

**A MERE CYPHER, A
NOVEL. IN THREE
VOLUMES, VOL. II**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649511471

A Mere Cypher, a Novel. In Three Volumes, Vol. II by Mary Angela Dickens

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MARY ANGELA DICKENS

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A NOVEL

BY

MARY ANGELA DICKENS

AUTHOR OF "CROSS CURRENTS."

"Not are those empty-hearted whose low sound
Reverbs no hollowness."

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London

MACMILLAN & CO.

AND NEW YORK

1893

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A MERE CYPHER

CHAPTER I.

FROM a street of houses the uniform white paint of which has taken on varying shades of grime, from white paving-stones and a narrow road, it is not possible, granted any quantity of sunshine, to produce colour; but it is possible to produce glare. In an atmosphere so laden with smoke and dust that even the sky looks pale and dirty it is not possible to produce exhilaration; but it is possible to produce almost unlimited oppression. Foiled on the one side the full power of the sun may be concentrated on the other, and nature's great magician become a tyrant.

In a small crescent in Bloomsbury cause and effect of this description were equally rife one August morning, five years after the spring which Norman Strange had spent at Thornsdyke. It was not yet ten o'clock, but the sun had been beating pitilessly down for the last five hours ; and there was something cruel and relentless in the steady brilliance with which it scorched the ugly houses and the dusty road, making the ugliness uglier and the dust more all-pervading, until it seemed that no November fog or February downpour could be so unendurably dreary as that glaring summer sunshine.

The houses were not provided with sun-blinds ; in most of them the choice lay between the semi-darkness and total airlessness of tightly-closed venetian blinds, and the full glare of the sun. In the first-floor

room of one of those in which the former alternative had been chosen, somewhat late for the meal though it was, Mrs. Custance and her husband were at breakfast. It was a small, furnished house, and the room was the description of dining-room inevitable under the circumstances, rather shabby, rather dingy, essentially wanting in any sort of charm. One of the closely-drawn venetian blinds wanted mending, there was a great gap between two of the laths, and the ray of hot, vivid sunshine which came through and fell across the room in a great glaring bar, bringing with it a suggestion of what lay outside that seemed to add to the oppression of the atmosphere within, seemed to touch nothing in which it did not bring into strong relief the ugliness and dreariness which the surrounding dimness hardly seemed to soften. It would have

been difficult to say exactly what was wrong. The room was scrupulously clean and neat; the ugly sideboard was in no need of polish; dust, except in that relentless ray of light, was nowhere to be seen; nor was there any painfully apparent air of poverty; but there was a curiously forlorn and unhomelike appearance which was not merely the ordinary characteristic of the furnished house, but which suggested a total want of hope or interest in the care bestowed upon it.

Silence had been quite unbroken since breakfast began. Once Dr. Custance had looked up from his plate as though to make a remark, and the nervous start with which his wife received the movement was a proof that such an occurrence was an exception. Something in the paper propped before him, however, had apparently caught his eye at the moment; he had not spoken, and after