GEORGE MEREDITH

THE TRAGIC COMEDIANS: A STUDY IN A WELL-KNOWN STORY. COMPLETE

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Содержание

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The word ‘fantastical’ is accentuated in our tongue to so scornful an utterance that the constant good service it does would make it seem an appointed instrument for reviewers of books of imaginative matter distasteful to those expository pens. Upon examination, claimants to the epithet will be found outside of books and of poets, in many quarters, Nature being one of the prominent, if not the foremost. Wherever she can get to drink her fill of sunlight she pushes forth fantastically. As for that wandering ship of the drunken pilot, the mutinous crew and the angry captain, called Human Nature, ‘fantastical’ fits it no less completely than a continental baby’s skull-cap the stormy infant.

Our sympathies, one may fancy, will be broader, our critical acumen shrewder, if we at once accept the thing as a part of us and worthy of study.

The pair of tragic comedians of whom there will be question pass under this word as under their banner and motto. Their acts are incredible: they drank sunlight and drove their bark in a manner to eclipse historical couples upon our planet. Yet they do

belong to history, they breathed the stouter air than fiction's, the last chapter of them is written in red blood, and the man pouring out that last chapter, was of a mighty nature not unheroical, a man of the active grappling modern brain which wrestles with facts, to keep the world alive, and can create them, to set it spinning.

A Faust-like legend might spring from him: he had a devil. He was the leader of a host, the hope of a party, venerated by his followers, well hated by his enemies, respected by the intellectual chiefs of his time, in the pride of his manhood and his labours when he fell. And why this man should have come to his end through love, and the woman who loved him have laid her hand in the hand of the slayer, is the problem we have to study, nothing inventing, in the spirit and flesh of both. To ask if it was love is useless. Love may be celestial fire before it enters into the systems of mortals. It will then take the character of its place of abode, and we have to look not so much for the pure thing as for the passion. Did it move them, hurry them, animating the giants and gnomes of one, the elves and sprites of the other, and putting animal nature out of its fashionable front rank? The bare railway-line of their story tells of a passion honest enough to entitle it to be related. Nor is there anything invented, because an addition of fictitious incidents could never tell us how she came to do this, he to do that; or how the comic in their natures led by interplay to the tragic issue. They are real creatures, exquisitely fantastical, strangely exposed to the world by a lurid catastrophe, who teach us, that fiction, if it can imagine events and persons

more agreeable to the taste it has educated, can read us no such furrowing lesson in life.

BOOK 1

CHAPTER I

An unresisted lady-killer is probably less aware that he roams the pastures in pursuit of a coquette, than is the diligent Arachne that her web is for the devouring lion. At an early age Clotilde von Rudiger was dissatisfied with her conquests, though they were already numerous in her seventeenth year, for she began precociously, having at her dawn a lively fancy, a womanly person, and singular attractions of colour, eyes, and style. She belonged by birth to the small aristocracy of her native land. Nature had disposed her to coquettry, which is a pastime counting among the arts of fence, and often innocent, often serviceable, though sometimes dangerous, in the centres of polished barbarism known as aristocratic societies, where nature is not absent, but on the contrary very extravagant, tropical, by reason of her idle hours for the imbibing of copious draughts of sunlight. The young lady of charming countenance and sprightly manners is too much besought to choose for her choice to be decided; the numbers beseeching prevent her from choosing instantly, after the fashion of holiday schoolboys crowding a buffet of pastry. These are not coquettish, they clutch what is handy: and little so is the starved damsel of the sequestered

village, whose one object of the worldly picturesque is the passing curate; her heart is his for a nod. But to be desired ardently of trooping hosts is an incentive to taste to try for yourself. Men (the jury of householders empanelled to deliver verdicts upon the ways of women) can almost understand that. And as it happens, tasting before you have sounded the sense of your taste will frequently mislead by a step or two difficult to retrieve: the young coquette must then be cruel, as necessarily we kick the waters to escape drowning: and she is not in all cases dealing with simple blocks or limp festoons, she comes upon veteran tricksters that have a knowledge of her sex, capable of outfencing her nascent individuality. The more imagination she has, for a source of strength in the future days, the more is she a prey to the enemy in her time of ignorance.

Clotilde's younger maiden hours and their love episodes are wrapped in the mists Diana considerately drops over her adventurous favourites. She was not under a French mother's rigid supervision. In France the mother resolves that her daughter shall be guarded from the risks of that unequal rencounter between foolish innocence and the predatory. Vigilant foresight is not so much practised where the world is less accurately comprehended. Young people of Clotilde's upper world everywhere, and the young women of it especially, are troubled by an idea drawn from what they inhale and guess at in the spirituous life surrounding them, that the servants of the devil are the valiant host, this world's elect, getting and deserving

to get the best it can give in return for a little dashing audacity, a flavour of the Fronde in their conduct; they sin, but they have the world; and then they repent perhaps, but they have had the world. The world is the golden apple. Thirst for it is common during youth: and one would think the French mother worthy of the crown of wisdom if she were not so scrupulously provident in excluding love from the calculations on behalf of her girl.

Say (for Diana's mists are impenetrable and freeze curiosity) that Clotilde was walking with Count Constantine, the brilliant Tartar trained in Paris, when first she met Prince Marko Romaris, at the Hungarian Baths on the borders of the Styrian highlands. The scene at all events is pretty, and weaves a fable out of a variety of floating threads. A stranger to the Baths, dressed in white and scarlet, sprang from his carriage into a group of musical gypsies round an inn at the arch of the chestnut avenue, after pulling up to listen to them for a while. The music had seized him. He snatched bow and fiddle from one of the ring, and with a few strokes kindled their faces. Then seating himself, on a bench he laid the fiddle on his knee, and pinched the strings and flung up his voice, not ceasing to roll out the spontaneous notes when Clotilde and her cavalier, and other couples of the party, came nigh; for he was on the tide of the song, warm in it, and loved it too well to suffer intruders to break the flow, or to think of them. They were close by when the last of it rattled (it was a popular song of a fiery tribe) to its finish: He rose and saluted Clotilde, smiled and jumped back to his carriage, sending

a cry of adieu to the swarthy, lank-locked, leather-hued circle, of which his dark oriental eyes and skin of burnished walnut made him look an offshoot, but one of the celestial branch.

He was in her father's reception-room when she reached home: he was paying a visit of ceremony on behalf of his family to General von Rudiger; which helped her to remember that he had been expected, and also that his favourite colours were known to be white and scarlet. In those very colours, strange to tell, Clotilde was dressed; Prince Marko had recognized her by miraculous divination, he assured her he could have staked his life on the guess as he bowed to her. Adieu to Count Constantine. Fate had interposed the prince opportunely, we have to suppose, for she received a strong impression of his coming straight from her invisible guardian; and the stroke was consequently trenchant which sent the conquering Tartar raving of her fickleness. She struck, like fate, one blow. She discovered that the prince, in addition to his beauty and sweet manners and gift of song, was good; she fell in love with goodness, whereof Count Constantine was not an example: so she set her face another way, soon discovering that there may be fragility in goodness. And now first her imagination conceived the hero who was to subdue her. Could Prince Marko be he, soft as he was, pliable, a docile infant, burning to please her, enraptured in obeying?—the hero who would wrestle with her, overcome and hold her bound? Siegfried could not be dreamed in him, or a Siegfried's baby son-in-arms. She caught a glorious image of the woman rejecting him

and his rival, and it informed her that she, dissatisfied with an Adonis, and more than a match for a famous conqueror, was a woman of decisive and independent, perhaps unexampled, force of character. Her idea of a spiritual superiority that could soar over those two men, the bad and the good—the bad because of his vileness, the good because of his frailness—whispered to her of deserving, possibly of attracting, the best of men: the best, that is, in the woman's view of us—the strongest, the great eagle of men, lord of earth and air.

One who will dominate me, she thought.

Now when a young lady of lively intelligence and taking charm has brought her mind to believe that she possesses force of character, she persuades the rest of the world easily to agree with her, and so long as her pretensions are not directly opposed to their habits of thought, her parents will be the loudest in proclaiming it, fortifying so the maid's presumption, which is ready to take root in any shadow of subserviency. Her father was a gouty general of infantry in the diplomatic service, disinclined to unnecessary disputes, out of consideration for his vehement irritability when roused. Her mother had been one of the beauties of her set, and was preserving an attenuated reign, through the conversational arts, to save herself from fading into the wall. Her brothers and sisters were not of an age to contest her lead. The temper of the period was revolutionary in society by reflection of the state of politics, and juniors were sturdy democrats, letting their elders know that they had come to their inheritance, while

the elders, confused by the impudent topsy-turvy, put on the gaping mask (not unfamiliar to history) of the disestablished conservative, whose astounded state paralyzes his wrath.

Clotilde maintained a decent measure in the liberty she claimed, and it was exercised in wildness of dialogue rather than in capricious behaviour. If her flowing tongue was imperfectly controlled, it was because she discoursed by preference to men upon our various affairs and tangles, and they encouraged her with the tickled wonder which bids the bold advance yet farther into bogland. Becoming the renowned original of her society, wherever it might be, in Germany, Italy, Southern France, she grew chillily sensible of the solitude decreed for their heritage to our loftiest souls. Her Indian Bacchus, as a learned professor supplied Prince Marko's title for her, was a pet, not a companion. She to him was what she sought for in another. As much as she pitied herself for not lighting on the predestined man, she pitied him for having met the woman, so that her tenderness for both inspired many signs of warm affection, not very unlike the thing it moaned secretly the not being. For she could not but distinguish a more poignant sorrow in the seeing of the object we yearn to vainly than in vainly yearning to one unseen. Dressed, to delight him, in Prince Marko's colours, the care she bestowed on her dressing was for the one absent, the shrouded comer: so she pleased the prince to be pleasing to her soul's lord, and this, owing to an appearance of satisfactory deception that it bore, led to her thinking guiltily. We may ask it: an eagle is expected,

and how is he to declare his eagleship save by breaking through our mean conventional systems, tearing links asunder, taking his own in the teeth of vulgar ordinances? Clotilde's imagination drew on her reading for the knots it tied and untied, and its ideas of grandeur. Her reading was an interfusion of philosophy skimmed, and realistic romances deep-sounded. She tried hard, but could get no other terrible tangle for her hero's exhibition of flaming azure divineness than the vile one of the wedded woman. Further thinking of it, she revived and recovered; she despised the complication, yet without perceiving how else he was to manifest himself legitimately in a dull modern world. The rescuing her from death would be a poor imitation of worn-out heroes. His publication of a trumpeting book fell appallingly flat in her survey. Deeds of gallantry done as an officer in war (defending his country too) distinguished the soldier, but failed to add the eagle feather to the man. She had a mind of considerable soaring scope, and eclectic: it analyzed a Napoleon, and declined the position of his empress. The man must be a gentleman. Poets, princes, warriors, potentates, marched before her speculative fancy unselected.

So far, as far as she can be portrayed introductorily, she is not without exemplars in the sex. Young women have been known to turn from us altogether, never to turn back, so poor and shrunken, or so fleshly-bulgy have we all appeared in the fairy jacket they wove for the right one of us to wear becomingly. But the busy great world was round Clotilde while she was malleable, though

she might be losing her fresh ideas of the hammer and the block, and that is a world of much solicitation to induce a vivid girl to merge an ideal in a living image. Supposing, when she has accomplished it, that men justify her choice, the living will retain the colours of the ideal. We have it on record that he may seem an eagle.

'You talk curiously like Alvan, do you know,' a gentleman of her country said to her as they were descending the rock of Capri, one day. He said it musingly.

He belonged to a circle beneath her own: the learned and artistic. She had not heard of this Alvan, or had forgotten him; but professing universal knowledge, especially of celebrities, besides having an envious eye for that particular circle, which can pretend to be the choicest of all, she was unwilling to betray her ignorance, and she dimpled her cheek, as one who had often heard the thing said to her before. She smiled musingly.

CHAPTER II

'Who is the man they call Alvan?' She put the question at the first opportunity to an aunt of hers.

Up went five-fingered hands. This violent natural sign of horror was comforting: she saw that he was a celebrity indeed.

'Alvan! My dear Clotilde! What on earth can you want to know about a creature who is the worst of demagogues, a disreputable person, and a Jew!'

Clotilde remarked that she had asked only who he was. 'Is he clever?'

'He is one of the basest of those wretches who are for upsetting the Throne and Society to gratify their own wicked passions: that is what he is.'

'But is he clever?'

'Able as Satan himself, they say. He is a really dangerous, bad man. You could not have been curious about a worse one.'

'Politically, you mean.'

'Of course I do.'

The lady had not thought of any other kind of danger from a man of that station.

The likening of one to Satan does not always exclude meditation upon him. Clotilde was anxious to learn in what way her talk resembled Alvan's. He being that furious creature, she thought of herself at her wildest, which was in her estimation

her best; and consequently, she being by no means a furious creature, though very original, she could not meditate on him without softening the outlines given him by report; all because of the likeness between them; and, therefore, as she had knowingly been taken for furious by very foolish people, she settled it that Alvan was also a victim of the prejudices he scorned. It had pleased her at times to scorn our prejudices and feel the tremendous weight she brought on herself by the indulgence. She drew on her recollections of the Satanic in her bosom when so situated, and never having admired herself more ardently than when wearing that aspect, she would have admired the man who had won the frightful title in public, except for one thing—he was a Jew.

The Jew was to Clotilde as flesh of swine to the Jew. Her parents had the same abhorrence of Jewry. One of the favourite similes of the family for whatsoever grunted in grossness, wriggled with meanness, was Jew: and it was noteworthy from the fact that a streak of the blood was in the veins of the latest generation and might have been traced on the maternal side.

Now a meanness that clothes itself in the Satanic to terrify cowards is the vilest form of impudence venturing at insolence; and an insolent impudence with Jew features, the Jew nose and lips, is past endurance repulsive. She dismissed her contemplation of Alvan. Luckily for the gentleman who had compared her to the Jew politician, she did not meet him again in Italy.

She had meanwhile formed an idea of the Alvanesque in dialogue; she summoned her forces to take aim at it, without becoming anything Jewish, still remaining clean and Christian; and by her astonishing practice of the art she could at any time blow up a company—scatter mature and seasoned dames, as had they been balloons on a wind, ay, and give our stout sex a shaking.

Clotilde rejected another aspirant proposed by her parents, and falling into disgrace at home, she went to live for some months with an ancient lady who was her close relative residing in the capital city where the brain of her race is located. There it occurred that a dashing officer of social besides military rank, dancing with her at a ball, said, for a comment on certain boldly independent remarks she had been making: 'I see you know Alvan.'

Alvan once more.

'Indeed I do not,' she said, for she was addressing an officer high above Alvan in social rank; and she shrugged, implying that she was almost past contradiction of the charge.

'Surely you must,' said he; 'where is the lady who could talk and think as you do without knowing Alvan and sharing his views!'

Clotilde was both startled and nettled.

'But I do not know him at all; I have never met him, never seen him. I am unlikely to meet the kind of person,' she protested; and she was amazed yet secretly rejoiced on hearing him, a noble of her own circle, and a dashing officer, rejoin: 'Come, come, let

us be honest. That is all very well for the little midges floating round us to say of Alvan, but we two can clasp hands and avow proudly that we both know and love the man.'

'Were it true, I would own it at once, but I repeat, that he is a total stranger to me,' she said, seeing the Jew under quite a different illumination.

'Actually?'

'In honour.'

'You have never met, never seen him, never read any of his writings?'

'Never. I have heard his name, that is all.'

'Then,' the officer's voice was earnest, 'I pity him, and you no less, while you remain strangers, for you were made for one another. Those ideas you have expressed, nay, the very words, are Alvan's: I have heard him use them. He has just the same original views of society and history as yours; they're identical; your features are not unlike… you talk alike: I could fancy your voice the sister of his. You look incredulous? You were speaking of Pompeius, and you said "Plutarch's Pompeius," and more for it is almost incredible under the supposition that you do not know and have never listened to Alvan—you said that Pompeius appeared to have been decorated with all the gifts of the Gods to make the greater sacrifice of him to Caesar, who was not personally worth a pretty woman's "bite." Come, now—you must believe me: at a supper at Alvan's table the other night, the talk happened to be of a modern Caesar, which led to the real one, and from him

to “Plutarch’s Pompeius,” as Alvan called him; and then he said of him what you have just said, absolutely the same down to the allusion to the bite. I assure you. And you have numbers of little phrases in common: you are partners in aphorisms: Barriers are for those who cannot fly: that is Alvan’s. I could multiply them if I could remember; they struck me as you spoke.’

‘I must be a shameless plagiarist,’ said Clotilde.

‘Or he,’ said Count Kollin.

It is here the place of the Chorus to state that these: ideas were in the air at the time; sparks of the Vulcanic smithy at work in politics and pervading literature: which both Alvan and Clotilde might catch and give out as their own, in the honest belief that the epigram was, original to them. They were not members of a country where literature is confined to its little paddock, without, influence on the larger field (part lawn, part marsh) of the social world: they were readers in sympathetic action with thinkers and literary artists. Their saying in common, ‘Plutarch’s Pompeius,’ may be traceable to a reading of some professorial article on the common portrait-painting of the sage of Chaeroneia. The dainty savageness in the ‘bite’ Plutarch mentions, evidently struck on a similarity of tastes in both, as it has done with others. And in regard to Caesar, Clotilde thought much of Caesar; she had often wished that Caesar (for the additional pleasure in thinking of him) had been endowed with the beauty of his rival: one or two of Plutarch’s touches upon the earlier history of Pompeius had netted her fancy, faintly (your generosity must be equal to

hearing it) stung her blood; she liked the man; and if he had not been beaten in the end, she would have preferred him femininely. His name was not written Pompey to her, as in English, to sound absurd: it was a note of grandeur befitting great and lamentable fortunes, which the young lady declined to share solely because of her attraction to the victor, her compulsion to render unto the victor the sunflower's homage. She rendered it as a slave: the splendid man beloved to ecstasy by the flower of Roman women was her natural choice.

Alvan could not be even a Caesar in person, he was a Jew. Still a Jew of whom Count Kollin spoke so warmly must be exceptional, and of the exceptional she dreamed. He might have the head of a Caesar. She imagined a huge head, the cauldron of a boiling brain, anything but bright to the eye, like a pot always on the fire, black, greasy, encrusted, unkempt: the head of a malicious tremendous dwarf. Her hungry inquiries in a city where Alvan was well known, brought her full information of one who enjoyed a highly convivial reputation besides the influence of his political leadership; but no description of his aspect accompanied it, for where he was nightly to be met somewhere about the city, none thought of describing him, and she did not push that question because she had sketched him for herself, and rather wished, the more she heard of his genius, to keep him repulsive. It appeared that his bravery was as well proved as his genius, and a brilliant instance of it had been given in the city not long since. He had her ideas, and he won

multitudes with them: he was a talker, a writer, and an orator; and he was learned, while she could not pretend either to learning or to a flow of rhetoric. She could prattle deliciously, at times pointedly, relying on her intuition to tell her more than we get from books, and on her sweet impudence for a richer original strain. She began to appreciate now a reputation for profound acquirements. Learned professors of jurisprudence and history were as enthusiastic for Alvan in their way as Count Kollin. She heard things related of Alvan by the underbreath. That circle below her own, the literary and artistic, idolized him; his talk, his classic breakfasts and suppers, his undisguised ambition, his indomitable energy, his dauntlessness and sway over her sex, were subjects of eulogy all round her; and she heard of an enamoured baroness. No one blamed Alvan. He had shown his chivalrous valour in defending her. The baroness was not a young woman, and she was a hardbound Blue. She had been the first to discover the prodigy, and had pruned, corrected, and published him; he was one of her political works, promising to be the most successful. An old affair apparently; but the association of a woman's name with Alvan's, albeit the name of a veteran, roused the girl's curiosity, leading her to think his mental and magnetic powers must be of the very highest, considering his physical repulsiveness, for a woman of rank to yield him such extreme devotion. She commissioned her princely serving-man, who had followed and was never far away from her, to obtain precise intelligence of this notorious Alvan.

Prince Marko did what he could to please her; he knew something of the rumours about Alvan and the baroness. But why should his lady trouble herself for particulars of such people, whom it could scarcely be supposed she would meet by accident? He asked her this. Clotilde said it was common curiosity. She read him a short lecture on the dismal narrowness of their upper world; and on the advantage of taking an interest in the world below them and more enlightened; a world where ideas were current and speech was wine. The prince nodded; if she had these opinions, it must be good for him to have them too, and he shared them, as it were, by the touch of her hand, and for the length of time that he touched her hand, as an electrical shock may be taken by one far removed from the battery, susceptible to it only through the link; he was capable of thinking all that came to him from her a blessing—shocks, wounds and disruptions. He did not add largely to her stock of items, nor did he fetch new colours. The telegraph wire was his model of style. He was more or less a serviceless Indian Bacchus, standing for sign of the beauty and vacuity of their world: and how dismally narrow that world was, she felt with renewed astonishment at every dive out of her gold-fish pool into the world of tides below; so that she was ready to scorn the cultivation of the graces, and had, when not submitting to the smell, fanciful fits of a liking for tobacco smoke—the familiar incense of those homes where speech was wine.

At last she fell to the asking of herself whether, in the same city with him, often among his friends, hearing his latest intimate

remarks—things homely redolent of him as hot bread of the oven—she was ever to meet this man upon whom her thoughts were bent to the eclipse of all others. She desired to meet him for comparison's sake, and to criticize a popular hero. It was inconceivable that any one popular could approach her standard, but she was curious; flame played about him; she had some expectation of easing a spiteful sentiment created by the recent subjection of her thoughts to the prodigious little Jew; and some feeling of closer pity for Prince Marko she had, which urged her to be rid of her delusion as to the existence of a wonder-working man on our earth, that she might be sympathetically kind to the prince, perhaps compliant, and so please her parents, be good and dull, and please everybody, and adieu to dreams, good night, and so to sleep with the beasts!…

Calling one afternoon on a new acquaintance of the flat table-land she liked tripping down to from her heights, Clotilde found the lady in supreme toilette, glowing, bubbling: 'Such a breakfast, my dear!' The costly profusion, the anecdotes, the wit, the fun, the copious draughts of the choicest of life—was there ever anything to match it? Never in that lady's recollection, or her husband's either, she exclaimed. And where was the breakfast? Why, at Alvan's, to be sure; where else could such a breakfast be?

'And you know Alvan!' cried Clotilde, catching excitement from the lady's flush.

'Alvan is one of my husband's closest friends'

Clotilde put on the playful frenzy; she made show of wringing

her hands: 'Oh! happy you! you know Alvan? And everybody is to know him except me? why? I proclaim it unjust. Because I am unmarried? I'll take a husband to-morrow morning to be entitled to meet Alvan in the evening.'

The playful frenzy is accepted in its exact innocent signification of 'this is my pretty wilful will and way,' and the lady responded to it cordially; for it is pleasant to have some one to show, and pleasant to assist some one eager to see: besides, many had petitioned her for a sight of Alvan; she was used to the request.

'You're not obliged to wait for to-morrow,' she said. 'Come to one of our gatherings to-night. Alvan will be here.'

'You invite me?'

'Distinctly. Pray, come. He is sure to be here. We have his promise, and Alvan never fails. Was it not Frau v. Crestow who did us the favour of our introduction? She will bring you.'

The Frau v. Crestow was a cousin of Clotilde's by marriage, sentimental, but strict in her reading of the proprieties. She saw nothing wrong in undertaking to conduct Clotilde to one of those famous gatherings of the finer souls of the city and the race; and her husband agreed to join them after the sitting of the Chamber upon a military-budget vote. The whole plan was nicely arranged and went well. Clotilde dressed carefully, letting her gold-locks cloud her fine forehead carelessly, with finishing touches to the negligence, for she might be challenged to take part in disputations on serious themes, and a handsome

young woman who has to sustain an argument against a man does wisely when she forearms her beauties for a reserve, to carry out flanking movements if required. The object is to beat him.

CHAPTER III

Her hostess met her at the entrance of the rooms, murmuring that Alvan was present, and was there: a direction of a nod that any quick-witted damsel must pretend to think sufficient, so Clotilde slipped from her companion and gazed into the recess of a doorless inner room, where three gentlemen stood, backed by book cases, conversing in blue vapours of tobacco. They were indistinct; she could see that one of them was of good stature. One she knew; he was the master of the house, mildly Jewish. The third was distressingly branded with the slum and gutter signs of the Ahasuerus race. Three hats on his head could not have done it more effectively. The vindictive caricatures of the God Pan, executed by priests of the later religion burning to hunt him out of worship in the semblance of the hairy, hoofy, snouty Evil One, were not more loathsome. She sank on a sofa. That the man? Oh! Jew, and fifty times over Jew! nothing but Jew!

The three stepped into the long saloon, and she saw how veritably magnificent was the first whom she had noticed.

She sat at her lamb's-wool work in the little ivory frame, feeding on the contrast. This man's face was the born orator's, with the light-giving eyes, the forward nose, the animated mouth, all stamped for speechfulness and enterprise, of Cicero's rival in the forum before he took the headship of armies and marched to empire.

The gifts of speech, enterprise, decision, were marked on his features and his bearing, but with a fine air of lordly mildness. Alas, he could not be other than Christian, so glorious was he in build! One could vision an eagle swooping to his helm by divine election. So vigorously rich was his blood that the swift emotion running with the theme as he talked pictured itself in passing and was like the play of sheet lightning on the variations of the uninterrupted and many-glancing outpour. Looking on him was listening. Yes, the looking on him sufficed. Here was an image of the beauty of a new order of godlike men, that drained an Indian Bacchus of his thin seductions at a breath-reduced him to the state of nursery plaything, spangles and wax, in the contemplation of a girl suddenly plunged on the deeps of her womanhood. She shrank to smaller and smaller as she looked.

Be sure that she knew who he was. No, says she. But she knew. It terrified her soul to think he was Alvan. She feared scarcely less that it might not be he. Between these dreads of doubt and belief she played at cat and mouse with herself, escaped from cat, persecuted mouse, teased herself, and gloated. It is he! not he! he! not he! most certainly! impossible!—And then it ran: If he, oh me! If another, woe me! For she had come to see Alvan. Alvan and she shared ideas. They talked marvellously alike, so as to startle Count Kollin: and supposing he was not Alvan, it would be a bitter disappointment. The supposition that he was, threatened her with instant and life-long bondage.

Then again, could that face be the face of a Jew? She feasted. It

was a noble profile, an ivory skin, most lustrous eyes. Perchance a Jew of the Spanish branch of the exodus, not the Polish. There is the noble Jew as well as the bestial Gentile. There is not in the sublimest of Gentiles a majesty comparable to that of the Jew elect. He may well think his race favoured of heaven, though heaven chastise them still. The noble Jew is grave in age, but in his youth he is the arrow to the bow of his fiery eastern blood, and in his manhood he is—ay, what you see there! a figure of easy and superb preponderance, whose fire has mounted to inspirit and be tempered by the intellect.

She was therefore prepared all the while for the surprise of learning that the gentleman so unlike a Jew was Alvan; and she was prepared to express her recordation of the circumstance in her diary with phrases of very eminent surprise. Necessarily it would be the greatest of surprises.

The three, this man and his two of the tribe, upon whom Clotilde's attention centred, with a comparison in her mind too sacred to be other than profane (comparisons will thrust themselves on minds disordered), dropped to the cushions of the double-seated sofa, by one side of which she cowered over her wool-work, willing to dwindle to a pin's head if her insignificance might enable her to hear the words of the speaker. He pursued his talk: there was little danger of not hearing him. There was only the danger of feeling too deeply the spell of his voice. His voice had the mellow fulness of the clarionet. But for the subject, she could have fancied a noontide piping of great Pan by the

sedges. She had never heard a continuous monologue so musical, so varied in music, amply flowing, vivacious, interwovenly the brook, the stream, the torrent: a perfect natural orchestra in a single instrument. He had notes less pastorally imageable, notes that fired the blood, with the ranging of his theme. The subject became clearer to her subjugated wits, until the mental vivacity he roused on certain impetuous phrases of assertion caused her pride to waken up and rebel as she took a glance at herself, remembering that she likewise was a thinker, deemed in her society an original thinker, an intrepid thinker and talker, not so very much beneath this man in audacity of brain, it might be. He kindled her thus, and the close-shut but expanded and knew the fretting desire to breathe out the secret within it, and be appreciated in turn.

The young flower of her sex burned to speak, to deliver an opinion. She was unaccustomed to yield a fascinated ear. She was accustomed rather to dictate and be the victorious performer, and though now she was not anxious to occupy the pulpit—being too strictly bred to wish for a post publicly in any of the rostra—and meant still less to dispossess the present speaker of the place he filled so well, she yearned to join him: and as that could not be done by a stranger approving, she panted to dissent. A young lady cannot so well say to an unknown gentleman: 'You have spoken truly, sir,' as, 'That is false!' for to speak in the former case would be gratuitous, and in the latter she is excused by the moral warmth provoking her. Further, dissent rings out

finely, and approval is a feeble murmur—a poor introduction of oneself. Her moral warmth was ready and waiting for the instigating subject, but of course she was unconscious of the goad within. Excitement wafted her out of herself, as we say, or out of the conventional vessel into the waves of her troubled nature. He had not yet given her an opportunity for dissenting; she was compelled to agree, dragged at his chariot-wheels in headlong agreement.

His theme was Action; the political advantages of Action; and he illustrated his view with historical examples, to the credit of the French, the temporary discredit of the German and English races, who tend to compromise instead. Of the English he spoke as of a power extinct, a people 'gone to fat,' who have gained their end in a hoard of gold and shut the door upon bandit ideas. Action means life to the soul as to the body. Compromise is virtual death: it is the pact between cowardice and comfort under the title of expediency. So do we gather dead matter about us. So are we gradually self-stifled, corrupt. The war with evil in every form must be incessant; we cannot have peace. Let then our joy be in war: in uncompromising Action, which need not be the less a sagacious conduct of the war.... Action energizes men's brains, generates grander capacities, provokes greatness of soul between enemies, and is the guarantee of positive conquest for the benefit of our species. To doubt that, is to doubt of good being to be had for the seeking. He drew pictures of the healthy Rome when turbulent, the doomed quiescent. Rome struggling

grasped the world. Rome stagnant invited Goth and Vandal. So forth: alliterative antitheses of the accustomed pamphleteer. At last her chance arrived.

His opposition sketch of Inaction was refreshed by an analysis of the character of Hamlet. Then he reverted to Hamlet's promising youth. How brilliantly endowed was the Prince of Denmark in the beginning!

'Mad from the first!' cried Clotilde.

She produced an effect not unlike that of a sudden crack of thunder. The three made chorus in a noise of boots on the floor.

Her hero faced about and stood up, looking at her fulgently. Their eyes engaged without wavering on either side. Brave eyes they seemed, each pair of them, for his were fastened on a comely girl, and she had strung herself to her gallantest to meet the crisis.

His friends quitted him at a motion of the elbows. He knelt on the sofa, leaning across it, with clasped hands.

'You are she!—So, then, is a contradiction of me to be the commencement?'

'After the apparition of Hamlet's father the prince was mad,' said Clotilde hurriedly, and she gazed for her hostess, a paroxysm of alarm succeeding that of her boldness.

'Why should we two wait to be introduced?' said he. 'We know one another. I am Alvan. You are she of whom I heard from Kollin: who else? Lucretia the gold-haired; the gold-crested serpent, wise as her sire; Aurora breaking the clouds; in short, Clotilde!'

Her heart exulted to hear him speak her name. She laughed with a radiant face. His being Alvan, and his knowing her and speaking her name, all was like the happy reading of a riddle. He came round to her, bowing, and his hand out. She gave hers: she could have said, if asked, 'For good!' And it looked as though she had given it for good.

CHAPTER IV

'Hamlet in due season,' said he, as they sat together. 'I shall convince you.'

She shook her head.

'Yes, yes, an opinion formed by a woman is inflexible; I know that: the fact is not half so stubborn. But at present there are two more important actors: we are not at Elsinore. You are aware that I hoped to meet you?'

'Is there a periodical advertisement of your hopes?—or do they come to us by intuition?'

'Kollin was right!—the ways of the serpent will be serpentine. I knew we must meet. It is no true day so long as the goddess of the morning and the sun-god are kept asunder. I speak of myself, by what I have felt since I heard of you.'

'You are sure of your divinity?'

'Through my belief in yours!'

They bowed smiling at the courtly exchanges.

'And tell me,' said he, 'as to meeting me…?'

She replied: 'When we are so like the rest of the world we may confess our weakness.'

'Unlike! for the world and I meet and part: not we two.'

Clotilde attempted an answer: it would not come. She tried to be revolted by his lording tone, and found it strangely inoffensive. His lording presence and the smile that was like a waving feather

on it compelled her so strongly to submit to hear, as to put her in danger of appearing to embrace this man's rapid advances.

She said: 'I first heed of you at Capri.'

'And I was at Capri seven days after you had left.'

'You knew my name then?'

'Be not too curious with necromancers. Here is the date—March 15th. You departed on the 8th.'

'I think I did. That is a year from now.'

'Then we missed: now we meet. It is a year lost. A year is a great age! Reflect on it and what you owe me. How I wished for a comrade at Capri! Not a "young lady," and certainly no man. The understanding Feminine, was my desire—a different thing from the feminine understanding, usually. I wanted my comrade young and fair, necessarily of your sex, but with heart and brain: an insane request, I fancied, until I heard that you were the person I wanted. In default of you I paraded the island with Tiberius, who is my favourite tyrant. We took the initiative against the patricians, at my suggestion, and the Annals were written by a plebeian demagogue, instead of by one of that party, whose account of my extinction by command of the emperor was pathetic. He apologized in turn for my imperial master and me, saying truly, that the misunderstanding between us was past cement: for each of us loved the man but hated his office; and as the man is always more in his office than he is in himself, clearly it was the lesser portion of our friend that each of us loved. So, I, as the weaker, had to perish, as he would have done

had I been the stronger; I admitted it, and sent my emperor my respectful adieux, with directions for the avoiding of assassins. Mademoiselle, by delaying your departure seven days you would have saved me from death. You see, the official is the artificial man, and I ought to have known there is no natural man left in us to weigh against the artificial. I counted on the emperor's personal affection, forgetting that princes cannot be our friends.'

'You died bravely?'

Clotilde entered into the extravagance with a happy simulation of zest.

'Simply, we will say. My time had come, and I took no sturdy pose, but let the life-stream run its course for a less confined embankment. Sapphire sea, sapphire sky: one believes in life there, thrills with it, when life is ebbing: ay, as warmly as when life is at the flow in our sick and shrivelled North—the climate for dried fish! Verily the second death of hearing that a gold-haired Lucretia had been on the island seven days earlier, was harder to bear. Tell me frankly—the music in Italy?'

'Amorous and martial, brainless and monotonous.'

'Excellent!' his eyes flashed delightedly. 'O comrade of comrades! that year lost to me will count heavily as I learn to value those I have gained. Yes, brainless! There, in music, we beat them, as politically France beats us. No life without brain! The brainless in Art and in Statecraft are nothing but a little more obstructive than the dead. It is less easy to cut a way through them. But it must be done, or the Philistine will be as the locust

in his increase, and devour the green blades of the earth. You have been trained to shudder at the demagogue?'

'I do not shudder,' said Clotilde.

'A diamond from the lapidary!—Your sentences have many facets. Well, you are conversing with a demagogue, an avowed one: a demagogue and a Jew. You take it as a matter of course: you should exhibit some sparkling incredulity. The Christian is like the politician in supposing the original obverse of him everlastingly the same, after the pattern of the monster he was originally taught to hate. But the Jew has been a little christianized, and we have a little bejewed the Christian. So with demagogues: as we see the conservative crumbling, we grow conservatived. Try to think individually upon what you have to learn collectively—that is your task. You are of the few who will be equal to it. We are not men of blood, believe me. I am not. For example, I detest and I decline the duel. I have done it, and proved myself a man of metal notwithstanding. To say nothing of the inhumanity, the senselessness of duelling revolts me. 'Tis a folly, so your nobles practise it, and your royal wiseacre sanctions. No blood for me: and yet I tell you that whatever opposes me, I will sweep away. How? With the brain. If we descend to poor brute strength or brutal craft, it is from failing in the brain: we quit the leadership of our forces, and the descent is the beast's confession. Do I say how? Perhaps by your aid.—You do not start and cry: "Mine!" That is well. I have not much esteem for non-professional actresses. They are numerous and not entertaining.

—You leave it to me to talk.'

'Could I do better?'

'You listen sweetly.'

'It is because I like to hear.'

'You have the pearly little ear of a shell on the sand.'

'With the great sea sounding near it!'

Alvan drew closer to her.

'I look into your eyes and perceive that one may listen to you and speak to you. Heart to heart, then! Yes, a sea to lull you, a sea to win you—temperately, let us hope; by storm, if need be. My prize is found! The good friend who did the part of Iris for us came bounding to me: "I have discovered the wife for you, Alvan." I had previously heard of her from another as having touched the islet of Capri. "But," said Kollin, "she is a gold-crested serpent—slippery!" Is she? That only tells me of a little more to be mastered. I feel my future now. Hitherto it has been a land without sunlight. Do you know how the look of sunlight on a land calms one? It signifies to the eye possession and repose, the end gained—not the end to labour, just heaven! but peace to the heart's craving, which is the renewal of strength for work, the fresh dip in the waters of life. Conjure up your vision of Italy. Remember the meaning of Italian light and colour: the clearness, the luminous fulness, the thoughtful shadows. Mountain and wooded headland are solid, deep to the eye, spirit-speaking to the mind. They throb. You carve shapes of Gods out of that sky, the sea, those peaks. They live with you. How they satiate the vacant

soul by influx, and draw forth the troubled from its prickly nest! —Well, and you are my sunlighted land. And you will have to be fought for. And I see not the less repose in the prospect! Part of you may be shifty-sand. The sands are famous for their golden shining—as you shine. Well, then, we must make the quicksands concrete. I have a perfect faith in you, and in the winning of you. Clearly you will have to be fought for. I should imagine it a tough battle to come. But as I doubt neither you nor myself, I see beyond it.—We use phrases in common, and aphorisms, it appears. Why? but that our minds act in unison. What if I were to make a comparison of you with Paris?—the city of Paris, Lutetia.'

'Could you make it good?' said Clotilde.

He laughed and postponed it for a series of skimming discussions, like swallow-flights from the nest beneath the eaves to the surface of the stream, perpetually reverting to her, and provoking spirited replies, leading her to fly with him in expectation of a crowning compliment that must be singular and was evidently gathering confirmation in his mind from the touchings and probings of her character on these flights.

She was like a lady danced off her sense of fixity, to whom the appearance of her whirling figure in the mirror is both wonderful and reassuring; and she liked to be discussed, to be compared to anything, for the sake of being the subject, so as to be sure it was she that listened to a man who was a stranger, claiming her for his own; sure it was she that by not breaking from him

implied consent, she that went speeding in this magical rapid round which slung her more and more out of her actual into her imagined self, compelled her to proceed, denied her the right to faint and call upon the world for aid, and catch at it, though it was close by and at a signal would stop the terrible circling. The world was close by and had begun to stare. She half apprehended that fact, but she was in the presence of the irresistible. In the presence of the irresistible the conventional is a crazy structure swept away with very little creaking of its timbers on the flood. When we feel its power we are immediately primitive creatures, flying anywhere in space, indifferent to nakedness. And after trimming ourselves for it, the sage asks your permission to add, it will be the thing we are most certain some day to feel. Had not she trimmed herself?—so much that she had won fame for an originality mistaken by her for the independent mind, and perilously, for courage. She had trimmed herself and Alvan too —herself to meet it, and Alvan to be it. Her famous originality was a trumpet blown abroad proclaiming her the prize of the man who sounded as loudly his esteem for the quality—in a fair young woman of good breeding. Each had evoked the other. Their common anticipations differed in this, that he had expected comeliness, she the reverse—an Esau of the cities; and seeing superb manly beauty in the place of the thick-featured sodden satyr of her miscreating fancy, the irresistible was revealed to her on its divinest whirlwind.

They both desired beauty; they had each stipulated for beauty

before captivity could be acknowledged; and he beholding her very attractive comeliness, walked into the net, deeming the same a light thing to wear, and rather a finishing grace to his armoury; but she, a trained disciple of the conventional in social behaviour (as to the serious points and the extremer trifles), fluttered exceedingly; she knew not what she was doing, where her hand was, how she looked at him, how she drank in his looks on her. Her woman's eyes had no guard they had scarcely speculation. She saw nothing in its passing, but everything backward, under haphazard flashes. The sight of her hand disengaged told her it had been detained; a glance at the company reminded her that those were men and women who had been other than phantoms; recollections of the words she listened to, assented to, replied to, displayed the gulfs she had crossed. And nevertheless her brain was as quick as his to press forward to pluck the themes which would demonstrate her mental vividness and at least indicate her force of character. The splendour of the man quite extinguished, or over-brightened, her sense of personal charm; she set fire to her brain to shine intellectually, treating the tale of her fair face as a childish tale that might have a grain of truth in it, some truth, a very little, and that little nearly worthless, merely womanly, a poor charm of her sex. The intellectual endowment was rarer: still rarer the moral audacity. O, to match this man's embracing discursiveness! his ardour, his complacent energy, the full strong sound he brought out of all subjects! He struck, and they rang. There was a bell in everything for him; Nature gave out her cry,

and significance was on all sides of the universe; no dead stuff, no longer any afflicting lumpishness. His brain was vivifying light. And how humane he was! how supremely tolerant! Where she had really thought instead of flippantly tapping at the doors of thought, or crying vagrantly for an echo, his firm footing in the region thrilled her; and where she had felt deeper than fancifully, his wise tenderness overwhelmed. Strange to consider: with all his precious gifts, which must make the gift of life thrice dear to him, he was fearless. Less by what he said than by divination she discerned that he knew not fear. If for only that, she would have hung to him like his shadow. She could have detected a brazen pretender. A meaner mortal vaunting his great stores she would have written down coxcomb. Her social training and natural perception raised her to a height to measure the bombastical and distinguish it from the eloquently lofty. He spoke of himself, as the towering Alp speaks out at a first view, bidding that which he was be known. Fearless, confident, able, he could not but be, as he believed himself, indomitable. She who was this man's mate would consequently wed his possessions, including courage. Clotilde at once reached the conclusion of her having it in an equal degree. Was she not displaying it? The worthy people of the company stared, as she now perceived, and she was indifferent; her relatives were present without disturbing her exaltation. She wheeled above their heads in the fiery chariot beside her sun-god. It could not but be courage, active courage, superior to her previous tentative steps—the verbal temerities

she had supposed so dauntless. For now she was in action, now she was being tried to match the preacher and incarnation of the virtues of action!

Alvan shaped a comparison of her with Paris, his beloved of cities—the symbolized goddess of the lightning brain that is quick to conceive, eager to realize ideas, impassioned for her hero, but ever putting him to proof, graceful beyond all rhyme, colloquial as never the Muse; light in light hands, yet valiant unto death for a principle; and therefore not light, anything but light in strong hands, very stedfast rather: and oh! constantly entertaining.

The comparison had to be strained to fit the living lady's shape. Did he think it, or a dash of something like it?

His mood was luxurious. He had found the fair and youthful original woman of refinement and station desired by him. He had good reason to wish to find her. Having won a name, standing on firm ground, with promise of a great career, chief of what was then taken for a growing party and is not yet a collapsed, nor will be, though the foot on it is iron, his youth had flown under the tutelage of an extraordinary Mentor, whom to call Athene robs the goddess of her personal repute for wisdom in conduct, but whose head was wise, wise as it was now grey. Verily she was original; and a grey original should seem remarkable above a blooming blonde. If originality in woman were our prime request, the grey should bear the palm. She has gone through the battle, retaining the standard she carried into it, which is a

victory. Alas, that grey, so spirit-touching in Art, should be so wintry in reality!

The discovery of a feminine original breathing Spring, softer, warmer than the ancient one, gold instead of snowcrested, and fully as intrepid as devoted, was an immense joy to Alvan. He took it luxuriously because he believed in his fortune, a kind of natal star, the common heritage of the adventurous, that brought him his good things in time, in return for energetic strivings in a higher direction apart from his natural longings.

Fortune had delayed, he had wintered long. All the sweeter was the breath of the young Spring. That exquisite new sweetness robed Clotilde in the attributes of the person dreamed of for his mate; and deductively assuming her to possess them, he could not doubt his power of winning her. Barriers are for those who cannot fly. The barriers were palpable about a girl of noble Christian birth: so was the courage in her which would give her wings, he thought, coming to that judgement through the mixture of his knowledge of himself and his perusal of her exterior. He saw that she could take an impression deeply enough to express it sincerely, and he counted on it, sympathetically endowing her with his courage to support the originality she was famed for.

They were interrupted between-whiles by weariful men running to Alvan for counsel on various matters—how to play their game, or the exact phrasing of some pregnant sentence current in politics or literature. He satisfied them severally and shouldered them away, begging for peace that night. Clotilde

corroborated his accurate recital of the lines of a contested verse of the incomparable Heinrich, and they fell to capping verses of the poet-lucid metheglin, with here and there no dubious flavour of acid, and a lively sting in the tail of the honey. Sentiment, cynicism, and satin impropriety and scabrous, are among those verses, where pure poetry has a recognized voice; but the lower elements constitute the popularity in a cultivated society inclining to wantonness out of bravado as well as by taste. Alvan, looking indolently royal and royally roguish, quoted a verse that speaks of the superfluousness of a faithless lady's vowing bite:

> 'The kisses were in the course of things,
> The bite was a needless addition.'

Clotilde could not repress her reddening—Count Kollin had repeated too much! She dropped her eyes, with a face of sculpture, then resumed their chatter. He spared her the allusion to Pompeius. She convinced him of her capacity for reserve besides intrepidity, and flattered him too with her blush. She could dare to say to Kollin what her scarlet sensibility forbade her touching on with him: not that she would not have had an airy latitude with him to touch on what she pleased: he liked her for her boldness and the cold peeping of the senses displayed in it: he liked also the distinction she made.

The cry to supper conduced to a further insight of her adaptation to his requirements in a wife. They marched to

the table together, and sat together, and drank a noble Rhine wine together—true Rauenthal. His robustness of body and soul inspired the wish that his well-born wife might be, in her dainty fashion, yet honestly and without mincing, his possible boonfellow: he and she, glass in hand, thanking the bountiful heavens, blessing mankind in chorus. It belonged to his hearty dream of the wife he would choose, were she to be had. The position of interpreter of heaven's benevolence to mankind through his own enjoyment of the gifts, was one that he sagaciously demanded for himself, sharing it with the Philistine unknowingly; and to have a wife no less wise than he on this throne of existence was a rosy exaltation. Clotilde kindled to the hint of his festival mood of Solomon at the banquet. She was not devoid of a discernment of flavours; she had heard grave judges at her father's board profoundly deliver their verdicts upon this and that vineyard and vintage; and it is a note of patriotism in her country to be enthusiastic for wine of the Rhine: she was, moreover, thirsty from much talking and excitement. She drank her glass relishingly, declaring the wine princely. Alvan smacked his hands in a rapture: 'You are not for the extract of raisin our people have taken to copy from French Sauternes, to suit a female predilection for sugar?'

'No, no, the grape for me!' said she: 'the Rhine grape with the elf in it, and the silver harp and the stained legend!'

'Glorious!'

He toasted the grape. 'Wine of the grape is the young bride—

the young sun-bride! divine, and never too sweet, never cloying like the withered sun-dried, with its one drop of concentrated sugar, that becomes ten of gout. No raisin-juice for us! None of their too-long-on-the-stem clusters! We are for the blood of the grape in her youth, her heaven-kissing ardour. I have a cellar charged with the bravest of the Rhine. We—will we not assail it, bleed it in the gallant days to come? we two!' The picture of his bride and him drinking the sun down after a day of savage toil was in the shout—a burst unnoticed in the incessantly verbalizing buzz of a continental supper-table. Clotilde acquiesced: she chimed to it like a fair boonfellow of the rollicking faun. She was realizing fairyland.

They retired to the divan-corner where it was you-and-I between them as with rivulets meeting and branching, running parallel, uniting and branching again, divided by the theme, but unending in the flow of the harmony. So ran their chirping arguments and diversions. The carrying on of a prolonged and determined you-and-I in company intimates to those undetermined floating atoms about us that a certain sacred something is in process of formation, or has formed; and people looked; and looked hard at the pair, and at one another afterward: none approached them. The Signor conjuror who has a thousand arts for conjuring with nature was generally considered to have done that night his most ancient and reputedly fabulous trick—the dream of poets, rarely witnessed anywhere, and almost too wonderful for credence in a haunt of our later civilization. Yet

there it was: the sudden revelation of the intense divinity to a couple fused in oneness by his apparition, could be perceived of all having man and woman in them; love at first sight, was visible. 'Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?' And if nature, character, circumstance, and a maid clever at dressing her mistress's golden hair, did prepare them for Love's lightning-match, not the less were they proclaimingly alight and in full blaze. Likewise, Time, imperious old gentleman though we know him to be, with his fussy reiterations concerning the hour for bed and sleep, bowed to the magical fact of their condition, and forbore to warn them of his passing from night to day. He had to go, he must, he has to be always going, but as long as he could he left them on their bank by the margin of the stream, where a shadow-cycle of the eternal wound a circle for them and allowed them to imagine they had thrust that old driver of the dusty high-road quietly out of the way. They were ungrateful, of course, when the performance of his duties necessitated his pulling them up beside him pretty smartly, but he uttered no prophecy of ever intending to rob them of the celestial moments they had cut from him and meant to keep between them 'for ever,' and fresh.

The hour was close on the dawn of a March morning. Alvan assisted at the cloaking and hooding of Clotilde. Her relatives were at hand; they hung by while he led her to the stairs and down into a spacious moonlight that laid the traceries of the bare tree-twigs clear-black on grass and stone.

'A night to head the Spring!' said Alvan. 'Come.'

He lifted her off the steps and set her on the ground, as one who had an established right to the privilege and she did not contest it, nor did her people, so kingly was he, arrayed in the thunder of the bolt which had struck the pair. These things, and many things that islands know not of, are done upon continents, where perhaps traditions of the awfulness of Love remain more potent in society; or it may be, that an island atmosphere dispossesses the bolt of its promptitude to strike, or the breastplates of the islanders are strengthened to resist the bolt, or no tropical heat is there to create and launch it, or nothing is to be seen of it for the haziness, or else giants do not walk there. But even where he walked, amid a society intellectually fostering sentiment, in a land bowing to see the simplicity of the mystery paraded, Alvan's behaviour was passing heteroclite. He needed to be the kingly fellow he was, crowned by another kingly fellow—the lord of hearts—to impose it uninterruptedly. 'She is mine; I have won her this night!' his bearing said; and Clotilde's acquiesced; and the worthy couple following them had to exhibit a copy of the same, much wondering. Partly by habit, and of his natural astuteness, Alvan peremptorily usurped a lead that once taken could not easily be challenged, and would roll him on a good tideway strong in his own passion and his lady's up against the last defences—her parents. A difficulty with them was foreseen. What is a difficulty!—a gate in the hunting-field: an opponent on a platform: a knot beneath a sword: the dam to waters that draw from the heavens. Not desiring it in this case—it

would have been to love the difficulty better than the woman—he still enjoyed the bracing prospect of a resistance, if only because it was a portion of the dowry she brought him. Good soldiers (who have won their grades) are often of a peaceful temper and would not raise an invocation to war, but a view of the enemy sets their pugnacious forces in motion, the bugle fills their veins with electrical fire, till they are as racers on the race-course.—His inmost hearty devil was glad of a combat that pertained to his possession of her, for battle gives the savour of the passion to win, and victory dignifies a prize: he was, however, resolved to have it, if possible, according to the regular arrangement of such encounters, formal, without snatchings, without rash violence; a victory won by personal ascendancy, reasoning eloquence.

He laughed to hear her say, in answer to a question as to her present feelings: 'I feel that I am carried away by a centaur!' The comparison had been used or implied to him before.

'No!' said he, responding to a host of memories, to shake them off, 'no more of the quadruped man! You tempt him—may I tell you that? Why, now, this moment, at the snap of my fingers, what is to hinder our taking the short cut to happiness, centaur and nymph? One leap and a gallop, and we should be into the morning, leaving night to grope for us, parents and friends to run about for the wits they lose in running. But no! No more scandals. That silver moon invites us by its very spell of bright serenity, to be mad: just as, when you drink of a reverie, the more prolonged it is the greater the readiness for wild delirium at the

end of the draught. But no!' his voice deepened—'the handsome face of the orb that lights us would be well enough were it only a gallop between us two. Dearest, the orb that lights us two for a lifetime must be taken all round, and I have been on the wrong side of the moon.

I have seen the other face of it—a visage scored with regrets, dead dreams, burnt passions, bald illusions, and the like, the like! —sunless, waterless, without a flower! It is the old volcano land: it grows one bitter herb: if ever you see my mouth distorted you will know I am revolving a taste of it; and as I need the antidote you give, I will not be the centaur to win you, for that is the land where he stables himself; yes, there he ends his course, and that is the herb he finishes by pasturing on. You have no dislike of metaphors and parables? We Jews are a parable people.'

'I am sure I do understand…' said Clotilde, catching her breath to be conscientious, lest he should ask her for an elucidation.

'Provided always that the metaphor be not like the metaphysician's treatise on Nature: a torch to see the sunrise!— You were going to add?'

'I was going to say, I think I understand, but you run away with me still.'

'May the sensation never quit you!'

'It will not.'

'What a night!' Alvan raised his head: 'A night cast for our first meeting and betrothing! You are near home?'

'The third house yonder in the moonlight.'

'The moonlight lays a white hand on it!'

'That is my window sparkling.'

'That is the vestal's cresset. Shall I blow it out?'

'You are too far. And it is a celestial flame, sir!'

'Celestial in truth! My hope of heaven! Dian's crescent will be ever on that house for me, Clotilde. I would it were leagues distant, or the door not forbidden!'

'I could minister to a good knight humbly.'

Alvan bent to her, on a sudden prompting:

'When do father and mother arrive?'

'To-morrow.'

He took her hand. 'To-morrow, then! The worst of omens is delay.'

Clotilde faintly gasped. Could he mean it?—he of so evil a name in her family and circle!

Her playfulness and pleasure in the game of courtliness forsook her.

'Tell me the hour when it will be most convenient to them to receive me,' said Alvan.

She stopped walking in sheer fright.

'My father—my mother?' she said, imaging within her the varied horror of each and the commotion.

'To-morrow or the day after—not later. No delays! You are mine, we are one; and the sooner my cause is pleaded the better for us both. If I could step in and see them this instant, it would be forestalling mischances. Do you not see, that time is due to

us, and the minutes are our gold slipping away?'

She shrank her hand back: she did not wish to withdraw the hand, only to shun the pledge it signified. He opened an abyss at her feet, and in deadly alarm of him she exclaimed: 'Oh! not yet; not immediately.' She trembled, she made her petition dismal by her anguish of speechlessness. 'There will be such… not yet! Perhaps later. They must not be troubled yet—at present. I am… I cannot—pray, delay!'

'But you are mine!' said Alvan. 'You feel it as I do. There can be no real impediment?'

She gave an empty sigh that sought to be a run of entreaties. In fear of his tongue she caught at words to baffle it, senseless of their imbecility: 'Do not insist: yes, in time: they will—they —they may. My father is not very well… my mother: she is not very well. They are neither of them very well: not at present!— Spare them at present.'

To avoid being carried away, she flung herself from the centaur's back to the disenchanting earth; she separated herself from him in spirit, and beheld him as her father and mother and her circle would look on this pretender to her hand, with his lordly air, his Jew blood, and his hissing reputation—for it was a reputation that stirred the snakes and the geese of the world. She saw him in their eyes, quite coldly: which imaginative capacity was one of the remarkable feats of cowardice, active and cold of brain even while the heart is active and would be warm.

He read something of her weakness. 'And supposing I decide

that it must be?'

'How can I supplicate you!' she replied with a shiver, feeling that she had lost her chance of slipping from his grasp, as trained women of the world, or very sprightly young wits know how to do at the critical moment: and she had lost it by being too sincere. Her cowardice appeared to her under that aspect.

'Now I perceive that the task is harder,' said Alvan, seeing her huddled in a real dismay. 'Why will you not rise to my level and fear nothing! The way is clear: we have only to take the step. Have you not seen tonight that we are fated for one another? It is your destiny, and trifling with destiny is a dark business. Look at me. Do you doubt my having absolute control of myself to bear whatever they put on me to bear, and hold firmly to my will to overcome them! Oh! no delays.'

'Yes!' she cried; 'yes, there must be.'

'You say it?'

The courage to repeat her cry was wanting.

She trembled visibly: she could more readily have bidden him bear her hence than have named a day for the interview with her parents; but desperately she feared that he would be the one to bid; and he had this of the character of destiny about him, that she felt in him a maker of facts. He was her dream in human shape, her eagle of men, and she felt like a lamb in the air; she had no resistance, only terror of his power, and a crushing new view of the nature of reality.

'I see!' said he, and his breast fell. Her timid inability to join

with him for instant action reminded him that he carried many weights: a bad name among her people and class, and chains in private. He was old enough to strangle his impulses, if necessary, or any of the brood less fiery than the junction of his passions. 'Well, well!—but we might so soon have broken through the hedge into the broad highroad! It is but to determine to do it—to take the bold short path instead of the wearisome circuit. Just a little lightning in the brain and tightening of the heart. Battles are won in that way: not by tender girls! and she is a girl, and the task is too much for her. So, then, we are in your hands, child! Adieu, and let the gold-crested serpent glide to her bed, and sleep, dream, and wake, and ask herself in the morning whether she is not a wedded soul. Is she not a serpent? gold-crested, all the world may see; and with a mortal bite, I know. I have had the bite before the kisses. That is rather an unjust reversal of the order of things. Apropos, Hamlet was poisoned—ghost-poisoned.'

'Mad, he was mad!' said Clotilde, recovering and smiling.

'He was born bilious; he partook of the father's constitution, not the mother's. High-thoughted, quick-nerved to follow the thought, reflective, if an interval yawned between his hand and the act, he was by nature two-minded: as full of conscience as a nursing mother that sleeps beside her infant:—she hears the silent beginning of a cry. Before the ghost walked he was an elementary hero; one puff of action would have whiffed away his melancholy. After it, he was a dizzy moralizer, waiting for the winds to blow him to his deed-ox out. The apparition of his father

to him poisoned a sluggish run of blood, and that venom in the blood distracted a head steeped in Wittenberg philosophy. With metaphysics in one and poison in the other, with the outer world opened on him and this world stirred to confusion, he wore the semblance of madness; he was throughout sane; sick, but never with his reason dethroned.'

'Nothing but madness excuses his conduct to Ophelia!'

'Poison in the blood is a pretty good apology for infidelity to a lady.'

'No!'

'Well, to an Ophelia of fifty?' said Alvan.

Clotilde laughed, not perfectly assured of the wherefore, but pleased to be able to laugh. Her friends were standing at the house door, farewells were spoken, Alvan had gone. And then she thought of the person that Ophelia of fifty might be, who would have to find a good apology for him in his dose of snake-bite, or love of a younger woman whom he termed gold-crested serpent.

He was a lover, surely a lover: he slid off to some chance bit of likeness to himself in every subject he discussed with her.

And she? She speeded recklessly on the back of the centaur when he had returned to the state of phantom and the realities he threatened her with were no longer imminent.

CHAPTER V

Clotilde was of the order of the erring who should by rights have a short sermon to preface an exposure of them, administering the whip to her own sex and to ours, lest we scorn too much to take an interest in her. The exposure she had done for herself, and she has not had the art to frame her apology. The day after her meeting, with her eagle, Alvan, she saw Prince Marko. She was gentle to him, in anticipation of his grief; she could hardly be ungentle on account of his obsequious beauty, and when her soft eyes and voice had thrilled him to an acute sensibility to the blow, honourably she inflicted it.

'Marko, my friend, you know that I cannot be false; then let me tell you I yesterday met the man who has but to lift his hand and I go to him, and he may lead me whither he will.'

The burning eyes of her Indian Bacchus fixed on her till their brightness moistened and flashed.

Whatever was for her happiness he bowed his head to, he said. He knew the man.

Her duty was thus performed; she had plighted herself. For the first few days she was in dread of meeting, seeing, or hearing of Alvan. She feared the mention of a name that rolled the world so swiftly. Her parents had postponed their coming, she had no reason for instant alarm; it was his violent earnestness, his imperial self-confidence that she feared, as nervous people

shrink from cannon: and neither meeting, seeing, nor hearing of him, she began to yearn, like the child whose curiosity is refreshed by a desire to try again the startling thing which frightened it. Her yearning grew, the illusion of her courage flooded back; she hoped he would present himself to claim her, marvelled that he did not, reproached him; she could almost have scorned him for listening to the hesitations of the despicable girl so little resembling what she really was—a poor untried girl, anxious only on behalf of her family to spare them a sudden shock. Remembering her generous considerations in their interests, she thought he should have known that the creature he called a child would have yielded upon supplication to fly with him. Her considerateness for him too, it struck her next, was the cause of her seeming cowardly, and the man ought to have perceived it and put it aside. He should have seen that she could be brave, and was a mate for him. And if his shallow experience of her wrote her down nerveless, his love should be doing.

Was it love? Her restoration to the belief in her possessing a decided will whispered of high achievements she could do in proof of love, had she the freedom of a man. She would not have listened (it was quite true) to a silly supplicating girl; she would not have allowed an interval to yawn after the first wild wooing of her. Prince Marko loved. Yes, that was love! It failed in no sign of the passion. She set herself to study it in Marko, and was moved by many sentiments, numbering among them pity, thankfulness, and the shiver of a feeling between

admiration and pathetic esteem, like that the musician has for a precious instrument giving sweet sound when shattered. He served her faithfully, in spite of his distaste for some of his lady's commissions. She had to get her news of Alvan through Marko. He brought her particulars of the old trial of Alvan, and Alvan's oration in defence of himself for a lawless act of devotion to the baroness; nothing less than the successfully scheming to wrest by force from that lady's enemy a document precious to her lawful interests. It was one of those cases which have a really high gallant side as well as a bad; an excellent case for rhetoric. Marko supplied the world's opinion of the affair, bravely owning it to be not unfavourable. Her worthy relatives, the Frau v. Crestow and husband, had very properly furnished a report to the family of the memorable evening; and the hubbub over it, with the epithets applied to Alvan, intimated how he would have been received on a visit to demand her in marriage. There was no chance of her being allowed to enter houses where this 'rageing demagogue and popular buffoon' was a guest; his name was banished from her hearing, so she was compelled to have recourse to Marko. Unable to take such services without rewarding him, she fondled: it pained her to see him suffer. Those who toss crumbs to their domestic favourites will now and then be moved to toss meat, which is not so good for them, but the dumb mendicant's delight in it is winning, and a little cannot hurt. Besides, if any one had a claim on her it was the prince; and as he was always adoring, never importunate, he restored her to the pedestal she had been

really rudely shaken from by that other who had caught her up suddenly into the air, and dropped her! A hand abandoned to her slave rewarded him immeasurably. A heightening of the reward almost took his life. In the peacefulness of dealing with a submissive love that made her queenly, the royal, which plucked her from throne to footstool, seemed predatory and insolent. Thus, after that scene of 'first love,' in which she had been actress, she became almost (with an inward thrill or two for the recovering of him) reconciled to the not seeing of the noble actor; for nothing could erase the scene—it was historic; and Alvan would always be thought of as a delicious electricity. She and Marko were together on the summer excursion of her people, and quite sisterly, she could say, in her delicate scorn of his advantages and her emotions. True gentlemen are imperfectly valued when they are under the shadow of giants; but still Clotilde's experience of a giant's manners was favourable to the liberty she could enjoy in a sisterly intimacy of this kind, rather warmer than her word for it would imply. She owned that she could better live the poetic life—that is, trifle with fire and reflect on its charms in the society of Marko. He was very young, he was little more than an adolescent, and safely timid; a turn of her fingers would string or slacken him. One could play on him securely, thinking of a distant day—and some shipwreck of herself for an interlude—when he might be made happy.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.