Esther Summerson

A Novelette in a Dickensian Style

By Maryanne Peters

Chapter One

“I have a proposal for you, Mr. Summers,” she said. She appeared to me to be a fine woman, of imperious bearing and with an expensive frock – totally out of place in the gatehouse where we first met that day.

I confess that I was mightily depressed that morning. I had a sleepless night, the night before that morning. My mind was brim full of my woes, and there seemed no way out. My debts, that were the reason for my incarceration, were the least of my worries. It was now clear that my actions could be properly construed as fraud, which meant prosecution must follow. It seemed doubtful that I would ever taste freedom again. I could say nothing. My reply was to look at her glumly. If she had no pistol for me to put to my head, she was of no use to me.

“My son, whom I care for deeply, is a man of unusual, some might say perverse, proclivities,” she said. He needs a wife, for reasons I can explain in time, but that wife cannot be … well, she cannot be entirely female…”.

She looked at me as if to invite some response, but I was capable of nothing.

She continued: “I was in the civil courts last week on the matter of my late father’s estate, and I saw you. My immediate thought was that you might be the person my son could be happy with. You are clearly well educated and correctly brought up, putting aside your offending for a moment. And your countenance is … shall I say, I find you pretty. Not at all masculine.”

“Madam,” I said, summoning my deepest voice. “I can assure you that I am a normal man in every way. If you are attempting to procure me to engage in some indecency with your unfortunate son, then I cannot assist you. I am aware of the perversion you speak of, but I am not of that nature.”

“Frankly, I do not care about your nature in such areas,” she said. “Your other qualification is that you are desperate – or you ought to be. My solicitor has scrutinised your case and assures me that you are in a great deal of difficulty. You have debts and you face prosecution. It is here in Marshalsea Debtors Prison that you might stay, or if you are convicted you face the horrors of Newgate Prison, with the debt still remaining if you ever come out. And with your only qualifications being with a pen, a conviction will prevent you from gaining the employment necessary to repay what you owe, I think. Your position, I humbly suggest, is dire. Survival should be your sole concern.”

She need not have reminded me. I was of a delicate disposition. That I knew only too well. I had been sickly in my youth, and so more inclined to books than an outdoor life. I had intelligence, inherited from my late mother, as also was my general appearance. Of slight build, and “pretty” the lady had called me. It was not a description that I enjoyed, but it was probably accurate. Newgate presented terror to any man, but for me, multiplied in the extreme.

“How could you rectify my situation?” I asked. Somehow the prospect of being buggered by this lady’s son had been put aside.

“I can repay your debt by paying the offended party,” she said. “I am confident that they can be persuaded not to bring evidence in the fraud matter. You would be free but indebted to my family. The only condition is that my son will need to approve of you. If he does then you must commit your life to him. But at least you will have a life.”

“So, you are buying my debt on the condition that I commit to a life being sodomised by your son?” I asked, the sneer of disgust obvious as it was deliberate.

“I should venture to add that it will be a life of some luxury and pleasure,” she said, with that same imperious air. “A few minutes of discomfort every now and again is no worse than any low-born woman faces to secure a privileged life among her betters. We do not complain. Nor should you. But the choice is yours. If you say yes, I will arrange for my son to visit you tomorrow, to approve of you or not. Otherwise, our business terminates forthwith.”

It seemed to me that she had betrayed her own humble origins, but her point was well made. We all must suffer indignities of life. Some are born to more than others, and some take the risk of ignominy upon themselves.

My thinking was that I should not ignore any opportunity to free myself from my predicament. If I kept all avenues open I could consider my position overnight. So, I said to her that she should send her son the following day. Which she did.

In anticipation of his arrival I had taken the step of shaving very closely and wearing a flamboyant necktie. I may even have adopted a slightly feminine flourish in my gestures. None of this was my manner, but I had determined overnight that my best course was to accept the terms offered by the lady, however unpleasant, and escape my present incarceration.

I reasoned that I would have some control over my destiny if she could deliver what she promised. As for the sodomy, I knew by repute that if I were sent to Newgate that would be my fate in any event. Somehow the prospect seemed tolerable if between clean bedsheets.

The gatekeeper told me that a Mr Dedlock had come to call upon me, so I went to the antechamber but I never met him. He only looked at me through the grille. I could see his eyes, which were dark and wide. I thought that I could hear him panting slightly. His eyes looked down to my legs in my tight trousers which were the style of the time. I could not help but look down to them also, and when I raised my eyes he was gone.

Approval was evidenced by the documents that arrived that afternoon. A contract of indenture had been drawn up between myself and the Trustees for the Dedlock Family. I acknowledged liability to the Trustees for my debts that they would by, and I promised to serve in any capacity of their choosing.

Before you judge me, do me the courtesy of considering my situation from my own viewpoint. Others have the good fortune to be able to choose a milder fate. I did not enjoy that privilege.

Chapter Two

She awaited me in the sitting room of her London home, a residence of comfort without being opulent.

“Your name will be Esther Summerson,” said Lady Dedlock, she with whom I had struck this odd bargain. “I have asked of our family friend, Mr Jarndyce, that he be your guardian in this matter. A young woman such as you will be, needs to have a guardian.”

The idea still seemed to me to be preposterous, but here was I, freshly discharged from debtors’ prison and being prepared for my journey to the home of the Dedlocks, mother and son, the place that was to be my home. As if to remind me that I was at liberty of a kind, the day was fine and the air remarkably clear and without the foul odours common in London of late. So the windows were open.

“Mr Jarndyce has another ward,” she continued. “Ada Clare will assist you to prepare for your travels. She is a young lady much concerned with her appearance, so you would be well served by following her example and her instructions. My Butler, Mr Smoot, will show you to your room and Ada will join you when she arrives.”

I was led up the stairs to a bed chamber two flights up – spacious and well appointed but doubtlessly not the finest room in the house. On the bed there were laid out women’s clothes including a corset, chemise, bloomers, stockings, petticoats, and a hoop skirt, plus an outer dress, bonnet and gloves. There were boxes of shoes in different sizes.

Seemingly immediately Ada burst into the room without knocking. She was small and pretty, and her face was flushed and full of enthusiasm.

“Esther,” she said. “We will be great friends.”

The appellation still seemed odd, in particular and I was still dressed entirely as a man, albeit in clothing as close to rags as a gentleman could allow. But her greeting made it clear that she was well part of this outrageous scheme. Quite how we should be great friends in that event, was, for the moment, unclear.

“Apparently, you are to assist me with my disguise,” I remarked, in a not entirely friendly manner.

“This will be no disguise,” she assured me. “This will be a new life. And I hope a happy one. I am informed that you have suffered great misfortune. I can assure you that in having the patronage of Lady Dedlock and having my treasured Mr Jarndyce as your guardian, your troubles are over.”

Her happy demeanour made it hard for me not to smile, although my fate seemed far less humorous. I had still not really met the young man who had been promised my fundamental orifice, and the very thought of that still weighed heavily upon me.

“Take those clothes off,” she directed.

“I am sure that would not be decent,” I replied, out of concern for her disposition, as becomes a gentleman.

“Nonsense,” she said. “You must get used to this. We are both young ladies, you and I, from now on. How can I help you if you will not dress appropriately for your new sex? Now, take your clothes off. I have already drawn a bath and we have much work to do to see you properly presented before dinnertime.”

The bath was in a room next door and was hot and scented with a floral perfume. There was a razor on the dresser but no shaving brush for my beard, as I pointed out.

“Goodness no,” exclaimed Ada. “Those whiskers on you face will need to be pulled out immediately. The razor will suffice for your body. Every inch of it must be denuded of hair, from neck to toe. And what you cannot do yourself, I will do for you. For now, it is not seeing you naked that will offend me but seeing a lady with ugly hair upon her body.”

To my great discomfort and embarrassment, she set about her work, pulling off my clothes, ripping the beard from my face with hot wax, and shaving me to what felt like an inch below the skin. If I had felt naked without clothes, then the feeling of a body without hair doubled the humiliation. I sank into the bath to hide myself.

“Your hair will be very pretty, given time to grow,” she said. “It is fair and soft, and not cut for sometime is my guess. Nevertheless, we will need to promote its growth. I have many preparations that will assist. Some brought from India by Mr. Woodcourt. It is said that the women there have the longest hair in the world. But until it is grown, there is enough length to use a hair-piece under your bonnet for some ringlet curls.”

“Do you know Lady Dedlock’s son?” I asked, that still being my greatest concern.

“He is unusual,” she said. “But in his heart he is a good man. He is a man in need of the right kind of partner for life. A woman on the outside but not underneath, it seems clear. I think that you could be the one who can make him achieve his full potential. And that is exactly what his mother wants.”

“I see,” I said, betraying some discomfort I would suggest.

“In life we all seek partners that can make us better people. Don’t you agree, Esther?”

It was a little unclear whether she was referring to my criminal past or Mr Dedlock’s present perversion, but It did show me that Ada was insightful and kind. The prospect of us being such good friends now seemed more likely.

Chapter Three

On board our carriage was Ada and me, Mr Jarndyce and Richard Carstone, a young man with an obvious interest in Ada, but of no apparent means. Mr. Jarndyce disapproved of the blossoming friendship but had taken Richard on as clerk in connection with a lawsuit affecting the Jarndyce family. Soon afterwards he was to terminate this employment forcing Richard to seek income elsewhere. In the end Richard joined the army, but was to return to our story much later.

But for the moment the company was agreeable and that made the journey more tolerable. Being dressed as I was, in a dress of pale blue with a white bonnet with my freshly washed hair pinned up inside it and the fake curls descending from the back, I felt uncomfortable in engaging in conversation lest my voice betray me. I was able to feign a loss of voice from a chill said to have been recently endured, so that I could affirm or demur in a polite croak, while otherwise communicating with smiles and nods.

When we two were alone Ada prevailed upon me the necessity of developing a feminine speaking voice, and I agreed that I would do so, spending hours at the piano in the sitting room perfecting a higher tone.

It was not the sitting room of Dedlock Hall- rather than terminate our journey there, our carriage stopped at the home of Mr. Jarndyce, the property known as “Bleak House”. I knew immediately that I had found a home in that place.

That sense was further encouraged by the character of Mr. John Jarndyce, as pleasant a man as you could expect to meet, and certainly much more than any young lady (for that was my post) could expect in a guardian.

Ada and I were assigned adjoining rooms on the level above the main entry hall. The rooms were spacious, light and airy, decorated and furnished with the fairer sex in mind, whereas the floor below had a distinctly masculine character. There we would await the visitation of Lady Dedlock’s son.

Before he came, we had other visitors including the doctor already mentioned: Mr. Woodcourt. He was a well-travelled man having spent some time in China and India. In those countries he had learned many things, not least of which were the various compounds needed to treat my peculiar conditions. As I had already heard that he had compounds to rapidly promote the growth of hair on my head, but he had other pharmacological wonders as well. As Lady Dedlock had described it to him, I suffered from an unfortunate deformity in the region of my genitals. It so happened (as Mr. Woodcourt was to explain) that this affliction is not at all uncommon, in particular in India. He knew of many treatments which he referred me to, and which Ada enthusiastically delivered upon me. For some in India these substances served to arrest the maleness in men and promote the fullness of chest and posterior to give a distinctly female shape.

I would have thought that, knowing of my condition Mr. Woodcourt would not have entertained any feelings for me, but I was wrong. When he returned to China a bouquet of flowers was left for by an unidentified person. I was later to discover that it was he.

Apparently, he had left me this gift with the entreaty that I maintain the treatments in his absence. This I did, but not entirely because of his insistence. After a time it seemed to me that I had been delivered from debtors’s prison (a truly awful place) into a world of friendship and comfort, on the basis that I was to be Esther Summerson, so she I intended to be her.

Becoming the betrothed of Mr. Dedlock was less to my liking, but still I had not met the man. I was to resident at Bleak House so that Mr Dedlock could present himself to me in the proper fashion, and court me if that was his desire.

Of course I was bound by contract to be his, but both Ada and I had agreed that Mr Dedlock should woo me accordingly to custom. This would allow me to maintain a proper deportment at all times. I would present myself as a lady, and he as a gentleman. Mr Jarndyce communicated this to him, and to his credit, Mr. Dedlock agreed.

Chapter Four

Bleak House was to be the scene of my true transformation to Esther Summerson. That is because all the work on my hair and skin and all of the potions from the East that Mr Woodcourt had furnished were of little effect were I not capable of acquiring the grace of womanhood. This is something that I learned is not innate in girls, but is acquired from a very tender age.

I was aware that in homes of a higher class that mine, it was a custom to raise boys very much as if they were girls, with long hair and frilly garments. The purpose of this exercise was lost on me, as it appeared that within a short time the pustule of manhood would break out upon the child and they would from that point present as the most aggressive type of male. I can only assume that the mother’s purpose was a momentary humiliation of the boy child.

If there were any long-lasting effects of this custom on the young aristocrats of England, it was not apparent to me. That is not to say that there may not have been secret relapses into femininity for such men, despite their overt and exaggerated masculinity.

As Esther Summerson I knew that I must do the opposite. I should embrace the feminine, and thanks to Ada I found that very easy to do.

“Being a woman is quite the most marvellous thing,” she was prone to say. “Quite why a man would want to be a man is beyond my understanding. You have to work you know. Or go to war and die. Or be sent to the far reaches of the empire and face disease and unpleasant climates, or both!”

I began to realise that as a woman of the class I was on the verge of entering, I could lead a very easy life. All I had to do was to breath in as my corset was tightened, use my hands just so, and learn to swing my skirts and adjust my hair. War and malaria was for men, but not for me.

Apart from the Dedlock’s it seemed to me that only Mr Jarndyce and Ada had been enlisted to emasculate me, although Mr Woodcourt must have suspected. His Indian concoctions proved remarkably effective in doing what art could not, in softening my skins and gift me soft fleshy form just where a woman would carry bulk.

Mr Dedlock asked to call upon us with two days’ notice, which seemed thoughtful. It gave us time to further prepare to receive him. On the afternoon of his visit I took time to prepare myself and put on a new dress and have Ada style my hair in a fashionable manner.

When he walked into the drawing room I was pleasantly surprised to see that he was a tall and quite handsome man, although he seemed to have a weak chin and an overly sallow complexion.

I confess that I had expected Mr Dedlock to be a similar character to his mother, who seemed to me to devious and manipulative. Imagine my surprise to find that he was quite the opposite. As Ada had said to me, he was a man with a good heart, but cursed with a misaligned carnal desire.

There was a wonderful naivety about him, such as with his view of business, which appeared to confuse him.

“My dear Miss Summerson, and my dear Miss Clare, Mr. Jarndyce engages in is business, and I don't know business. It is he who encourages me. He emerges from great feats of business, presents the brightest prospects before me as their result, and calls upon me to admire them. I do admire them—as bright prospects. But I know no more about them, and I tell him so."

Here was a man with wealth given to him, with no idea of where it came from and what he should do with it. As a person of a very different outlook I suddenly saw that what Ada had said about complementing a man could be true in my relationship with this one.

“And in the case of you Miss Summerson, or if you will allow, may I call you Esther, I am aware of some business between you and my family, but I would hope that I might win your heart.”

And I replied that I hoped that he might too.

He did have one condition, though. He said: “You look so much like a woman I have to say that I feel compelled to ask for confirmation that you are not … of that sex. I mean that as a compliment. My mother has asked that I marry, and I can see that you would be a perfect bride, but …”.

“Please, you do not need to go further, good sir,” I said. “I understand the circumstances completely, but please forgive me for requiring decency. If I am to lift my skirts, then it should be in private and on only after you promise that it will not cause you to disrespect me.”

“Heavens no, Madam,” he said.

Ada stood at the door while I lifted my skirts and pulled down my bloomers.

I knew then what drove this man, my betrothed. When he saw what I had between my legs he almost immediately started to drool and perspire. A look of lust came over his face that had not been evident before. He gulped when I put things away and appeared despondent that he would be denied to opportunity to touch it, let alone do anything else.

“Esther,” he said. “Would you do the honour of being my wife.”

Chapter Five

Of course a lady does not wish to give a man a response to a proposal of marriage on the very afternoon that they meet for the first time. That would seem almost indecent. And I did say that he would need to make a proper approach to Mr. Jarndyce as my guardian before making a proper proposal, with a small gift according to custom.

But I had become something he had to have, and I admit that being desired with such ardour makes a woman far more receptive.

I told Mr Jarndyce that my consent was given, should Mr Dedlock or his family undertake to meet the costs of the nuptials or a greater part of them. It was just for show, of course. I was, after all, bound by contract to accept his proposal, but I always made it clear that he had won my heart. In a way he had, or was it that my heart had been lost to womanhood?

In any event, Ada and I began to plan the wedding from Bleak House, with the prospect of me moving from there to the matrimonial home at Dedlock Hall being the only dampener.

“I too will be married and will have to leave,” said Ada. Then whispering she added: “In fact I am already married. Richard and I have been secretly married. Mr. Jarndyce thinks ill of Rick and I will need to consider how to break the news.”

I hugged her as women do, and I realised as I did it that she was a woman and I was one too. We would soon both have husbands and homes with them.

Quite whether it was the miraculous preparations of Mr Woodcourt that had brought about my change in sexual preference or whether it was my new-found girlishness, I cannot say. It would surely be beyond the understanding of Mr. Darwin, but his book was not to appear until many years later.

But, as if summoned by my curiosity Mr Woodcourt reappeared from another of his travels, and called upon Ada at Bleak House.

It was then that I learned that he had been my secret admirer all along.

“Dear and sincere Mr Woodcourt,” I said to him, with no small amount of sorrow. “I am sorry to tell you that Mr Dedlock and myself are engaged to be wed, not a month hence.”

“Miss Summerson, I wish you nothing but happiness,” said Mr Woodcourt, with the a look on his face that made clear he was the opposite of happy. “But I suspect that there may be reasons why Mr Dedlock would be unable to consummate any marriage between you.”

I should have been insulted, but it seemed like a statement made out of desperation rather than spite.

“Whatever do you mean, Mr Woodcourt?” was my startled reply, not intending to be disingenuous. It was clear that he knew my secret, most likely by intelligent deduction.

For a moment it appeared as if he felt he had made a huge and offensive error, so his lips searched until the fastened upon: “A possible inability to have children”.

“Mr Dedlock is fully aware of my physical condition,” I said, with some indignation, whether real or feigned even I do not know. “He will marry me anyway.”

If to be loved is a thrill, then to be loved or desired by two men at the same time seems so much more than the sum of the two. But it was not my intention to take advantage of either of them. It seemed to me that, some odd traits put to one side, both men were fundamentally good and deserving of a good woman. Could I ever be that?

But what Mr Woodcourt could never know was of my bargain and my contractual obligations to the Dedlock family. I would be wed to Mr Dedlock and Mr Woodcourt was invited to the wedding which he bore with stoic sadness.

It was my day, and Ada was there with me to ensure that it was until the carriage bore us away to Dedlock Hall. But I learned later that in the joyful moment, with Richard Carstone also present as my invitee for her, she took the opportunity to announce her own existing marriage to Mr Jarndyce. It was just as well I was not there, for it was not well taken by the man who was no longer my guardian. Ada and Richard were forced to flee Bleak House.

Even though I would never have thought Mr Jarndyce was capable of such for reasons of spite, soon afterwards Mr Jarndyce gifted Bleak House to Mr. Woodcourt.

Chapter Six

Modesty has prevented me from disclosing the interventions of Caddy Jellyby in my preparations to become a woman and a wife. Mistress Jellyby was an acquaintance of Ada’s living in the town near to Bleak House and operating a small shop. She worked very hard and her husband (an excellent one) being lame was able to do very little. Still, she is more than contented and did all that she had to do with all her heart.

Her shop contained many curiosities and she was keen to see that we could find what we needed. Being a woman of some intelligence she was able to hazard a guess and to reassure us.

“A lady can use any part of her body to discharge her obligations to her husband,” she said, glancing across at a moribund Mr. Jellyby. “In particular if you have no pressing need for children, there are other parts for which a secondary purpose can be found. But preparation is advisable if discomfort is to be avoided.”

She had all the necessary tools and special cleaning apparatus in a drawn under the counter. Discomfort was something that I did seek to avoid.

I was fully prepared on the morning of the wedding, and was ready to receive the full advances of my new husband. As it happened he would have taken me in the carriage had I not playfully pushed him aside after the twentieth passionate kiss, accompanied by my stroking and tugging of my distinctly un-wifely appendage.

“Mr. Dedlock, this is not the bridal bed,” I scolded.

“Mrs. Dedlock. You are a goddess,” he said. Which is exactly how I felt.

Mistress Jellyby had given me other lessons too, on the appropriate movements and noises that can help a man to spend himself quickly an allow a woman to get about her chores. But in my case, I found my movements and noises were my own, brought about by Mr Dedlock’s considerable size and skill. I was almost disappointed when he was spent, but I soon found out that his appetite would never leave me wanting.

The curious thing was that I found myself matching his need even though it seemed that I was now unable of functioning as a man. I found that a woman does not need to function at all, and even while lying back in a state of disinterest she may find herself within minutes suddenly more than interested and even screaming with joy.

The older Mrs. Dedlock would look at me with disapproval when I reappeared, my hair now long and all my own, and tousled through my efforts, or those of my husband.

But this was her contract, and I had done more than my part. I was a wife to her son, and one who brought him happiness, and put an end to her fear of shame. I had earned my freedom from debtors’ prison.

But was I truly free? The answer is largely yes. I had a house to run while he ran the estate, with my help. As I have explained, he was not a man of business, as I had been and as was Mr Jarndyce. But I was able to help with what I knew.

And I would visit Mr Jarndyce, who still resided at Bleak House, even after it had become the property of the perennially absent Mr. Woodcourt. The case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce finally settled but legal and court fees had taken all the money. He was now a guest of Mr. Woodcourt and a welcome one.

And I saw Ada less often. She and her beloved Rick had three children and lived in somewhat depressed conditions on a minor officer’s pay but would travel to Bleak House for holidays with me. Mr Jarndyce and his absent hots never ceased in their support of his two ex-wards, having forgiven Ada for her elopement after the birth of her first child.

It could have been said that we both found happiness in our marriages. But fate had other plans for both of us.

Chapter Seven

For me the problems began with the death of Lady Dedlock. Although her son was entitled to assume his father’s title upon the old man’s death, my husband had never gone to London to take his seat out of respect for his mother’s adoration for her late husband – “the real Lord Dedlock”. Now he said that he would need to go and take his seat.

To begin with I thought that I would enjoy time in the city, attending balls and the theatre as the new Lady Dedlock, a woman of grace and charm and with a certain exotic element that neither man nor woman who met me could quite put a finger on. Only my husband would have that privilege.

But our rented house was not my own, and a woman needs to belong, and a woman was what I now was. After I had wafted through society turning many heads, and puzzling a few more, I felt the regular need to return to the comforts of Dedlock Hall.

I am not sure whether my husband saw the growing womn in me. I thought that I was still what he wanted in bed. I had become an enthusiastic lover. It was no longer a pretence. He must have known that ours was now a shared lust. Such feelings seem close to love when accompanied by a longing for the bedroom that was heavy in the air between us even in the middle of the day. But not every day. Not anymore.

And there are pleasures in the City of Westminster that are denied to a man in the country. And in the case of my husband, it appears that these were the desires that could not even be met by a very special wife such as me.

I was more than a woman, I was a lady, and as such I had standards to maintain and a reputation to protect. In our world the reputation of the husband is visited upon his wife, and that is much harder protect without the presence of direct control.

I began to hear stories. It would seem that without my guiding hand or my satisfying carnal presence, or both, Mr Dedlock was slipping into depravation.

Because he has had promised it for all time, I found myself seeking the assistance of Mr Jarndyce as my erstwhile guardian. He travelled with me as I went back to London to upbraid my degenerating husband.

“Look here Dedlock,” my paternal protector said. “You have a beautiful wife who has sacrifice her everything to be yours; and you have a home that she lovingly maintains; and you have wealth and power. Would you throw it all away for something that can be yours as she offers it to you?”

“This is not something I can control, my dear Jarndyce,” my husband explained. He looked at me as if I would should confirm it, which I could have done. My husband was driven by his natures and his desires.

I wonder now if there was such a change in my psyche that I was becoming less attractive to him. I also wonder if, having realised that, I could have done anything about it.

But it was to be of no further consideration. Mr Jarndyce was with me at our lodgings that February evening when Inspector Bucket came calling upon us.

“Lady Dedlock, I have the unpleasant duty of advising you of the death of your husband, Lord Dedlock, in Regent’ Park last night,” the policeman explained, with a dead face that probably showed he was used to giving bad news. “Murder, I am afraid. We have a young man in custody. A well known deviant. I expect that he will plead guilty, which will save you from any embarrassment.”

O course, I expressed gratitude, and left the room in genuine grief as Mr Jarndyce gather the further details.

Given all that had happened, my feelings for my late husband may seem hard to understand. But I was always of the view that the devil’s bargain that started this whole series of events was his mother’s rather than his. He was in many respects, a small child who was doing nothing more than asking his mother for a sweet treat, but with the requirement that it had to be on a stick. His mother doted on him, so she had complied.

I was his sweet thing, and as a child he would lick me and put me in his mouth, and he would love me as the lolly that never melts away.

How could I not love him? It seemed to me that I had. It caused me great sadness.

But when Mr Jarndyce asked me whether this might mean the end of Esther Summerson, I confess that I was horrified by the thought. It seemed to me that there was nobody else. I was now she, or rather I was Esther, Lady Dedlock, wealthy widow.

Mr Jarndyce was very pleased to hear it.

Chapter Eight

Mr Woodcourt was on one of his regular trips to the East but was able to send me a letter of condolence. In that letter he asked if he might call upon me upon his return in the summer, and I confess that my heart warmed at the thought, as did other parts of me.

I was reminded me of our encounter prior to my wedding that now seemed so long before, and his evident interest in me. I confess that for a person who was not born to desire men, the absence of a husband had left a need that only another man could fill, and despite his oddities I wondered whether Mr Woodcourt might be that person, even accepting that I did I was not a complete woman.

But it was in that happy anticipation that I learned of the sad news about Ada and her family. The shock was to learn that her husband Captain Richard Carstone had been killed in action in the Crimea. The shock was so great that she had not reached out to me but I had learned through a mutual friend.

Naturally I hurried down to her humble home in Essex and there found her wracked with a grief so deep that she appeared to have abandoned the care of her children, two daughters and a new born son named for his father. I insisted that they all travel home with me to Dedlock Hall where I could better care for my close friend, the one who had, in large measure, made me the woman that I was.

And now I was almost a mother. The little child Richard was given into my arms at such a tender age, and in even more tender circumstances, that I was drawn to him, as to his older sisters, all neglected by their mother in her tragic distemper.

It was during this period of emotional torment that Mr. Woodcourt returned. He begged to see me but I confess that I was much diverted and put him off. But he was insistent.

“My dearest Esther,” he said. “I have not been able to think of anything but you since I heard the news of your husband’s death. No, I am not being entirely truthful. I have not been able to think of anything but you for some time before that. No, in fact, basically since the moment I met you.”

“You flatter me sir,” I said. “In particular since you may have some notion of my condition.”

“Miss Summerson, as I must call you, because I cannot think of you as Lady Dedlock, I am a doctor, and well versed with all conditions, and with a remedy for most.”

“Not mine I suspect,” I said with some regret.

“The seeds of secretions offensive to the feminine can be easily removed through minor surgery,” he said. “And I have in this small box a device made in Siam that can be placed over what remains and create a perfect facsimile of female organs.”

And with that Mr. Woodcourt revealed the exotic tool, even as his own was clearly summoned by the anticipation of its use.

It was the most remarkable looking thing, and was to prove high efficacious – it still is.

Sadly, soon afterwards Ada was to die of her broken heart despite the best ministrations of us both. The effect of that was to leave her children to be raised as the offspring of Mr. and Mrs. Allan Woodcourt.

My husband now practices as a physician and one of some repute due to his experience gained from the Orient. For my part the people even praise me as the doctor's wife. The people even like me as I go about and make so much of me that I am quite abashed. I owe it all to him, my love, my pride! They like me for his sake, as I do everything I do in life for his sake.

A night or two ago, after bustling about preparing for my darling and my guardian and little Richard, who are coming to-morrow, I was sitting out in the porch of all places, that dearly memorable porch, when Allan came home. So, he said, "My precious little woman, what are you doing here?"

And I said, "The moon is shining so brightly, Allan, and the night is so delicious, that I have been sitting here thinking."

"What have you been thinking about, my dear?" said Allan then.

"How curious you are!" said I. "I am almost ashamed to tell you, but I will. I have been thinking about my old personage — before I became a woman. I was thinking about how I am the most fortunate to have been so changed and to have found the love of a spouse and of my own children”.

"And don't you know that you are prettier than you ever were?"

The End

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