

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

ONE OF OUR
CONQUERORS.
VOLUME 2

George Meredith

One of Our Conquerors. Volume 2

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Содержание

CHAPTER XII	5
CHAPTER XIII	9
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	15

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One of Our Conquerors – Volume 2

CHAPTER XII

TREATS OF THE DUMBNESS POSSIBLE WITH MEMBERS OF A HOUSEHOLD HAVING ONE HEART

Two that live together in union are supposed to be intimate on every leaf. Particularly when they love one another and the cause they have at heart is common to them in equal measure, the uses of a cordial familiarity forbid reserves upon important matters between them, as we think; not thinking of an imposed secretiveness, beneath the false external of submissiveness, which comes of an experience of repeated inefficiency to maintain a case in opposition, on the part of the loquently weaker of the pair. In Constitutional Kingdoms a powerful Government needs not to be tyrannical to lean oppressively; it is more serviceable to party than agreeable to country; and where the alliance of men and women binds a loving couple, of whom one is a torrent of persuasion, their differings are likely to make the other resemble a log of the torrent. It is borne along; it dreams of a distant corner of the way for a determined stand; it consents to its whirling in anticipation of an undated hour when it will no longer be neutral.

There may be, moreover, while each has the key of the fellow breast, a mutually sensitive nerve to protest against intrusion of light or sound. The cloud over the name of their girl could now strike Nataly and Victor dumb in their taking of counsel. She divined that his hint had encouraged him to bring the crisis nearer, and he that her comprehension had become tremblingly awake. They shrank, each of them, the more from an end drawing closely into view. All subjects glooming off or darkening up to it were shunned by them verbally, and if they found themselves entering beneath that shadow, conversation passed to an involuntary gesture, more explicit with him, significant of the prohibited, though not acknowledging it.

All the stronger was it Victor's purpose, leaping in his fashion to the cover of action as an escape from perplexity, to burn and scheme for the wedding of their girl—the safe wedding of that dearest, to have her protected, secure, with the world warm about her. And he well knew why his Nataly had her look of a closed vault (threatening, if opened, to thunder upon Life) when he dropped his further hints. He chose to call it feminine inconsistency, in a woman who walked abroad with a basket of marriage-ties for the market on her arm. He knew that she would soon have to speak the dark words to their girl; and the idea of any doing of it, caught at his throat. Reasonably she dreaded the mother's task; pardonably indeed. But it is for the mother to do, with a girl. He deputed it lightly to the mother because he could see himself stating the facts to a son. 'And, my dear boy, you will from this day draw your five thousand a year, and we double it on the day of your marriage, living at Lakelands or where you will.'

His desire for his girl's protection by the name of one of our great Families, urged him to bind Nataly to the fact, with the argument, that it was preferable for the girl to hear their story during her green early youth, while she reposed her beautiful blind faith in the discretion of her parents, and as an immediate step to the placing of her hand in a husband's. He feared that her mother required schooling to tell the story vindicatingly and proudly, in a manner to distinguish instead of degrading or temporarily seeming to accept degradation.

The world would weigh on her confession of the weight of the world on her child; she would want inciting and strengthening, if one judged of her capacity to meet the trial by her recent bearing; and how was he to do it! He could not imagine himself encountering the startled, tremulous, nascent

intelligence in those pure brown darklashed eyes of Nesta; he pitied the poor mother. Fancifully directing her to say this and that to the girl, his tongue ran till it was cut from his heart and left to wag dead colourless words.

The prospect of a similar business of exposition, certainly devolving upon the father in treaty with the fortunate youth, gripped at his vitals a minute, so intense was his pride in appearing woundless and scarless, a shining surface, like pure health's, in the sight of men. Nevertheless he skimmed the story, much as a lecturer strikes his wand on the prominent places of a map, that is to show us how he arrived at the principal point, which we are all agreed to find chiefly interesting. This with Victor was the naming of Nesta's bridal endowment. He rushed to it. 'My girl will have ten thousand a year settled on her the day of her marriage.' Choice of living at Lakelands was offered.

It helped him over the unpleasant part of that interview. At the same time, it moved him to a curious contempt of the youth. He had to conjure-up an image of the young man in person, to correct the sentiment:—and it remained as a kind of bruise only half cured.

Mr. Dudley Sowerby was not one of the youths whose presence would rectify such an abstract estimate of the genus pursuer. He now came frequently of an evening, to practise a duet for flutes with Victor;—a Mercadante, honeyed and flowing; too honeyed to suit a style that, as Fenellan characterized it to Nataly, went through the music somewhat like an inquisitive tourist in a foreign town, conscientious to get to the end of the work of pleasure; until the notes had become familiar, when it rather resembled a constable's walk along the midnight streets into collision with a garlanded roysterer; and the man of order and the man of passion, true to the measure though they were, seeming to dissent, almost to wrangle, in their different ways of winding out the melody, on to the last movement; which was plainly a question between home to the strayed reveller's quarters or off to the lockup. Victor was altogether the younger of the two. But his vehement accompaniment was a tutorship; Mr. Sowerby improved; it was admitted by Nesta and mademoiselle that he gained a show of feeling; he had learnt that feeling was wanted. Passion, he had not a notion of: otherwise he would not be delaying; the interview, dramatized by the father of the young bud of womanhood, would be taking place, and the entry into Lakelands calculable, for Nataly's comfort, as under the aegis of the Cantor earldom. Gossip flies to a wider circle round the members of a great titled family, is inaudible; or no longer the diptherian whisper the commonalty hear of the commonalty: and so we see the social uses of our aristocracy survive. We do not want the shield of any family; it is the situation that wants it; Nataly ought to be awake to the fact. One blow and we have silenced our enemy: Nesta's wedding-day has relieved her parents.

Victor's thoughts upon the instrument for striking that, blow, led him to suppose Mr. Sowerby might be meditating on the extent of the young lady's fortune. He talked randomly of money, in a way to shatter Nataly's conception of him. He talked of City affairs at table, as it had been his practice to shun the doing; and hit the resounding note on mines, which have risen in the market like the crest of a serpent, casting a certain spell upon the mercantile understanding. 'Fred's diamonds from her own mine, or what once was—and she still reserves a share,' were to be shown to Mr. Sowerby.

Nataly respected the young fellow for not displaying avidity at the flourish of the bait, however it might be affecting him; and she fancied that he did laboriously, in his way earnestly, study her girl, to sound for harmony between them, previous to a wooing. She was a closer reader of social character than Victor; from refraining to run on the broad lines which are but faintly illustrative of the individual one in being common to all—unless we have hit by chance on an example of the downright in roguery or folly or simple goodness. Mr. Sowerby's bearing to Nesta was hardly warmed by the glitter of diamonds. His next visit showed him livelier in courtliness, brighter, fresher; but that was always his way at the commencement of every visit, as if his reflections on the foregone had come to a satisfactory conclusion; and the labours of the new study of the maiden ensued again in due course to deaden him.

Gentleman he was. In the recognition of his quality as a man of principle and breeding, Nataly was condemned by thoughts of Nesta's future to question whether word or act of hers should, if inclination on both sides existed, stand between her girl and a true gentleman. She counselled herself, as if the counsel were in requisition, to be passive; and so doing, she more acutely than Victor—save in his chance flashes—discerned the twist of her very nature caused by their false position. And her panacea for ills, the lost little cottage, would not have averted it: she would there have had the same coveting desire to name a man of breeding, honour, station, for Nesta's husband. Perhaps in the cottage, choosing at leisure, her consent to see the brilliant young creature tied to the best of dull men would have been unready, without the girl to push it. For the Hon. Dudley was lamentably her pupil in liveliness; he took the second part, as it is painful for a woman with the old-fashioned ideas upon the leading of the sexes to behold; resembling in his look the deaf, who constantly require to have an observation repeated; resembling the most intelligent of animals, which we do not name, and we reprove ourselves for seeing likeness.

Yet the likeness or apparent likeness would suggest that we have not so much to fear upon the day of the explanation to him. Some gain is there. Shameful thought! Nataly hastened her mind to gather many instances or indications testifying to the sterling substance in young Mr. Sowerby, such as a mother would pray for her son-in-law to possess. She discovered herself feeling as the burdened mother, not providently for her girl, in the choice of a mate. The perception was clear, and not the less did she continue working at the embroidery of Mr. Sowerby on the basis of his excellent moral foundations, all the while hoping, praying, that he might not be lured on to the proposal for Nesta. But her subservience to the power of the persuasive will in Victor—which was like the rush of a conflagration—compelled her to think realizingly of any scheme he allowed her darkly to read.

Opposition to him, was comparable to the stand of blocks of timber before flame. Colney Durance had done her the mischief we take from the pessimist when we are overweighted: in darkening the vision of external aid from man or circumstance to one who felt herself mastered. Victor could make her treacherous to her wishes, in revolt against them, though the heart protested. His first conquest of her was in her blood, to weaken a spirit of resistance. For the precedent of submission is a charm upon the faint-hearted through love: it unwinds, unwill them. Nataly resolved fixedly, that there must be a day for speaking; and she had her moral sustainment in the resolve; she had also a tormenting consciousness of material support in the thought, that the day was not present, was possibly distant, might never arrive. Would Victor's release come sooner? And that was a prospect bearing resemblance to hopes of the cure of a malady through a sharp operation.

These were matters going on behind the curtain; as wholly vital to her, and with him at times almost as dominant, as the spiritual in memory, when flesh has left but its shining track in dust of a soul outwritten; and all their talk related to the purchase of furniture, the expeditions to Lakelands, music, public affairs, the pardonable foibles of friends created to amuse their fellows, operatic heroes and heroines, exhibitions of pictures, the sorrows of Crowned Heads, so serviceable ever to mankind as an admonition to the ambitious, a salve to the envious!—in fine, whatsoever can entertain or affect the most social of couples, domestically without a care to appearance. And so far they partially—dramatically—deceived themselves by imposing on the world while they talked and duetted; for the purchase of furniture from a flowing purse is a cheerful occupation; also a City issuing out of hospital, like this poor City of London, inspires good citizens to healthy activity. But the silence upon what they were most bent on, had the sinister effect upon Victor, of obscuring his mental hold of the beloved woman, drifting her away from him. In communicating Fenellan's news through the lawyer Carling of Mrs. Burman's intentions, he was aware that there was an obstacle to his being huggingly genial, even candidly genial with her, until he could deal out further news, corroborative and consecutive, to show the action of things as progressive. Fenellan had sunk into his usual apathy:—and might plead the impossibility of his moving faster than the woman professing to transform herself into, beneficence out of malignity;—one could hear him saying the words! Victor had not seen him since

last Concert evening, and he deemed it as well to hear the words Fenellan's mouth had to say. He called at an early hour of the Westward tidal flow at the Insurance Office looking over the stormy square of the first of Seamen.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LATEST OF MRS. BURMAN

After cursory remarks about the business of the Office and his friend's contributions to periodical literature, in which he was interested for as long as he had assurance that the safe income depending upon official duties was not endangered by them, Victor kicked his heels to and fro. Fenellan waited for him to lead.

'Have you seen that man, her lawyer, again?'

'I have dined with Mr. Carling:—capital claret.'

Emptiness was in the reply.

Victor curbed himself and said: 'By the way, you're not likely to have dealings with Blathenoy. The fellow has a screw to the back of a shifty eye; I see it at work to fix the look for business. I shall sit on the Board of my Bank. One hears things. He lives in style at Wrensham. By the way, Fredi has little Mab Mountney from Creckholt staying with her. You said of little Mabsy—"Here she comes into the room all pink and white, like a daisy." She's the daisy still; reminds us of our girl at that age.—So, then, we come to another dead block!'

'Well, no; it's a chemist's shop, if that helps us on,' said Fenellan, settling to a new posture in his chair. 'She's there of an afternoon for hours.'

'You mean it's she?'

'The lady. I 'll tell you. I have it from Carling, worthy man; and lawyers can be brought to untruss a point over a cup of claret. He's a bit of a "Mackenzie Man," as old aunts of mine used to say at home—a Man of Feeling. Thinks he knows the world, from having sifted and sorted a lot of our dustbins; as the modern Realists imagine it's an exposition of positive human nature when they've pulled down our noses to the worst parts—if there's a worse where all are useful: but the Realism of the dogs is to have us by the nose:—excite it and befoul it, and you're fearfully credible! You don't read that olfactory literature. However, friend Carling is a conciliatory carle. Three or four days of the week the lady, he says, drives to her chemist's, and there she sits in the shop; round the corner, as you enter; and sees all Charing in the shop looking-glass at the back; herself a stranger spectacle, poor lady, if Carling's picture of her is not overdone; with her fashionable no-bonnet striding the contribution chignon on the crown, and a huge square green shade over her forehead. Sits hours long, and cocks her ears at orders of applicants for drugs across the counter, and sometimes catches wind of a prescription, and consults her chemist, and thinks she 'll try it herself. It's a basket of medicine bottles driven to Regent's Park pretty well every day.'

'Ha! Regent's Park!' exclaimed Victor, and shook at recollections of the district and the number of the house, dismal to him. London buried the woman deep until a mention of her sent her flaring over London. 'A chemist's shop! She sits there?'

'Mrs. Burman. We pass by the shop.'

'She had always a turn for drugs.—Not far from here, did you say? And every day! under a green shade?'

'Dear fellow, don't be suggesting ballads; we'll go now,' said Fenellan.

'It 's true it's like sitting on the banks of the Stygian waters.'

He spied at an obsequious watch, that told him it was time to quit the office.

'You've done nothing?' Victor asked in a tone of no expectation.

'Only to hear that her latest medical man is Themison.'

'Where did you hear?'

'Across the counter of Boyle and Luckwort, the lady's chemists. I called the day before yesterday, after you were here at our last Board Meeting.'

'The Themison?'

'The great Dr. Themison; who kills you kindlier than most, and is much in request for it.'

'There's one of your echoes of Colney!' Victor cried. 'One gets dead sick of that worn-out old jibeing at doctors. They don't kill, you know very well. It 's not to their interest to kill. They may take the relish out of life; and upon my word, I believe that helps to keep the patient living!'

Fenellan sent an eye of discreet comic penetration travelling through his friend.

'The City's mending; it's not the weary widow woman of the day when we capsized the diurnal with your royal Old Veuve,' he said, as they trod the pavement. 'Funny people, the English! They give you all the primeing possible for amusement and jollity, and devil a sentry-box for the exercise of it; and if you shake a leg publicly, partner or not, you're marched off to penitence. I complain, that they have no philosophical appreciation of human nature.'

'We pass the shop?' Victor interrupted him.

'You're in view of it in a minute. And what a square, for recreative dancing! And what a people, to be turning it into a place of political agitation! And what a country, where from morning to night it's an endless wrangle about the first conditions of existence! Old Colney seems right now and then: they 're the offspring of pirates, and they 've got the manners and tastes of their progenitors, and the trick of quarrelling everlastingly over the booty. I 'd have band-music here for a couple of hours, three days of the week at the least; and down in the East; and that forsaken North quarter of London; and the Baptist South too. But just as those omnibus-wheels are the miserable music of this London of ours, it 's only too sadly true that the people are in the first rumble of the notion of the proper way to spend their lives. Now you see the shop: Boyle and Luckwort: there.'

Victor looked. He threw his coat open, and pulled the waistcoat, and swelled it, ahemming. 'That shop?' said he. And presently: 'Fenellan, I'm not superstitious, I think. Now listen; I declare to you, on the day of our drinking Old Veuve together last—you remember it,—I walked home up this way across the square, and I was about to step into that identical shop, for some household prescription in my pocket, having forgotten Nataly's favourite City chemists Fenbird and Jay, when—I'm stating a fact—I distinctly—I 'm sure of the shop—felt myself plucked back by the elbow; pulled back the kind of pull when you have to put a foot backward to keep your equilibrium.'

So does memory inspired by the sensations contribute an additional item for the colouring of history.

He touched the elbow, showed a flitting face of crazed amazement in amusement, and shrugged and half-laughed, dismissing the incident, as being perhaps, if his hearer chose to have it so, a gem of the rubbish tumbled into the dustcart out of a rather exceptional householder's experience.

Fenellan smiled indulgently. 'Queer things happen. I recollect reading in my green youth of a clergyman, who mounted a pulpit of the port where he was landed after his almost solitary rescue from a burning ship at midnight in mid-sea, to inform his congregation, that he had overnight of the catastrophe a personal Warning right in his ear from a Voice, when at his bed or bunk-side, about to perform the beautiful ceremony of undressing: and the Rev. gentleman was to lie down in his full uniform, not so much as to relieve himself of his boots, the Voice insisted twice; and he obeyed it, despite the discomfort to his poor feet; and he jumped up in his boots to the cry of Fire, and he got them providentially over the scuffling deck straight at the first rush into the boat awaiting them, and had them safe on and polished the day he preached the sermon of gratitude for the special deliverance. There was a Warning! and it might well be called, as he called it, from within. We're cared for, never doubt. Aide-toi. Be ready dressed to help yourself in a calamity, or you'll not stand in boots at your next Sermon, contrasting with the burnt. That sounds like the moral.'

'She could have seen me,' Victor threw out an irritable suggestion. The idea of the recent propinquity set hatred in motion.

'Scarcely likely. I'm told she sits looking on her lap, under the beetling shade, until she hears an order for tinctures or powders, or a mixture that strikes her fancy. It's possible to do more suicidal

things than sit the afternoons in a chemist's shop and see poor creatures get their different passports to Orcus.'

Victor stepped mutely beneath the windows of the bellied glass-urns of chemical wash. The woman might be inside there now! She might have seen his figure in the shop-mirror! And she there! The wonder of it all seemed to be, that his private history was not walking the streets. The thinness of the partition concealing it, hardly guaranteed a day's immunity: because this woman would live in London, in order to have her choice of a central chemist's shop, where she could feed a ghastly imagination on the various recipes . . . and while it would have been so much healthier for her to be living in a recess of the country!

He muttered: 'Diseases—drugs!'

Those were the corresponding two strokes of the pendulum which kept the woman going.

'And deadly spite.' That was the emanation of the monotonous horrible conflict, for which, and by which, the woman lived.

In the neighbourhood of the shop, he could not but think of her through the feelings of a man scorched by a furnace.

A little further on, he said: 'Poor soul!' He confessed to himself, that latterly he had, he knew not why, been impatient with her, rancorous in thought, as never before. He had hitherto aimed at a picturesque tolerance of her vindictiveness; under suffering, both at Craye and Creckholt; and he had been really forgiving. He accused her of dragging him down to humanity's lowest.

But if she did that, it argued the possession of a power of a sort.

Her station in the chemist's shop he passed almost daily, appeared to him as a sudden and a terrific rush to the front; though it was only a short drive from the house in Regent's Park; but having shaken-off that house, he had pushed it back into mists, obliterated it. The woman certainly had a power.

He shot away to the power he knew of in himself; his capacity for winning men in bodies, the host of them, when it came to an effort of his energies: men and, individually, women. Individually, the women were to be counted on as well; warm supporters.

It was the admission of a doubt that he might expect to enroll them collectively. Eyeing the men, he felt his command of them. Glancing at congregated women, he had a chill. The Wives and Spinsters in ghostly judicial assembly: that is, the phantom of the offended collective woman: that is, the regnant Queen Idea issuing from our concourse of civilized life to govern Society, and pronounce on the orderly, the tolerable, the legal, and banish the rebellious: these maintained an aspect of the stand against him.

Did Nataly read the case: namely, that the crowned collective woman is not to be subdued? And what are we to say of the indefinite but forcible Authority, when we see it upholding Mrs. Burman to crush a woman like Nataly!

Victor's novel exercises in reflection were bringing him by hard degrees to conceive it to be the impalpable which has prevailing weight. Not many of our conquerors have scored their victories on the road of that index: nor has duration been granted them to behold the minute measure of value left even tangible after the dust of the conquest subsides. The passing by a shop where a broken old woman might be supposed to sit beneath her green forehead-shade—Venetian-blind of a henbane-visage!— had precipitated him into his first real grasp of the abstract verity: and it opens on to new realms, which are a new world to the practical mind. But he made no advance. He stopped in a fever of sensibility, to contemplate the powerful formless vapour rolling from a source that was nothing other than yonder weak lonely woman.

In other words, the human nature of the man was dragged to the school of its truancy by circumstances, for him to learn the commonest of sums done on a slate, in regard to payment of debts and the unrelaxing grip of the creditor on the defaulter. Debtors are always paying like those who are guilty of the easiest thing in life, the violation of Truth, they have made themselves bondmen to pay,

if not in substance, then in soul; and the nipping of the soul goes on for as long as the concrete burden is undischarged. You know the Liar; you must have seen him diminishing, until he has become a face without features, withdrawn to humanity's preliminary sketch (some half-dozen frayed threads of woeful outline on our original tapestry-web); and he who did the easiest of things, he must from such time sweat in being the prodigy of inventive nimbleness, up to the day when he propitiates Truth by telling it again. There is a repentance that does reconstitute! It may help to the tracing to springs of a fable whereby men have been guided thus far out of the wood.

Victor would have said truly that he loved Truth; that he paid every debt with a scrupulous exactitude: money, of course; and prompt apologies for a short brush of his temper. Nay, he had such a conscience for the smallest eruptions of a transient irritability, that the wish to say a friendly mending word to the Punctilio donkey of London Bridge, softened his retrospective view of the fall there, more than once. Although this man was a presentation to mankind of the force in Nature which drives to unresting speed, which is the vitality of the heart seen at its beating after a plucking of it from the body, he knew himself for the reverse of lawless; he inclined altogether to good citizenship. So social a man could not otherwise incline. But when it came to the examination of accounts between Mrs. Burman and himself, spasms of physical revulsion, loathings, his excessive human nature, put her out of Court. To men, it was impossible for him to speak the torments of those days of the monstrous alliance. The heavens were cognizant. He pleaded his case in their accustomed hearing:—a youngster tempted by wealth, attracted, besought, snared, revolted, etc. And Mrs. Burman, when roused to jealousy, had shown it by teasing him for a confession of his admiration of splendid points in the beautiful Nataly, the priceless fair woman living under their roof, a contrast of very life, with the corpse and shroud; and she seen by him daily, singing with him, her breath about him, her voice incessantly upon every chord of his being!

He pleaded successfully. But the silence following the verdict was heavy; the silence contained an unheard thunder. It was the sound, as when out of Court the public is dissatisfied with a verdict. Are we expected to commit a social outrage in exposing our whole case to the public?—Imagine it for a moment as done. Men are ours at a word—or at least a word of invitation. Women we woo; fluent smooth versions of our tortures, mixed with permissible courtship, win the individual woman. And that unreasoning collective woman, icy, deadly, condemns the poor racked wretch who so much as remembers them! She is the enemy of Nature.—Tell us how? She is the slave of existing conventions.—And from what cause? She is the artificial production of a state that exalts her so long as she sacrifices daily and hourly to the artificial.

Therefore she sides with Mrs. Burman—the foe of Nature: who, with her arts and gold lures, has now possession of the Law (the brass idol worshipped by the collective) to drive Nature into desolation.

He placed himself to the right of Mrs. Burman, for the world to behold the couple: and he lent the world a sigh of disgust.

What he could not do, as in other matters he did, was to rise above the situation, in a splendid survey and rapid view of the means of reversing it. He was too social to be a captain of the socially insurgent; imagination expired.

But having a courageous Nataly to second him!—how then? It was the succour needed. Then he would have been ready to teach the world that Nature—honest Nature—is more to be prized than Convention: a new Era might begin.

The thought was tonic for an instant and illuminated him springingly. It sank, excused for the flaccidity by Nataly's want of common adventurous daring. She had not taken to Lakelands; she was purchasing furniture from a flowing purse with a heavy heart—unfeminine, one might say; she preferred to live obscurely; she did not, one had to think—but it was unjust: and yet the accusation, that she did not cheerfully make a strain and spurt on behalf of her child, pressed to be repeated.

These short glimpses at reflection in Victor were like the verberant twang of a musical instrument that has had a smart blow, and wails away independent of the player's cunning hand. He would have said, that he was more his natural self when the cunning hand played on him, to make him praise and uplift his beloved: mightily would it have astonished him to contemplate with assured perception in his own person the Nature he invoked. But men invoking Nature, do not find in her the Holy Mother she in such case becomes to her daughters, whom she so persecutes. Men call on her for their defence, as a favourable witness: she is a note of their rhetoric. They are not bettered by her sustainment; they have not, as women may have, her enaemic aid at a trying hour. It is not an effort at epigram to say, that whom she scourges most she most supports.

An Opera-placard drew his next remark to Fenellan.

'How Wagner seems to have stricken the Italians! Well, now, the Germans have their Emperor to head their armies, and I say that the German emperor has done less for their lasting fame and influence than Wagner has done. He has affected the French too; I trace him in Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette*—and we don't gain by it; we have a poor remuneration for the melody gone; think of the little shepherd's piping in *Mireille*; and there's another in *Sapho-delicious*. I held out against Wagner as long as I could. The Italians don't much more than Wagnerize in exchange for the loss of melody. They would be wiser in going back to Pergolese, *Campagnole*. The *Mefistofole* was good—of the school of the foreign master. *Aida* and *Otello*, no. I confess to a weakness for the old barleysugar of Bellini or a *Donizetti-Serenade*. Aren't you seduced by cadences? Never mind Wagner's tap of his paedagogue's baton—a cadence catches me still. Early taste for barley-sugar, perhaps! There's a march in Verdi's *Attila* and *I Lombardi*, I declare I'm in military step when I hear them, as in the old days, after leaving the Opera. Fredi takes little Mab Mountney to her first Opera to-night. Enough to make us old ones envious! You remember your first Opera, Fenellan? *Sonnambula*, with me. I tell you, it would task the highest poetry—say, require, if you like—showing all that's noblest, splendidest, in a young man, to describe its effect on me. I was dreaming of my box at the Opera for a year after. The *Huguenots* to-night. Not the best suited for little Mabsy; but she'll catch at the *Rataplan*. Capital Opera; we used to think it the best, before we had *Tannhauser* and *Lohengrin* and the *Meistersinger*.'

Victor hinted notes of the Conspiracy Scene closing the Third Act of the *Huguenots*. That sombre Chorus brought Mrs. Burman before him. He drummed the *Rataplan*, which sent her flying. The return of a lively disposition for dinner and music completed his emancipation from the yoke of the baleful creature sitting half her days in the chemist's shop; save that a thought of drugs brought the smell, and the smell the picture; she threatened to be an apparition at any moment pervading him through his nostrils. He spoke to Fenellan of hunger for dinner, a need for it; singular in one whose appetite ran to the stroke of the hour abreast with Armandine's kitchen-clock. Fenellan proposed a glass of sherry and bitters at his Club over the way. He had forgotten a shower of black-balls (attributable to the conjurations of old Ate) on a certain past day. Without word of refusal, Victor entered a wine-merchant's office, where he was unknown, and stating his wish for bitters and dry sherry, presently received the glass, drank, nodded to the administering clerk, named the person whom he had obliged and refreshed, and passed out, remarking to Fenellan: 'Colney on Clubs! he's right; they're the mediaeval in modern times, our Baron's castles, minus the Baron; dead against public life and social duties. Business excuses my City Clubs; but I shall take my name off my Club up West.'

'More like monasteries, with a Committee for Abbot, and Whist for the services,' Fenellan said. 'Or tabernacles for the Chosen, and Grangousier playing Divinity behind the veil. Well, they're social.'

'Sectionally social, means anything but social, my friend. However—and the monastery had a bell for the wanderer! Say, I'm penniless or poundless, up and down this walled desert of a street, I feel, I must feel, these palaces—if we're Christian, not Jews: not that the Jews are uncharitable; they set an: example, in fact . . . '

He rambled, amusingly to the complacent hearing of Fenellan, who thought of his pursuit of wealth and grand expenditure.

Victor talked as a man having his mind at leaps beyond the subject.

He was nearing to the Idea he had seized and lost on London Bridge.

The desire for some good news wherewith to inspirit Nataly, withdrew him from his ineffectual chase. He had nought to deliver; on the contrary, a meditation concerning her comfort pledged him to concealment which was the no step, or passive state, most abhorrent to him.

He snatched at the name of Themison.

With Dr. Themison fast in his grasp, there was a report of progress to be made to Nataly; and not at all an empty report.

Themison, then: he leaned on Themison. The woman's doctor should have an influence approaching to authority with her.

Land-values in the developing Colonies, formed his theme of discourse to Fenellan: let Banks beware.

Fenellan saw him shudder and rub the back of his head. 'Feel the wind?' he said.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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