

**FOR BETTER,
NOT FOR WORSE**

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For Better, Not for Worse by Langton George Vere

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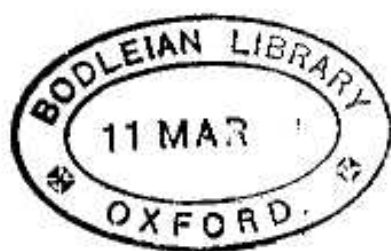
BY
REV. LANGTON GEORGE VERE.



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1882

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CHAPTER I.

A GOOD SAMARITAN.

A MISERABLY wet and windy October day had worn on in all its dulness and bleakness. Dusk came, and it still rained and blew, it was still dull and bleak, in that usually miserable quarter of London which lies between the more genteel portion of the great Mudford Estate and the muddy waters of the Thames. Through all this storm a manly figure, with a steady purpose, bent its way towards a narrow street of small dimensions, but which, in contrast to the neighbouring thoroughfares and no-thoroughfares, was of neat and orderly appearance. This street had no exit, but was bounded at the end by the iron railings of a churchyard. The storm charged fiercely at the wayfarer as he turned into this secluded spot. He was evidently a stranger to the neighbourhood, for after passing up one side

of the street and partly down the other he stopped as if in indecision at an open door. Within this door stood a dark-haired, pale-faced child, with her little shawl drawn over her head, evidently expecting some one. Seeing the stranger, she asked :

‘Are you looking for old Mr. Bolton, sir?’ then observing in his manner an answer in the affirmative, she quickly added : ‘He lives here, sir ; if you come upstairs, please, I will show you his room.’

Throwing her shawl over her arm, the child, with a light and fairy-like step, hurried up the steep and awkward staircase to the top story, where she rapped gently at a door, opened it and entered. Going quietly to a bed in an opposite corner, she whispered softly :

‘Mr. Bolton, here is a gentleman wishes to see you.’

She then passed to the chimney-piece, took down a candle, which she lighted, and was about to retire, when the old man beckoned her to his bedside. Few more touching sights has this week-day world witnessed than the scene in that attic. Not much romance, surely, our patient readers will say, in a rickety old room, a poor old man and a pauper child ! Perhaps not, but we shall see ; if not romantic, it was real. Heaven knows it does the human heart good to see reality in any shape or form in this false and flattering age. Being real, it was touching.

The room was poorly, but nevertheless substantially furnished, and most neat and clean. There was that luxurious piece of furniture which one so frequently meets in the homes of the sober and struggling poor, a large chest of drawers, on the top of which was displayed quite a profusion of glasses, cups, china images and nicknacks of not over-artistic design or perfect finish. The walls were literally covered with pictures of various shapes and subjects. A battle here, the Iron Duke there, Her Gracious Majesty and Lord Raglan, some few religious prints, highly coloured, and others of like nature, met the eye on every side. A couple of wooden chairs, a small bedstead, a little stool with basin and pitcher and a deal table, completed the furniture of the humble abode. He who lay sick upon the bed was a fine, handsome, soldierly old man with a flowing grey beard and venerable head. The child who bent over him was about fifteen years old, rather tall, but delicately and lightly formed. Her dress with its long sleeves was very neat, and of a dark common material, over which was a pinafore gathered at the waist with a band; spotless in its whiteness, but patched and darned here and there. Her long black hair hung in loose profusion over her shoulders. Her face was singularly pleasing, more intelligent and handsome than beautiful. It was too marked with thought and care, too delicate and wan to form the ideal beauty which it suggested.

The large dark-brown eyes deeply fringed, the forehead high and intellectual, the lips thin and somewhat compressed, gave to the thoughtful face of the dark-haired child an expression which, once seen, it was difficult to banish from the memory. Such was the child upon whom the stranger gazed as he entered the room.

'Lizzie,' said the sick man, 'Lizzie dear, when your mother comes in, tell her I should like to speak to her.' Then turning to the stranger, he added: 'I am sorry, Doctor, to have dragged you out on such a night; but I was so ill when I sent this afternoon, when the good Priest came, that he gave me a letter to send round to the Dispensary.'

The Doctor, all this time, had stood with an abstracted air, his eyes riveted on the child, who, after raising the poor sick patient, had quietly busied herself with putting together the fire, and then noiselessly retired. Hearing the word 'Dispensary,' he turned to the speaker and said in a somewhat embarrassed manner:

'I beg your pardon, but you were saying——'

'That I was very sorry——'

'Pray make no excuse, my good man.'

Then taking the sick man's hand he felt his pulse, asked him kindly several questions, assured him that there was no danger, that what he wanted was quiet, a little attentive nursing, and that he would soon get round again.

'I will put you up a little medicine if you can send round for it this evening.'

'My little nurse, the child who has just left us, will be only too glad to go for it.'

'But,' urged the Doctor, 'the child looks delicate, and it's such a wet and stormy night—couldn't you find a more robust messenger?'

'I see,' said the old man, 'you are a kind-hearted gentleman. But, deary me, little Lizzie has at times to rough the storm: the lot of the fatherless poor is a very hard one!'

The Doctor had drawn a chair to the bedside and sat down while speaking.

'You seem interested in that child, to judge from your looks,' continued the sick man.

'You judge rightly. I *am* interested, and should much like to know who and what she is.'

'Well, that's Lizzie Mount: she is the favourite, the pet of us all. A more gentle little creature never breathed, yet she has a good spirit and a mighty strong will of her own on some points. I've been in many a land as an old soldier, and before and since then as a trusted servant. I've seen the daughters of many a lord and lady, yet for gentleness and sweetness of manner I'd back my little nurse agen them all.'

'So she nurses you, does she?'

'Why, you see, her mother is a widow woman, and is out at work all day, and little Lizzie is a teacher at our school hard by; but between hours, and when her mother can spare her, she runs up here and tends on me, a poor lone man, who haven't