

BELLE

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Belle by Evelyn Whitaker

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EVELYN WHITAKER

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BY THE AUTHOR OF

"MISS TOOSEY'S MISSION," "LADDIE,"
"TIP-CAT," "DON," "POMONA,"
"LIL," Etc.



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BELLE.

CHAPTER I.

THE BANK MANAGER.

And he that stands upon a slippery place
Makes nice of no vile hold to stay him up.

SHAKESPEARE.

A VERY dull house in a country town, with the pavement running so very close outside the dining-room windows that, in spite of the wire blinds and the frequently dingy condition of the panes, the family meals were clearly discernible to inquisitive passers-by. As the arrangements of the Hastings' household, their economies and parsimonies, were greatly discussed in Duckington, it spoke highly for the good manners of the place that there were not constantly rows of spectators on the pavement outside, and that for the most part passers-by contented themselves with a quick sidelong glance out of the corners of their eyes.

I have often observed this sense of honor in very exposed situations like the Hastings' dining-room; while, where curiosity is more difficult to gratify, people will peep and listen and stand on tiptoe without compunction.

Even Bob Court, the idiot, would not have liked to lean his elbows on the window-ledge and stare in, though the Hastings might have been having goose for dinner, which I can tell you was not very often.

There was a drawing-room behind, not exposed to the public gaze, looking out on a ragged strip of garden the width of the house. The nearer part of this had at one time been kept gay with flowers, with smooth turf and rolled gravel-paths, but it now showed all too plainly that one of the Hastings' economies was the gardener, or rather the absence of one; though Mrs. Hastings still protested against the family washing coming within flapping distance of the drawing-room window, or unornamental domestic work being performed within sight of it.

Beyond the domain that used to be so gay with flowers were, in old days, rows of trim vegetables, and Mr. Hastings used to pride himself on having the earliest peas and the largest cauliflowers in Duckington. Now there were forlorn cabbage-stalks, and mats of luxuriant weeds, and groundsel enough to supply all the canaries for miles round if their owners were at a loss for that commodity.

Beyond this again there always had been a rough, little bit, the neatest garden requiring a rubbish-heap; and here Belle had been allowed to reign supreme. She could begin gold-mining operations, or construct battlements, or prepare a wigwam or a fairy palace or waterworks, dig, plant, clear, and level as the whim directed her; and she was rarely without some direction of the sort of an overmastering vehemence,