

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

THE AMAZING
MARRIAGE.
VOLUME 3

George Meredith
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CHAPTER XX

STUDIES IN FOG, GOUT, AN OLD SEAMAN, A LOVELY SERPENT, AND THE MORAL EFFECTS THAT MAY COME OF A BORROWED SHIRT

Money of his father's enabled Gower to take the coach; and studies in fog, from the specked brown to the woolly white, and the dripping torn, were proposed to the traveller, whose preference of Nature's face did not arrest his observation of her domino and petticoats; across which blank sheets he curiously read backward, that he journeyed by the aid of his father's hard-earned, ungrudged piece of gold. Without it, he would have been useless in this case of need. The philosopher could starve with equanimity, and be the stronger. But one had, it seemed here

clearly, to put on harness and trudge along a line, if the unhappy were to have one's help. Gradual experiences of his business among his fellows were teaching an exercised mind to learn in regions where minds unexercised were doctoral giants beside it.

The study of gout was offered at Chinningfold. Admiral Fakenham's butler refused at first to take a name to his master. Gower persisted, stating the business of his mission; and in spite of the very suspicious glib good English spoken by a man wearing such a hat and suit, the butler was induced to consult Mrs. Carthew.

She sprang up alarmed. After having seen the young lady happily married and off with her lordly young husband, the arrival of a messenger from the bride gave a stir the wrong way to her flowing recollections; the scenes and incidents she had smothered under her love of the comfortable stood forth appallingly. The messenger, the butler said, was no gentleman. She inspected Gower and heard him speak. An anomaly had come to the house; for he had the language of a gentleman, the appearance of a nondescript; he looked indifferent, he spoke sympathetically; and he was frank as soon as the butler was out of hearing. In return for the compliment, she invited him to her sitting-room. The story of the young countess, whom she had seen driven away by her husband from the church in a coach and four, as being now destitute, praying to see her friends, in the Whitechapel of London—the noted haunt of thieves and outcasts, bankrupts and the abandoned; set her asking for the

first time, who was the man with dreadful countenance inside the coach? A previously disregarded horror of a man. She went trembling to the admiral, though his health was delicate, his temper excitable. It was, she considered, an occasion for braving the doctor's interdict.

Gower was presently summoned to the chamber where Admiral Fakenham reclined on cushions in an edifice of an arm-chair. He told a plain tale. Its effect was to straighten the admiral's back, and enlarge in grey glass a pair of sea-blue eyes. And, 'What's that? Whitechapel?' the admiral exclaimed,—at high pitch, far above his understanding. The particulars were repeated, whereupon the sick-room shook with, 'Greengrocer?' He stunned himself with another of the monstrous points in his pet girl's honeymoon: 'A prizefight?'

To refresh a saving incredulity, he took a closer view of the messenger. Gower's habiliments were those of the 'queer fish,' the admiral saw. But the meeting at Carlsruhe was recalled to him, and there was a worthy effort to remember it. 'Prize-fight! —Greengrocer! Whitechapel!' he rang the changes rather more moderately; till, swelling and purpling, he cried: 'Where's the husband?'

That was the emissary's question likewise.

'If I could have found him, sir, I should not have troubled you.'

'Disappeared? Plays the man of his word, then plays the madman! Prize- fight the first day of her honeymoon? Good Lord! Leaves her at the inn?'

'She was left.'

'When was she left?'

'As soon as the fight was over—as far as I understand.'

The admiral showered briny masculine comments on that bridegroom.

'Her brother's travelling somewhere in the Pyrenees—married my daughter. She has an uncle, a hermit.' He became pale. 'I must do it. The rascal insults us all. Flings her off the day he married her! It 's a slap in the face to all of us. You are acquainted with the lady, sir. Would you call her a red-haired girl?'

'Red-gold of the ballads; chestnut-brown, with threads of fire.'

'She has the eyes for a man to swear by. I feel the loss of her, I can tell you. She was wine and no penalty to me. Is she much broken under it?—if I 'm to credit . . . I suppose I must. It floors me.'

Admiral Baldwin's frosty stare returned on him. Gower caught an image of it, as comparable, without much straining, to an Arctic region smitten by the beams.

'Nothing breaks her courage,' he said.

'To be sure, my poor dear! Who could have guessed when she left my house she was on her way to a prizefight and a greengrocer's in Whitechapel. But the dog's not mad, though his bite 's bad; he 's an eccentric mongrel. He wants the whip; ought to have had it regularly from his first breeching. He shall whistle for her when he repents; and he will, mark me. This gout here will be having a snap at the vitals if I don't start to-night. Oblige

me, half a minute.'

The admiral stretched his hand for an arm to give support, stood, and dropped into the chair, signifying a fit of giddiness in the word 'Head.'

Before the stupor had passed, Mrs. Carthew entered, anxious lest the admittance of a messenger of evil to her invalid should have been an error of judgement. The butler had argued it with her. She belonged to the list of persons appointed to cut life's thread when it strains, their general kindness being so liable to misdirection.

Gower left the room and went into the garden. He had never seen a death; and the admiral's peculiar pallor intimated events proper to days of cold mist and a dripping stillness. How we go, was the question among his problems:—if we are to go! his youthful frame insistingly added.

The fog down a wet laurel-walk contracted his mind with the chilling of his blood, and he felt that he would have to see the thing if he was to believe in it. Of course he believed, but life throbbed rebelliously, and a picture of a desk near a lively fire-grate, books and pen and paper, and a piece of writing to be approved of by the Hesper of ladies, held ground with a pathetic heroism against the inevitable. He got his wits to the front by walking faster; and then thought of the young countess and the friend she might be about to lose. She could number her friends on her fingers. Admiral Fakenham's exclamations of the name of the place where she now was, conveyed an inky idea of the fall

she had undergone. Counting her absent brother, with himself, his father, and the two Whitechapel girls, it certainly was an unexampled fall, to say of her, that they and those two girls had become by the twist of circumstances the most serviceable of her friends.

Her husband was the unriddled riddle we have in the wealthy young lord,— burning to possess, and making, tatters of all he grasped, the moment it was his own. Glints of the devilish had shot from him at the gamingtables,—fine haunts for the study of our lower man. He could be magnificent in generosity; he had little humaneness. He coveted beauty in women hungrily, and seemed to be born hostile to them; or so Gower judged by the light of the later evidence on unconsidered antecedent observations of him. Why marry her to cast her off instantly? The crude philosopher asked it as helplessly as the admiral. And, further, what did the girl Madge mean by the drop of her voice to a hum of enforced endurance under injury, like the furnace behind an iron door? Older men might have understood, as he was aware; he might have guessed, only he had the habit of scattering meditation upon the game of hawk and fowl.

Dame Gossip boils. Her one idea of animation is to have her *dramatis persona* in violent motion, always the biggest foremost; and, indeed, that is the way to make them credible, for the wind they raise and the succession of collisions. The fault of the method is, that they do not instruct; so the breath is out of them before they are put aside; for the uninformative are the

humanly deficient: they remain with us like the tolerated old aristocracy, which may not govern, and is but socially seductive. The deuteragonist or secondary person can at times tell us more of them than circumstances at furious heat will help them to reveal; and the Dame will have him only as an index-post. Hence her endless ejaculations over the mystery of Life, the inscrutability of character, —in a plain world, in the midst of such readable people! To preserve Romance (we exchange a sky for a ceiling if we let it go), we must be inside the heads of our people as well as the hearts, more than shaking the kaleidoscope of hurried spectacles, in days of a growing activity of the head.

Gower Woodseer could not know that he was drawn on to fortune and the sight of his Hesper by Admiral Fakenham's order that the visitor was to stay at his house until he should be able to quit his bed, and journey with him to London, doctor or no doctor. The doctor would not hear of it. The admiral threatened it every night for the morning, every morning for the night; and Gower had to submit to postponements balefully affecting his linen. Remonstrance was not to be thought of; for at a mere show of reluctance the courtly admiral flushed, frowned, and beat the bed where he lay, a gouty volcano. Gower's one shirt was passing through the various complexions, and had approached the Nubian on its way to negro. His natural candour checked the downward course. He mentioned to Mrs. Carthew, with incidental gravity, on a morning at breakfast, that this article of his attire 'was beginning to resemble London snow.' She was

amused; she promised him a change more resembling country snow. 'It will save me from buttoning so high up,' he said, as he thanked her. She then remembered the daily increase of stiffness in his figure: and a reflection upon his patient waiting, and simpleness, and lexicographer speech to expose his minor needs, touched her unused sense of humour on the side where it is tender in women, from being motherly.

In consequence, she spoke of him with a pleading warmth to the Countess Livia, who had come down to see the admiral 'concerning an absurd but annoying rumour running over London.' Gower was out for a walk. He knew of the affair, Mrs. Carthew said, for an introduction to her excuses of his clothing.

'But I know the man,' said Livia. 'Lord Fleetwood picked him up somewhere, and brought him to us. Clever: Why, is he here?'

'He is here, sent to the admiral, as I understand, my lady.'

'Sent by whom?'

Having but a weak vocabulary to defend a delicate position, Mrs. Carthew stuttered into evasions, after the way of ill-armed persons; and naming herself a stranger to the circumstances, she feebly suggested that the admiral ought not to be disturbed before the doctor's next visit; Mr. Woodseer had been allowed to sit by his bed yesterday only for ten minutes, to divert him with his talk. She protected in this wretched manner the poor gentleman she sacrificed and emitted such a smell of secrecy, that Livia wrote three words on her card, for it to be taken to Admiral Baldwin at once. Mrs. Carthew supplicated faintly; she was unheeded.

The Countess of Fleetwood mounted the stairs—to descend them with the knowledge of her being the Dowager Countess of Fleetwood! Henrietta had spoken of the Countess of Fleetwood's hatred of the title of Dowager. But when Lady Fleetwood had the fact from the admiral, would she forbear to excite him? If she repudiated it, she would provoke him to fire 'one of his broadsides,'—as they said in the family, to assert its and that might exhaust him; and there was peril in that. And who was guilty? Mrs. Carthew confessed her guilt, asking how it could have been avoided. She made appeal to Gower on his return, transfixing him.

Not only is he no philosopher who has an idol, he has to learn that he cannot think rationally; his due sense of weight and measure is lost, the choice of his thoughts as well. He was in the house with his devoutly, simply worshipped, pearl of women, and his whole mind fell to work without ado upon the extravagant height of the admiral's shirt-collar cutting his ears. The very beating of his heart was perplexed to know whether it was for rapture or annoyance. As a result he was but histrionically master of himself when the Countess Livia or the nimbus of the lady appeared in the room.

She received his bow; she directed Mrs. Carthew to have the doctor summoned immediately. The remorseful woman flew.

'Admiral Fakenham is very ill, Mr. Woodseer, he has had distracting news. Oh, no, the messenger is not blamed. You are Lord Fleetwood's friend and will not allow him to be prejudged.

He will be in town shortly. I know him well, you know him; and could you hear him accused of cruelty—and to a woman? He is the soul of chivalry. So, in his way, is the admiral. If he were only more patient! Let us wait for Lord Fleetwood's version. I am certain it will satisfy me. The admiral wishes you to step up to him. Be very quiet; you will be; consent to everything. I was unaware of his condition: the things I heard were incredible. I hope the doctor will not delay. Now go. Beg to retire soon.'

Livia spoke under her breath; she had fears.

Admiral Baldwin lay in his bed, submitting to a nurse-woman-sign of extreme exhaustion. He plucked strength from the sight of Gower and bundled the woman out of the room, muttering: 'Kill myself? Not half so quick as they'd do it. I can't rest for that Whitechapel of yours. Please fetch pen and paper: it's a letter.'

The letter began, 'Dear Lady Arpington.'

The dictation of it came in starts. At one moment it seemed as if life's ending shook the curtains on our stage and were about to lift. An old friend in the reader of the letter would need no excuse for its jerky brevity. It said that his pet girl, Miss Kirby, was married to the Earl of Fleetwood in the first week of last month, and was now to be found at a shop No. 45 Longways, Whitechapel; that the writer was ill, unable to stir; that he would be in London within eight-and-forty hours at furthest. He begged Lady Arpington to send down to the place and have the young countess fetched to her, and keep her until he came.

Admiral Baldwin sat up to sign the letter.

'Yes, and write "miracles happen when the devil's abroad"—done it !' he said, sinking back. 'Now seal, you'll find wax—the ring at my watch-chain.'

He sighed, as it were the sound of his very last; he lay like a sleeper twitched by a dream. There had been a scene with Livia. The dictating of the letter took his remainder of strength out of him.

Gower called in the nurse, and went downstairs. He wanted the address of

Lady Arpington's town house.

'You have a letter for her?' said Livia, and held her hand for it in a way not to be withstood.

'There's no superscription,' he remarked.

'I will see to that, Mr. Woodseer.'

'I fancy I am bound, Lady Fleetwood.'

'By no means.' She touched his arm. 'You are Lord Fleetwood's friend.'

A slight convulsion of the frame struck the admiral's shirt-collar at his ears; it virtually prostrated him under foot of a lady so benign in overlooking the spectacle he presented. Still, he considered; he had wits alive enough, just to perceive a duty.

'The letter was entrusted to me, Lady Fleetwood.'

'You are afraid to entrust it to the post?'

'I was thinking of delivering it myself in town.'

'You will entrust it to me.'

'Anything on earth of my own.'

'The treasure would be valued. This you confide to my care.'

'It is important.'

'No.'

'Indeed it is.'

'Say that it is, then. It is quite safe with me. It may be important that it should not be delivered. Are you not Lord Fleetwood's friend? Lady Arpington is not so very, very prominent in the list with you and me. Besides, I don't think she has come to town yet. She generally sees out the end of the hunting season. Leave the letter to me: it shall go. You, with your keen observation missing nothing, have seen that my uncle has not his whole judgement at present. There are two sides to a case. Lord Fleetwood's friend will know that it would be unfair to offer him up to his enemies while he is absent. Things going favourably here, I drive back to town to-morrow, and I hope you will accept a seat in my carriage.'

He delivered his courtliest; he was riding on cloud.

They talked of Baden. His honourable surrender of her defeated purse was a subject for gentle humour with her, venturesome compliment with him. He spoke well; and though his hands were clean of Sir Meeson Corby's reproach of them, the caricature of presentable men blushed absurdly and seemed uneasy in his monstrous collar. The touching of him again would not be required to set him pacing to her steps. His hang of the head testified to the unerring stamp of a likeness Captain Abrane could affix with a stroke: he looked the fiddler over his bow, playing wonderfully to conceal the crack of a string. The merit

of being one of her army of admirers was accorded to him. The letter to Lady Arpington was retained.

Gower deferred the further mention of the letter until a visit to the admiral's chamber should furnish an excuse; and he had to wait for it. Admiral Baldwin's condition was becoming ominous. He sent messages downstairs by the doctor, forbidding his guest's departure until they two could make the journey together next day. The tortured and blissful young man, stripped of his borrowed philosopher's cloak, hung conscience-ridden in this delicious bower, which was perceptibly an antechamber of the vaults, offering him the study he thirsted for, shrank from, and mixed with his cup of amorous worship.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH WE HAVE

FURTHER GLIMPSSES OF THE

WONDROUS MECHANISM

OF OUR YOUNGER MAN

The report of Admiral Baldwin Fakenham as having died in the arms of a stranger visiting the house, hit nearer the mark than usual. He yielded his last breath as Gower Woodseer was lowering him to his pillow, shortly after a husky whisper of the letter to Lady Arpington; and that was one of Gower's crucial trials. It condemned him, for the pacifying of a dying man, to the murmur and shuffle, which was a lie; and the lie burnt him, contributed to the brand on his race. He and his father upheld a solitary bare staff, where the Cambrian flag had flown, before their people had been trampled in mire, to do as the worms. His loathing of any shadow of the lie was a protest on behalf of Welsh blood against an English charge, besides the passion for spiritual cleanliness: without which was no comprehension, therefore no enjoyment, of Nature possible to him. For Nature is the Truth.

He begged the countess to let him have the letter; he held to the petition, with supplications; he spoke of his pledged word, his honour; and her countenance did not deny to such an object as she

beheld the right to a sense of honour. 'We all have the sentiment, I hope, Mr. Woodseer,' she said, stupefying the worshipper, who did not see it manifested. There was a look of gentle intimacy, expressive of common grounds between them, accompanying the dead words. Mistress of the letter, and the letter safe under lock, the admiral dead, she had not to bestow a touch of her hand on his coatsleeve in declining to return it. A face languidly and benevolently querulous was bent on him, when he, so clever a man, resumed his very silly petition.

She was moon out of cloud at a change of the theme. Gower journeyed to London without the letter, intoxicated, and conscious of poison; enamoured of it, and straining for health. He had to reflect at the journey's end, that he had picked up nothing on the road, neither a thing observed nor a thing imagined; he was a troubled pool instead of a flowing river.

The best help to health for him was a day in his father's house. We are perpetually at our comparisons of ourselves with others; and they are mostly profitless; but the man carrying his religious light, to light the darkest ways of his fellows, and keeping good cheer, as though the heart of him ran a mountain water through the grimy region, plucked at Gower with an envy to resemble him in practice. His philosophy, too, reproached him for being outshone. Apart from his philosophy, he stood confessed a bankrupt; and it had dwindled to near extinction. Adoration of a woman takes the breath out of philosophy. And if one had only to say sheer donkey, he consenting to be driven

by her! One has to say worse in this case; for the words are, liar and traitor.

Carinthia's attitude toward his father conduced to his emulous respect for the old man, below whom, and indeed below the roadway of ordinary principles hedged with dull texts, he had strangely fallen. The sight of her lashed him. She made it her business or it was her pleasure to go the rounds beside Mr. Woodseer visiting his poor people. She spoke of the scenes she witnessed, and threw no stress on the wretchedness, having only the wish to assist in ministering. Probably the great wretchedness bubbling over the place blunted her feeling of loss at the word of Admiral Baldwin's end; her bosom sprang up: 'He was next to father,' was all she said; and she soon reverted to this and that house of the lodgings of poverty. She had descended on the world. There was of course a world outside Whitechapel, but Whitechapel was hot about her; the nests of misery, the sharp note of want in the air, tricks of an urchin who had amused her.

As to the place itself, she had no judgement to pronounce, except that: 'They have no mornings here'; and the childish remark set her quivering on her heights, like one seen through a tear, in Gower's memory. Scarce anything of her hungry impatience to meet her husband was visible: she had come to London to meet him; she hoped to meet him soon: before her brother's return, she could have added. She mentioned the goodness of Sarah Winch in not allowing that she was a burden to support. Money and its uses had impressed her; the quantity

possessed by some, the utter need of it for the first of human purposes by others. Her speech was not of so halting or foreign an English. She grew rapidly wherever she was planted.

Speculation on the conduct of her husband, empty as it might be, was necessitated in Gower. He pursued it, and listened to his father similarly at work: 'A young lady fit for any station, the kindest of souls, a born charitable human creature, void of pride, near in all she —does and thinks to the Shaping Hand, why should her husband forsake her on the day of their nuptials.

She is most gracious; the simplicity of an infant. Can you imagine the doing of an injury by a man to a woman like her?'

Then it was that Gower screwed himself to say:

'Yes, I can imagine it, I'm doing it myself. I shall be doing it till I've written a letter and paid a visit.'

He took a meditative stride or two in the room, thinking without revulsion of the Countess Livia under a similitude of the bell of the plant henbane, and that his father had immunity from temptation because of the insensibility to beauty. Out of which he passed to the writing of the letter to Lord Fleetwood, informing his lordship that he intended immediately to deliver a message to the Marchioness of Arpington from Admiral Baldwin Fakenham, in relation to the Countess of Fleetwood. A duty was easily done by Gower when he had surmounted the task of conceiving his resolution to do it; and this task, involving an offence to the Lady Livia and intrusion of his name on a nobleman's recollection, ranked next in severity to the chopping

off of his fingers by a man suspecting them of the bite of rabies.

An interview with Lady Arpington was granted him the following day.

She was a florid, aquiline, loud-voiced lady, evidently having no seat for her wonderments, after his account of the origin of his acquaintance with the admiral had quieted her suspicions. The world had only to stand beside her, and it would hear what she had heard. She rushed to the conclusion that Lord Fleetwood had married a person of no family.

'Really, really, that young man's freaks appear designed for the express purpose of heightening our amazement!' she exclaimed. 'He won't easily get beyond a wife in the east of London, at a shop; but there's no knowing. Any wish of Admiral Baldwin Fakenham's I hold sacred. At least I can see for myself. You can't tell me more of the facts? If Lord Fleetwood's in town, I will call him here at once. I will drive down to this address you give me. She is a civil person?'

'Her breeding is perfect,' said Gower.

'Perfect breeding, you say?' Lady Arpington was reduced to a murmur. She considered the speaker: his outlandish garb, his unprotesting self-possession. He spoke good English by habit, her ear told her. She was of an eminence to judge of a man impartially, even to the sufferance of an opinion from him, on a subject that lesser ladies would have denied to his clothing. Outwardly simple, naturally frank, though a tangle of the complexities inwardly, he was a touchstone for true

aristocracy, as the humblest who bear the main elements of it must be. Certain humorous turns in his conversation won him an amicable smile when he bowed to leave: they were the needed finish of a favourable impression.

One day later the earl arrived in town, read Gower Woodseer's brief words, and received the consequently expected summons, couched in a great lady's plain imperative. She was connected with his family on the paternal side.

He went obediently; not unwillingly, let the deputed historian of the Marriage, turning over documents, here say. He went to Lady Arpington disposed for marital humaneness and jog-trot harmony, by condescension; equivalent to a submitting to the drone of an incessant psalm at the drum of the ear. He was, in fact, rather more than inclined that way. When very young, at the age of thirteen, a mood of religious fervour had spiritualized the dulness of Protestant pew and pulpit for him. Another fit of it, in the Roman Catholic direction, had proposed, during his latest dilemma, to relieve him of the burden of his pledged word. He had plunged for a short space into the rapturous contemplation of a monastic life—'the clean soul for the macerated flesh,' as that fellow Woodseer said once: and such as his friend, the Roman Catholic Lord Feltre, moodily talked of getting in his intervals. He had gone down to a young and novel trial establishment of English penitents in the forest of a Midland county, and had watched and envied, and seen the escape from a lifelong bondage to the 'beautiful Gorgon,' under cover of a white flannel frock.

The world pulled hard, and he gave his body into chains of a woman, to redeem his word.

But there was a plea on behalf of this woman. The life she offered might have psalmic iteration; the dead monotony of it in prospect did, nevertheless, exorcise a devil. Carinthia promised, it might seem to chase and keep the black beast out of him permanently, as she could, he now conceived: for since the day of the marriage with her, the devil inhabiting him had at least been easier, 'up in a corner.'

He held an individual memory of his bride, rose-veiled, secret to them both, that made them one, by subduing him. For it was a charm; an actual feminine, an unanticipated personal, charm; past reach of tongue to name, wordless in thought. There, among the folds of the incense vapours of our heart's holy of holies, it hung; and it was rare, it was distinctive of her, and alluring, if one consented to melt to it, and accepted for compensation the exorcising of a devil.

Oh, but no mere devil by title!—a very devil. It was alert and frisky, flushing, filling the thin cold idea of Henrietta at a thought; and in the thought it made Carinthia's intimate charm appear as no better than a thing to enrich a beggar, while he knew that kings could never command the charm. Not love, only the bathing in Henrietta's incomparable beauty and the desire to be, desire to have been, the casket of it, broke the world to tempest and lightnings at a view of Henrietta the married woman—married to the brother of the woman calling him husband:—'It

is my husband.' The young tyrant of wealth could have avowed that he did not love Henrietta; but not the less was he in the swing of a whirlwind at the hint of her loving the man she had married. Did she? It might be tried.

She? That Henrietta is one of the creatures who love pleasure, love flattery, love their beauty: they cannot love a man. Or the love is a ship that will not sail a sea.

Now, if the fact were declared and attested, if her shallowness were seen proved, one might get free of the devil she plants in the breast. Absolutely to despise her would be release, and it would allow of his tasting Carinthia's charm, reluctantly acknowledged; not 'money of the country' beside that golden Henrietta's.

Yet who can say?—women are such deceptions. Often their fairest, apparently sweetest, when brought to the keenest of the tests, are graceless; or worse, artificially consonant; in either instance barren of the poetic. Thousands of the confidently expectant among men have been unbewitched; a lamentable process; and the grimly reticent and the loudly discursive are equally eloquent of the pretty general disillusion. How they loathe and tear the mask of the sham attraction that snatched them to the hag yoke, and fell away to show its grisly horrors within the round of the month, if not the second enumeration of twelve by the clock! Fleetwood had heard certain candid seniors talk, delivering their minds in superior appreciation of unpretentious boor wenches, nature's products, not esteemed by him. Well, of a truth, she—'Red Hair and Rugged Brows,' as the

fellow Woodseer had called her, in alternation with 'Mountain Face to Sun'—she at the unveiling was gentle, surpassingly; graceful in the furnace of the trial. She wore through the critic ordeal his burning sensitiveness to grace and delicacy cast about a woman, and was rather better than not withered by it.

On the borders between maidenly and wifely, she, a thing of flesh like other daughters of earth, had impressed her sceptical lord, inclining to contempt of her and detestation of his bargain, as a flitting hue, ethereal, a transfiguration of earthliness in the core of the earthly furnace. And how?—but that it must have been the naked shining forth of her character, startled to show itself:—'It is my husband':—it must have been love.

The love that they versify, and strum on guitars, and go crazy over, and end by roaring at as the delusion; this common bloom of the ripeness of a season; this would never have utterly captured a sceptic, to vanquish him in his mastery, snare him in her surrender. It must have been the veritable passion: a flame kept alive by vestal ministrants in the yewwood of the forest of Old Romance; planted only in the breasts of very favourite maidens. Love had eyes, love had a voice that night,—love was the explicable magic lifting terrestrial to seraphic. Though, true, she had not Henrietta's golden smoothness of beauty. Henrietta, illumined with such a love, would outdo all legends, all dreams of the tale of love. Would she? For credulous men she would be golden coin of the currency. She would not have a particular wild flavour: charm as of the running doe that has taken a dart and rolls an eye

to burst the hunter's heart with pity.

Fleetwood went his way to Lady Arpington almost complacently, having fought and laid his wilder self. He might be likened to the doctor's patient entering the chemist's shop, with a prescription for a drug of healing virtue, upon which the palate is as little consulted as a robustious lollypop boy in the household of ceremonial parents, who have rung for the troop of their orderly domestics to sit in a row and hearken the intonation of good words.

CHAPTER XXII

A RIGHT-MINDED GREAT LADY

The bow, the welcome, and the introductory remarks passed rapidly as the pull at two sides of a curtain opening on a scene that stiffens courtliness to hard attention.

After the names of Admiral Baldwin and 'the Mr. Woodseer,' the name of Whitechapel was mentioned by Lady Arpington. It might have been the name of any other place.

'Ah, so far, then, I have to instruct you,' she said, observing the young earl. 'I drove down there yesterday. I saw the lady calling herself Countess of Fleetwood. By right? She was a Miss Kirby.'

'She has the right,' Fleetwood said, standing well up out of a discharge of musketry.

'Marriage not contested. You knew of her being in that place?—I can't describe it.'

'Your ladyship will pardon me?'

London's frontier of barbarism was named for him again, and in a tone to penetrate.

He refrained from putting the question of how she had come there.

As iron as he looked, he said: 'She stays there by choice.'

The great lady tapped her foot on the floor.

'You are not acquainted with the district.'

'One of my men comes out of it.'

'The coming out of it ! . . . However, I understand her story, that she travelled from a village inn, where she had been left—without resources. She waited weeks; I forget how many. She has a description of maid in attendance on her. She came to London to find her husband. You were at the mines, we heard. Her one desire is to meet her husband. But, goodness! Fleetwood, why do you frown? You acknowledge the marriage, she has the name of the church; she was married out of that old Lord Levellier's house. You drove her—I won't repeat the flighty business. You left her, and she did her best to follow you. Will the young men of our time not learn that life is no longer a game when they have a woman for partner in the match!

You don't complain of her flavour of a foreign manner? She can't be so very . . . Admiral Baldwin's daughter has married her brother; and he is a military officer. She has germs of breeding, wants only a little rub of the world to smooth her. Speak to the point:—do you meet her here? Do you refuse?'

'At present? I do.'

'Something has to be done.'

'She was bound to stay where I left her.'

'You are bound to provide for her becomingly.'

'Provision shall be made, of course.'

'The story will . . . unless—and quickly, too.'

I know, I know!

Fleetwood had the clang of all the bells of London chiming

Whitechapel at him in his head, and he betrayed the irritated tyrant ready to decree fire and sword, for the defence or solace of his tender sensibilities.

The black flash flew.

'It 's a thing to mend as well as one can,' Lady Arpington said. 'I am not inquisitive: you had your reasons or chose to act without any. Get her away from that place. She won't come to me unless it 's to meet her husband. Ah, well, temper does not solve your problem; husband you are, if you married her. We'll leave the husband undiscussed: with this reserve, that it seems to me men are now beginning to play the misunderstood.'

'I hope they know themselves better,' said Fleetwood; and he begged for the name and number of the house in the Whitechapel street, where she who was discernibly his enemy, and the deadliest of enemies, had now her dwelling.

Her immediate rush to that place, the fixing of herself there for an assault on him, was a move worthy the daughter of the rascal Old Buccaneer; it compelled to urgent measures. He, as he felt horribly in pencilling her address, acted under compulsion; and a woman prodded the goad. Her mask of ingenuousness was flung away for a look of craft, which could be power; and with her changed aspect his tolerance changed to hatred.

'A shop,' Lady Arpington explained for his better direction: 'potatoes, vegetable stuff. Honest people, I am to believe. She is indifferent to her food, she says. She works, helping one of their ministers—one of their denominations: heaven knows what

they call themselves! Anything to escape from the Church! She's likely to become a Methodist. With Lord Feltre proselytizing for his Papist creed, Lord Pitscrew a declared Mohammedan, we shall have a pretty English aristocracy in time. Well, she may claim to belong to it now. She would not be persuaded against visitations to pestiferous hovels. What else is there to do in such a place? She goes about catching diseases to avoid bilious melancholy in the dark back room of a small greengrocer's shop in Whitechapel. There—you have the word for the Countess of Fleetwood's present address.'

It drenched him with ridicule.

'I am indebted to your ladyship for the information,' he said, and maintained his rigidity.

The great lady stiffened.

'I am obliged to ask you whether you intend to act on it at once. The admiral has gone; I am in some sort deputed as a guardian to her, and I warn you—very well, very well. In your own interests, it will be. If she is left there another two or three days, the name of the place will stick to her.'

'She has baptized herself with it already, I imagine,' said Fleetwood.

'She will have Esslemont to live in.'

'There will be more than one to speak as to that. You should know her.'

'I do not know her.'

'You married her.'

'The circumstances are admitted.'

'If I may hazard a guess, she is unlikely to come to terms without a previous interview. She is bent on meeting you.'

'I am to be subjected to further annoyance, or she will take the name of the place she at present inhabits, and bombard me with it. Those are the terms.'

'She has a brother living, I remind you.'

'State the deduction, if you please, my lady.'

'She is not of 'a totally inferior family.'

'She had a father famous over England as the Old Buccaneer, and is a diligent reader of his book of MAXIMS FOR MEN.'

'Dear me! Then Kirby—Captain Kirby! I remember. That's her origin, is it?' the great lady cried, illumined. 'My mother used to talk of the Cressett scandal. Old Lady Arpington, too. At any rate, it ended in their union—the formalities were properly respected, as soon as they could be.'

'I am unaware.'

'I detest such a tone of speaking. Speaking as you do now—married to the daughter? You are not yourself, Lord Fleetwood.'

'Quite, ma'am, let me assure you. Otherwise the Kirby-Cressetts would be dictating to me from the muzzle of one of the old rascalion's Maxims. They will learn that I am myself.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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