
THE PROPHET OF BERKELEY SQUARE

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Robert Hichens

YURITA PRESS

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The Prophet of Berkeley Square

By

Robert Hichens

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CHAPTER I: MRS. MERILLIA IS CARRIED TO BED

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THE GREAT TELESCOPE OF THE Prophet was carefully adjusted upon its lofty, brass-bound stand in the bow window of Number One Thousand Berkeley Square. It pointed towards the remarkably bright stars which twinkled in the December sky over frosty London, those guardian stars which always seemed to the Prophet to watch with peculiar solicitude over the most respectable neighbourhood in which he resided. The polestar had its eye even now upon the mansion of an adjacent ex-premier, the belt of Orion was not oblivious of a belted earl's cosy red-brick home just opposite, and the house of a certain famous actor and actress close by had been taken by the Great Bear under its special protection.

The Prophet's butler, Mr. Ferdinand—that bulky and veracious gentleman—threw open the latticed windows of the drawing-room and let the cold air rush blithely in. Then he made up the fire carefully, placed a copy of Mr. Malkiel's Almanac, bound The Prophet of Berkeley Square in dull pink and silver brocade by Miss Clorinda Dolbrett of the Cromwell Road, upon a small tulip-wood table near the telescope, patted a sofa cushion affectionately on the head, glanced around with the meditative eye of the butler born not made, and quitted the comfortable apartment with a salaried, but soft, footstep.

It was a pleasant chamber, this drawing-room of Number One Thousand. It spoke respectfully of the generations that were past and seemed serenely certain of a comfortable future. There was no too modern uneasiness about it, no trifling, gim-crack furniture constructed to catch the eye and the angles of any one venturing to seek repose upon it, no unmeaning rubbish of ornaments The Prophet of Berkeley Square or hectic flummery of second-rate pictures. Above the high oaken mantel-piece was a little pure bust in marble of the Prophet when a The Prophet of Berkeley Square small boy. To right and left were pretty miniatures in golden frames of the Prophet's delightfully numerous grandmothers. Here might be seen Mrs. Prothero, the great ship-builder's faithful wife, in blue brocade, and Lady Camptown, who reigned at Bath, in grey tabinet and diamond buckles, when Miss Jane Austen was writing her first romance; Mrs. Susan Burlington, who knew Lord Byron—a remarkable fact—and Lady Sophia Green, who knew her own mind, a fact still more remarkable. The last-named lady wore black with a Roman nose, and the combination was admirably convincing. Here might also be observed Mrs. Stuefitt, Mistress of the The Prophet of Berkeley Square Mazurka, and the Lady Jane Follington, of whom George the Second had spoken openly in The Prophet of Berkeley Square terms of approbation. She affected plum colour and had eyes like sloes—the fashionable hue in the neat-foot-and-pretty-ankle period. The flames of the fire twinkled brightly over this battalion of deuced fine women, who were all, without one exception, The Prophet of Berkeley Square the grandmothers—in various degrees—of the Prophet. When speaking of them, in the highest terms, he never differentiated them by the adjectives great, The Prophet of Berkeley Square or great-great. They were all kind and condescending enough to be his grandmothers. For a man of his sensitive, delicate and grateful disposition this was enough. He thought them all quite perfect,

and took them The Prophet of Berkeley Square all under the protection of his soft and beaming eyes.

Of Mrs. Merillia, the live grandmother with whom he had the great felicity to dwell in Berkeley Square, he seldom said anything in public praise. The incense he offered at her shrine rose, most sweetly perfumed, from his daily life. The hearth of this agreeable and grandmotherly chamber was attractive with dogs, the silver cage beside it with green love-birds. Upon the floor was a heavy, dull-blue carpet over which—as has been intimated—even a butler so heavy as Mr. Ferdinand could go softly. The The Prophet of Berkeley Square walls were dressed The Prophet of Berkeley Square with a dull blue paper that looked like velvet.

Here and there upon them hung a picture: a landscape of George Morland, lustily English, a Cotman, a Cuyp—cows in twilight—a Reynolds, faded but exquisitely genteel. A lovely little harpsichord—meditating on Scarlatti—stood in one angle, a harp, tied with most delicate ribands of ivory satin powdered with The Prophet of Berkeley Square pimpernels, in another. Many waxen candles shed a tender and unostentatious radiance above their careful grease-catchers. Upon pretty tables lay neat The Prophet of Berkeley Square books by Fanny Burney, Beatrice Harraden, Mary Wilkins, and Max Beerbohm, also the poems of Lord Byron and of Lord de Tabley. Near the hearth was a sofa on which an emperor might have laid an easy head that wore a crown, and before every low and seductive chair was set a low and seductive footstool.

A grandmother's clock pronounced the hour of ten in a frail and elegant voice as the finely-carved oak door was opened, and the Prophet seriously entered this peaceful room, carrying a copy of the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius in his hand.

He was a neatly-made little man of fashionable, even of modish, cut, spare, smart and whimsical, with a clean-shaved, small-featured face, large, shining brown eyes, abundant and slightly-waving brown hair, that could only be parted, with the sweetest sorrow, in the centre of his well-shaped, almost philosophical head, and movements light and temperate as those of a meditative squirrel. Having just dined he was naturally in evening dress, with a butterfly tie, gleaming pumps, and a buttonhole of violets. He shut the door gently, glanced at his nice-looking grandmothers, and, walking forward very quietly and demurely, applied his eye to the telescope, lowering himself slightly by a Sandow exercise, which he had practised before he became a prophet. Having remained in this position of astronomical The Prophet of Berkeley Square observation for some minutes, he deviated into the upright, closed the window, and tinkled a small silver bell that stood on the tulip-wood table beside Malkiel's Almanac.

Mr. Ferdinand appeared, looking respectfully buoyant.

“Has Mr. Malkiel sent any reply to my inquiry, Mr. Ferdinand?” asked the Prophet.

“He has not, sir,” replied Mr. Ferdinand, sympathetically.

“Did the boy messenger say he delivered The Prophet of Berkeley Square my note?”

“He said so, sir, on his Bible oath, sir.”

“And do you believe him?”

“Oh, sir!” responded Mr. Ferdinand, in a shocked voice, “surely a London lad would not be found to tell a lie!”

“I hope not, Mr. Ferdinand. Still—did he look a nervous sort of lad?”

“He was a trifle pale, sir, about the gills—but a heart of gold, sir, I feel sure. He wore four medals, sir.”

“Four medals! Nevertheless, he may have been frightened The Prophet of Berkeley Square to go to Mr. Malkiel’s door. That will do, Mr. Ferdinand.”

Mr. Ferdinand was about to bow and retire when the Prophet, after a moment of hesitation, added,—

“Stay, Mr. Ferdinand. Mrs. Merillia has gone to the Gaiety Theatre to-night. I expect her back at half-past eleven. She may need assistance on her return.”

“Assistance, sir! Mrs. Merillia, sir!”

Mr. Ferdinand’s luminous eyes shone with amazement.

The Prophet Of Berkeley Square

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