

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

DIANA OF THE
CROSSWAYS,
VOLUME 2

George Meredith

Diana of the Crossways. Volume 2

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Содержание

CHAPTER IX	5
CHAPTER X	10
CHAPTER XI	13
CHAPTER XII	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

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Diana of the Crossways – Volume 2

CHAPTER IX

SHOWS HOW A POSITION OF DELICACY FOR A LADY AND GENTLEMAN WAS MET IN SIMPLE FASHION WITHOUT HURT TO EITHER

Redworth's impulse was to laugh for very gladness of heart, as he proffered excuses for his tremendous alarms and in doing so, the worthy gentleman imagined he must have persisted in clamouring for admission because he suspected, that if at home, she would require a violent summons to betray herself. It was necessary to him to follow his abashed sagacity up to the mark of his happy animation.

'Had I known it was you!' said Diana, bidding him enter the passage.

She wore a black silk mantilla and was warmly covered.

She called to her maid Danvers, whom Redworth remembered: a firm woman of about forty, wrapped, like her mistress, in head-covering, cloak, scarf and shawl. Telling her to scour the kitchen for firewood, Diana led into a sitting-room. 'I need not ask—you have come from Lady Dunstane,' she said. 'Is she well?'

'She is deeply anxious.'

'You are cold. Empty houses are colder than out of doors. You shall soon have a fire.'

She begged him to be seated.

The small glow of candle-light made her dark rich colouring orange in shadow.

'House and grounds are open to a tenant,' she resumed. 'I say good-bye to them to-morrow morning. The old couple who are in charge sleep in the village to-night. I did not want them here. You have quitted the Government service, I think?'

'A year or so since.'

'When did you return from America?'

'Two days back.'

'And paid your visit to Copsley immediately?'

'As early as I could.'

'That was true friendliness. You have a letter for me?'

'I have.'

He put his hand to his pocket for the letter.

'Presently,' she said. She divined the contents, and nursed her resolution to withstand them. Danvers had brought firewood and coal. Orders were given to her, and in spite of the opposition of the maid and intervention of the gentleman, Diana knelt at the grate, observing:

'Allow me to do this. I can lay and light a fire.'

He was obliged to look on: she was a woman who spoke her meaning. She knelt, handling paper, firewood and matches, like a housemaid. Danvers proceeded on her mission, and Redworth eyed Diana in the first fire-glow. He could have imagined a Madonna on an old black Spanish canvas.

The act of service was beautiful in gracefulness, and her simplicity in doing the work touched it spiritually. He thought, as she knelt there, that never had he seen how lovely and how charged with mystery her features were; the dark large eyes full on the brows; the proud line of a straight nose in right measure to the bow of the lips; reposeful red lips, shut, and their curve of the slumber-smile at

the corners. Her forehead was broad; the chin of a sufficient firmness to sustain: that noble square; the brows marked by a soft thick brush to the temples; her black hair plainly drawn along her head to the knot, revealed by the mantilla fallen on her neck.

Elegant in plainness, the classic poet would have said of her hair and dress. She was of the women whose wits are quick in everything they do. That which was proper to her position, complexion, and the hour, surely marked her appearance. Unaccountably this night, the fair fleshly presence over-weighted her intellectual distinction, to an observer bent on vindicating her innocence. Or rather, he saw the hidden in the visible.

Owner of such a woman, and to lose her! Redworth pitied the husband.

The crackling flames reddened her whole person. Gazing, he remembered Lady Dunstane saying of her once, that in anger she had the nostrils of a war-horse. The nostrils now were faintly alive under some sensitive impression of her musings. The olive cheeks, pale as she stood in the doorway, were flushed by the fire-beams, though no longer with their swarthy central rose, tropic flower of a pure and abounding blood, as it had seemed. She was now beset by battle. His pity for her, and his eager championship, overwhelmed the spirit of compassion for the foolish wretched husband. Dolt, the man must be, Redworth thought; and he asked inwardly, Did the miserable tyrant suppose of a woman like this, that she would be content to shine as a candle in a grated lanthorn? The generosity of men speculating upon other men's possessions is known. Yet the man who loves a woman has to the full the husband's jealousy of her good name. And a lover, that without the claims of the alliance, can be wounded on her behalf, is less distracted in his homage by the personal luminary, to which man's manufacture of balm and incense is mainly drawn when his love is wounded. That contemplation of her incomparable beauty, with the multitude of his ideas fluttering round it, did somewhat shake the personal luminary in Redworth. He was conscious of pangs. The question bit him: How far had she been indiscreet or wilful? and the bite of it was a keen acid to his nerves. A woman doubted by her husband, is always, and even to her champions in the first hours of the noxious rumour, until they had solidified in confidence through service, a creature of the wilds, marked for our ancient running. Nay, more than a cynical world, these latter will be sensible of it. The doubt casts her forth, the general yelp drags her down; she runs like the prey of the forest under spotting branches; clear if we can think so, but it has to be thought in devotedness: her character is abroad. Redworth bore a strong resemblance to, his fellowmen, except for his power of faith in this woman. Nevertheless it required the superbness of her beauty and the contrasting charm of her humble posture of kneeling by the fire, to set him on his right track of mind. He knew and was sure of her. He dispersed the unhallowed fry in attendance upon any stirring of the reptile part of us, to look at her with the eyes of a friend. And if . . . !—a little mouse of a thought scampered out of one of the chambers of his head and darted along the passages, fetching a sweat to his brows. Well, whatsoever the fact, his heart was hers! He hoped he could be charitable to women.

She rose from her knees and said: 'Now, please, give me the letter.'

He was entreated to excuse her for consigning him to firelight when she left the room.

Danvers brought in a dismal tallow candle, remarking that her mistress had not expected visitors: her mistress had nothing but tea and bread and butter to offer him. Danvers uttered no complaint of her sufferings; happy in being the picture of them. 'I'm not hungry,' said he.

A plate of Andrew Hedger's own would not have tempted him. The foolish frizzle of bacon sang in his ears as he walked from end to end of the room; an illusion of his fancy pricked by a frost-edged appetite. But the anticipated contest with Diana checked and numbed the craving.

Was Warwick a man to proceed to extremities on a mad suspicion?—What kind of proof had he?

Redworth summoned the portrait of Mr. Warwick before him, and beheld a sweeping of close eyes in cloud, a long upper lip in cloud; the rest of him was all cloud. As usual with these conjurations of a face, the index of the nature conceived by him displayed itself, and no more; but he took it for

the whole physiognomy, and pronounced of the husband thus delineated, that those close eyes of the long upper lip would both suspect and proceed madly.

He was invited by Danvers to enter the dining-room.

There Diana joined him.

'The best of a dinner on bread and butter is, that one is ready for supper soon after it,' she said, swimming to the tea-tray. 'You have dined?'

'At the inn,' he replied.

'The Three Ravens! When my father's guests from London flooded The Crossways, The Three Ravens provided the overflow with beds. On nights like this I have got up and scraped the frost from my window-panes to see them step into the old fly, singing some song of his. The inn had a good reputation for hospitality in those days. I hope they treated you well?'

'Excellently,' said Redworth, taking an enormous mouthful, while his heart sank to see that she who smiled to encourage his eating had been weeping. But she also consumed her bread and butter.

'That poor maid of mine is an instance of a woman able to do things against the grain,' she said. 'Danvers is a foster-child of luxury. She loves it; great houses, plentiful meals, and the crowd of twinkling footmen's calves. Yet you see her here in a desolate house, consenting to cold, and I know not what, terrors of ghosts! poor soul. I have some mysterious attraction for her. She would not let me come alone. I should have had to hire some old Storling grannam, or retain the tattling keepers of the house. She loves her native country too, and disdains the foreigner. My tea you may trust.'

Redworth had not a doubt of it. He was becoming a tea-taster. The merit of warmth pertained to the beverage. 'I think you get your tea from Scoppin's, in the City,' he said.

That was the warehouse for Mrs. Warwick's tea. They conversed of Teas; the black, the green, the mixtures; each thinking of the attack to come, and the defence. Meantime, the cut bread and butter having flown, Redwerth attacked the loaf. He apologized.

'Oh! pay me a practical compliment,' Diana said, and looked really happy at his unfeigned relish of her simple fare.

She had given him one opportunity in speaking of her maid's love of native country. But it came too early.

'They say that bread and butter is fattening,' he remarked.

'You preserve the mean,' said she.

He admitted that his health was good. For some little time, to his vexation at the absurdity, she kept him talking of himself. So flowing was she, and so sweet the motion of her mouth in utterance, that he followed her lead, and he said odd things and corrected them. He had to describe his ride to her.

'Yes! the view of the Downs from Dewhurst,' she exclaimed. 'Or any point along the ridge. Emma and I once drove there in Summer, with clotted cream from her dairy, and we bought fresh-plucked wortleberries, and stewed them in a hollow of the furzes, and ate them with ground biscuits and the clotted cream iced, and thought it a luncheon for seraphs. Then you dropped to the road round under the sand-heights—and meditated railways!'

'Just a notion or two.'

'You have been very successful in America?'

'Successful; perhaps; we exclude extremes in our calculations of the still problematical.'

'I am sure,' said she, 'you always have faith in your calculations.'

Her innocent archness dealt him a stab sharper than any he had known since the day of his hearing of her engagement. He muttered of his calculations being human; he was as much of a fool as other men—more!

'Oh! no,' said she.

'Positively.'

'I cannot think it.'

'I know it.'

'Mr. Redworth, you will never persuade me to believe it.'

He knocked a rising groan on the head, and rejoined 'I hope I may not have to say so to-night.'

Diana felt the edge of the dart. 'And meditating railways, you scored our poor land of herds and flocks; and night fell, and the moon sprang up, and on you came. It was clever of you to find your way by the moonbeams.'

'That's about the one thing I seem fit for!'

'But what delusion is this, in the mind of a man succeeding in everything he does!' cried Diana, curious despite her wariness. 'Is there to be the revelation of a hairshirt ultimately?—a Journal of Confessions? You succeeded in everything you aimed at, and broke your heart over one chance miss?'

'My heart is not of the stuff to break,' he said, and laughed off her fortuitous thrust straight into it. 'Another cup, yes. I came . . .'

'By night,' said she, 'and cleverly found your way, and dined at The

Three Ravens, and walked to The Crossways, and met no ghosts.'

'On the contrary—or at least I saw a couple.'

'Tell me of them; we breed them here. We sell them periodically to the newspapers!'

'Well, I started them in their natal locality. I saw them, going down the churchyard, and bellowed after them with all my lungs. I wanted directions to The Crossways; I had missed my way at some turning. In an instant they were vapour.'

Diana smiled. 'It was indeed a voice to startle delicate apparitions! So do roar Hyrcanean tigers. Pyramus and Thisbe—slaying lions! One of your ghosts carried a loaf of bread, and dropped it in fright; one carried a pound of fresh butter for home consumption. They were in the churchyard for one in passing to kneel at her father's grave and kiss his tombstone.'

She bowed her head, forgetful of her guard.

The pause presented an opening. Redworth left his chair and walked to the mantelpiece. It was easier to him to speak, not facing her.

'You have read Lady Dunstane's letter,' he began.

She nodded. 'I have.'

'Can you resist her appeal to you?'

'I must.'

'She is not in a condition to bear it well. You will pardon me, Mrs.

Warwick . . .'

'Fully! Fully!'

'I venture to offer merely practical advice. You have thought of it all, but have not felt it. In these cases, the one thing to do is to make a stand. Lady Dunstane has a clear head. She sees what has to be endured by you. Consider: she appeals to me to bring you her letter. Would she have chosen me, or any man, for her messenger, if it had not appeared to her a matter of life and death? You count me among your friends.'

'One of the truest.'

'Here are two, then, and your own good sense. For I do not believe it to be a question of courage.'

'He has commenced. Let him carry it out,' said Diana.

Her desperation could have added the cry—And give me freedom! That was the secret in her heart. She had struck on the hope for the detested yoke to be broken at any cost.

'I decline to meet his charges. I despise them. If my friends have faith in me—and they may!—I want nothing more.'

'Well, I won't talk commonplaces about the world,' said Redworth. 'We can none of us afford to have it against us. Consider a moment: to your friends you are the Diana Merion they knew, and they will not suffer an injury to your good name without a struggle. But if you fly? You leave the dearest you have to the whole brunt of it.'

'They will, if they love me.'

'They will. But think of the shock to her. Lady Dunstane reads you—'

'Not quite. No, not if she even wishes me to stay!' said Diana.

He was too intent on his pleading to perceive a signification.

'She reads you as clearly in the dark as if you were present with her.'

'Oh! why am I not ten years older!' Diana cried, and tried to face round to him, and stopped paralyzed. 'Ten years older, I could discuss my situation, as an old woman of the world, and use my wits to defend myself.'

'And then you would not dream of flight before it!'

'No, she does not read me: no! She saw that I might come to The Crossways. She—no one but myself can see the wisdom of my holding aloof, in contempt of this baseness.'

'And of allowing her to sink under that which your presence would arrest.

Her strength will not support it.'

'Emma! Oh, cruel!' Diana sprang up to give play to her limbs. She dropped on another chair. 'Go I must, I cannot turn back. She saw my old attachment to this place. It was not difficult to guess . . . Who but I can see the wisest course for me!'

'It comes to this, that the blow aimed at you in your absence will strike her, and mortally,' said Redworth.

'Then I say it is terrible to have a friend,' said Diana, with her bosom heaving.

'Friendship, I fancy, means one heart between two.'

His unstressed observation hit a bell in her head, and set it reverberating. She and Emma had spoken, written, the very words. She drew forth her Emma's letter from under her left breast, and read some half-blinded lines.

Redworth immediately prepared to leave her to her feelings—trustier guides than her judgement in this crisis.

'Adieu, for the night, Mrs. Warwick,' he said, and was guilty of eulogizing the judgement he thought erratic for the moment. 'Night is a calm adviser. Let me presume to come again in the morning. I dare not go back without you.'

She looked up. As they faced together each saw that the other had passed through a furnace, scorching enough to him, though hers was the delicacy exposed. The reflection had its weight with her during the night.

'Danvers is getting ready a bed for you; she is airing linen,' Diana, said. But the bed was declined, and the hospitality was not pressed. The offer of it seemed to him significant of an unwary cordiality and thoughtlessness of tattlers that might account possibly for many things— supposing a fool or madman, or malignants, to interpret them.

'Then, good night,' said she.

They joined hands. He exacted no promise that she would be present in the morning to receive him; and it was a consolation to her desire for freedom, until she reflected on the perfect confidence it implied, and felt as a quivering butterfly impalpably pinned.

CHAPTER X

THE CONFLICT OF THE NIGHT

Her brain was a steam-wheel throughout the night; everything that could be thought of was tossed, nothing grasped.

The unfriendliness of the friends who sought to retain her recurred. For look—to fly could not be interpreted as a flight. It was but a stepping aside, a disdain of defending herself, and a wrapping herself in her dignity. Women would be with her. She called on the noblest of them to justify the course she chose, and they did, in an almost audible murmur.

And O the rich reward. A black archway-gate swung open to the glittering fields of freedom.

Emma was not of the chorus. Emma meditated as an invalid. How often had Emma bewailed to her that the most, grievous burden of her malady was her fatal tendency to brood sickly upon human complications! She could not see the blessedness of the prospect of freedom to a woman abominably yoked. What if a miserable woman were dragged through mire to reach it! Married, the mire was her portion, whatever she might do. That man—but pass him!

And that other—the dear, the kind, careless, high-hearted old friend. He could honestly protest his guiltlessness, and would smilingly leave the case to go its ways. Of this she was sure, that her decision and her pleasure would be his. They were tied to the stake. She had already tasted some of the mortal agony. Did it matter whether the flames consumed her?

Reflecting on the interview with Redworth, though she had performed her part in it placidly, her skin burned. It was the beginning of tortures if she stayed in England.

By staying to defend herself she forfeited her attitude of dignity and lost all chance of her reward. And name the sort of world it is, dear friends, for which we are to sacrifice our one hope of freedom, that we may preserve our fair fame in it!

Diana cried aloud, 'My freedom!' feeling as a butterfly flown out of a box to stretches of sunny earth beneath spacious heavens. Her bitter marriage, joyless in all its chapters, indefensible where the man was right as well as where insensately wrong, had been imprisonment. She excused him down to his last madness, if only the bonds were broken. Here, too, in this very house of her happiness with her father, she had bound herself to the man voluntarily, quite inexplicably. Voluntarily, as we say. But there must be a spell upon us at times. Upon young women there certainly is.

The wild brain of Diana, armed by her later enlightenment as to the laws of life and nature, dashed in revolt at the laws of the world when she thought of the forces, natural and social, urging young women to marry and be bound to the end.

It should be a spotless world which is thus ruthless.

But were the world impeccable it would behave more generously.

The world is ruthless, dear friends, because the world is hypocrite!

The world cannot afford to be magnanimous, or even just.

Her dissensions with her husband, their differences of opinion, and puny wranglings, hoistings of two standards, reconciliations for the sake of decency, breaches of the truce, and his detested meanness, the man behind the mask; and glimpses of herself too, the half-known, half-suspected, developing creature claiming to be Diana, and unlike her dreamed Diana, deformed by marriage, irritable, acerb, rebellious, constantly justifiable against him, but not in her own mind, and therefore accusing him of the double crime of provoking her and perverting her—these were the troops defiling through her head while she did battle with the hypocrite world.

One painful sting was caused by the feeling that she could have loved—whom? An ideal. Had he, the imagined but unvisioned, been her yoke-fellow, would she now lie raising caged-beast cries in execration of the yoke? She would not now be seeing herself as hare, serpent, tigress! The hypothesis

was reviewed in negatives: she had barely a sense of softness, just a single little heave of the bosom, quivering upward and leadenly sinking, when she glanced at a married Diana heartily mated. The regrets of the youthful for a life sailing away under medical sentence of death in the sad eyes of relatives resemble it. She could have loved. Good-bye to that!

A woman's brutallest tussle with the world was upon her. She was in the arena of the savage claws, flung there by the man who of all others should have protected her from them. And what had she done to deserve it? She listened to the advocate pleading her case; she primed him to admit the charges, to say the worst, in contempt of legal prudence, and thereby expose her transparent honesty. The very things awakening a mad suspicion proved her innocence. But was she this utterly simple person? Oh, no! She was the Diana of the pride in her power of fencing with evil—by no means of the order of those ninny young women who realize the popular conception of the purely innocent. She had fenced and kept her guard. Of this it was her angry glory to have the knowledge. But she had been compelled to fence. Such are men in the world of facts, that when a woman steps out of her domestic tangle to assert, because it is a tangle, her rights to partial independence, they sight her for their prey, or at least they complacently suppose her accessible. Wretched at home, a woman ought to bury herself in her wretchedness, else may she be assured that not the cleverest, wariest guard will cover her character.

Against the husband her cause was triumphant. Against herself she decided not to plead it, for this reason, that the preceding Court, which was the public and only positive one, had entirely and justly exonerated her. But the holding of her hand by the friend half a minute too long for friendship, and the over-friendliness of looks, letters, frequency of visits, would speak within her. She had a darting view of her husband's estimation of them in his present mood. She quenched it; they were trifles, things that women of the world have to combat. The revelation to a fair-minded young woman of the majority of men being naught other than men, and some of the friendliest of men betraying confidence under the excuse of temptation, is one of the shocks to simplicity which leave her the alternative of misanthropy or philosophy. Diana had not the heart to hate her kind, so she resigned herself to pardon, and to the recognition of the state of duel between the sexes—active enough in her sphere of society. The circle hummed with it; many lived for it. Could she pretend to ignore it? Her personal experience might have instigated a less clear and less intrepid nature to take advantage of the opportunity for playing the popular innocent, who runs about with astonished eyes to find herself in so hunting a world, and wins general compassion, if not shelter in unsuspected and unlicensed places. There is perpetually the inducement to act the hypocrite before the hypocrite world, unless a woman submits to be the humbly knitting housewife, unquestioningly worshipful of her lord; for the world is ever gracious to an hypocrisy that pays homage to the mask of virtue by copying it; the world is hostile to the face of an innocence not conventionally simpering and quite surprised; the world prefers decorum to honesty. 'Let me be myself, whatever the martyrdom!' she cried, in that phase of young sensation when, to the blooming woman; the putting on of a mask appears to wither her and reduce her to the show she parades. Yet, in common with her sisterhood, she owned she had worn a sort of mask; the world demands it of them as the price of their station. That she had never worn it consentingly, was the plea for now casting it off altogether, showing herself as she was, accepting martyrdom, becoming the first martyr of the modern woman's cause—a grand position! and one imaginable to an excited mind in the dark, which does not conjure a critical humour, as light does, to correct the feverish sublimity. She was, then, this martyr, a woman capable of telling the world she knew it, and of, confessing that she had behaved in disdain of its rigid rules, according to her own ideas of her immunities. O brave!

But was she holding the position by flight? It involved the challenge of consequences, not an evasion of them.

She moaned; her mental steam-wheel stopped; fatigue brought sleep.

She had sensationally led her rebellious wits to The Crossways, distilling much poison from thoughts on the way; and there, for the luxury of a still seeming indecision, she sank into oblivion.

CHAPTER XI

RECOUNTS THE JOURNEY IN A CHARIOT, WITH A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF DIALOGUE, AND A SMALL INCIDENT ON THE ROAD

In the morning the fight was over. She looked at the signpost of The Crossways whilst dressing, and submitted to follow, obediently as a puppet, the road recommended by friends, though a voice within, that she took for the intimations of her reason, protested that they were wrong, that they were judging of her case in the general, and unwisely—disastrously for her.

The mistaking of her desires for her reasons was peculiar to her situation.

'So I suppose I shall some day see The Crossways again,' she said, to conceive a compensation in the abandonment of freedom. The night's red vision of martyrdom was reserved to console her secretly, among the unopened lockers in her treasury of thoughts. It helped to sustain her; and she was too conscious of things necessary for her sustainment to bring it to the light of day and examine it. She had a pitiful bit of pleasure in the gratification she imparted to Danvers, by informing her that the journey of the day was backward to Copsley.

'If I may venture to say so, ma'am, I am very glad,' said her maid.

'You must be prepared for the questions of lawyers, Danvers.'

'Oh, ma'am! they'll get nothing out of me, and their wigs won't frighten me.'

'It is usually their baldness that is most frightening, my poor Danvers.'

'Nor their baldness, ma'am,' said the literal maid; 'I never cared for their heads, or them. I've been in a Case before.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed her mistress; and she had a chill.

Danvers mentioned a notorious Case, adding, 'They got nothing out of me.'

'In my Case you will please to speak the truth,' said Diana, and beheld in the looking-glass the primming of her maid's mouth. The sight shot a sting.

'Understand that there is to be no hesitation about telling the truth of what you know of me,' said Diana; and the answer was, 'No, ma'am.'

For Danvers could remark to herself that she knew little, and was not a person to hesitate. She was a maid of the world, with the quality of faithfulness, by nature, to a good mistress.

Redworth's further difficulties were confined to the hiring of a conveyance for the travellers, and hot-water bottles, together with a postillion not addicted to drunkenness. He procured a posting-chariot, an ancient and musty, of a late autumnal yellow unrefreshed by paint; the only bottles to be had were Dutch Schiedam. His postillion, inspected at Storling, carried the flag of habitual inebriation on his nose, and he deemed it adviseable to ride the mare in accompaniment as far as Riddlehurst, notwithstanding the postillion's vows upon his honour that he was no drinker. The emphasis, to a gentleman acquainted with his countrymen, was not reassuring. He had hopes of enlisting a trustier fellow at Riddlehurst, but he was disappointed; and while debating upon what to do, for he shrank from leaving two women to the conduct of that inflamed troughsnout, Brisby, despatched to Storling by an afterthought of Lady Dunstane's, rushed out of the Riddlehurst inn taproom, and relieved him of the charge of the mare. He was accommodated with a seat on a stool in the chariot. 'My triumphal car,' said his captive. She was very amusing about her postillion; Danvers had to beg pardon for laughing. 'You are happy,' observed her mistress. But Redworth laughed too, and he could not boast of any happiness beyond the temporary satisfaction, nor could she who sprang the laughter boast of that little. She said to herself, in the midst of the hilarity, 'Wherever I go now, in all weathers, I am perfectly naked!' And remembering her readings of a certain wonderful old quarto book in

her father's library, by an eccentric old Scottish nobleman, wherein the wearing of garments and sleeping in houses is accused as the cause of human degeneracy, she took a forced merry stand on her return to the primitive healthful state of man and woman, and affected scorn of our modern ways of dressing and thinking. Whence it came that she had some of her wildest seizures of iridescent humour. Danvers attributed the fun to her mistress's gladness in not having pursued her bent to quit the country. Redworth saw deeper, and was nevertheless amazed by the airy hawk-poise and pounce-down of her wit, as she ranged high and low, now capriciously generalizing, now dropping bolt upon things of passage—the postillion jogging from rum to gin, the rustics baconly agape, the horse-kneed ostlers. She touched them to the life in similes and phrases; and next she was aloft, derisively philosophizing, but with a comic afflatus that dispersed the sharpness of her irony in mocking laughter. The afternoon refreshments at the inn of the county market-town, and the English idea of public hospitality, as to manner and the substance provided for wayfarers, were among the themes she made memorable to him. She spoke of everything tolerantly, just naming it in a simple sentence, that fell with a ring and chimed: their host's ready acquiescence in receiving, orders, his contemptuous disclaimer of stuff he did not keep, his flat indifference to the sheep he sheared, and the phantom half-crown flickering in one eye of the anticipatory waiter; the pervading and confounding smell of stale beer over all the apartments; the prevalent, notion of bread, butter, tea, milk, sugar, as matter for the exercise of a native inventive genius—these were reviewed in quips of metaphor.

'Come, we can do better at an inn or two known to me,' said Redworth.

'Surely this is the best that can be done for us, when we strike them with the magic wand of a postillion?' said she.

'It depends, as elsewhere, on the individuals entertaining us.'

'Yet you admit that your railways are rapidly "polishing off" the individual.'

'They will spread the metropolitan idea of comfort.'

'I fear they will feed us on nothing but that big word. It booms—a curfew bell—for every poor little light that we would read by.'

Seeing their beacon-nosed postillion preparing too mount and failing in his jump, Redworth was apprehensive, and questioned the fellow concerning potation.

'Lord, sir, they call me half a horse, but I can't 'bids water,' was the reply, with the assurance that he had not 'taken a pailful.'

Habit enabled him to gain his seat.

'It seems to us unnecessary to heap on coal when the chimney is afire; but he may know the proper course,' Diana said, convulsing Danvers; and there was discernibly to Redworth, under the influence of her phrases, a likeness of the flaming 'half-horse,' with the animals all smoking in the frost, to a railway engine. 'Your wrinkled centaur,' she named the man. Of course he had to play second to her, and not unwillingly; but he reflected passingly on the instinctive push of her rich and sparkling voluble fancy to the initiative, which women do not like in a woman, and men prefer to distantly admire. English women and men feel toward the quick-witted of their species as to aliens, having the demerits of aliens-wordiness, vanity, obscurity, shallowness, an empty glitter, the sin of posturing. A quick-witted woman exerting her wit is both a foreigner and potentially a criminal. She is incandescent to a breath of rumour. It accounted for her having detractors; a heavy counterpoise to her enthusiastic friends. It might account for her husband's discontent—the reduction of him to a state of mere masculine antagonism. What is the husband of a vanward woman? He feels himself but a diminished man. The English husband of a voluble woman relapses into a dreary mute. Ah, for the choice of places! Redworth would have yielded her the loquent lead for the smallest of the privileges due to him who now rejected all, except the public scourging of her. The conviction was in his mind that the husband of this woman sought rather to punish than be rid of her. But a part of his own emotion went to form the judgement.

Furthermore, Lady Dunstane's allusion to her 'enemies' made him set down her growing crops of backbiters to the trick she had of ridiculing things English. If the English do it themselves, it is in a professionally robust, a jocose, kindly way, always with a glance at the other things, great things, they excel in; and it is done to have the credit of doing it. They are keen to catch an inimical tone; they will find occasion to chastise the presumptuous individual, unless it be the leader of a party, therefore a power; for they respect a power. Redworth knew their quaintnesses; without overlooking them he winced at the acid of an irony that seemed to spring from aversion, and regretted it, for her sake. He had to recollect that she was in a sharp-strung mood, bitterly surexcited; moreover he reminded himself of her many and memorable phrases of enthusiasm for England—Shakespeareland, as she would sometimes perversely term it, to sink the country in the poet. English fortitude, English integrity, the English disposition to do justice to dependents, adolescent English ingenuousness, she was always ready to laud. Only her enthusiasm required rousing by circumstances; it was less at the brim than her satire. Hence she made enemies among a placable people.

He felt that he could have helped her under happier conditions. The beautiful vision she had been on the night of the Irish Ball swept before him, and he looked at her, smiling.

'Why do you smile?' she said.

'I was thinking of Mr. Sullivan Smith.'

'Ah! my dear compatriot! And think, too, of Lord Larrian.'

She caught her breath. Instead of recreation, the names brought on a fit of sadness. It deepened; shy neither smiled nor rattled any more. She gazed across the hedgeways at the white meadows and bare-twigged copses showing their last leaves in the frost.

'I remember your words: "Observation is the most, enduring of the pleasures of life"; and so I have found it,' she said. There was a brightness along her under-eyelids that caused him to look away.

The expected catastrophe occurred on the descent of a cutting in the sand, where their cordial postillion at a trot bumped the chariot against the sturdy wheels of a waggon, which sent it reclining for support upon a beech-tree's huge intertwined serpent roots, amid strips of brown bracken and pendant weeds, while he exhibited one short stump of leg, all boot, in air. No one was hurt. Diana disengaged herself from the shoulder of Danvers, and mildly said:

'That reminds me, I forgot to ask why we came in a chariot.'

Redworth was excited on her behalf, but the broken glass had done no damage, nor had Danvers fainted. The remark was unintelligible to him, apart from the comforting it had been designed to give. He jumped out, and held a hand for them to do the same. 'I never foresaw an event more positively,' said he.

'And it was nothing but a back view that inspired you all the way,' said

Diana.

A waggoner held the horses, another assisted Redworth to right the chariot. The postillion had hastily recovered possession of his official seat, that he might as soon as possible feel himself again where he was most intelligent, and was gay in stupidity, indifferent to what happened behind him. Diana heard him counselling the waggoner as to the common sense of meeting small accidents with a cheerful soul.

'Lord!' he cried, 'I been pitched a Somerset in my time, and taken up for dead, and that didn't beat me!'

Disasters of the present kind could hardly affect such a veteran. But he was painfully disconcerted by Redworth's determination not to entrust the ladies any farther to his guidance. Danvers had implored for permission to walk the mile to the town, and thence take a fly to Copsley. Her mistress rather sided with the postillion; who begged them to spare him the disgrace of riding in and delivering a box at the Red Lion.

'What'll they say? And they know Arthur Dance well there,' he groaned. 'What! Arthur! chariotin' a box! And me a better man to his work now than I been for many a long season, fit for

double the journey! A bit of a shake always braces me up. I could read a newspaper right off, small print and all. Come along, sir, and hand the ladies in.'

Danvers vowed her thanks to Mr. Redworth for refusing. They walked ahead; the postillion communicated his mixture of professional and human feelings to the waggoners, and walked his horses in the rear, meditating on the weak-heartedness of gentryfolk, and the means for escaping being chaffed out of his boots at the Old Red Lion, where he was to eat, drink, and sleep that night. Ladies might be fearsome after a bit of a shake; he would not have supposed it of a gentleman. He jogged himself into an arithmetic of the number of nips of liquor he had taken to soothe him on the road, in spite of the gentleman. 'For some of 'em are sworn enemies of poor men, as yonder one, ne'er a doubt.'

Diana enjoyed her walk beneath the lingering brown-red of the frosty November sunset, with the scent of sand-earth strong in the air.

'I had to hire a chariot because there was no two-horse carriage,' said Redworth, 'and I wished to reach Copsley as early as possible.'

She replied, smiling, that accidents were fated. As a certain marriage had been! The comparison forced itself on her reflections.

'But this is quite an adventure,' said she, reanimated by the brisker flow of her blood. 'We ought really to be thankful for it, in days when nothing happens.'

Redworth accused her of getting that idea from the perusal of romances.

'Yes, our lives require compression, like romances, to be interesting, and we object to the process,' she said. 'Real happiness is a state of dulness. When we taste it consciously it becomes mortal—a thing of the Seasons. But I like my walk. How long these November sunsets burn, and what hues they have! There is a scientific reason, only don't tell it me. Now I understand why you always used to choose your holidays in November.'

She thrilled him with her friendly recollection of his customs.

'As to happiness, the looking forward is happiness,' he remarked.

'Oh, the looking back! back!' she cried.

'Forward! that is life.'

'And backward, death, if you will; and still at is happiness. Death, and our postillion!'

'Ay; I wonder why the fellow hangs to the rear,' said Redworth, turning about.

'It's his cunning strategy, poor creature, so that he may be thought to have delivered us at the head of the town, for us to make a purchase or two, if we go to the inn on foot,' said Diana. 'We 'll let the manoeuvre succeed.'

Redworth declared that she had a head for everything, and she was flattered to hear him.

So passing from the southern into the western road, they saw the town-lights beneath an amber sky burning out sombrely over the woods of Copsley, and entered the town, the postillion following.

CHAPTER XII BETWEEN EMMA AND DIANA

Diana was in the arms of her friend at a late hour of the evening, and Danvers breathed the amiable atmosphere of footmen once more, professing herself perished. This maid of the world, who could endure hardships and loss of society for the mistress to whom she was attached, no sooner saw herself surrounded by the comforts befitting her station, than she indulged in the luxury of a wailful dejectedness, the better to appreciate them. She was unaffectedly astonished to find her outcries against the cold and the journeyings to and fro interpreted as a serving- woman's muffled comments on her mistress's behaviour. Lady Dunstane's maid Bartlett, and Mrs. Bridges the housekeeper, and Foster the butler, contrived to let her know that they could speak an if they would; and they expressed their pity of her to assist her to begin the speaking. She bowed in acceptance of Fosters offer of a glass of wine after supper, but treated him and the other two immediately as though they had been interrogating bigwigs.

'They wormed nothing out of me,' she said to her mistress at night, undressing her. 'But what a set they are! They've got such comfortable places, they've all their days and hours for talk of the doings of their superiors. They read the vilest of those town papers, and they put their two and two together of what is happening in and about. And not one of the footmen thinks of staying, because it 's so dull; and they and the maids object—did one ever hear?—to the three uppers retiring, when they 've done dining, to the private room to dessert.'

'That is the custom?' observed her mistress.

'Foster carries the decanter, ma'am, and Mrs. Bridges the biscuits, and Bartlett the plate of fruit, and they march out in order.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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