GEORGE MEREDITH

EVAN HARRINGTON. VOLUME 5

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CHAPTER XXVI
MRS. MEL MAKES A BED FOR HERSELF AND FAMILY

The last person thought of by her children at this period was Mrs. Mel: nor had she been thinking much of them till a letter from Mr. Goren arrived one day, which caused her to pass them seriously in review. Always an early bird, and with maxims of her own on the subject of rising and getting the worm, she was standing in a small perch in the corner of the shop, dictating accounts to Mrs. Fiske, who was copying hurriedly, that she might earn sweet intervals for gossip, when Dandy limped up and delivered the letter. Mrs. Fiske worked hard while her aunt was occupied in reading it, for a great deal of fresh talk follows the advent of the post, and may be reckoned on. Without looking up, however, she could tell presently that the letter had been read through. Such being the case, and no conversation coming of it, her curiosity was violent. Her aunt's face, too, was an index of something extraordinary. That inflexible woman, instead of alluding to the letter in any way, folded it up, and renewed her

dictation. It became a contest between them which should show her human nature first. Mrs. Mel had to repress what she knew; Mrs. Fiske to control the passion for intelligence. The close neighbourhood of one anxious to receive, and one capable of giving, waxed too much for both.

'I think, Anne, you are stupid this morning,' said Mrs. Mel.

'Well, I am, aunt,' said Mrs. Fiske, pretending not to see which was the first to unbend, 'I don't know what it is. The figures seem all dazzled like. I shall really be glad when Evan comes to take his proper place.'

'Ah!' went Mrs. Mel, and Mrs. Fiske heard her muttering. Then she cried out: 'Are Harriet and Caroline as great liars as Louisa?'

Mrs. Fiske grimaced. 'That would be difficult, would it not, aunt?'

'And I have been telling everybody that my son is in town learning his business, when he's idling at a country house, and trying to play his father over again! Upon my word, what with liars and fools, if you go to sleep a minute you have a month's work on your back.'

'What is it, aunt?' Mrs. Fiske feebly inquired.

'A gentleman, I suppose! He wouldn't take an order if it was offered. Upon my word, when tailors think of winning heiresses it's time we went back to Adam and Eve.'

'Do you mean Evan, aunt?' interposed Mrs. Fiske, who probably did not see the turns in her aunt's mind.

'There—read for yourself,' said Mrs. Mel, and left her with the letter.

Mrs. Fiske read that Mr. Goren had been astonished at Evan's non- appearance, and at his total silence; which he did not consider altogether gentlemanly behaviour, and certainly not such as his father would have practised. Mr. Goren regretted his absence the more as he would have found him useful in a remarkable invention he was about to patent, being a peculiar red cross upon shirts—a fortune to the patentee; but as Mr. Goren had no natural heirs of his body, he did not care for that. What affected him painfully was the news of Evan's doings at a noble house, Beckley Court, to wit, where, according to the report of a rich young gentleman friend, Mr. Raikes (for whose custom Mr. Goren was bound to thank Evan), the youth who should have been learning the science of Tailoring, had actually passed himself off as a lord, or the son of one, or something of the kind, and had got engaged to a wealthy heiress, and would, no doubt, marry her if not found out. Where the chances of detection were so numerous, Mr. Goren saw much to condemn in the idea of such a marriage. But 'like father like son,' said Mr. Goren. He thanked the Lord that an honest tradesman was not looked down upon in this country; and, in fact, gave Mrs. Mel a few quiet digs to waken her remorse in having missed the man that he was.

When Mrs. Fiske met her aunt again she returned her the letter, and simply remarked: 'Louisa.'

Mrs. Mel nodded. She understood the implication.

The General who had schemed so successfully to gain Evan time at Beckley Court in his own despite and against a hundred obstructions, had now another enemy in the field, and one who, if she could not undo her work, could punish her. By the afternoon coach, Mrs. Mel, accompanied by Dandy her squire, was journeying to Fallow field, bent upon things. The faithful squire was kept by her side rather as a security for others than for, his particular services. Dandy's arms were crossed, and his countenance was gloomy. He had been promised a holiday that afternoon to give his mistress, Sally, Kilne's cook, an airing, and Dandy knew in his soul that Sally, when she once made up her mind to an excursion, would go, and would not go alone, and that her very force of will endangered her constancy. He had begged humbly to be allowed to stay, but Mrs. Mel could not trust him. She ought to have told him so, perhaps. Explanations were not approved of by this well-intended despot, and however beneficial her resolves might turn out for all parties, it was natural that in the interim the children of her rule should revolt, and Dandy, picturing his Sally flaunting on the arm of some accursed low marine, haply, kicked against Mrs. Mel's sovereignty, though all that he did was to shoot out his fist from time to time, and grunt through his set teeth: 'Iron!' to express the character of her awful rule.

Mrs. Mel alighted at the Dolphin, the landlady of which was a Mrs. Hawkshaw, a rival of Mrs. Sockley of the Green Dragon. She was welcomed by Mrs. Hawkshaw with considerable respect.

The great Mel had sometimes slept at the Dolphin.

'Ah, that black!' she sighed, indicating Mrs. Mel's dress and the story it told.

'I can't give you his room, my dear Mrs. Harrington, wishing I could! I'm sorry to say it's occupied, for all I ought to be glad, I dare say, for he's an old gentleman who does you a good turn, if you study him. But there! I'd rather have had poor dear Mr. Harrington in my best bed than old or young—Princes or nobodies, I would—he was that grand and pleasant.'

Mrs. Mel had her tea in Mrs. Hawkshaw's parlour, and was entertained about her husband up to the hour of supper, when a short step and a querulous voice were heard in the passage, and an old gentleman appeared before them.

'Who's to carry up my trunk, ma'am? No man here?'

Mrs. Hawkshaw bustled out and tried to lay her hand on a man. Failing to find the growth spontaneous, she returned and begged the old gentleman to wait a few moments and the trunk would be sent up.

'Parcel o' women!' was his reply. 'Regularly bedevilled. Gets worse and worse. I 'll carry it up myself.'

With a wheezy effort he persuaded the trunk to stand on one end, and then looked at it. The exertion made him hot, which may account for the rage he burst into when Mrs. Hawkshaw began flutteringly to apologize.

'You're sure, ma'am, sure—what are you sure of? I'll tell you what I am sure of—eh? This keeping clear of men's a

damned pretence. You don't impose upon me. Don't believe in your pothouse nunneries—not a bit. Just like you! when you are virtuous it's deuced inconvenient. Let one of the maids try? No. Don't believe in 'em.'

Having thus relieved his spleen the old gentleman addressed himself to further efforts and waxed hotter. He managed to tilt the trunk over, and thus gained a length, and by this method of progression arrived at the foot of the stairs, where he halted, and wiped his face, blowing lustily.

Mrs. Mel had been watching him with calm scorn all the while. She saw him attempt most ridiculously to impel the trunk upwards by a similar process, and thought it time to interfere.

'Don't you see you must either take it on your shoulders, or have a help?'

The old gentleman sprang up from his peculiarly tight posture to blaze round at her. He had the words well-peppered on his mouth, but somehow he stopped, and was subsequently content to growl: 'Where 's the help in a parcel of petticoats?'

Mrs. Mel did not consider it necessary to give him an answer. She went up two or three steps, and took hold of one handle of the trunk, saying: 'There; I think it can be managed this way,' and she pointed for him to seize the other end with his hand.

He was now in that unpleasant state of prickly heat when testy old gentlemen could commit slaughter with ecstasy. Had it been the maid holding a candle who had dared to advise, he would have overturned her undoubtedly, and established a fresh

instance of the impertinence, the uselessness and weakness of women. Mrs. Mel topped him by half a head, and in addition stood three steps above him; towering like a giantess. The extreme gravity of her large face dispersed all idea of an assault. The old gentleman showed signs of being horribly injured: nevertheless, he put his hand to the trunk; it was lifted, and the procession ascended the stairs in silence.

The landlady waited for Mrs. Mel to return, and then said:

'Really, Mrs. Harrington, you are clever. That lifting that trunk's as good as a lock and bolt on him. You've as good as made him a Dolphin— him that was one o' the oldest Green Dragons in Fallifield. My thanks to you most sincere.'

Mrs. Mel sent out to hear where Dandy had got to after which, she said:

'Who is the man?'

'I told you, Mrs. Harrington—the oldest Green Dragon. His name, you mean? Do you know, if I was to breathe it out, I believe he'd jump out of the window. He 'd be off, that you might swear to. Oh, such a whimsical! not ill-meaning—quite the contrary. Study his whims, and you'll never want. There's Mrs. Sockley—she 's took ill. He won't go there—that 's how I've caught him, my dear—but he pays her medicine, and she looks to him the same. He hate a sick house: but he pity a sick woman. Now, if I can only please him, I can always look on him as half a Dolphin, to say the least; and perhaps to-morrow I'll tell you who he is, and what, but not to-night; for there's his supper to

get over, and that, they say, can be as bad as the busting of one of his own vats. Awful!'

'What does he eat?' said Mrs. Mel.

'A pair o' chops. That seem simple, now, don't it? And yet they chops make my heart go pitty-pat.'

'The commonest things are the worst done,' said Mrs. Mel.

'It ain't that; but they must be done his particular way, do you see, Mrs. Harrington. Laid close on the fire, he say, so as to keep in the juice. But he ups and bounces in a minute at a speck o' black. So, one thing or the other, there you are: no blacks, no juices, I say.'

'Toast the chops,' said Mrs. Mel.

The landlady of the Dolphin accepted this new idea with much enlightenment, but ruefully declared that she was afraid to go against his precise instructions. Mrs. Mel then folded her hands, and sat in quiet reserve. She was one of those numerous women who always know themselves to be right. She was also one of those very few whom Providence favours by confounding dissentients. She was positive the chops would be ill-cooked: but what could she do? She was not in command here; so she waited serenely for the certain disasters to enthrone her. Not that the matter of the chops occupied her mind particularly: nor could she dream that the pair in question were destined to form a part of her history, and divert the channel of her fortunes. Her thoughts were about her own immediate work; and when the landlady rushed in with the chops under a cover, and said: 'Look at 'em, dear Mrs.

Harrington!' she had forgotten that she was again to be proved right by the turn of events.

'Oh, the chops!' she responded. 'Send them while they are hot.'

'Send 'em! Why you don't think I'd have risked their cooling? I have sent 'em; and what do he do but send 'em travelling back, and here they be; and what objections his is I might study till I was blind, and I shouldn't see 'em.'

'No; I suppose not,' said Mrs. Mel. 'He won't eat 'em?'

'Won't eat anything: but his bed-room candle immediately. And whether his sheets are aired. And Mary says he sniffed at the chops; and that gal really did expect he 'd fling them at her. I told you what he was. Oh, dear!'

The bell was heard ringing in the midst of the landlady's lamentations.

'Go to him yourself,' said Mrs. Mel. 'No Christian man should go to sleep without his supper.'

'Ah! but he ain't a common Christian,' returned Mrs. Hawkshaw.

The old gentleman was in a hurry to know when his bed-room candle was coming up, or whether they intended to give him one at all that night; if not, let them say so, as he liked plain-speaking. The moment Mrs. Hawkshaw touched upon the chops, he stopped her mouth.

'Go about your business, ma'am. You can't cook 'em. I never expected you could: I was a fool to try you. It requires at least ten years' instruction before a man can get a woman to cook his

chop as he likes it.'

'But what was your complaint, sir?' said Mrs. Hawkshaw, imploringly.

'That's right!' and he rubbed his hands, and brightened his eyes savagely. 'That's the way. Opportunity for gossip! Thing's well done —down it goes: you know that. You can't have a word over it—eh? Thing's done fit to toss on a dungheap, aha! Then there's a cackle! My belief is, you do it on purpose. Can't be such rank idiots. You do it on purpose. All done for gossip!'

'Oh, sir, no!' The landlady half curtsied.

'Oh, ma'am, yes!' The old gentleman bobbed his head.

'No, indeed, sir!' The landlady shook hers.

'Damn it, ma'am, I swear you do.'

Symptoms of wrath here accompanied the declaration; and, with a sigh and a very bitter feeling, Mrs. Hawkshaw allowed him to have the last word. Apparently this—which I must beg to call the lady's morsel—comforted his irascible system somewhat; for he remained in a state of composure eight minutes by the clock. And mark how little things hang together. Another word from the landlady, precipitating a retort from him, and a gesture or muttering from her; and from him a snapping outburst, and from her a sign that she held out still; in fact, had she chosen to battle for that last word, as in other cases she might have done, then would he have exploded, gone to bed in the dark, and insisted upon sleeping: the consequence of which would have been to change this history. Now while Mrs. Hawkshaw was upstairs,

Mrs. Mel called the servant, who took her to the kitchen, where she saw a prime loin of mutton; off which she cut two chops with a cunning hand: and these she toasted at a gradual distance, putting a plate beneath them, and a tin behind, and hanging the chops so that they would turn without having to be pierced. The bell rang twice before she could say the chops were ready. The first time, the maid had to tell the old gentleman she was taking up his water. Her next excuse was, that she had dropped her candle. The chops ready—who was to take them?

'Really, Mrs. Harrington, you are so clever, you ought, if I might be so bold as say so; you ought to end it yourself,' said the landlady. 'I can't ask him to eat them: he was all but on the busting point when I left him.'

'And that there candle did for him quite,' said Mary, the maid.

'I'm afraid it's chops cooked for nothing,' added the landlady.

Mrs. Mel saw them endangered. The maid held back: the landlady feared.

'We can but try,' she said.

'Oh! I wish, mum, you'd face him, 'stead o' me,' said Mary; 'I do dread that old bear's den.'

'Here, I will go,' said Mrs. Mel. 'Has he got his ale? Better draw it fresh, if he drinks any.'

And upstairs she marched, the landlady remaining below to listen for the commencement of the disturbance. An utterance of something certainly followed Mrs. Mel's entrance into the old bear's den. Then silence. Then what might have been question

and answer. Then—was Mrs. Mel assaulted? and which was knocked down? It really was a chair being moved to the table. The door opened.

'Yes, ma'am; do what you like,' the landlady heard. Mrs. Mel descended, saying: 'Send him up some fresh ale.'

'And you have made him sit down obedient to those chops?' cried the landlady. 'Well might poor dear Mr. Harrington—pleasant man as he was! —say, as he used to say, "There's lovely women in the world, Mrs. Hawkshaw," he'd say, "and there's Duchesses," he'd say, "and there's they that can sing, and can dance, and some," he says, "that can cook." But he'd look sly as he'd stoop his head and shake it. "Roll 'em into one," he says, "and not any of your grand ladies can match my wife at home."

And, indeed, Mrs. Harrington, he told me he thought so many a time in the great company he frequented.'

Perfect peace reigning above, Mrs. Hawkshaw and Mrs. Mel sat down to supper below; and Mrs. Hawkshaw talked much of the great one gone. His relict did not care to converse about the dead, save in their practical aspect as ghosts; but she listened, and that passed the time. By-and-by, the old gentleman rang, and sent a civil message to know if the landlady had ship's rum in the house.

'Dear! here's another trouble,' cried the poor woman. 'No—none!'

'Say, yes,' said Mrs. Mel, and called Dandy, and charged him to run down the street to the square, and ask for the house of Mr.

Coxwell, the maltster, and beg of him, in her name, a bottle of his ship's rum.

'And don't you tumble down and break the bottle, Dandy. Accidents with spirit-bottles are not excused.'

Dandy went on the errand, after an energetic grunt.

In due time he returned with the bottle, whole and sound, and Mr. Coxwell's compliments. Mrs. Mel examined the cork to see that no process of suction had been attempted, and then said:

'Carry it up to him, Dandy. Let him see there's a man in the house besides himself.'

'Why, my dear,' the landlady turned to her, 'it seems natural to you to be mistress where you go. I don't at all mind, for ain't it my profit? But you do take us off our legs.'

Then the landlady, warmed by gratitude, told her that the old gentleman was the great London brewer, who brewed there with his brother, and brewed for himself five miles out of Fallow field, half of which and a good part of the neighbourhood he owned, and his name was Mr. Tom Cogglesby.

'Oh!' said Mrs. Mel. 'And his brother is Mr. Andrew.'

'That 's it,' said the landlady. 'And because he took it into his head to go and to choose for himself, and be married, no getting his brother, Mr. Tom, to speak to him. Why not, indeed? If there's to be no marrying, the sooner we lay down and give up, the better, I think. But that 's his way. He do hate us women, Mrs. Harrington. I have heard he was crossed. Some say it was the lady of Beckley Court, who was a Beauty, when he was only

a poor cobbler's son.'

Mrs. Mel breathed nothing of her relationship to Mr. Tom, but continued from time to time to express solicitude about Dandy. They heard the door open, and old Tom laughing in a capital good temper, and then Dandy came down, evidently full of ship's rum.

'He's pumped me!' said Dandy, nodding heavily at his mistress.

Mrs. Mel took him up to his bed-room, and locked the door. On her way back she passed old Tom's chamber, and his chuckles were audible to her.

'They finished the rum,' said Mrs. Hawkshaw.

'I shall rate him for that to-morrow,' said Mrs. Mel. 'Giving that poor beast liquor!'

'Rate Mr. Tom! Oh! Mrs. Harrington! Why, he'll snap your head off for a word.'

Mrs. Mel replied that her head would require a great deal of snapping to come off.

During this conversation they had both heard a singular intermittent noise above. Mrs. Hawkshaw was the first to ask:

'What can it be? More trouble with him? He's in his bed-room now.'

'Mad with drink, like Dandy, perhaps,' said Mrs. Mel.

'Hark!' cried the landlady. 'Oh!'

It seemed that Old Tom was bouncing about in an extraordinary manner. Now came a pause, as if he had sworn to take his rest: now the room shook and the windows rattled.

'One 'd think, really, his bed was a frying-pan, and him a live fish in it,' said the landlady. 'Oh—there, again! My goodness! have he got a flea?'

The thought was alarming. Mrs. Mel joined in:

'Or a –'

'Don't! don't, my dear!' she was cut short. 'Oh! one o' them little things 'd be ruin to me. To think o' that! Hark at him! It must be. And what's to do? I 've sent the maids to bed. We haven't a man. If I was to go and knock at his door, and ask?'

'Better try and get him to be quiet somehow.'

'Ah! I dare say I shall make him fire out fifty times worse.'

Mrs. Hawkshaw stipulated that Mrs. Mel should stand by her, and the two women went up-stairs and stood at Old Tom's door. There they could hear him fuming and muttering imprecations, and anon there was an interval of silence, and then the room was shaken, and the cursings recommenced.

'It must be a fight he 's having with a flea,' said the landlady. 'Oh! pray heaven, it is a flea. For a flea, my dear-gentlemen may bring that theirselves; but a b–, that's a stationary, and born of a bed. Don't you hear? The other thing 'd give him a minute's rest; but a flea's hop-hop-off and on. And he sound like an old gentleman worried by a flea. What are you doing?'

Mrs. Mel had knocked at the door. The landlady waited breathlessly for the result. It appeared to have quieted Old Tom.

'What's the matter?' said Mrs. Mel, severely.

The landlady implored her to speak him fair, and reflect on

the desperate things he might attempt.

'What's the matter? Can anything be done for you?'

Mr. Tom Cogglesby's reply comprised an insinuation so infamous regarding women when they have a solitary man in their power, that it cannot be placed on record.

'Is anything the matter with your bed?'

'Anything? Yes; anything is the matter, ma'am. Hope twenty live geese inside it's enough-eh? Bed, do you call it? It's the rack! It's damnation! Bed? Ha!'

After delivering this, he was heard stamping up and down the room.

'My very best bed!' whispered the landlady. 'Would it please you, sir, to change—I can give you another?'

'I'm not a man of experiments, ma'am-'specially in strange houses.'

'So very, very sorry!'

'What the deuce!' Old Tom came close to the door. 'You whimpering! You put a man in a beast of a bed—you drive him half mad—and then begin to blubber! Go away.'

'I am so sorry, sir!'

'If you don't go away, ma'am, I shall think your intentions are improper.'

'Oh, my goodness!' cried poor Mrs. Hawkshaw. 'What can one do with him?'

Mrs. Mel put Mrs. Hawkshaw behind her.

'Are you dressed?' she called out.

In this way Mrs. Mel tackled Old Tom. He was told that should he consent to cover himself decently, she would come into his room and make his bed comfortable. And in a voice that dispersed armies of innuendoes, she bade him take his choice, either to rest quiet or do her bidding. Had Old Tom found his master at last, and in one of the hated sex? Breathlessly Mrs. Hawkshaw waited his answer, and she was an astonished woman when it came.

'Very well, ma'am. Wait a couple of minutes. Do as you like.'

On their admission to the interior of the chamber, Old Tom was exhibited in his daily garb, sufficiently subdued to be civil and explain the cause of his discomfort. Lumps in his bed: he was bruised by them. He supposed he couldn't ask women to judge for themselves—they'd be shrieking—but he could assure them he was blue all down his back. Mrs. Mel and Mrs. Hawkshaw turned the bed about, and punched it, and rolled it.

'Ha!' went Old Tom, 'what's the good of that? That's just how I found it. Moment I got into bed geese began to put up their backs.'

Mrs. Mel seldom indulged in a joke, and then only when it had a proverbial cast. On the present occasion, the truth struck her forcibly, and she said:

'One fool makes many, and so, no doubt, does one goose.'

Accompanied by a smile the words would have seemed impudent; but spoken as a plain fact, and with a grave face, it set Old Tom blinking like a small boy ten minutes after the whip.

'Now,' she pursued, speaking to him as to an old child, 'look here. This is how you manage. Knead down in the middle of the bed. Then jump into the hollow. Lie there, and you needn't wake till morning.'

Old Tom came to the side of the bed. He had prepared himself for a wretched night, an uproar, and eternal complaints against the house, its inhabitants, and its foundations; but a woman stood there who as much as told him that digging his fist into the flock and jumping into the hole— into that hole under his, eyes—was all that was wanted! that he had been making a noise for nothing, and because he had not the wit to hit on a simple contrivance! Then, too, his jest about the geese—this woman had put a stop to that! He inspected the hollow cynically. A man might instruct him on a point or two: Old Tom was not going to admit that a woman could.

'Oh, very well; thank you, ma'am; that's your idea. I'll try it. Good night.'

'Good night,' returned Mrs. Mel. 'Don't forget to jump into the middle.'

'Head foremost, ma'am?'

'As you weigh,' said Mrs. Mel, and Old Tom trumped his lips, silenced if not beaten. Beaten, one might almost say, for nothing more was heard of him that night.

He presented himself to Mrs. Mel after breakfast next morning.

'Slept well, ma'am.'

'Oh! then you did as I directed you,' said Mrs. Mel.

'Those chops, too, very good. I got through 'em.'

'Eating, like scratching, only wants a beginning,' said Mrs. Mel.

'Ha! you've got your word, then, as well as everybody else. Where's your Dandy this morning, ma'am?'

'Locked up. You ought to be ashamed to give that poor beast liquor. He won't get fresh air to-day.'

'Ha! May I ask you where you're going to-day, ma'am?'

'I am going to Beckley.'

'So am I, ma'am. What d' ye say, if we join company. Care for insinuations?'

'I want a conveyance of some sort,' returned Mrs. Mel.

'Object to a donkey, ma'am?'

'Not if he's strong and will go.'

'Good,' said Old Tom; and while he spoke a donkey-cart stopped in front of the Dolphin, and a well-dressed man touched his hat.

'Get out of that damned bad habit, will you?' growled Old Tom. What do you mean by wearing out the brim o' your hat in that way? Help this woman in.'

Mrs. Mel helped herself to a part of the seat.

'We are too much for the donkey,' she said.

'Ha, that's right. What I have, ma'am, is good. I can't pretend to horses, but my donkey's the best. Are you going to cry about him?'

'No. When he's tired I shall either walk or harness you,' said Mrs. Mel.

This was spoken half-way down the High Street of Fallow field. Old Tom looked full in her face, and bawled out:

'Deuce take it. Are you a woman?'

'I have borne three girls and one boy,' said Mrs. Mel.

'What sort of a husband?'

'He is dead.'

'Ha! that's an opening, but 'tain't an answer. I'm off to Beckley on a marriage business. I 'm the son of a cobbler, so I go in a donkey-cart. No damned pretences for me. I'm going to marry off a young tailor to a gal he's been playing the lord to. If she cares for him she'll take him: if not, they're all the luckier, both of 'em.'

'What's the tailor's name?' said Mrs. Mel.

'You are a woman,' returned Old Tom. 'Now, come, ma'am, don't you feel ashamed of being in a donkeycart?'

'I 'm ashamed of men, sometimes,' said Mrs. Mel; 'never of animals.'

''Shamed o' me, perhaps.'

'I don't know you.'

'Ha! well! I'm a man with no pretences. Do you like 'em? How have you brought up your three girls and one boy? No pretences —eh?'

Mrs. Mel did not answer, and Old Tom jogged the reins and chuckled, and asked his donkey if he wanted to be a racer.

'Should you take me for a gentleman, ma'am?'

'I dare say you are, sir, at heart. Not from your manner of speech.'

'I mean appearances, ma'am.'

'I judge by the disposition.'

'You do, ma'am? Then, deuce take it, if you are a woman, you 're –'

Old Tom had no time to conclude.

A great noise of wheels, and a horn blown, caused them both to turn their heads, and they beheld a curricle descending upon them vehemently, and a fashionably attired young gentleman straining with all his might at the reins. The next instant they were rolling on the bank. About twenty yards ahead the curricle was halted and turned about to see the extent of the mischief done.

'Pardon, a thousand times, my worthy couple,' cried the sonorous Mr. Raikes. 'What we have seen we swear not to divulge. Franco and Fred— your pledge!'

'We swear!' exclaimed this couple.

But suddenly the cheeks of Mr. John Raikes flushed. He alighted from the box, and rushing up to Old Tom, was shouting, 'My bene—'

'Do you want my toe on your plate?' Old Tom stopped him with.

The mysterious words completely changed the aspect of Mr. John Raikes. He bowed obsequiously and made his friend Franco step down and assist in the task of reestablishing the donkey, who

fortunately had received no damage.

CHAPTER XXVII
EXHIBITS ROSE'S GENERALSHIP; EVAN'S PERFORMANCE ON THE SECOND FIDDLE; AND THE WRETCHEDNESS OF THE COUNTESS

We left Rose and Evan on their way to Lady Jocelyn. At the library-door Rose turned to him, and with her chin archly lifted sideways, said:

'I know what you feel; you feel foolish.'

Now the sense of honour, and of the necessity of acting the part it imposes on him, may be very strong in a young man; but certainly, as a rule, the sense of ridicule is more poignant, and Evan was suffering horrid pangs. We none of us like to play second fiddle. To play second fiddle to a young woman is an abomination to us all. But to have to perform upon that instrument to the darling of our hearts—would we not rather die? nay, almost rather end the duet precipitately and with violence. Evan, when he passed Drummond into the house, and quietly returned his gaze, endured the first shock of this strange feeling. There could be no doubt that he was playing second fiddle to

Rose. And what was he about to do? Oh, horror! to stand like a criminal, and say, or worse, have said for him, things to tip the ears with fire! To tell the young lady's mother that he had won her daughter's love, and meant— what did he mean? He knew not. Alas! he was second fiddle; he could only mean what she meant. Evan loved Rose deeply and completely, but noble manhood was strong in him. You may sneer at us, if you please, ladies. We have been educated in a theory, that when you lead off with the bow, the order of Nature is reversed, and it is no wonder therefore, that, having stript us of one attribute, our fine feathers moult, and the majestic cock-like march which distinguishes us degenerates. You unsex us, if I may dare to say so. Ceasing to be men, what are we? If we are to please you rightly, always allow us to play First.

Poor Evan did feel foolish. Whether Rose saw it in his walk, or had a loving feminine intuition of it, and was aware of the golden rule I have just laid down, we need not inquire. She hit the fact, and he could only stammer, and bid her open the door.

'No,' she said, after a slight hesitation, 'it will be better that I should speak to Mama alone, I see. Walk out on the lawn, dear, and wait for me. And if you meet Drummond, don't be angry with him. Drummond is very fond of me, and of course I shall teach him to be fond of you. He only thinks . . . what is not true, because he does not know you. I do thoroughly, and there, you see, I give you my hand.'

Evan drew the dear hand humbly to his lips. Rose then nodded

meaningly, and let her eyes dwell on him, and went in to her mother to open the battle.

Could it be that a flame had sprung up in those grey eyes latterly? Once they were like morning before sunrise. How soft and' warm and tenderly transparent they could now be! Assuredly she loved him. And he, beloved by the noblest girl ever fashioned, why should he hang his head, and shrink at the thought of human faces, like a wretch doomed to the pillory? He visioned her last glance, and lightning emotions of pride and happiness flashed through his veins. The generous, brave heart! Yes, with her hand in his, he could stand at bay—meet any fate. Evan accepted Rose because he believed in her love, and judged it by the strength of his own; her sacrifice of her position he accepted, because in his soul he knew he should have done no less. He mounted to the level of her nobleness, and losing nothing of the beauty of what she did, it was not so strange to him.

Still there was the baleful reflection that he was second fiddle to his beloved. No harmony came of it in his mind. How could he take an initiative? He walked forth on the lawn, where a group had gathered under the shade of a maple, consisting of Drummond Forth, Mrs. Evremonde, Mrs. Shorne, Mr. George Uplift, Seymour Jocelyn, and Ferdinand Laxley. A little apart Juliana Bonner was walking with Miss Carrington. Juliana, when she saw him, left her companion, and passing him swiftly, said, 'Follow me presently into the conservatory.'

Evan strolled near the group, and bowed to Mrs. Shorne,

whom he had not seen that morning.

The lady's acknowledgement of his salute was constrained, and but a shade on the side of recognition. They were silent till he was out of earshot. He noticed that his second approach produced the same effect. In the conservatory Juliana was awaiting him.

'It is not to give you roses I called you here, Mr. Harrington,' she said.

'Not if I beg one?' he responded.

'Ah! but you do not want them from . . . It depends on the person.'

'Pluck this,' said Evan, pointing to a white rose.

She put her fingers to the stem.

What folly!' she cried, and turned from it.

'Are you afraid that I shall compromise you?' asked Evan.

'You care for me too little for that.'

'My dear Miss Bonner!'

'How long did you know Rose before you called her by her Christian name?'

Evan really could not remember, and was beginning to wonder what he had been called there for. The little lady had feverish eyes and fingers, and seemed to be burning to speak, but afraid.

'I thought you had gone,' she dropped her voice, 'without wishing me good-bye.'

'I certainly should not do that, Miss Bonner.'

'Formal!' she exclaimed, half to herself. 'Miss Bonner thanks

you. Do you think I wish you to stay? No friend of yours would wish it. You do not know the selfishness—brutal!—of these people of birth, as they call it.'

'I have met with nothing but kindness here,' said Evan.

'Then go while you can feel that,' she answered; 'for it cannot last another hour. Here is the rose.' She broke it from the stem and handed it to him. 'You may wear that, and they are not so likely to call you an adventurer, and names of that sort. I am hardly considered a lady by them.'

An adventurer! The full meaning of the phrase struck Evan's senses when he was alone. Miss Bonner knew something of his condition, evidently. Perhaps it was generally known, and perhaps it was thought that he had come to win Rose for his worldly advantage! The idea was overwhelmingly new to him. Up started self-love in arms. He would renounce her.

It is no insignificant contest when love has to crush self-love utterly. At moments it can be done. Love has divine moments. There are times also when Love draws part of his being from self-love, and can find no support without it.

But how could he renounce her, when she came forth to him, —smiling, speaking freshly and lightly, and with the colour on her cheeks which showed that she had done her part? How could he retract a step?

'I have told Mama, Evan. That's over. She heard it first from me.'

'And she?'

'Dear Evan, if you are going to be sensitive, I'll run away. You that fear no danger, and are the bravest man I ever knew! I think you are really trembling. She will speak to Papa, and then—and then, I suppose, they will both ask you whether you intend to give me up, or no. I'm afraid you'll do the former.'

'Your mother—Lady Jocelyn listened to you, Rose? You told her all?'

'Every bit.'

'And what does she think of me?'

'Thinks you very handsome and astonishing, and me very idiotic and natural, and that there is a great deal of bother in the world, and that my noble relatives will lay the blame of it on her. No, dear, not all that; but she talked very sensibly to me, and kindly. You know she is called a philosopher: nobody knows how deep-hearted she is, though. My mother is true as steel. I can't separate the kindness from the sense, or I would tell you all she said. When I say kindness, I don't mean any "Oh, my child," and tears, and kisses, and maundering, you know. You mustn't mind her thinking me a little fool. You want to know what she thinks of you. She said nothing to hurt you, Evan, and we have gained ground so far, and now we'll go and face our enemies. Uncle Mel expects to hear about your appointment, in a day or two, and–'

'Oh, Rose!' Evan burst out.

'What is it?'

'Why must I owe everything to you?'

'Why, dear? Why, because, if you do, it's very much better

than your owing it to anybody else. Proud again?'

Not proud: only second fiddle.

'You know, dear Evan, when two people love, there is no such thing as owing between them.'

'Rose, I have been thinking. It is not too late. I love you, God knows! I did in Portugal: I do now—more and more. But Oh, my bright angel!' he ended the sentence in his breast.

'Well? but—what?'

Evan sounded down the meaning of his 'but.' Stripped of the usual heroics, it was, 'what will be thought of me?' not a small matter to any of us. He caught a distant glimpse of the little bit of bare selfishness, and shrank from it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.