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ESTHER HILL'S SECRET BY G. M. CRAIK.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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SECRET.

BY

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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ESTHER HILL'S SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

"If you please, ma'am," said Peggy, dropping a curtsey, "mother says you'll be glad to hear we've got a lodger."

"And who *is* the lodger, my dear?" asked Aunt Susan.

It was after sunset at the end of a 'hot day. The month was only May, but the weather had turned very warm, and the house was close, Aunt Susan thought: besides, she had got a little tired of listening to the talk of the young curate in the drawing-room, and the fresh air felt pleasant after it. He was a very excellent young man—"but really I begin to wish he would not come so often, or that my brother was at home," thought Aunt Susan, lingering amongst her flowers, and giving a gentle sigh as she thought of the small troubles of her life, and of the follies of young people. Not that Gabrielle

meant any harm—she was sure of that, but she was so young and pretty. “It all comes of that—of her being so very pretty,” thought Aunt Susan gravely. “She can’t help it, poor dear, of course,—but it is a real trial to those connected with her.”

It was a country house, not very far from a provincial town (the town was Chester); a pleasant old house, set down on a big lawn, with a belt of flowers about it (the flowers were just beginning to blow now, scarlet geraniums and yellow calceolarias putting forth their brilliant colours at the foot of the old walls), and round the lawn a line of noble beeches. “They are more than two hundred years old—the finest beeches that I know anywhere about,” Mr. Dunstan would sometimes say with a loving pride in them. “They used long ago to be a great weight upon Susan’s mind, when I was a little fellow, and was always trying to climb them, and running the daily risk of breaking my neck. I never did break my neck, or any other part of me, with them,—but Susan, you know, in those days watched over me like a hen over her one chicken.”

This was Guy Dunstan, the master of the house, who was away on the other side of the world at present,—“the more’s the pity,” as Aunt Susan often thought, “for there is too much upon my hands for any woman to see to properly. It is not the manag-