I can keep him from the gallows. Hetty, put your hand in mine and tell me all over again what you saw."

"I can't bear to go over it again, Aunt Fanny—it seems burnt into me like fire. I can think of nothing else—I can think of no face but Mr. Armitage's—I can only remember the look on his face when he bent over the man he had killed. I saw his face just for a minute by the light of the match, and I never could have believed that human face could have looked like that before. It was old—like the face of an old man. But I met him this evening, Aunt Fanny, and he had forgotten all about it and he was jolly and happy, and they say he was seen with Miss Douglas to day. The family had a picnic on the Plain, and Miss Douglas was there, with her uncle, Sir John Outburt, and there were a lot of other young ladies. Mr. Armitage went back to Outburtstone winning to the Court. I met him. All the world knows he worships the ground she walks on. I suppose he'll marry her by and bye, Aunt—he seemed so happy and contented to-night."

"I suppose he will marry her, child—that is the best thing that could happen to him, and she's a nice young lady and his equal in other ways. He happy, did you say? Maybe he is for a bit, but he's a gone man for all that—nothing, or no one can keep the doom of his house from him. What are you queezing my hand for Hetty?"

"I can't bear to think of the Squire marrying Miss Douglas."

"Stuff and nonsense! What is the Squire to you, except as one of the family. You'd better mind your station, Hetty, and leave your better to themselves. If you don't you'll get into awful trouble some day. But now the night is going on, and we've got something to do. Tell me again how the murder was done."

"The Squire ran at Mr. Frere, and the point of his stick ran into Mr. Frere's eye."

"What did he do with the stick?"

"He went to a copse of young alders and thrust in into the middle. Oh, it's safe enough."

"Nothing of the kind—it isn't safe at all. How do you know they won't cut those alders down and find the stick? Mr. Robert's walking stick is well known—it has a silver plate upon it with his name. Years hence people may come across that stick, and all the country will know at once who it belonged to. Come along Hetty—you and I have our work to do."

"What is that Aunt Fanny?"

"Before the morning dawns we must bury that stick where no one will find it."

"Oh, Aunt, don't ask me—I can't go back to the Plain again."

"You can and must—I wouldn't ask you, but I couldn't find the exact spot myself. I'll go down first and have a word with Armitage, and then return to you."

Mrs. Armitage softly unlocked the door of her niece's room, and going first to her own bedroom, washed her face with cold water; she then rubbed it hard with a rough towel to take some of the tell-tale expression out of it. Afterwards she stole softly down-stairs. Her husband was busy in the taproom. She opened the door, and called his name.

"Armitage, I want you a minute."

"Mercy on us, I thought you were in bed an hour ago, wife," he said. "Why do you look bad, what's the matter?"

"It isn't me, it's the child—she's hysterical. I've been having no end of a time with her: I came down to say that I'd sleep with Hetty to-night. Good night, Armitage."

"Good night," said the man. "Say, wife, though," he called after her, "see that you are up in good time to-morrow."

"Never fear," exclaimed Mrs. Armitage, as she ascended the creaking stairs. "I'll be down and about at six."

She re-entered her niece's bedroom and locked the door.

"How did you get out last night? she asked.

"Through the window."

"Well, you're a nice one. This is not the time to scold you however, and you and I have got to go out the same way now. They'll think we are in our bed—let them think it. Come, be quick—show me the way out. It's a goodish step from here to the Plain, we've not a minute to lose, and not a soul must see us going or returning."

Mrs. Armitage was nearly as slender and active as her niece. She accomplished the descent from the window without the least difficulty, and soon she and Hetty were walking quickly in the direction of the road, and did not meet a soul the entire way. During that walk neither woman spoke a word to the other. Presently they reached the Plain. Hetty trembled as she stood by the alder copse.

"Keep your courage up," whispered Mrs. Armitage, "we must bury that stick where no one can find it."

"Don't bury it, Aunt Fanny," whispered Hetty, "I have thought of something—there's the pond half a mile away. Let us weight the stick with stones and throw it into the pond."

"That's a good thought, child, we'll do it."

## CHAPTER VIII.

The village never forgot the week when the young Squire came of age. During that week many important things happened. The usual festivities were arranged to take place on Monday, for on that day the Squire completed his twenty-first year. On the following Thursday, Robert Armitage was to marry Margaret Douglas, and between these two days, namely on Tuesday or Wednesday, Frank Everett was to be tried for the murder of Horace Frere at Salisbury. It will be easily believed, therefore, that the excitement of the good folks all over the country reached high water mark. Quite apart from his position, the young Squire was much loved for himself. He was an interesting personality. Even if this had not been so, the fact of his coming of age, and the almost more interesting fact of his marriage, would fill all who knew him with a lively sense of pleasure. The public gaze would be naturally turned full upon this young man. But great as was the interest which all who knew him took in Armitage, it was nothing to that which was felt with regard to a man who was a stranger in the county, but whose awful fate now filled all hearts and minds. The strongest circumstantial evidence was against Frank Everett, but beyond circumstantial evidence there was nothing but good to be known of this young man. He had lived in the past, as far as all could tell, an immaculate life. He was the only son of a widowed mother. Mrs. Everett had taken lodgings in Salisbury, and was awaiting the issue of the trial with feelings which none could fathom.

As the week of her wedding approached Margaret Douglas showed none of the happy expectancy of a bride. Her face began to assume a worn and anxious expression. She could hardly think of anything except the coming trial. A few days before the wedding she earnestly begged her lover to postpone the ceremony for a short time.

"I cannot account for my sensations, Robert," she said. "The shadow of this awful tragedy seems to shut away the sunshine from me. You cannot, of course, help coming of age on Monday, but surely there is nothing unreasonable in my asking to have the wedding postponed for a week. I will own that I am superstitious—I come of a superstitious race—my grandmother had the gift of second sight—perhaps I inherit it also. I cannot say. Do yield to me in the matter, Robert. Do postpone the wedding."

Armitage stood close to Margaret. She looked anxiously into his eyes; they met hers with a curious expression of irritation in them. The young Squire was pale; there were fretful lines round his mouth.

"I told you before," he said, "that I am affected with a strange and unaccountable apathy with regard to this terrible murder. I try with all my might to get up sympathy for that poor unfortunate Everett. Try as I may, however, I utterly fail to feel even pity for him. Margaret, I would confess this to no one in the world but yourself. Everett is nothing to me—you are everything. Why should I postpone my happiness on Everett's account?"

"You are not well, dearest," said Margaret, looking at him anxiously.

"Yes, I am, Maggie," he replied. "You must not make me fanciful. I never felt better in my life, except—Here he pressed his hand to his brow."

"Except?" she repeated.

"Nothing really—I have a curious sensation of numbness in the back of my head. I should think nothing at all about it but for the fact—"

Here he paused, and looked ahead of him steadily.

"But for what fact, Robert?"

"You must have heard—it must have been whispered to you—everyone all over the country knows that sometimes, sometimes, Maggie, queer things happen to men of our house."

"Of course, I have heard of what you allude to," she answered brightly. "Do you think I mind? Do you think I believe in the thing? Not I. I am not superstitious in that way. So you, dear old fellow, are imagining that you are to be one of the victims of that dreadful old curse. Rest assured that you will be nothing of the kind. I have a cousin—he is in the medical profession—you shall know him when we go to London. I spoke to Dr. Rumsey once about this curious phase in your family history. He said it was caused by an extraordinary state of nerves, and that the resolute power of will was needed to overcome it. Dr. Rumsey is a very interesting man, Robert. He believed in heredity; who does not? but he also firmly believes that the power of will, rightly exercised, can be more powerful than heredity. Now, I don't mean you to be a victim to that old family failing, so please banish the thought from your mind once and for ever."

Armitage smiled at her.

"You cheer me," he said. "I am a lucky man to have found such a woman as you to be my wife. You will help to bring forward all that is best in me. Margaret, I feel that through you I shall conquer the curse which has in my blood."

"There is no curse, Robert. When your grandfather married a strong-minded Scotch wife, the curse was completely arrested—the spell removed."

"Yes," said Armitage, "of course you are perfectly right. My father has never



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suffered from a trace of the family malady, and as for me, I didn't know what nervousness meant until within the last month. I certainly have suffered from a stupid lapse of memory during the last month."

"We all forget things at times," said Margaret. "What is it that worries you?"

"Something so trifling that you will laugh when I tell you. You know my favourite stick?"

"Of course. By the way, you have not used it lately."

"I have not. It is lost. I have looked for it high and low, and racked my memory in vain to know where I could have put it. When last I remember using it, I was talking to that unfortunate young Frere in the underwood. I wish I could find it—not for the sake of the stick, but because, under my circumstances, I don't want to forget things."

"Well, everyone forgets things at times—you will remember where you have put the stick when you are not thinking of it."

"Quite true; I wish it didn't worry me, however. You know that poor Frere met his death in the most extraordinary manner. The man who killed him ran his walking stick into his eye. The doctors say that the ferrule of the stick entered the brain, causing instantaneous death. Everett carried a stick, but the ferrule was a little larger for the size of the wound made. Now my stick—"

"Really, Robert, I won't listen to you for another moment," exclaimed Margaret. "The next thing you will do is to assure me that your stick was the weapon which caused the murder."

"No," he replied, with a spasm of queer pain. "Of course, Maggie, there is nothing wrong, only with our peculiar idiosyncrasies, small lapses of memory make one anxious. I should be happy if I could find the stick, and happier still if this numbness would leave the back of my head. But your sweet society will soon put me right."

"I mean it to," she replied, in her firm way.

"You will marry me, dearest, on the twenty-fourth?"

"Yes," she answered, "you are first, first of all. I will put aside my superstition—the wedding shall not be postponed."

"Thank you a thousand times—how happy you make me."

Armitage went home in the highest spirits. The auspicious week dawned. The young Squire's coming of age went off without a flaw. The day was a perfect one in August. All the tenants assembled at the Court to welcome Armitage to his majority. His modest and graceful speech was applauded on all sides. He never looked better than when he stood on a raised platform and addressed the tenants who had known him from his babyhood. Some day he was to be their landlord. In Wiltshire the tie between landlord and tenant is very strong. The spirit of the feudal times still in a measure pervades this part of the country. The cheers which followed Armitage's speech rose high on the evening air. Immediately afterwards there was supper on the lawn, followed by a dance. Amongst those assembled, however, might have been seen two anxious faces—one of them belonged to Mrs. Armitage. She had been a young-looking woman for her years, until after the night of the murder—now she looked old, her hair was sprinkled with grey, her face had deep lines in it, there was a touch of irritation about her in manner. She and Hetty kept close together. Sometimes her hand clutched hold of the hand of her niece and gave it a hard pressure. Hetty's little hand trembled, and her whole frame quivered with almost uncontrollable agony when Mrs. Armitage did this. All the gay scene was ghastly mockery to poor Hetty. Her distress, her wasted appearance, could not but draw general attention to her. The little girl, however, had never looked more beautiful nor lovelier. She was observed by many people; strangers pointed her out to one another.

"Do you see that little girl with the beautiful face?" they said. "It was on her account that the tragedy took place."

Presently the young Squire came down and asked Mrs. Armitage to open the ball with him.

"You do me great honor, sir," she said. She hesitated, then placed her hand on his arm.

As he led her away, his eyes met those of Hetty.

"I'll give you a dance later on," he said, nodding carelessly to the young girl. She blushed and pressed her hand to her heart.

There wasn't a village lad in the entire assembly who would not have given a year of his life to dance even once with beautiful little Hetty, but she declined all the village boys' attentions that evening.

"She wasn't in the humour to dance,

she said. "Oh, yes, of course, she would dance with the Squire if he asked her, but she would not bestow her favors upon anyone else." She sat down presently in a secluded corner. Her eyes followed Armitage wherever he went. By and by Margaret Douglas noticed her. There was something about the childish sad face which drew out the compassion of Margaret's large heart. She went quickly across the lawn to speak to her.

"Good evening Hetty," she said. "I hope you are well?"

Hetty stood up; she began to tremble.

"Yes, Miss Douglas, I am quite well," she answered.

"You don't look well," said Margaret. "Why are you not dancing?"

"I haven't the heart to dance," said Hetty, turning suddenly away. Her eyes brimmed with sudden tears.

"Poor little girl! how could I be so thoughtless as to suppose she would care to dance," thought Margaret. "All her thoughts must be occupied with this terrible trial—Robert told me that she would be the principal witness. Poor little thing!"

"I feel for you—I quite understand you," she said. Her voice trembled with deep and full sympathy. "I see that you are suffering a great deal, but you will be better afterwards—you ought to go away afterwards—you will want change."

"I would rather stay at home, please, Miss Douglas."

"Well, I won't worry you. Here is Mr. Armitage. You haven't danced once, Hetty. Would you not like to have a dance with the Squire, just for luck? Yes, I see you would. Robert, come here."

"What is it?" asked Armitage. "Oh, is that you, Hetty? I have not forgotten our dance."

"Dance with her now, Robert," said Margaret. "There is a waltz just tripping up—I will meet you presently on the terrace."

Margaret crossed the lawn, and Armitage gave his arm to Hetty. She turned her large eyes upon him for a moment, her lips trembled, she placed her hand on his arm.

"Yes, I will dance with him once," she said to herself. "It will please me—I am doing a great deal for him, and it will strengthen me—to have this pleasure. Oh, I hope, I do hope I'll be brave and silent, and not let the awful pain at my heart get the better of me. Please, God, help me to be true to Mr. Robert."

"Come, Hetty, why won't you talk?" said the Squire; he gave her a kindly yet careless glance.

They began to waltz, but Hetty had soon to pause for want of breath.

"You are not well," said Armitage; "let me lead you out of the crowd. Here, let us sit the dance out under this tree; now you are better, are you not?"

"You, sir, oh, yes, Mr. Robert, I am much better now." She panted as she spoke.

"How pale you are," said Armitage, "and you used to be such a blooming, rosy, little thing. Well, never mind," he added hastily. "I ought not to forget that you have a good deal to worry you just now. You must try to keep up your courage. All you have to do to-morrow when you go into court is to tell the entire and exact truth."

"You don't mean me to do that, you can't," said Hetty. She opened her eyes and gave a wild start of alarm. The next moment her whole face was covered with confusion. "Oh, what have I said?" she cried, in consternation. "Of course I will tell the exact and perfect truth."

"Of course," said Armitage, surprised at her manner. "You'll be under oath, remember." He stood up as he spoke.

"Now let me take you to your aunt."

"One moment first, Mr. Robert; I'd like to ask you a question."

"Well, Hetty, what is it?" said the young man, kindly.

Hetty raised her eyes for a moment, then she lowered them.

"It's a very awful thing, the kind of thing that God doesn't forgive," she said in a whisper, "for—a girl to tell a lie when she's under oath."

"It is perjury," said Armitage, in a sharp, short voice. "Why should you worry your head about such a matter?"

"Of course not, sir, only I'd like to know I hope you'll be very happy with your good lady, Mr. Armitage, when you're married. I think I'll go home now, sir. I'm not quite well, and it makes me giddy to dance. I wish you a happy life, sir, and—"

And Miss Douglas was gone. If you see Aunt Fanny, Mr. Robert, will you tell her that I've gone home?"

"Yes, to be sure I will. Good-bye, Hetty. Here, shake hands, won't you? God bless you, little girl. I hope you will soon be all right."

Hetty crept slowly away; she looked like a little grey shadow as she returned to the village, passing silently through the lovely gardens and all the sweet summer world. Beautiful as she was, she was out of keeping with the summer and the time of gaiety.

Against Armitage's wish Margaret insisted on being present during the first day of the trial. Everett's trial would in all probability occupy the whole of two days. Armitage was to appear in court as witness. His evidence and that of Hetty Armitage and the labourer who had seen Frere running across the Plain, would probably sum up the case against the prisoner. Hetty's evidence, however, was the most important of all. Some of the neighbours said that Hetty would never have strength to go through the trial. But when the little creature stepped into the witness box, there was no perceptible want of energy about her—her cheeks were pink with the colour of excitement, her lovely eyes shone brightly. She gave her testimony in a clear, penetrating, slightly defiant voice. That voice of hers never once faltered. Her eyes full of desperate courage were fixed firmly on the face of the solicitor who examined her. Even the terrible ordeal of cross-examination was borne without flinching; nor did Hetty once commit herself, or contradict her own evidence. At the end of the cross-examination, however, she faltered off. It was noticed afterwards by eye witnesses that Hetty's whole evidence had been given with her face slightly turned away from that of the accused man. It was after she had inadvertently met his eyes that she turned white to the very lips, and fell down fainting in the witness box. She was carried away immediately, and murmurs of sympathy followed her as she was taken out of the court. Hetty was undoubtedly the heroine of the occasion. Her remarkable beauty, her modesty, the ring of truth which seemed to pervade all her unwilling words, told fatally against poor Everett.

She was obliged to return to the court on the second day, but Margaret did not go to Salisbury on that occasion. After the first day of the trial Margaret spent a sleepless night. She was on the eve of her own wedding, but she could not think of anything but Everett and Everett's mother. Mrs. Everett was present at the trial. She wore a widow's dress and her veil was down but once or twice she raised it and looked at her son, the son also glanced at his mother. Margaret had seen these glances, and they wrung her heart to its depths. She felt that she could not be in Court when the verdict was given. She was so excited with regard to the issue of the trial that she gave no attention to those minor matters which usually occupy the minds of young brides.

"It