

THE BLUE BANDIT.

I.

It was a very long, dreary street in which Mrs. Marma-
duke Wyvern and her two daughters resided. Of all
ugly London streets, in those silent, semi-aristocratic
regions where there are no shops but only rows and rows
of tall two-windowed houses, this street was one of the
very ugliest. It consisted for the most part of dingy,
colorless houses, though here and there a spasmodic at-
tempt had been made by some enterprising persons to
embellish their abodes, or, perhaps it should rather be
said, to distinguish them as much as possible from each
other. Mrs. Wyvern's residence was one of the unob-
trusive houses. Mrs. Wyvern was a lady in reduced cir-
cumstances, and consequently she put off the expense of
doing up her house as long as possible, just as she post-
poned many other expensive pleasures. Economy was
her one thought, night and day; poor Mrs. Wyvern, there
were so few ways left untried in which she could econo-
mize! She had married somewhat late in life, and when,
after four years of happiness, her husband died suddenly,
he left her alone in the world, with her two little girls, a
London house of tolerable size and a hand-to-hand fight
with fortune before her, the greater part of his income
(being a pension for military services) having ceased at
his death.

The widow tried hard to make some addition to her
narrow means, but she had been brought up, like most
women, to do but little for herself. She endeavored to
turn authoress, but she had scant literary talent. It
caused her a week of intense labor and anxiety to indite
an article of feeble interest, for which a country journal
rewarded her with a few shillings. She then gave her
attention to embroidery, and worked a few elaborate
cushions and table covers for a friend, receiving some
private remuneration, but by and by her eyesight grew
weak, and besides there seemed few advantageous open-
ings for the sale of ladies' work.

She might have sold her house and retired into a
country cottage, but she considered London the best
place to live in, both for her own happiness and for her
children's education. Above all, she clung to the house
itself; dull and dreary as it might appear, it had been
her husband's. Therein, still unaltered, was his morn-
ing-room, full of his own old-fashioned things, as his
dear hand had placed them—the table at which he sat,
the chair in which he loved to read. Mrs. Wyvern came
to the conclusion that, by dint of scrupulous economy,
she might continue to live in her house and present to
the outer world the same appearance as before. That is
the chief thing, after all, for which we each of us plan
and struggle—the appearance we present to the world.

The two little girls, partly from the fact that the dif-
ference of age between themselves and their mother was
greater than is often the case, partly because that mother
lived so much mentally in a past that was everything to
her, yet meant nothing to them, relied on one another
for companionship, and had grown into girlhood passion-
ately attached to each other.

Amelia was strong, Grace was clinging. Amelia was
tall and straight and beautiful, Grace was delicate and
weakly; indeed, a cripple. At five years old she had met
with an accident that injured her for life. Ever after
that accident she lay on her back, poor little Gracie, and
from her lowly and recumbent position she viewed life
through a lovely spiritual lens of her very own making.
There was no envy, no malice, no uncharitableness in her
heart; the few figures that moved and had their being in
her narrow world were all beautiful and all good, to her
thinking; she alone was not sufficiently good. But she
meant to try to be. She did not struggle much for this
end, however; she loved peacefully, and was loved in
return. There was no uneasiness about her nature;
being herself the incarnation of tenderness and trust,
she confidently took for granted the kindness of every
one else.

She was, besides, a delightful companion, full of fun
and gentle teasing; a very Philistine, said her sister, but
that was because, when Amelia was smitten with her first
craze of æstheticism, Gracie flatly refused to have her
dressing gown and bed quilt trimmed with drab and sage-
green instead of the old familiar pink or sky-blue that
her childish soul had always loved.

"Why, what would happen to poor mamma if we
both of us became artists, Amy?" asked Grace.

"You don't disapprove of my following art as a
career, surely, Gracie, do you?" entreated Amelia, who
was one of those earnest and serious-minded people who
ride their hobbies at all times, both in and out of season.

"If you have thought out any theory about the mat-
ter, dear, pray tell me," she added.

"But I have thought out nothing," replied Grace,
laughing, "and I never have theories about anything at
all. Don't you know me well enough to know that?"

"It is a very responsible thing to be an artist," said
Amelia gravely; "one owes a kind of duty to the great
and beautiful in everything."

"Perhaps," said Grace.

"I feel," continued Amelia—"I feel as though I had
dedicated myself to some unknown deity, put on a robe,
registered a vow, bound myself for life, in fact."

"To your profession?"

"Yes, to my profession; you understand, don't you,
Gracie?"

"I think so, dear."

"It seems a solemn thing, a privilege to be almost
frightened of, to belong to the same profession as Raphael
and Titian—a far-off, humble disciple as I am, but still
one of the same band. Do you see, Gracie?"

"I see. You are a darling, Amy."

Grace stretched out her thin little hand, on which the
blue veins made a clear tracery, and took Amelia's firm,
ruddy fingers within hers.

"I am so glad you are strong, Amy!"

"Strength is necessary for a woman who seeks to
make her way in any career," said Amelia, with decision.
"And you know, dear, I want to work, both for mother
and for you. Only think of all the pretty things I shall