

THAT CHILD

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That Child by Margaret Roberts & Gordon Browne

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MARGARET ROBERTS & GORDON BROWNE

THAT CHILD



"By-and-by she sat up with a feeling that surely some one must come to comfort her."—P. 35.

Frontispiece.



"THAT CHILD."

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE ATELIER DU LYS," "IN THE OLDEN TIME,"
"SYDONIE'S DOWRY," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY GORDON BROWNE.

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and bask there for hours before even a cart passes, perhaps until the shadows of the houses opposite lengthen with sunset, and take the warmth from him. The market-hall stands at its mouth, a quaint edifice, constructed of wood and red and black plaster, mounted on wooden legs. A little old staircase leads up to the hall overhead, and on the broad step made by the edge of the stone floor below, two or three old men from St. Wulfstan's almshouse, who look almost as aged as the old hall, and much more decrepit, are sure to be sitting on fine days, slowly dropping out a remark now and then, as they feebly smoke, with crutch or stick laid beside them, and look out into the sunny vacancy of the street, and note who chances to come in and out of the gates of the opposite garden. They are now the only token left to remind Ashbury that once there had existed a great charitable foundation, known as St. Wulfstan's Hospital, but which now had dwindled down to a bare maintenance for a few old people.

That it had done so was an ever-present annoyance to Simon Ashbury, a great antiquarian and archæologist, who lived close to the market-hall, in

an ancient corner house, black and white, with square, projecting windows filled with little diamond panes, high gables, and a small garden, through which a flagged path led to the door,—a house evidently always kept in good preservation by owners who were very proud of it. For at least four hundred years it had always been inhabited by Ashburys, a family who bore the same name as the town in which they lived, and who were equally proud of name and house; but now the long line was ending in a widower, who had married late in life, and one year later stood by the grave of his wife and child in the shadow of the fine old church, which stood at the end of the narrow passage leading past his house, out of the High-street, with a great bell-tower standing beside it. It looked like a strong keep, only with a much more modern spire perched like a fool's cap upon its venerable head, to the indignation of all antiquaries.

Since that time, which seemed quite to crush him, Simon Ashbury had retired more and more into himself, taking little share in such society as the country town offered, and spending his days in studying music, for which he had a great gift. On

the death of the old organist, he had volunteered to take his place unpaid, to the great satisfaction of the vicar, who did not know one tune from another, and thenceforward thankfully devolved all the musical part of the service on Simon, no heavy burden after all, for the choir attempted nothing beyond hymns and chanting the Doxology; but such of the congregation as were musical listened with delight to the voluntaries which he played as the congregation entered and left the church, while others grumbled occasionally about the length of them. Indeed, though kept in some order as to how long he played while people came in, by a signal from the chorister nearest him when he seemed oblivious how time was passing, he would go on playing in the empty building, unconscious of all but his music and his thoughts, until the clerk came to warn him that he was about to lock up the church, and that the blower wanted to go home to dinner; and even then, had not the air suddenly ceased to fill the pipes, perhaps Simon would have still played on.

Over the way, on the other side of the market-hall, stood the red-brick house belonging to Miss

Philippa Beaumont, in its own grounds, with a wide lawn and great trees about it. Compared to the black-and-white houses of the High-street, this one was quite modern, although it dated at latest from Queen Anne's time. Here for many years two maiden sisters had lived a very quiet life, though by rank and fortune by far the most leading people in Ashbury. The elder had died just before the making of the railway, which ran about a mile from the town—some people said that she had been so much perturbed by the innovation that it had killed her. The younger went on living her solitary life in the red-brick house, rarely going from home, and as rarely inviting any guests; she read a great deal and gave away a great deal of money. There was a third sister, but she had struck out a line for herself after their father's death, years before. She was of another nature to the two elder ones,—an active, bustling person, who had become a sort of free lance of charity, doing little bits of hard work, now here, now there, in her own peculiar fashion, useful, esteemed, but far less liked or likeable than her sisters. She had not been in Ashbury for some years; her good

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works absorbed her almost entirely; and besides, although a good woman, she had not the knack of getting on happily with her relations, and generally disapproved so decidedly both of their tastes and their styles of charity that it was clearly best they should live apart.

She disapproved particularly of an act of kindness shown by Philippa after the eldest sister's death, or rather of the way in which it was done. "Most injudicious," she both said and wrote. "Bring up that child if you will, but make her fit to earn her bread instead of pampering her," but she spoke and wrote in vain. "That child" was one known in Ashbury as *Avice Seaman*, and she had at one time aroused a strong general interest in the town, although it had died out since, as time effaced the recollection of a great calamity, and people grew accustomed to her presence; but any allusion to *Avice* would still recall the memory of that winter night of icy wind and blinding snow, when, while the Ashbury folks sat quietly by warm hearths, two trains ran into one another at the mouth of a tunnel a couple of miles away, and in an instant all was confusion, wounds, shrieks,