

**A MERE CYPHER, A
NOVEL; IN THREE
VOLUMES, VOL. III**

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

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MARY ANGELA DICKENS

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NOVEL; IN THREE
VOLUMES, VOL. III**

A MERE CYPHER

A Novel

BY
MARY ANGELA DICKENS

AUTHOR OF "GROSS CURRENTS."

"Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound
Reverbs no hollowness."

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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AND NEW YORK

1893

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A MERE CYPHER

CHAPTER I.

MRS. CUSTANCE made no attempt to detain him ; she made no movement, indeed, of any kind. Her eyes had dilated a little as he spoke, and a certain faint shock had passed across her face. Then she remained exactly as he left her, her eyes fixed as though they were still meeting his, until she started painfully as Stella Chisholm's voice struck on her ear.

"Here are the rest of the books," said Stella, indicating the burdens borne by the train of boys who followed her. "Thank

you, boys. Now you can run off and play, all of you. No, there's really nothing more for you to do, thanks."

The boys departed accordingly, with many proffers of further assistance, and when the door was shut upon the last of them Mrs. Custance and Stella were alone in the room.

"What peace!" exclaimed Stella, in a tone the easy brightness of which was rather exaggerated. "Now, Mrs. Custance, we shall get on splendidly."

They got on very silently, at least. For nearly half an hour they worked, no word passing between them. And as the moments passed away, over the faces of the girl and of the woman there came a change of expression that subtly modified the characteristics of each.

With every moment of their silent labour

there grew upon Stella a pale preoccupation which seemed to displace in the growing something of her youth and freshness, to make the distance less that lay between her and the tired woman by her side. With every moment something of its apathy and dulness gave way in Mrs. Custance's face before a light of growing purpose—nervous indeed, self-distrustful, and most ill-assured, but still purpose.

The piles of books by which they were surrounded disappeared rapidly ; but Stella's brisk, capable hands had often to wait idle—though she herself appeared unconscious of the fact—as Mrs. Custance's movements became always slower and more confused. They had begun upon the last pile, and Mrs. Custance was collecting an armful of books from it, and dropping them as fast as she picked them up, when she said

awkwardly, without any preface or introduction of the subject, and with her dull voice a little duller than usual, as though something suppressed it :

“ I have known Mr. Strange a long time now.”

Stella was kneeling upright, her hands resting idly on the packing-case. She started violently at the sound of Mrs. Custance's voice, and turned towards her involuntarily, her pale, absorbed face flushing slightly. Then the sense of what Mrs. Custance had said seemed to dawn on her ; her face hardened, and she stretched out her hands for the books the other held, saying only “ Thanks ! ” as though the words required no answer.

“ Six years—it is six years—is a long time,” continued Mrs. Custance in the same tone, as a dull colour rose in her wan face.

"Yes," returned Stella with cold indifference. "I am ready, please, Mrs. Custance."

Mrs. Custance turned mechanically towards the pile of books and went on speaking, ignoring Stella's obvious intention of changing the subject, except inasmuch as her voice was not quite steady, as she said, infelicitously enough as regards grammar:

"And when one lives in the same house with any one, one gets to know them well."

Stella glanced up, as though surprised.

"Did Mr. Strange ever live in your house?" she said involuntarily.

"Yes." The flat voice was very low, and there was a moment's pause. Then, before Stella could speak, Mrs. Custance turned to her suddenly, the pile of books she had collected unthought of in her hands.

"You haven't heard the details," she