

**MISS ARMSTRONG'S
AND OTHER
CIRCUMSTANCES**

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Miss Armstrong's and Other Circumstances by John Davidson

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NEW YORK
STONE & KIMBALL

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MISS ARMSTRONG'S CIRCUM-
STANCES

AFTER all, my friends have been mistaken ; my experiences are not nearly so exciting as they appeared to be when I saw them through their spectacles. They insisted that I had only to write down an exact chronicle of the days of the years of my life to be the author of a record as interesting as any novel. I was pretty well persuaded of the truth of their judgment when I began to write my history ; but I had not proceeded far when doubts began to spring up, and by the time I had arrived at my seventh chapter, and the end of my seventeenth year, I was so tired of writing, and of my subject, that I threw my pen in the fire, and stowed away my papers in an old band-box, out of sight and out of mind.

I have read somewhere that if a woman once falls in love, and then falls out of it,

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she has no peace until she is again swimming for life in a high-sea of passion. (I had better state here that I am just nineteen. The English master used to object to my figures of speech; but I am writing this entirely for my own satisfaction, and mean to give my imagination free scope.) It seems to me that literary composition is like love. When one has begun to write something of one's own, it doesn't matter how disgusted one may become, one returns to the ink-pot like a drunkard to his cups. So, after three months, I unearthed the bandbox, and read over my seven chapters. There were only two interesting pages in the whole manuscript, and those were the two last. All the early incidents in my life which my friends thought so wonderful were of no moment to me. My birth in Paris during the siege; the death of my father, a Scotch Socialist, on a barricade; my French mother's penniless journey to London; our life as beggars; my mother's second marriage to a philanthropic City man; my running away when I was seven, and my wanderings for a fortnight; my attempt to poison my baby-

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brother with matches ; my attack on my philanthropic step-papa with a poker ; my exile to a suburban boarding-school ; my step-papa's fraudulent bankruptcy and disappearance, and the deaths of my poor mother and her little boy — all this was narrated in a dull, frigid manner, quite up to the degree of stupidity that would have registered ' Excellent ' on Mr. Standard, the English master's meter. (I wonder what he would think of that metaphor !) A great deal, doubtless, might be made out of my early life, and when I am older I may be able to embody it in some readable way ; but in the meantime it is impossible for me to put myself in the place of the little girl I was. This is simply because I did not begin to be self-conscious until I was seventeen. When my life ceases to be as full as it has been of late, I shall doubtless be able to study myself from the beginning. At present I am driven as if by some power outside me to write an account of a certain day in my life. I don't like writing, so I am going to make it as short as I can.

First of all, I shall quote the last two pages of my manuscript :

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'It was at the age of seventeen, when I found myself in a position of dependence in the house of a relative of my stepfather's, that I first began to look upon myself as a *circumstance*. Doubtless this notion arose from something I had read, but I have never been able to trace its origin. One night while I was sitting alone in my room, the thought came to me that the whole world was an experiment. Here was I, a tall, handsome girl, already a woman in appearance, thrust by circumstances into a family that would have preferred to do without me. Were circumstances playing off a serio-comic practical joke on this family and me? But my fancy took a higher flight. I saw circumstances in the shape of the professor of chemistry and his lean assistant shaking up folk and families, and towns and countries, in bottles and beakers; braying stubborn folks like me in mortars: precipitating, calcining, sifting, subliming, filtering powers and principalities, companies and corporations; conducting a stupendous qualitative analysis of the world. I thought, "Since it's all an experiment, how can we help it if