

# GEORGE MEREDITH

THE TRAGIC  
COMEDIANS: A STUDY  
IN A WELL-KNOWN  
STORY. VOLUME 2

George Meredith

**The Tragic Comedians: A Study  
in a Well-known Story. Volume 2**

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# **George Meredith**

## **The Tragic Comedians: A Study in a Well-known Story – Volume 2**

### **CHAPTER VII**

He was down on the plains to her the second day, and as usual when they met, it was as if they had not parted; his animation made it seem so. He was like summer's morning sunlight, his warmth striking instantly through her blood dispersed any hesitating strangeness that sometimes gathers during absences, caused by girlish dread of a step to take, or shame at the step taken, when coldish gentlemen rather create these backflowings and gaps in the feelings. She had grown reconciled to the perturbation of his messages, and would have preferred to have him startling and thrilling her from a distance; but seeing him, she welcomed him, and feeling in his bright presence not the faintest chill of the fit of shyness, she took her bravery of heart for a sign that she had reached his level, and might own it by speaking of the practical measures to lead to their union. On one subject sure to be raised against him by her parents, she had a right to be inquisitive: the baroness.

She asked to see a photograph of her.

Alvan gave her one out of his pocketbook, and watched her eyelids in profile as she perused those features of the budless grey woman. The eyelids in such scrutinies reveal the critical mind; Clotilde's drooped till they almost closed upon their lashes—deadly criticism.

'Think of her age,' said Alvan, colouring. He named a grandmaternal date for the year of the baroness's birth.

Her eyebrows now stood up; her contemplation of those disenchanting lineaments came to an abrupt finish.

She returned the square card to him, slowly shaking her head, still eyeing earth as her hand stretched forth the card laterally. He could not contest the woeful verdict.

'Twenty years back!' he murmured, writhing. The baroness was a woman fair to see in the days twenty years back, though Clotilde might think it incredible: she really was once.

Clotilde resumed her doleful shaking of the head; she sighed. He shrugged; she looked at him, and he blinked a little. For the first time since they had come together she had a clear advantage, and as it was likely to be a rare occasion, she did not let it slip. She sighed again. He was wounded by her underestimate of his ancient conquest.

'Yes—now,' he said, impatiently.

'I cannot feel jealousy, I cannot feel rivalry,' said she, sad of voice.

The humour of her tranced eyes in the shaking head provoked him to defend the baroness for her goodness of heart, her energy of brain.

Clotilde 'told' her naughty head.

'But it is a strong face,' she said, 'a strong face—a strong jaw, by Lavater! You were young—and daringly adventurous; she was captivating in her distress. Now she is old—and you are friends.'

'Friends, yes,' Alvan replied, and praised the girl, as of course she deserved to be praised for her open mind.

'We are friends!' he said, dropping a deep-chested breath. The title this girl scornfully supplied was balm to the vanity she had stung, and his burnt skin was too eager for a covering of any sort to examine the mood of the giver. She had positively humbled him so far as with a single word to relieve him; for he had seen bristling chapters in her look at the photograph. Yet for all the natural sensitiveness of the man's vanity, he did not seek to bury the subject at the cost of a misconception



injurious in the slightest degree to the sentiments he entertained toward the older lady as well as the younger. 'Friends! you are right; good friends; only you should know that it is just a little—a trifle different. The fact is, I cannot kill the past, and I would not. It would try me sharply to break the tie connecting us, were it possible to break it. I am bound to her by gratitude. She is old now; and were she twice that age, I should retain my feeling for her. You raise your eyes, Clotilde! Well, when I was much younger I found this lady in desperate ill-fortune, and she honoured me with her confidence. Young man though I was, I defended her; I stopped at no measure to defend her: against a powerful husband, remember—the most unscrupulous of foes, who sought to rob her of every right she possessed. And what I did then I again would do. I was vowed to her interests, to protect a woman shamefully wronged; I did not stick at trifles, as you know; you have read my speech in defence of myself before the court. By my interpretation of the case, I was justified; but I estranged my family and made the world my enemy. I gave my time and money, besides the forfeit of reputation, to the case, and reasonably there was an arrangement to repay me out of the estate reserved for her, so that the baroness should not be under the degradation of feeling herself indebted. You will not think that out of the way: men of the world do not. As for matters of the heart between us, we're as far apart as the Poles.'

He spoke hurriedly. He had said all that could be expected of him.

They were in a wood, walking through lines of spruce firs of deep golden green in the yellow beams. One of these trees among its well-robed fellows fronting them was all lichen-smitten. From the low sweeping branches touching earth to the plumed top, the tree was dead-black as its shadow; a vision of blackness.

'I will compose a beautiful, dutiful, modest, oddest, beseeching, screeching, mildish, childish epistle to her, and you shall read it, and if you approve it, we shall despatch it,' said Clotilde.

'There speaks my gold-crested serpent at her wisest!' replied Alvan. 'And now for my visit to your family: I follow you in a day. En avant! contre les canons! A run to Lake Lemán brings us to them in the afternoon. I shall see you in the evening. So our separation won't be for long this time. All the auspices are good. We shall not be rich—nor poor.'

Clotilde reminded him that a portion of money would be brought to the store by her.

'We don't count it,' said he. 'Not rich, certainly. And you will not expect me to make money by my pen. Above all things I detest the writing for money. Fiction and verse appeal to a besotted public, that judges of the merit of the work by the standard of its taste: avaunt! And journalism for money is Egyptian bondage. No slavery is comparable to the chains of hired journalism. My pen is my fountain—the key of me; and I give my self, I do not sell. I write when I have matter in me and in the direction it presses for, otherwise not one word!'

'I would never ask you to sell yourself,' said Clotilde. 'I would rather be in want of common comforts.'

He squeezed her wrist. They were again in front of the black-draped blighted tree. It was the sole tree of the host clad thus in scurf bearing a semblance of livid metal. They looked at it as having seen it before, and passed on.

'But the wife of Sigismund Alvan will not be poor in renown!' he resumed, radiating his full bloom on her.

'My highest ambition is to be Sigismund Alvan's wife!' she exclaimed.

To hear her was as good as wine, and his heart came out on a genial chuckle. 'Ay, the choice you have made is not, by heaven, so bad. Sigismund Alvan's wife shall take the foremost place of all. Look at me.' He lifted his head to the highest on his shoulders, widening his eagle eyes. He was now thoroughly restored and in his own upper element, expansive after the humiliating contraction of his man's vanity under the glances of a girl. 'Do you take me for one who could be content with the part of second? I will work and do battle unceasingly, but I will have too the prize of battle to clasp it, savour it richly. I was not fashioned to be the lean meek martyr of a cause, not I. I carry too decisive a

weight in the balance to victory. I have a taste for fruits, my fairest! And Republics, my bright Lutetia, can give you splendid honours.' He helped her to realize this with the assuring splendour of his eyes.

"Bride of the Elect of the People!" is not that as glorious a title, think you, as queen of an hereditary sovereign mumbling of God's grace on his worm-eaten throne? I win that seat by service, by the dedication of this brain to the people's interests. They have been ground to the dust, and I lift them, as I did a persecuted lady in my boyhood. I am the soldier of justice against the army of the unjust. But I claim my reward. If I live to fight, I live also to enjoy. I will have my station. I win it not only because I serve, but because also I have seen, have seen ahead, seen where all is dark, read the unwritten—because I am soldier and prophet. The brain of man is Jove's eagle and his lightning on earth—the title to majesty henceforth. Ah! my fairest; entering the city beside me, and the people shouting around, she would not think her choice a bad one?"

Clotilde made sign and gave some earnest on his arm of ecstatic hugging.

'We may have hard battles, grim deceptions, to go through before that day comes,' he continued after a while. 'The day is coming, but we must wait for it, work on. I have the secret of how to head the people—to put a head to their movement and make it irresistible, as I believe it will be beneficent. I set them moving on the lines of the law of things. I am no empty theorizer, no phantasmal speculator; I am the man of science in politics. When my system is grasped by the people, there is but a step to the realization of it. One step. It will be taken in my time, or acknowledged later. I stand for index to the people of the path they should take to triumph—must take, as triumph they must sooner or later: not by the route of what is called Progress—pooh! That is a middle-class invention to effect a compromise. With the people the matter rests with their intelligence! meanwhile my star is bright and shines reflected.'

'I notice,' she said, favouring him with as much reflection as a splendid lover could crave for, 'that you never look down, you never look on the ground, but always either up or straight before you.'

'People have remarked it,' said he, smiling. 'Here we are at this funereal tree again. All roads lead to Rome, and ours appears to conduct us perpetually to this tree. It 's the only dead one here.'

He sighted the plumed black top and along the swelling branches decorously clothed in decay: a salted ebon moss when seen closely; the small grey particles giving a sick shimmer to the darkness of the mass. It was very witch-like, of a witch in her incantation-smoke.

'Not a single bare spot! but dead, dead as any peeled and fallen!' said Alvan, fingering a tuft of the sooty snake-lichen. 'This is a tree for a melancholy poet—eh, Clotilde?—for him to come on it by moonlight, after a scene with his mistress, or tales of her! By the way and by the way, my fair darling, let me never think of your wearing this kind of garb for me, should I be ordered off the first to join the dusky army below. Women who put on their dead husbands in public are not well-mannered women, though they may be excellent professional widows, excellent!'

He snapped the lichen-dust from his fingers, observing that he was not sure the contrast of the flourishing and blighted was not more impressive in sunlight: and then he looked from the tree to his true love's hair. The tree at a little distance seemed run over with sunless lizards: her locks were golden serpents.

'Shall I soon see your baroness?' Clotilde asked him.

'Not in advance of the ceremony,' he answered. 'In good time. You understand—an old friend making room for a new one, and that one young and beautiful, with golden tresses; at first . . . ! But her heart is quite sound. Have no fear! I guarantee it; I know her to the roots. She desires my welfare, she does my behests. If I am bound to her by gratitude, so, and in a greater degree, is she to me. The utmost she will demand is that my bride shall be worthy of me—a good mate for me in the fight to come; and I have tested my bride and found her half my heart; therefore she passes the examination with the baroness.'

They left the tree behind them.

'We will take good care not to return this way again,' said Alvan, without looking back. 'That tree belongs to a plantation of the under world; its fellows grow in the wood across Acheron, and that tree has looked into the ghastliness of the flood and seen itself. Hecate and Hermes know about it. Phoebus cannot light it. That tree stands for Death blooming. We think it sinister, but down there it is a homely tree. Down there! When do we go? The shudder in that tree is the air exchanging between Life and Death—the ghosts going and coming; it's on the border line. I just felt the creep. I think you did. The reason is—there is always a material reason—that you were warm, and a bit of chill breeze took you as you gazed; while for my part I was imagining at that very moment what of all possible causes might separate us, and I acknowledged that death could do the trick. But death, my love, is far from us two!'

'Does she look as grimmish as she does in the photograph?' said Clotilde.

'Who? the baroness?' Alvan laughed. The baroness was not so easily defended from a girl as from her husband, it appeared. 'She is the best of comrades, best of friends. She has her faults; may not relish the writ announcing her final deposition, but be you true to me, and as true as she has unfailingly been to me, she will be to you. That I can promise. My poor Lucie! She is winter, if you will. It is not the winter of the steppes; you may compare her to winter in a noble country; a fine landscape of winter. The outlines of her face . . . She has a great brain. How much I owe that woman for instruction! You meet now and then men who have the woman in them without being womanized; they are the pick of men. And the choicest women are those who yield not a feather of their womanliness for some amount of manlike strength. And she is one; man's brain, woman's heart. I thought her unique till I heard of you. And how do I stand between you two? She has the only fault you can charge me with; she is before me in time, as I am before you. Shall I spoil you as she spoilt me? No, no! Obedience to a boy is the recognition of the heir-apparent, and I respect the salique law as much as I love my love. I do not offer obedience to a girl, but succour, support. You will not rule me, but you will invigorate, and if you are petted, you shall not be spoilt. Do not expect me to show like that undertakerly tree till my years are one hundred. Even then it will be dangerous to repose beneath my branches in the belief that I am sapless because I have changed colour. We Jews have a lusty blood. We are strong of the earth. We serve you, but you must minister to us. Sensual? We have truly excellent appetites. And why not? Heroical too! Soldiers, poets, musicians; the Gentile's masters in mental arithmetic—keenest of weapons: surpassing him in common sense and capacity for brotherhood. Ay, and in charity; or what stores of vengeance should we not have nourished! Already we have the money-bags. Soon we shall hold the chief offices. And when the popular election is as unimpeded as the coursing of the blood in a healthy body, the Jew shall be foremost and topmost, for he is pre-eminently by comparison the brain of these latter-day communities. But that is only my answer to the brutish contempt of the Jew. I am no champion of a race. I am for the world, for man!'

Clotilde remarked that he had many friends, all men of eminence, and a large following among the people.

He assented: 'Yes: Tresten, Retka, Kehlen, the Nizzian. Yes, if I were other than for legality:—if it came to a rising, I could tell off able lieutenants.'

'Tell me of your interview with Ironsides,' she said proudly and fondly.

'Would this ambitious little head know everything?' said Alvan, putting his lips among the locks. 'Well, we met: he requested it. We agreed that we were on neutral ground for the moment: that he might ultimately have to decapitate me, or I to banish him, but temporarily we could compare our plans for governing. He showed me his hand. I showed him mine. We played open-handed, like two at whist. He did not doubt my honesty, and I astonished him by taking him quite in earnest. He has dealt with diplomatists, who imagine nothing but shuffling: the old Ironer! I love him for his love of common sense, his contempt of mean deceit. He will outwit you, but his dexterity is a giant's—a simple evolution rapidly performed: and nothing so much perplexes pygmies! Then he has them, bagsful of them! The world will see; and see giant meet giant, I suspect. He and I proposed each of



us in the mildest manner contrary schemes—schemes to stiffen the hair of Europe! Enough that we parted with mutual respect. He is a fine fellow: and so was my friend the Emperor Tiberius, and so was Richelieu. Napoleon was a fine engine:—there is a difference. Yes, Ironsides is a fine fellow! but he and I may cross. His ideas are not many. The point to remember is that he is iron on them: he can drive them hard into the density of the globe. He has quick nerves and imagination: he can conjure up, penetrate, and traverse complications—an enemy's plans, all that the enemy will be able to combine, and the likeliest that he will do. Good. We opine that we are equal to the same. He is for kingcraft to mask his viziercraft—and save him the labour of patiently attempting oratory and persuasion, which accomplishment he does not possess:—it is not in iron. We think the more precious metal will beat him when the broader conflict comes. But such an adversary is not to be underrated. I do not underrate him: and certainly not he me. Had he been born with the gifts of patience and a fluent tongue, and not a petty noble, he might have been for the people, as knowing them the greater power. He sees that their knowledge of their power must eventually come to them. In the meantime his party is forcible enough to assure him he is not fighting a losing game at present: and he is, no doubt, by lineage and his traditions monarchical. He is curiously simple, not really cynical. His apparent cynicism is sheer irritability. His contemptuous phrases are directed against obstacles: against things, persons, nations that oppose him or cannot serve his turn against his king, if his king is restive; but he respects his king: against your friends' country, because there is no fixing it to a line of policy, and it seems to have collapsed; but he likes that country the best in Europe after his own. He is nearest to contempt in his treatment of his dupes and tools, who are dropped out of his mind when he has quite squeezed them for his occasion; to be taken up again when they are of use to him. Hence he will have no following. But let me die to-morrow, the party I have created survives. In him you see the dam, in me the stream. Judge, then, which of them gains the future!— admitting that, in the present he may beat me. He is a Prussian, stoutly defined from a German, and yet again a German stoutly defined from our borderers: and that completes him. He has as little the idea of humanity as the sword of our Hermann, the cannon-ball of our Frederick. Observe him. What an eye he has! I watched it as we were talking: and he has, I repeat, imagination; he can project his mind in front of him as far as his reasoning on the possible allows: and that eye of his flashes; and not only flashes, you see it hurling a bolt; it gives me the picture of a Balearic slinger about to whizz the stone for that eye looks far, and is hard, and is dead certain of its mark-within his practical compass, as I have said. I see farther, and I fancy I proved to him that I am not a dreamer. In my opinion, when we cross our swords I stand a fair chance of not being worsted. We shall: you shrink? Figuratively, my darling have no fear! Combative as we may be, both of us, we are now grave seniors, we have serious business: a party looks to him, my party looks to me. Never need you fear that I shall be at sword or pistol with any one. I will challenge my man, whoever he is that needs a lesson, to touch buttons on a waistcoat with the button on the foil, or drill fiver and eights in cards at twenty paces: but I will not fight him though he offend me, for I am stronger than my temper, and as I do not want to take his nip of life, and judge it to be of less value than mine, the imperilling of either is an absurdity.'

'Oh! because I know you are incapable of craven fear,' cried Clotilde, answering aloud the question within herself of why she so much admired, why she so fondly loved him. To feel his courage backing his high good sense was to repose in security, and her knowledge that an astute self-control was behind his courage assured her he was invincible. It seemed to her, therefore, as they walked side by side, and she saw their triumphant pair of figures in her fancy, natural that she should instantly take the step to prepare her for becoming his Republican Princess. She walked an equal with the great of the earth, by virtue of her being the mate of the greatest of the great; she trod on some, and she thrilled gratefully to the man who sustained her and shielded her on that eminence. Elect of the people he! and by a vaster power than kings can summon through the trumpet! She could surely pass through the trial with her parents that she might step to the place beside him! She pressed his arm to be physically a sharer of his glory. Was it love? It was as lofty a stretch as her nature could strain to.

She named the city on the shores of the great Swiss lake where her parents were residing; she bade him follow her thither, and name the hotel where he was to be found, the hour when he was to arrive. 'Am I not precise as an office clerk?' she said, with a pleasant taste of the reality her preciseness pictured.

'Practical as the head of a State department,' said he, in good faith.

'I shall not keep you waiting,' she resumed.

'The sooner we are together after the action opens the better for our success, my golden crest!'

'Have no misgivings, Sigismund. You have transformed me. A spark of you is in my blood. Come. I shall send word to your hotel when you are to appear. But you will come, you will be there, I know. I know you so entirely.'

'As a rule, Lutetia, women know no more than half of a man even when they have married him. At least you ought to know me. You know that if I were to exercise my will firmly now—it would not waver if I called it forth—I could carry you off and spare you the flutter you will have to go through during our interlude with papa and mama.'

'I almost wish you would,' said she. She looked half imploringly, biting her lip to correct the peeping wish.

Alvan pressed a finger on one of her dimples: 'Be brave. Flight and defiance are our last resource. Now that I see you resolved I shun the scandal, and we will leave it to them to insist on it, if it must be. How can you be less than resolved after I have poured my influence into your veins? The other day on the heights—had you consented then? Well! it would have been very well, but not so well. We two have a future, and are bound to make the opening chapters good sober reading, for an example, if we can. I take you from your father's house, from your mother's arms, from the "God speed" of your friends. That is how Alvan's wife should be presented to the world.'

Clotilde's epistle to the baroness was composed, approved, and despatched. To a frigid eye it read as more hypocritical than it really was; for supposing it had to be written, the language of the natural impulse called up to write it was necessarily in request, and that language is easily overdone, so as to be discordant with the situation, while it is, as the writer feels, a fairly true and well-formed expression of the pretty impulse. But wiser is it always that the star in the ascendant should not address the one waning. Hardly can a word be uttered without grossly wounding. She would not do it to a younger rival: the letter strikes on the recipient's age! She babbles of a friendship: she plays at childish ninny! The display of her ingenuous happiness causes feminine nature's bosom to rise in surges. The declarations of her devotedness to the man waken comparisons with a deeper, a longer-tried suffering. Actually the letter of the rising star assumes personal feeling to have died out of the abandoned luminary, and personal feeling is chafed to its acutest edge by the perusal; contempt also of one who can stupidly simulate such innocence, is roused.

Among Alvan's gifts the understanding of women did not rank high. He was too robust, he had been too successful. Your very successful hero regards them as nine-pins destined to fall, the whole tuneful nine, at a peculiar poetical twist of the bowler's wrist, one knocking down the other—figuratively, for their scruples, or for their example with their sisters. His tastes had led him into the avenues of success, and as he had not encountered grand resistances, he entertained his opinion of their sex. The particular maxim he cherished was, to stake everything on his making a favourable first impression: after which single figure, he said, all your empty naughts count with women for hundreds, thousands, millions: noblest virtues are but sickly units. He would have stared like any Philistine at the tale of their capacity to advance to a likeness unto men in their fight with the world. Women for him were objects to be chased, the politician's relaxation, taken like the sportsman's business, with keen relish both for the pursuit and the prey, and a view of the termination of his pastime. Their feelings he could appreciate during the time when they flew and fell, perhaps a little longer; but the change in his own feelings withdrew him from the communion of sentiment. This is the state of men who

frequent the avenues of success. At present he was thinking of a wife, and he approved the epistle to the baroness cordially.

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