

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

ONE OF OUR
CONQUERORS,
VOLUME 4

George Meredith

One of Our Conquerors. Volume 4

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One of Our Conquerors – Volume 4

CHAPTER XXV NATALY IN ACTION

A ticket of herald newspapers told the world of Victor's returning to his London. Pretty Mrs. Blathenoy was Nataly's first afternoon visitor, and was graciously received; no sign of inquiry for the cause of the lady's alacrity to greet her being shown. Colney Durance came in, bringing the rumour of an Australian cantatrice to kindle Europe; Mr. Peridon, a seeker of tidings from the city of Bourges; Miss Priscilla Graves, reporting of Skepsey, in a holiday Sunday tone, that his alcoholic partner might at any moment release him; Mr. Septimus Barmby, with a hanged heavy look, suggestive of a wharfside crane swinging the ponderous thing he had to say. 'I have seen Miss Radnor.'

'She was well?' the mother asked, and the grand basso pitched forth an affirmative.

'Dear sweet girl she is!' Mrs. Blathenoy exclaimed to Colney.

He bowed. 'Very sweet. And can let fly on you, like a haggis, for a scratch.'

She laughed, glad of an escape from the conversational formalities imposed on her by this Mrs. Victor Radnor's mighty manner. 'But what girl worth anything! . . .

We all can do that, I hope, for a scratch!'

Mr. Barmby's Profession dissented.

Mr. Catkin appeared; ten minutes after his Peridon. He had met Victor near the Exchange, and had left him humming the non fu sogno of ERNANI.

'Ah, when Victor takes to Verdi, it's a flat City, and wants a burst of drum and brass,' Colney said; and he hummed a few bars of the march in Attila, and shrugged. He and Victor had once admired that blatancy.

Mr. Pempton appeared, according to anticipation. He sat himself beside Priscilla. Entered Mrs. John Cormyn, voluminous; Mrs. Peter Yatt, effervescent; Nataly's own people were about her and she felt at home.

Mrs. Blathenoy pushed a small thorn into it, by speaking of Captain Fenellan, and aside, as if sharing him with her. Nataly heard that Dartrey had been the guest of these Blathenoys. Even Dartrey was but a man!

Rather lower under her voice, the vain little creature asked: 'You knew her?'

'Her?'

The cool counter-interrogation was disregarded. 'So sad! In the desert! a cup of pure water worth more than barrow-loads of gold! Poor woman!'

'Who?'

'His wife.'

'Wife!'

'They were married?'

Nataly could have cried: Snake! Her play at brevity had certainly been foiled. She nodded gravely. A load of dusky wonders and speculations pressed at her bosom. She disdained to question the mouth which had bitten her.

Mrs. Blathenoy, resolving, that despite the jealousy she excited, she would have her friend in Captain Fenellan, whom she liked—liked, she was sure, quite as innocently as any other woman of his

acquaintance did, departed and she hugged her innocence defiantly, with the mournful pride which will sometimes act as a solvent.

A remark or two passed among the company upon her pretty face.

Nataly murmured to Colney: 'Is there anything of Dartrey's wife?'

'Dead,' he answered.

'When?'

'Months back. I had it from Simeon. You didn't hear?'

She shook her head. Her ears buzzed. If he had it from Simeon Fenellan, Victor must have known it.

Her duties of hostess were conducted with the official smile.

As soon as she stood alone, she dropped on a chair, like one who has taken a shot in the heart, and that hideous tumult of wild cries at her ears blankly ceased. Dartrey, Victor, Nesta, were shifting figures of the might-have-been for whom a wretched erring woman, washed clean of her guilt by death, in a far land, had gone to her end: vainly gone: and now another was here, a figure of wood, in man's shape, conjured up by one of the three, to divide the two others; likely to be fatal to her or to them: to her, she hoped, if the choice was to be: and beneath the leaden hope, her heart set to a rapid beating, a fainter, a chill at the core.

She snatched for breath. She shut her eyes, and with open lips, lay waiting; prepared to thank the kindness about to hurry her hence, out of the seas of pain, without pain.

Then came sighs. The sad old servant in her bosom was resuming his labours.

But she had been near it—very near it? A gush of pity for Victor, overwhelmed her hardness of mind.

Unreflectingly, she tried her feet to support her, and tottered to the door, touched along to the stairs, and descended them, thinking strangely upon such a sudden weakness of body, when she would no longer have thought herself the weak woman. Her aim was to reach the library. She sat on the stairs midway, pondering over the length of her journey: and now her head was clearer; for she was travelling to get Railway-guides, and might have had them from the hands of a footman, and imagined that she had considered it prudent to hide her investigation of those books: proofs of an understanding fallen backward to the state of infant and having to begin our drear ascent again.

A slam of the kitchen stair-door restored her. She betrayed no infirmity of footing as she walked past Arlington in the hall; and she was alive to the voice of Skepsey presently on the door-steps. Arlington brought her a note.

Victor had written: 'My love, I dine with Blathenoy in the City, at the Walworth. Business. Skepsey for clothes. Eight of us. Formal. A thousand embraces. Late.'

Skepsey was ushered in. His wife had expired at noon, he said; and he postured decorously the grief he could not feel, knowing that a lady would expect it of him. His wife had fallen down stone steps; she died in hospital. He wished to say, she was no loss to the country; but he was advised within of the prudence of abstaining from comment and trusting to his posture, and he squeezed a drop of conventional sensibility out of it, and felt improved.

Nataly sent a line to Victor: 'Dearest, I go to bed early, am tired.

Dine well. Come to me in the morning.'

She reproached herself for coldness to poor Skepsey, when he had gone. The prospect of her being alone until the morning had been so absorbing a relief.

She found a relief also in work at the book of the trains. A walk to the telegraph-station strengthened her. Especially after despatching a telegram to Mr. Dudley Sowerby at Cronidge, and one to Nesta at Moorsedge, did she become stoutly nerved. The former was requested to meet her at Penhurst station at noon. Nesta was to be at the station for the Wells at three o'clock.

From the time of the flying of these telegrams, up to the tap of Victor's knuckle on her bedroom door next morning, she was not more reflectively conscious than a packet travelling to its

destination by pneumatic tube. Nor was she acutely impressionable to the features and the voice she loved.

'You know of Skepsey?' she said.

'Ah, poor Skepsey!' Victor frowned and heaved.

'One of us ought to stand beside him at the funeral.'

'Colney or Fenellan?'

'I will ask Mr. Durance.'

'Do, my darling.'

'Victor, you did not tell me of Dartrey's wife.'

'There again! They all get released! Yes, Dartrey! Dartrey has his luck too.'

She closed her eyes, with the desire to be asleep.

'You should have told me, dear.'

'Well, my love! Well—poor Dartrey! I fancy I hadn't a confirmation of the news. I remember a horrible fit of envy on hearing the hint: not much more than a hint: serious illness, was it?—or expected event. Hardly worth while to trouble my dear soul, till certain. Anything about wives, forces me to think of myself—my better self!'

'I had to hear of it first from Mrs. Blathenoy.'

'You've heard of duels in dark rooms:—that was the case between Blathenoy and me last night for an hour.'

She feigned somnolent fatigue over her feverish weariness of heart. He kissed her on the forehead.

Her spell-bound intention to speak of Dudley Sowerby to him, was broken by the sounding of the hall-door, thirty minutes later. She had lain in a trance.

Life surged to her with the thought, that she could decide and take her step. Many were the years back since she had taken a step; less independently then than now; unregretted, if fatal. Her brain was heated for the larger view of things and the swifter summing of them. It could put the man at a remove from her and say, that she had lived with him and suffered intensely. It gathered him to her breast rejoicing in their union: the sharper the scourge, the keener the exultation. But she had one reproach to deafen and beat down. This did not come on her from the world: she and the world were too much foot to foot on the antagonist's line, for her to listen humbly. It came of her quick summary survey of him, which was unnoticed by the woman's present fiery mind as being new or strange in any way: simply it was a fact she now read; and it directed her to reproach herself for an abasement beneath his leadership, a blind subserviency and surrender of her faculties to his greater powers, such as no soul of a breathing body should yield to man: not to the highest, not to the Titan, not to the most Godlike of men. Under cloak, they demand it. They demand their bane.

And Victor! . . . She had seen into him.

The reproach on her was, that she, in her worship, had been slave, not helper. Scarcely was she irreproachable in the character of slave. If it had been utter slave! she phrased the words, for a further reproach. She remembered having at times murmured, dissented. And it would have been a desperate proud thought to comfort a slave, that never once had she known even a secret opposition to the will of her lord.

But she had: she recalled instances. Up they rose; up rose everything her mind ranged over, subsiding immediately when the service was done. She had not conceived her beloved to be infallible, surest of guides in all earthly-matters. Her intellect had sometimes protested.

What, then, had moved her to swamp it?

Her heart answered. And that heart also was arraigned: and the heart's fleshly habitation acting on it besides: so flagellant of herself was she: covertly, however, and as the chaste among women can consent to let our animal face them. Not grossly, still perceptibly to her penetrative hard eye on

herself, she saw the senses of the woman under a charm. She saw, and swam whirling with a pang of revolt from her personal being and this mortal kind.

Her rational intelligence righted her speedily. She could say in truth, by proof, she loved the man: nature's love, heart's love, soul's love. She had given him her life.

It was a happy cross-current recollection, that the very beginning and spring of this wild cast of her life, issued from something he said and did (merest of airy gestures) to signify the blessing of life—how good and fair it is. A drooping mood in her had been struck; he had a look like the winged lyric up in blue heavens: he raised the head of the young flower from its contemplation of grave-mould. That was when he had much to bear: Mrs. Burman present: and when the stranger in their household had begun to pity him and have a dread of her feelings. The lucent splendour of his eyes was memorable, a light above the rolling oceans of Time.

She had given him her life, little aid. She might have closely counselled, wound in and out with his ideas. Sensible of capacity, she confessed to the having been morally subdued, physically as well; swept onward; and she was arrested now by an accident, like a waif of the river-floods by the dip of a branch. Time that it should be! But was not Mr. Durance, inveighing against the favoured system for the education of women, right when he declared them to be unfitted to speak an opinion on any matter external to the household or in a crisis of the household? She had not agreed with him: he presented stinging sentences, which irritated more than they enlightened. Now it seemed to her, that the model women of men make pleasant slaves, not true mates: they lack the worldly training to know themselves or take a grasp of circumstances.

There is an exotic fostering of the senses for women, not the strengthening breath of vital common air. If good fortune is with them, all may go well: the stake of their fates is upon the perpetual smooth flow of good fortune. She had never joined to the cry of the women. Few among them were having it in the breast as loudly.

Hard on herself, too, she perceived how the social rebel had reduced her mind to propitiate a simulacrum, reflected from out, of an enthroned Society within it, by an advocacy of the existing laws and rules and habits. Eminently servile is the tolerated lawbreaker: none so conservative. Not until we are driven back upon an unviolated Nature, do we call to the intellect to think radically: and then we begin to think of our fellows.

Or when we have set ourselves in motion direct for the doing of the right thing: have quitted the carriage at the station, and secured the ticket, and entered the train, counting the passage of time for a simple rapid hour before we have eased heart in doing justice to ourself and to another; then likewise the mind is lighted for radiation. That doing of the right thing, after a term of paralysis, cowardice—any evil name—is one of the mighty reliefs, equal to happiness, of longer duration.

Nataly had it. But her mind was actually radiating, and the comfort to her heart evoked the image of Dartrey Fenellan. She saw a possible reason for her bluntness to the coming scene with Dudley.

At once she said, No! and closed the curtain; knowing what was behind, counting it nought. She repeated almost honestly her positive negative. How we are mixed of the many elements! she thought, as an observer; and self-justifyingly thought on, and with truth, that duty urged her upon this journey; and proudly thought, that she had not a shock of the painful great organ in her breast at the prospect at the end, or any apprehension of its failure to carry her through.

Yet the need of peace or some solace needed to prepare her for her interview turned her imagination burningly on Dartrey. She would not allow herself to meditate over hopes and schemes:—Nesta free: Dartrey free. She vowed to her soul sacredly—and she was one of those in whom the Divinity lives, that they may do so—not to speak a word for the influencing of Dudley save the one fact. Consequently, for a personal indulgence, she mused; she caressed maternally the object of her musing; of necessity, she excluded Nesta; but in tenderness she gave Dartrey a fair one to love him.

The scene was waved away. That one so loving him, partly worthy of him, ready to traverse the world now beside him—who could it be other than she who knew and prized his worth? Foolish! It is one of the hatefuller scourges upon women whenever, a little shaken themselves, they muse upon some man's image, that they cannot put in motion the least bit of drama without letting feminine self play a part; generally to develop into a principal part. . . The apology makes it a melancholy part.

Dartrey's temper of the caged lion dominated by his tamer, served as keynote for any amount of saddest colouring. He controlled the brute: but he held the contempt of danger, the love of strife, the passion for adventure; he had crossed the desert of human anguish. He of all men required a devoted mate, merited her. Of all men living, he was the hardest to match with a woman—with a woman deserving him.

The train had quitted London. Now for the country, now for free breathing! She who two days back had come from Alps, delighted in the look on flat green fields. It was under the hallucination of her saying in flight adieu to them, and to England; and, that somewhere hidden, to be found in Asia, Africa, America, was the man whose ideal of life was higher than enjoyment. His caged brute of a temper offered opportunities for delicious petting; the sweetest a woman can bestow: it lifts her out of timidity into an adoration still palpitatingly fearful. Ah, but familiarity, knowledge, confirmed assurance of his character, lift her to another stage, above the pleasures. May she not prove to him how really matched with him she is, to disdain the pleasures, cheerfully accept the burdens, meet death, if need be; readily face it as the quietly grey to-morrow: at least, show herself to her hero for a woman—the incredible being to most men—who treads the terrors as well as the pleasures of humanity beneath her feet, and may therefore have some pride in her stature. Ay, but only to feel the pride of standing not so shamefully below his level beside him.

Woods were flying past the carriage-windows. Her solitary companion was of the class of the admiring gentlemen. Presently he spoke. She answered. He spoke again. Her mouth smiled, and her accompanying look of abstract benevolence arrested the tentative allurements to conversation.

New ideas were set revolving in her. Dartrey and Victor grew to a likeness; they became hazily one man, and the mingled phantom complimented her on her preserving a good share of the beauty of her youth. The face perhaps: the figure rather too well suits the years! she replied. To reassure her, this Dartrey-Victor drew her close and kissed her; and she was confused and passed into the breast of Mrs. Burman expecting an operation at the hands of the surgeons. The train had stopped. 'Penhurst?' she said.

'Penhurst is the next station,' said the gentleman. Here was a theme for him! The stately mansion, the noble grounds, and Sidney! He discoursed of them.

The handsome lady appeared interested. She was interested also by his description of a neighbouring village, likely one hundred years hence to be a place of pilgrimage for Americans and for Australians. Age, he said, improves true beauty; and his eyelids indicated a levelling to perform the soft intentness. Mechanically, a ball rose in her throat; the remark was illuminated by a saying of Colney's, with regard to his countrymen at the play of courtship. No laughter came. The gentleman talked on.

All fancies and internal communications left her. Slowness of motion brought her to the plain piece of work she had to do, on a colourless earth, that seemed foggy; but one could see one's way. Resolution is a form of light, our native light in this dubious world.

Dudley Sowerby opened her carriage-door. They greeted.

'You have seen Nesta?' she said.

'Not for two days. You have not heard? The Miss Duvidneys have gone to Brighton.'

'They are rather in advance of the Season.'

She thanked him for meeting her. He was grateful for the summons.

Informing the mother of his betrothed, that he had ridden over from Cronidge, he speculated on the place to select for her luncheon, and he spoke of his horse being led up and down outside the

station. Nataly inquired for the hour of the next train to London. He called to one of the porters, obtained and imparted the time; evidently now, as shown by an unevenness of his lifted brows, expecting news of some little weight.

'Your husband is quite well?' he said, in affection for the name of husband.

'Mr. Radnor is well; I have to speak to you; I have more than time.'

'You will lunch at the inn?'

'I shall not eat. We will walk.'

They crossed the road and passed under trees.

'My mother was to have called on the Miss Duvidneys. They left hurriedly; I think it was unanticipated by Nesta. I venture . . . you pardon the liberty . . . she allows me to entertain hopes. Mr. Radnor, I am hardly too bold in thinking . . . I trust, in appealing to you . . . at least I can promise!

'Mr. Sowerby, you have done my daughter the honour to ask her hand in marriage.'

He said: 'I have,' and had much to say besides, but deferred: a blow was visible. The father had been more encouraging to him than the mother.

'You have not known of any circumstance that might cause hesitation in asking?'

'Miss Radnor?'

'My daughter:—you have to think of your family.'

'Indeed, Mrs. Radnor, I was coming to London tomorrow, with the consent of my family.'

'You address me as Mrs. Radnor. I have not the legal right to the name.'

'Not legal!' said he, with a catch at the word.

He spun round in her sight, though his demeanour was manfully rigid.

'Have I understood, madam . . . ?'

'You would not request me to repeat it. Is that your horse the man is leading?'

'My horse: it must be my horse.'

'Mount and ride back. Leave me: I shall not eat. Reflect, by yourself. You are in a position of one who is not allowed to decide by his feelings. Mr. Radnor you know where to find.'

'But surely, some food? I cannot have misapprehended?'

'I cannot eat. I think you have understood me clearly.'

'You wish me to go?'

'I beg.'

'It pains me, dear madam.'

'It relieves me, if you will. Here is your horse.'

She gave her hand. He touched it and bent. He looked at her. A surge of impossible questions rolled to his mouth and rolled back, with the thought of an incredible thing, that her manner, more than her words, held him from doubting.

'I obey you,' he said.

'You are kind.'

He mounted horse, raised hat, paced on, and again bowing, to one of the wayside trees, cantered. The man was gone; but not from Nataly's vision that face of wet chalk under one of the shades of fire.

CHAPTER XXVI IN WHICH WE SEE A CONVENTIONAL GENTLEMAN ENDEAVOURING TO EXAMINE A SPECTRE OF HIMSELF

Dudley rode back to Cronidge with his thunderstroke. It filled him, as in those halls of political clamour, where explanatory speech is not accepted, because of a drowning tide of hot blood on both sides. He sought to win attention by submitting a resolution, to the effect, that he would the next morning enter into the presence of Mr. Victor Radnor, bearing his family's feelings, for a discussion upon them. But the brutish tumult, in addition to surcharging, encased him: he could not rightly conceive the nature of feelings: men were driving shoals; he had lost hearing and touch of individual men; had become a house of angrily opposing parties.

He was hurt, he knew; and therefore he supposed himself injured, though there were contrary outcries, and he admitted that he stood free; he had not been inextricably deceived.

The girl was caught away to the thinnest of wisps in a dust-whirl. Reverting to the father and mother, his idea of a positive injury, that was not without its congratulations, sank him down among his disordered deeper sentiments; which were a diver's wreck, where an armoured livid subtermarine, a monstrous puff-ball of man, wandered seriously light in heaviness; trembling his hundredweights to keep him from dancing like a bladder-block of elastic lumber; thinking occasionally, amid the mournful spectacle, of the atmospheric pipe of communication with the world above, whereby he was deafened yet sustained. One tug at it, and he was up on the surface, disengaged from the hideous harness, joyfully no more that burly phantom cleaving green slime, free! and the roaring stopped; the world looked flat, foreign, a place of crusty promise. His wreck, animated by the dim strange fish below, appeared fairer; it winked lurefully when abandoned.

The internal state of a gentleman who detested intangible metaphor as heartily as the vulgarest of our gobblegobbets hate it, metaphor only can describe; and for the reason, that he had in him just something more than is within the compass of the language of the meat-markets. He had—and had it not the less because he fain would not have had—sufficient stuff to furnish forth a soul's epic encounter between Nature and Circumstance: and metaphor, simile, analysis, all the fraternity of old lamps for lighting our abysmal darkness, have to be rubbed, that we may get a glimpse of the fray.

Free, and rejoicing; without the wish to be free; at the same time humbly and sadly acquiescing in the stronger claim of his family to pronounce the decision: such was the second stage of Dudley's perturbation after the blow. A letter of Nesta's writing was in his pocket: he knew her address. He could not reply to her until he had seen her father: and that interview remained necessarily prospective until he had come to his exact resolve, not omitting his critical approval of the sentences giving it shape, stamp, dignity—a noble's crest, as it were.

Nesta wrote briefly. The apostrophe was, 'Dear Mr. Sowerby.' She had engaged to send her address. Her father had just gone. The Miss Duvidneys had left the hotel yesterday for the furnished house facing the sea. According to arrangements, she had a livery-stable hack, and had that morning trotted out to the downs with a riding-master and company, one of whom was 'an agreeable lady.'

He noticed approvingly her avoidance of an allusion to the 'Delphica' of Mr. Durance's incomprehensible serial story, or whatever it was; which, as he had shown her, annoyed him, for its being neither fact nor fun; and she had insisted on the fun; and he had painfully tried to see it or anything of a meaning; and it seemed to him now, that he had been humiliated by the obedience to her lead: she had offended by her harping upon Delphica. However, here it was unmentioned. He held the letter out to seize it in the large, entire.

Her handwriting was good, as good as the writing of the most agreeable lady on earth. Dudley did not blame her for letting the lady be deceived in her—if she knew her position. She might be ignorant of it. And to strangers, to chance acquaintances, even to friends, the position, of the loathsome name, was not materially important. Marriage altered the view. He sided with his family.

He sided, edging away, against his family. But a vision of the earldom coming to him, stirred reverential objections, composed of all which his unstained family could protest in religion, to repudiate an alliance with a stained house, and the guilty of a condonation of immorality. Who would have imagined Mr. Radnor a private sinner flaunting for one of the righteous? And she, the mother, a lady—quite a lady; having really a sense of duty, sense of honour! That she must be a lady, Dudley was convinced. He beheld through a porous crape, woven of formal respectfulness, with threads of personal disgust, the scene, striking him drearily like a distant great mansion's conflagration across moorland at midnight, of a lady's breach of bonds and plunge of all for love. How had it been concealed? In Dudley's upper sphere, everything was exposed: Scandal walked naked and unashamed-figurante of the polite world. But still this lady was of the mint and coin, a true lady. Handsome now, she must have been beautiful. And a comprehensible pride (for so would Dudley have borne it) keeps the forsaken man silent up to death: . . . grandly silent; but the loss of such a woman is enough to kill a man! Not in time, though! Legitimacy evidently, by the mother's confession, cannot protect where it is wanted. Dudley was optically affected by a round spot of the world swinging its shadow over Nesta.

He pitied, and strove to be sensible of her. The effort succeeded so well, that he was presently striving to be insensible. The former state, was the mounting of a wall; the latter, was a sinking through a chasm. There would be family consultations, abhorrent; his father's agonized amazement at the problem presented to a family of scrupulous principles and pecuniary requirements; his mother's blunt mention of the abominable name—mediaevally vindicated in champions of certain princely families indeed, but morally condemned; always under condemnation of the Church: a blot: and handed down: Posterity, and it might be a titled posterity, crying out. A man in the situation of Dudley could not think solely of himself. The nobles of the land are bound in honour to their posterity. There you have one of the prominent permanent distinctions between them and the commonalty.

His mother would again propose her chosen bride for him: Edith Averst, with the dowry of a present one thousand pounds per annum, and prospect of six or so, excluding Sir John's estate, Carping, in Leicestershire; a fair estate, likely to fall to Edith; consumption seized her brothers as they ripened. A fair girl too; only Dudley did not love her; he wanted to love. He was learning the trick from this other one, who had become obscured and diminished, tainted, to the thought of her; yet not extinct. Sight of her was to be dreaded.

Unguiltily tainted, in herself she was innocent. That constituted the unhappy invitation to him to swallow one half of his feelings, which had his world's blessing on it, for the beneficial enlargement and enthronement of the baser unblest half, which he hugged and distrusted. Can innocence issue of the guilty? He asked it, hoping it might be possible: he had been educated in his family to believe, that the laws governing human institutions are divine—until History has altered them. They are altered, to present a fresh bulwark against the infidel. His conservative mind, retiring in good order, occupied the next rearward post of resistance. Secretly behind it, the man was proud of having a heart to beat for the cause of the besieging enemy, in the present instance. When this was blabbed to him, and he had owned it, he attributed his weakness to excess of nature, the liking for a fair face. —Oh, but more! spirit was in the sweet eyes. She led him—she did lead him in spiritual things; led him out of common circles of thought, into refreshing new spheres; he had reminiscences of his having relished the juices of the not quite obviously comic, through her indications: and really, in spite of her inferior flimsy girl's education, she could boast her acquirements; she was quick, startlingly; modest, too, in commerce with a slower mind that carried more; though she laughed and was a needle for humour: she taught him at times to put away his contempt of the romantic; she had actually shown him, that his expressed contempt of it disguised a dread: as it did, and he was conscious of the foolishness

of it now while pursuing her image, while his intelligence and senses gave her the form and glory of young morning.

Wariness counselled him to think it might be merely the play of her youth; and also the disposition of a man in harness of business, exaggeratingly to prize an imagined finding of the complementary feminine of himself. Venerating purity as he did, the question, whether the very sweetest of pure young women, having such an origin, must not at some time or other show trace of the origin, surged up. If he could only have been sure of her moral exemption from taint, a generous ardour, in reserve behind his anxious dubieties, would have precipitated Dudley to quench disapprobation and brave the world under a buckler of those monetary advantages, which he had but stoutly to plead with the House of Cantor, for the speedy overcoming of a reluctance to receive the nameless girl and prodigious heiress. His family's instruction of him, and his inherited tastes, rendered the aspect of a Nature stripped of the clothing of the laws offensive down to devilish: we grant her certain steps, upon certain conditions accompanied by ceremonies; and when she violates them, she becomes visibly again the revolutionary wicked old beast bent on levelling our sacred edifices. An alliance with any of her votaries, appeared to Dudley as an act of treason to his house, his class, and his tenets. And nevertheless he was haunted by a cry of criminal happiness for and at the commission of the act.

He would not decide to be 'precipitate,' and the days ran their course, until Lady Grace Halley arrived at Cronidge, a widow. Lady Cantor spoke to her of Dudley's unfathomable gloom. Lady Grace took him aside.

She said, without preface: 'You've heard, have you!'

'You were aware of it?' said he, and his tone was irritable with a rebuke.

'Coming through town, for the first time yesterday. I had it—of all men!—from a Sir Abraham Quatley, to whom I was recommended to go, about my husband's shares in a South American Railway; and we talked, and it came out. He knows; he says, it is not generally known; and he likes, respects Mr. Victor Radnor; we are to keep the secret. Hum? He had heard of your pretensions; and our relationship, etc.: "esteemed" it—you know the City dialect—his duty to mention, etc. That was after I had spied on his forehead the something I wormed out of his mouth. What are you going to do?'

'What can I do!'

'Are you fond of the girl?'

An attachment was indicated, as belonging to the case. She was not a woman to whom the breathing of pastoral passion would be suitable; yet he saw that she despised him for a lover; and still she professed to understand his dilemma. Perplexity at the injustice of fate and persons universally, put a wrinkled mask on his features and the expression of his feelings. They were torn, and the world was torn; and what he wanted, was delay, time for him to define his feelings and behold a recomposed picture of the world. He had already taken six days. He pleaded the shock to his family.

'You won't have such a chance again,' she said. Shrugs had set in.

They agreed as to the behaviour of the girl's mother. It reflected on the father, he thought.

'Difficult thing to proclaim, before an engagement!' Her shoulders were restless.

'When a man's feelings get entangled!'

'Oh! a man's feelings! I'm your British Jury for, a woman's.'

'He has married her?'

She declared to not knowing particulars. She could fib smoothly.

The next day she was on the line to London, armed with the proposal of an appointment for the Hon. Dudley to meet 'the girl's father.'

CHAPTER XXVII

CONTAINS WHAT IS A SMALL THING OR A GREAT, AS THE SOUL OF THE CHIEF ACTOR MAY DECIDE

Skepsey ushered Lady Grace into his master's private room, and entertained her during his master's absence. He had buried his wife, he said: she feared, seeing his posture of the soaping of hands at one shoulder, that he was about to bewail it; and he did wish to talk of it, to show his modest companionship with her in loss, and how a consolation for our sorrows may be obtained: but he won her approval, by taking the acceptable course between the dues to the subject and those to his hearer, as a model cab should drive considerate equally of horse and fare.

A day of holiday at Hampstead, after the lowering of the poor woman's bones into earth, had been followed by a descent upon London; and at night he had found himself in the immediate neighbourhood of a public house, noted for sparring exhibitions and instructions on the first floor; and he was melancholy, unable quite to disperse 'the ravens' flocking to us on such days: though, if we ask why we have to go out of the world, there is a corresponding inquiry, of what good was our coming into it; and unless we are doing good work for our country, the answer is not satisfactory—except, that we are as well gone. Thinking which, he was accosted by a young woman: perfectly respectable, in every way: who inquired if he had seen a young man enter the door. She described him, and reviled the temptations of those houses; and ultimately, as she insisted upon going in to look for the young man and use her persuasions to withdraw him from 'that snare of Satan,' he had accompanied her, and he had gone upstairs and brought the young man down. But friends, or the acquaintances they call friends, were with him, and they were 'in drink,' and abused the young woman; and she had her hand on the young man's arm, quoting Scripture. Sad to relate of men bearing the name of Englishmen—and it was hardly much better if they pleaded intoxication!—they were not content to tear the young man from her grasp, they hustled her, pushed her out, dragged her in the street.

'It became me to step to her defence: she was meek,' said Skepsey. 'She had a great opinion of the efficacy of quotations from Scripture; she did not recriminate. I was able to release her and the young man she protected, on condition of my going upstairs to give a display of my proficiency. I had assured them, that the poor fellows who stood against me were not a proper match. And of course, they jeered, but they had the evidence, on the pavement. So I went up with them. I was heavily oppressed, I wanted relief, I put on the gloves. He was a bigger man; they laughed at the little one. I told them, it depended upon a knowledge of first principles, and the power to apply them. I will not boast, my lady: my junior by ten years, the man went down; he went down a second time; and the men seemed surprised; I told them, it was nothing but first principles put into action. I mention the incident, for the extreme relief it afforded me at the close of a dark day.'

'So you cured your grief !' said Lady Grace; and Skepsey made way for his master.

Victor's festival-lights were kindled, beholding her; cressets on the window-sill, lamps inside.

'Am I so welcome?' There was a pull of emotion at her smile. 'What with your little factotum and you, we are flattered to perdition when we come here. He has been proposing, by suggestion, like a Court-physician, the putting on of his boxing-gloves, for the consolation of the widowed:—meant most kindly! and it's a thousand pities women haven't their padded gloves.'

'Oh! but our boxing-gloves can do mischief enough. You have something to say, I see.'

'How do you see?'

'Tusk, tush.'

The silly ring of her voice and the pathless tattle changed; she talked to suit her laden look. 'You hit it. I come from Dudley. He knows the facts. I wish to serve you, in every way.'

Victor's head had lifted.

'Who was it?'

'No enemy.'

'Her mother. She did rightly!'

'Certainly she did,' said Victor, and he thought that instantaneously of the thing done. 'Oh, then she spoke to him! She has kept it from me. For now nearly a week—six days—I've seen her spying for something she expected, like a face behind a door three inches ajar. She has not been half alive; she refused explanations;—she was expecting to hear from him, of him:—the decision, whatever it's to be!'

'I can't aid you there,' said Lady Grace. 'He's one of the unreadables.'

He names Tuesday next week.'

'By all means.'

'She?'

'Fredri?—poor Fredri!—ah, my poor girl, yes!—No, she knows nothing. Here is the truth of it.—she, the legitimate, lives: they say she lives. Well, then, she lives against all rules physical or medical, lives by sheer force of will—it's a miracle of the power of a human creature to . . . I have it from doctors, friends, attendants, they can't guess what she holds on, to keep her breath. All the happiness in life!—if only it could benefit her. But it 's the cause of death to us. Do you see, dear friend;—you are a friend, proved friend,' he took her hand, and held and pressed it, in great need of a sanguine response to emphasis; and having this warm feminine hand, his ideas ran off with it. 'The friend I need! You have courage. My Nataly, poor dear—she can endure, in her quiet way. A woman of courage would take her place beside me and compel the world to do her homage, help;—a bright ready smile does it! She would never be beaten. Of course, we could have lived under a bushel—stifled next to death! But I am for light, air-battle, if you like. I want a comrade, not a—not that I complain. I respect, pity, love—I do love her, honour: only, we want something else—courage—to face the enemy. Quite right, that she should speak to Dudley Sowerby. He has to know, must know; all who deal closely with us must know. But see a moment: I am waiting to see the impediment dispersed, which puts her at an inequality with the world: and then I speak to all whom it concerns—not before: for her sake. How is it now? Dudley will ask . . . you understand. And when I am forced to confess, that the mother, the mother of the girl he seeks in marriage, is not yet in that state herself, probably at that very instant the obstacle has crumbled to dust! I say, probably: I have information—doctors, friends, attendants—they all declare it cannot last outside a week. But you are here— true, I could swear! a touch of a hand tells me. A woman's hand? Well, yes: I read by the touch of a woman's hand:—betrays more than her looks or her lips!' He sank his voice. 'I don't talk of condoling: if you are in grief, you know I share it.' He kissed her hand, and laid it on her lap; eyed it, and met her eyes; took a header into her eyes, and lost himself. A nip of his conscience moved his tongue to say: 'As for guilt, if it were known . . . a couple of ascetics—absolutely!' But this was assumed to be unintelligible; and it was merely the apology to his conscience in communion with the sprite of a petticoated fair one who was being subjected to tender little liberties, necessarily addressed in enigmas. He righted immediately, under a perception of the thoroughbred's contempt for the barriers of wattled sheep; and caught the word 'guilt,' to hide the Philistine citizen's lapse, by relating historically, in abridgement, the honest beauty of the passionate loves of the two whom the world proscribed for honestly loving. There was no guilt. He harped on the word, to erase the recollection of his first use of it.

'Fiddle,' said Lady Grace. 'The thing happened. You have now to carry it through. You require a woman's aid in a social matter. Rely on me, for what I can do. You will see Dudley on Tuesday? I will write. Be plain with him; not forgetting the gilding, I need not remark. Your Nesta has no aversion?'

'Admires, respects, likes; is quite—is willing.'

'Good enough beginning.' She rose, for the atmosphere was heated, rather heavy. 'And if one proves to be of aid, you'll own that a woman has her place in the battle.'

The fair black-clad widow's quick and singular interweaving of the evanescent pretty pouts and frowns dimpled like the brush of the wind on a sunny pool in a shady place; and her forehead was close below his chin, her lips not far. Her apparel was attractively mourning.

Widows in mourning, when they do not lean over extremely to the Stygian shore, with the complexions of the drugs which expedited the defunct to the ferry, provoke the manly arm within reach of them to pluck their pathetic blooming persons clean away from it. What of the widow who visibly likes the living? Compassion; sympathy, impulse; and gratitude, impulse again, living warmth; and a spring of the blood to wrestle with the King of Terrors for the other poor harper's half-night capped Eurydice; and a thirst, sudden as it is overpowering; and the solicitude, a reflective solicitude, to put the seal on a thing and call it a fact, to the astonishment of history; and a kick of our naughty youth in its coffin; all the insurgencies of Nature, with her colonel of the regiment absent, and her veering trick to drive two vessels at the cross of a track into collision, combine for doing that, which is very much more, and which affects us at times so much less than did the pressure of a soft wedded hand by our own elsewhere pledged one. On the contrary, we triumph, we have the rich flavour of the fruit for our pains; we commission the historian to write in hieroglyphs a round big fact.

The lady passed through the trial submitting, stiffening her shoulders, and at the close, shutting her eyes. She stood cool in her blush, and eyed him, like one gravely awakened. Having been embraced and kissed, she had to consider her taste for the man, and acknowledge a neatness of impetuosity in the deed; and he was neither apologizing culprit nor glorying-bandit when it was done, but something of the lyric God tempering his fervours to a pleased serenity, not offering a renewal of them. He glowed transparently. He said: 'You are the woman to take a front place in the battle!' With this woman beside him, it was a conquered world.

Comparisons, in the jotting souvenirs of a woman of her class and set, favoured him; for she disliked enterprising libertines and despised stumbling youths; and the genial simple glow of his look assured her, that the vanished fiery moment would not be built on by a dating master. She owned herself. Or did she? Some understanding of how the other woman had been won to the leap with him, was drawing in about her. She would have liked to beg for the story; and she could as little do that as bring her tongue to reproach. If we come to the den! she said to her thought of reproach. Our semi-civilization makes it a den, where a scent in his nostrils will spring the half-tamed animal away to wildness. And she had come unanticipatingly, without design, except perhaps to get a superior being to direct and restrain a gambler's hand perhaps for the fee of a temporary pressure.

'I may be able to help a little—I hope!' she fetched a breath to say, while her eyelids mildly sermonized; and immediately she talked of her inheritance of property in stocks and shares.

Victor commented passingly on the soundness of them, and talked of projects he entertained:—Parliament! 'But I have only to mention it at home, and my poor girl will set in for shrinking.'

He doated on the diverse aspect of the gallant woman of the world.

'You succeed in everything you do,' said she, and she cordially believed it; and that belief set the neighbour memory palpitating. Success folded her waist, was warm upon her lips: she worshipped the figure of Success.

'I can't consent to fail, it's true, when my mind is on a thing,' Victor rejoined.

He looked his mind on Lady Grace. The shiver of a maid went over her. These transparent visages, where the thought which is half design is perceived as a lightning, strike lightning into the physically feebler. Her hand begged, with the open palm, her head shook thrice; and though she did not step back, he bowed to the negation, and then she gave him a grateful shadow of a smile, relieved, with a startled view of how greatly relieved, by that sympathetic deference in the wake of the capturing intrepidity.

'I am to name Tuesday for Dudley?' she suggested.

'At any hour he pleases to appoint.'

'A visit signifies . . .'

'Whatever it signifies!'

'I'm thinking of the bit of annoyance.'

'To me? Anything appointed, finds me ready the next minute.'

Her smile was flatteringly bright. 'By the way, keep your City people close about you: entertain as much as possible; dine them,' she said.

'At home?'

'Better. Sir Rodwell Blachington, Sir Abraham Quatley: and their wives.

There's no drawing back now. And I will meet them.'

She received a compliment. She was on the foot to go.

But she had forgotten the Tiddler mine.

The Tiddler mine was leisurely mounting. Victor stated the figures; he saluted her hand, and Lady Grace passed out, with her heart on the top of them, and a buzz about it of the unexpected having occurred. She had her experiences to match new patterns in events; though not very many. Compared with gambling, the game of love was an idle entertainment. Compared with other players, this man was gifted.

Victor went in to Mr. Inchling's room, and kept Inchling from speaking, that he might admire him for he knew not what, or knew not well what. The good fellow was devoted to his wife. Victor in old days had called the wife Mrs. Grundy. She gossiped, she was censorious; she knew—could not but know—the facts; yet never by a shade was she disrespectful. He had a curious recollection of how his knowledge of Inchling and his wife being always in concert, entirely—whatever they might think in private—devoted to him in action, had influenced, if it had not originally sprung, his resolve to cast off the pestilential cloak of obscurity shortening his days, and emerge before a world he could illumine to give him back splendid reflections. Inchling and his wife, it was: because the two were one: and if one, and subservient to him, knowing all the story, why, it foreshadowed a conquered world.

They were the one pulse of the married Grundy beating in his hand. So it had been.

He rattled his views upon Indian business, to hold Inchling silent, and let his mind dwell almost lovingly on the good faithful spouse, who had no phosphorescent writing of a recent throbbing event on the four walls of his room.

Nataly was not so generously encountered in idea.

He felt and regretted this. He greeted her with a doubled affectionateness. Her pitiable deficiency of courage, excusing a man for this and that small matter in the thick of the conflict, made demands on him for gentle treatment.

'You have not seen any one?' she asked.

'City people. And you, my love?'

'Mr. Barnby called. He has gone down to Tunbridge Wells for a week, to some friend there.' She added, in pain of thought: 'I have seen Dartrey. He has brought Lord Clanconan to town, for a consultation, and expects he will have to take him to Brighton.'

'Brighton? What a life for a man like Dartrey, at Brighton!'

Her breast heaved. 'If I cannot see my Nesta there, he will bring her up to me for a day:

'But, my dear, I will bring her up to you, if it is your wish to see her.'

'It is becoming imperative that I should.'

'No hurry, no hurry: wait till the end of next week. And I must see Dartrey, on business, at once!'

She gave the address in a neighbouring square. He had minutes to spare before dinner, and flew. She was not inquisitive.

Colney Durance had told Dartrey that Victor was killing her. She had little animation; her smiles were ready, but faint. After her interview with Dudley, there had been a swoon at home; and her maid, sworn to secrecy, willingly spared a tender-hearted husband—so good a master.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MRS. MARSETT

Little acts of kindness were not beyond the range of Colney Durance, and he ran down to Brighton, to give the exiled Nesta some taste of her friendly London circle. The Duvidney ladies knew that the dreaded gentleman had a regard for the girl. Their own, which was becoming warmer than they liked to think, was impressed by his manner of conversing with her. 'Child though she was,' he paid her the compliment of a sober as well as a satirical review of the day's political matter and recent publications; and the ladies were introduced, in a wonderment, to the damsel Delphica. They listened placidly to a discourse upon her performances, Japanese to their understandings.

At New York, behold, another adventurous representative and advocate of the European tongues has joined the party: Signor Jeridomani: a philologer, of course; a politician in addition; Macchiavelli redivivus, it seems to fair Delphica. The speech he delivers at the Syndicate Delmonico Dinner, is justly applauded by the New York Press as a masterpiece of astuteness. He appears to be the only one of the party who has an eye for the dark. She fancies she may know a more widely awake in the abstract. But now, thanks to jubilant Journals and Homeric laughter over the Continent, the secret is out, in so far as the concurrents are all unmasked and exposed for the edification of the American public. Dr. Bouthoin's eyebrows are up, Mr. Semhians disfigures his name by greatly gaping. Shall they return to their Great Britain indignant? Patriotism, with the sauce of a luxurious expedition at no cost to the private purse, restrains them. Moreover, there is no sign of any one of the others intending to quit the expedition; and Mr. Semhians has done a marvel or two in the cricket-field: Old England looks up where she can. What is painfully extraordinary to our couple, they find in the frigid attitude of the Americans toward their 'common tongue'; together with the rumour of a design to despatch an American rival emissary to Japan.

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