GEORGE MEREDITH

EVAN HARRINGTON. VOLUME 2

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Evan Harrington – Volume 2:

Содержание

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CHAPTER VIII
INTRODUCES AN ECCENTRIC

At the Aurora—one of those rare antiquated taverns, smelling of comfortable time and solid English fare, that had sprung up in the great coffee days, when taverns were clubs, and had since subsisted on the attachment of steady bachelor Templars there had been dismay, and even sorrow, for a month. The most constant patron of the establishment—an old gentleman who had dined there for seven-and-twenty years, four days in the week, off dishes dedicated to the particular days, and had grown grey with the landlady, the cook, and the head-waiter—this old gentleman had abruptly withheld his presence. Though his name, his residence, his occupation, were things only to be speculated on at the Aurora, he was very well known there, and as men are best to be known: that is to say, by their habits. Some affection for him also was felt. The landlady looked on him as a part of the house. The cook and the waiter were accustomed to receive acceptable compliments from him monthly. His precise words, his regular ancient jokes, his pint of Madeira and after- pint of

Port, his antique bow to the landlady, passing out and in, his method of spreading his table-napkin on his lap and looking up at the ceiling ere he fell to, and how he talked to himself during the repast, and indulged in short chuckles, and the one look of perfect felicity that played over his features when he had taken his first sip of Port—these were matters it pained them at the Aurora to have to remember.

For three weeks the resolution not to regard him as of the past was general. The Aurora was the old gentleman's home. Men do not play truant from home at sixty years of age. He must, therefore, be seriously indisposed. The kind heart of the landlady fretted to think he might have no soul to nurse and care for him; but she kept his corner near the fire-place vacant, and took care that his pint of Madeira was there. The belief was gaining ground that he had gone, and that nothing but his ghost would ever sit there again. Still the melancholy ceremony continued: for the landlady was not without a secret hope, that in spite of his reserve and the mystery surrounding him, he would have sent her a last word. The cook and head-waiter, interrogated as to their dealings with the old gentleman, testified solemnly to the fact of their having performed their duty by him. They would not go against their interests so much as to forget one of his ways, they said-taking oath, as it were, by their lower nature, in order to be credited: an instinct men have of one another. The landlady could not contradict them, for the old gentleman had made no complaint; but then she called

to memory that fifteen years back, in such and such a year, Wednesday's, dish had been, by shameful oversight, furnished him for Tuesday's, and he had eaten it quietly, but refused his Port; which pathetic event had caused alarm and inquiry, when the error was discovered, and apologized for, the old gentleman merely saying, 'Don't let it happen again.' Next day he drank his Port, as usual, and the wheels of the Aurora went smoothly. The landlady was thus justified in averring that something had been done by somebody, albeit unable to point to anything specific. Women, who are almost as deeply bound to habit as old gentlemen, possess more of its spiritual element, and are warned by dreams, omens, creepings of the flesh, unwonted chills, suicide of china, and other shadowing signs, when a break is to be anticipated, or, has occurred. The landlady of the Aurora tavern was visited by none of these, and with that beautiful trust which habit gives, and which boastful love or vainer earthly qualities would fail in effecting, she ordered that the pint of Madeira should stand from six o'clock in the evening till seven—a small monument of confidence in him who was at one instant the 'poor old dear'; at another, the 'naughty old gad-about'; further, the 'faithless old-good-for- nothing'; and again, the 'blessed pet' of the landlady's parlour, alternately and indiscriminately apostrophized by herself, her sister, and daughter.

On the last day of the month a step was heard coming up the long alley which led from the riotous scrambling street to the

plentiful cheerful heart of the Aurora. The landlady knew the step. She checked the natural flutterings of her ribbons, toned down the strong simper that was on her lips, rose, pushed aside her daughter, and, as the step approached, curtsied composedly. Old Habit lifted his hat, and passed. With the same touching confidence in the Aurora that the Aurora had in him, he went straight to his corner, expressed no surprise at his welcome by the Madeira, and thereby apparently indicated that his appearance should enjoy a similar immunity.

As of old, he called 'Jonathan!' and was not to be disturbed till he did so. Seeing that Jonathan smirked and twiddled his napkin, the old gentleman added, 'Thursday!'

But Jonathan, a man, had not his mistress's keen intuition of the deportment necessitated by the case, or was incapable of putting the screw upon weak excited nature, for he continued to smirk, and was remarking how glad he was, he was sure, and something he had dared to think and almost to fear, when the old gentleman called to him, as if he were at the other end of the room, 'Will you order Thursday, or not, sir?' Whereat Jonathan flew, and two or three cosy diners glanced up from their plates, or the paper, smiled, and pursued their capital occupation.

'Glad to see me!' the old gentleman muttered, querulously. 'Of course, glad to see a customer! Why do you tell me that? Talk! tattle! might as well have a woman to wait—just!'

He wiped his forehead largely with his handkerchief; as one whom Calamity hunted a little too hard in summer weather.

'No tumbling-room for the wine, too!'

That was his next grievance. He changed the pint of Madeira from his left side to his right, and went under his handkerchief again, feverishly. The world was severe with this old gentleman.

'Ah! clock wrong now!'

He leaned back like a man who can no longer carry his burdens, informing Jonathan, on his coming up to place the roll of bread and firm butter, that he was forty seconds too fast, as if it were a capital offence, and he deserved to step into Eternity for outstripping Time.

'But, I daresay, you don't understand the importance of a minute,' said the old gentleman, bitterly. 'Not you, or any of you. Better if we had run a little ahead of your minute, perhaps—and the rest of you! Do you think you can cancel the mischief that's done in the world in that minute, sir, by hurrying ahead like that? Tell me !'

Rather at a loss, Jonathan scanned the clock seriously, and observed that it was not quite a minute too fast.

The old gentleman pulled out his watch. He grunted that a lying clock was hateful to him; subsequently sinking into contemplation of his thumbs,—a sign known to Jonathan as indicative of the old gentleman's system having resolved, in spite of external outrages, to be fortified with calm to meet the repast.

It is not fair to go behind an eccentric; but the fact was, this old gentleman was slightly ashamed of his month's vagrancy and cruel conduct, and cloaked his behaviour toward the Aurora, in

all the charges he could muster against it. He was very human, albeit an odd form of the race.

Happily for his digestion of Thursday, the cook, warned by Jonathan, kept the old gentleman's time, not the Aurora's: and the dinner was correct; the dinner was eaten in peace; he began to address his plate vigorously, poured out his Madeira, and chuckled, as the familiar ideas engendered by good wine were revived in him. Jonathan reported at the bar that the old gentleman was all right again.

One would like here to pause, while our worthy ancient feeds, and indulge in a short essay on Habit, to show what a sacred and admirable thing it is that makes flimsy Time substantial, and consolidates his triple life. It is proof that we have come to the end of dreams and Time's delusions, and are determined to sit down at Life's feast and carve for ourselves. Its day is the child of yesterday, and has a claim on to-morrow. Whereas those who have no such plan of existence and sum of their wisdom to show, the winds blow them as they list. Consider, then, mercifully the wrath of him on whom carelessness or forgetfulness has brought a snap in the links of Habit. You incline to scorn him because, his slippers misplaced, or asparagus not on his table the first day of a particular Spring month, he gazes blankly and sighs as one who saw the End. To you it may appear small. You call to him to be a man. He is: but he is also an immortal, and his confidence in unceasing orderly progression is rudely dashed.

But the old gentleman has finished his dinner and his Madeira,

and says: 'Now, Jonathan, "thock" the Port!'—his joke when matters have gone well: meant to express the sound of the uncorking, probably. The habit of making good jokes is rare, as you know: old gentlemen have not yet attained to it: nevertheless Jonathan enjoys this one, which has seen a generation in and out, for he knows its purport to be, 'My heart is open.'

And now is a great time with this old gentleman. He sips, and in his eyes the world grows rosy, and he exchanges mute or monosyllable salutes here and there. His habit is to avoid converse; but he will let a light remark season meditation.

He says to Jonathan: 'The bill for the month.'

'Yes, sir,' Jonathan replies. 'Would you not prefer, sir, to have the items added on to the month ensuing?'

'I asked you for the bill of the month,' said the old gentleman, with an irritated voice and a twinkle in his eye.

Jonathan bowed; but his aspect betrayed perplexity, and that perplexity was soon shared by the landlady for Jonathan said, he was convinced the old gentleman intended to pay for sixteen days, and the landlady could not bring her hand to charge him for more than two. Here was the dilemma foreseen by the old gentleman, and it added vastly to the flavour of the Port.

Pleasantly tickled, he sat gazing at his glass, and let the minutes fly. He knew the part he would act in his little farce. If charged for the whole month, he would peruse the bill deliberately, and perhaps cry out 'Hulloa?' and then snap at Jonathan for the interposition of a remark. But if charged for

two days, he would wish to be told whether they were demented, those people outside, and scornfully return the bill to Jonathan.

A slap on the shoulder, and a voice: 'Found you at last, Tom!' violently shattered the excellent plot, and made the old gentleman start. He beheld Mr. Andrew Cogglesby.

'Drinking Port, Tom?' said Mr. Andrew. 'I 'll join you': and he sat down opposite to him, rubbing his hands and pushing back his hair.

Jonathan entering briskly with the bill, fell back a step, in alarm. The old gentleman, whose inviolacy was thus rudely assailed, sat staring at the intruder, his mouth compressed, and three fingers round his glass, which it' was doubtful whether he was not going to hurl at him.

'Waiter!' Mr. Andrew carelessly hailed, 'a pint of this Port, if you please.'

Jonathan sought the countenance of the old gentleman.

'Do you hear, sir?' cried the latter, turning his wrath on him. 'Another pint!' He added: 'Take back the bill'; and away went Jonathan to relate fresh marvels to his mistress.

Mr. Andrew then addressed the old gentleman in the most audacious manner.

'Astonished to see me here, Tom? Dare say you are. I knew you came somewhere in this neighbourhood, and, as I wanted to speak to you very particularly, and you wouldn't be visible till Monday, why, I spied into two or three places, and here I am.'

You might see they were brothers. They had the same bushy

eyebrows, the same healthy colour in their cheeks, the same thick shoulders, and brisk way of speaking, and clear, sharp, though kindly, eyes; only Tom was cast in larger proportions than Andrew, and had gotten the grey furniture of Time for his natural wear. Perhaps, too, a cross in early life had a little twisted him, and set his mouth in a rueful bunch, out of which occasionally came biting things. Mr. Andrew carried his head up, and eyed every man living with the benevolence of a patriarch, dashed with the impudence of a London sparrow. Tom had a nagging air, and a trifle of acridity on his broad features. Still, any one at a glance could have sworn they were brothers, and Jonathan unhesitatingly proclaimed it at the Aurora bar.

Mr. Andrew's hands were working together, and at them, and at his face, the old gentleman continued to look with a firmly interrogating air.

'Want to know what brings me, Tom? I'll tell you presently. Hot,—isn't it?'

'What the deuce are you taking exercise for?' the old gentleman burst out, and having unlocked his mouth, he began to puff and alter his posture.

'There you are, thawed in a minute!' said Mr. Andrew. 'What's an eccentric? a child grown grey. It isn't mine; I read it somewhere. Ah, here's the Port! good, I'll warrant.'

Jonathan deferentially uncorked, excessive composure on his visage. He arranged the table-cloth to a nicety, fixed the bottle with exactness, and was only sent scudding by the old gentleman's

muttering of: 'Eavesdropping pie!' followed by a short, 'Go!' and even then he must delay to sweep off a particular crumb.

'Good it is!' said Mr. Andrew, rolling the flavour on his lips, as he put down his glass. 'I follow you in Port, Tom. Elder brother !'

The old gentleman also drank, and was mollified enough to reply: 'Shan't follow you in Parliament.'

'Haven't forgiven that yet, Tom?'

'No great harm done when you're silent.'

'Capital Port!' said Mr. Andrew, replenishing the glasses. 'I ought to have inquired where they kept the best Port. I might have known you'd stick by it. By the way, talking of Parliament, there's talk of a new election for Fallow field. You have a vote there. Will you give it to Jocelyn? There's talk of his standing.

'If he'll wear petticoats, I'll give him my vote.'

'There you go, Tom!'

'I hate masquerades. You're penny trumpets of the women. That tattle comes from the bed-curtains. When a petticoat steps forward I give it my vote, or else I button it up in my pocket.'

This was probably one of the longest speeches he had ever delivered at the Aurora. There was extra Port in it. Jonathan, who from his place of observation noted the length of time it occupied, though he was unable to gather the context, glanced at Mr. Andrew with a sly satisfaction. Mr. Andrew, laughing, signalled for another pint.

'So you've come here for my vote, have you?' said Mr. Tom.

'Why, no; not exactly that,' Mr. Andrew answered, blinking

and passing it by.

Jonathan brought the fresh pint, and Tom filled for himself, drank, and said emphatically, and with a confounding voice:

'Your women have been setting you on me, sir!'

Andrew protested that he was entirely mistaken.

'You're the puppet of your women!'

'Well, Tom, not in this instance. Here's to the bachelors, and brother

Tom at their head!'

It seemed to be Andrew's object to help his companion to carry a certain quantity of Port, as if he knew a virtue it had to subdue him, and to have fixed on a particular measure that he should hold before he addressed him specially. Arrived at this, he said:

'Look here, Tom. I know your ways. I shouldn't have bothered you here; I never have before; but we couldn't very well talk it over in business hours; and besides you're never at the Brewery till Monday, and the matter's rather urgent.'

'Why don't you speak like that in Parliament?' the old man interposed.

'Because Parliament isn't my brother,' replied Mr. Andrew. 'You know,

Tom, you never quite took to my wife's family.'

'I'm not a match for fine ladies, Nan.'

'Well, Harriet would have taken to you, Tom, and will now, if you 'll let her. Of course, it 's a pity if she 's ashamed of—hem!

You found it out about the Lymport people, Tom, and, you've kept the secret and respected her feelings, and I thank you for it. Women are odd in those things, you know. She mustn't imagine I 've heard a whisper. I believe it would kill her.'

The old gentleman shook silently.

'Do you want me to travel over the kingdom, hawking her for the daughter of a marquis?'

'Now, don't joke, Tom. I'm serious. Are you not a Radical at heart? Why do you make such a set against the poor women? What do we spring from?'

'I take off my hat, Nan, when I see a cobbler's stall.'

'And I, Tom, don't care a rush who knows it. Homo—something; but we never had much schooling. We 've thriven, and should help those we can. We've got on in the world . . .'

'Wife come back from Lymport?' sneered Tom.

Andrew hurriedly, and with some confusion, explained that she had not been able to go, on account of the child.

'Account of the child!' his brother repeated, working his chin contemptuously. 'Sisters gone?'

'They're stopping with us,' said Andrew, reddening.

'So the tailor was left to the kites and the crows. Ah! hum!' and Tom chuckled.

'You're angry with me, Tom, for coming here,' said Andrew. 'I see what it is. Thought how it would be! You're offended, old Tom.'

'Come where you like,' returned Tom, 'the place is open. It's

a fool that hopes for peace anywhere. They sent a woman here to wait on me, this day month.'

'That's a shame!' said Mr. Andrew, propitiatingly. 'Well, never mind,

Tom: the women are sometimes in the way.—Evan went down to bury his

father. He's there now. You wouldn't see him when he was at the

Brewery, Tom. He's—upon my honour! he's a good young fellow.'

'A fine young gentleman, I've no doubt, Nan.'

'A really good lad, Tom. No nonsense. I've come here to speak to you about him.'

Mr. Andrew drew a letter from his pocket, pursuing: 'Just throw aside your prejudices, and read this. It's a letter I had from him this morning. But first I must tell you how the case stands.'

'Know more than you can tell me, Nan,' said Tom, turning over the flavour of a gulp of his wine.

'Well, then, just let me repeat it. He has been capitally educated; he has always been used to good society: well, we mustn't sneer at it: good society's better than bad, you'll allow. He has refined tastes: well, you wouldn't like to live among crossing-sweepers, Tom. He 's clever and accomplished, can speak and write in three languages: I wish I had his abilities. He has good manners: well, Tom, you know you like them as well as anybody. And now—but read for yourself.'

'Yah!' went old Tom. 'The women have been playing the fool with him since he was a baby. I read his rigmarole? No.'

Mr. Andrew shrugged his shoulders, and opened the letter, saying: 'Well, listen'; and then he coughed, and rapidly skimmed the introductory part. 'Excuses himself for addressing me formally—poor boy! Circumstances have altered his position towards the world found his father's affairs in a bad state: only chance of paying off father's debts to undertake management of business, and bind himself to so much a year. But there, Tom, if you won't read it, you miss the poor young fellow's character. He says that he has forgotten his station: fancied he was superior to trade, but hates debt; and will not allow anybody to throw dirt at his father's name, while he can work to clear it; and will sacrifice his pride. Come, Tom, that's manly, isn't it? I call it touching, poor lad!'

Manly it may have been, but the touching part of it was a feature missed in Mr. Andrew's hands. At any rate, it did not appear favourably to impress Tom, whose chin had gathered its ominous puckers, as he inquired:

'What's the trade? he don't say.'

Andrew added, with a wave of the hand: 'Out of a sort of feeling for his sisters—I like him for it. Now what I want to ask you, Tom, is, whether we can't assist him in some way! Why couldn't we take him into our office, and fix him there, eh? If he works well—we're both getting old, and my brats are chicks—we might, by-and-by, give him a share.'

'Make a brewer of him? Ha! there'd be another mighty sacrifice for his pride!'

'Come, come, Tom,' said Andrew, 'he's my wife's brother, and I'm yours; and—there, you know what women are. They like to preserve appearances: we ought to consider them.'

'Preserve appearances!' echoed Tom: 'ha! who'll do that for them better than a tailor?'

Andrew was an impatient little man, fitter for a kind action than to plead a cause. Jeering jarred on him; and from the moment his brother began it, he was of small service to Evan. He flung back against the partition of the compound, rattling it to the disturbance of many a quiet digestion.

'Tom,' he cried, 'I believe you're a screw!'

'Never said I wasn't,' rejoined Tom, as he finished his glass. 'I 'm a bachelor, and a person—you're married, and an object. I won't have the tailor's family at my coat-tails.'

Do you mean to say, Tom, you don't like the young fellow? The Countess says he's half engaged to an heiress; and he has a chance of appointments —of course, nothing may come of them. But do you mean to say, you don't like him for what he has done?'

Tom made his jaw disagreeably prominent. ''Fraid I'm guilty of that crime.'

'And you that swear at people pretending to be above their station!' exclaimed Andrew. 'I shall get in a passion. I can't stand this. Here, waiter! what have I to pay?'

'Go,' cried the time-honoured guest of the Aurora to Jonathan

advancing.

Andrew pressed the very roots of his hair back from his red forehead, and sat upright and resolute, glancing at Tom. And now ensued a curious scene of family blood. For no sooner did elderly Tom observe this bantam-like demeanour of his brother, than he ruffled his feathers likewise, and looked down on him, agitating his wig over a prodigious frown. Whereof came the following sharp colloquy; Andrew beginning:

I 'll pay off the debts out of my own pocket.'

'You can make a greater fool of yourself, then?'

'He shan't be a tailor!'

'He shan't be a brewer!'

'I say he shall live like a gentleman!'

'I say he shall squat like a Turk!'

Bang went Andrew's hand on the table: 'I 've pledged my word, mind!'

Tom made a counter demonstration: 'And I'll have my way!'

'Hang it! I can be as eccentric as you,' said Andrew.

'And I as much a donkey as you, if I try hard,' said Tom.

Something of the cobbler's stall followed this; till waxing furious, Tom sung out to Jonathan, hovering around them in watchful timidity, 'More Port!' and the words immediately fell oily on the wrath of the brothers; both commenced wiping their heads with their handkerchiefs the faces of both emerged and met, with a half-laugh: and, severally determined to keep to what they had spoken, there was a tacit accord between them to drop

the subject.

Like sunshine after smart rain, the Port shone on these brothers. Like a voice from the pastures after the bellowing of the thunder, Andrew's voice asked: 'Got rid of that twinge of the gout, Tom? Did you rub in that ointment?' while Tom replied: 'Ay. How about that rheumatism of yours? Have you tried that Indy oil?' receiving a like assurance.

The remainder of the Port ebbed in meditation and chance remarks. The bit of storm had done them both good; and Tom especially—the cynical, carping, grim old gentleman—was much improved by the nearer resemblance of his manner to Andrew's.

Behind this unaffected fraternal concord, however, the fact that they were pledged to a race in eccentricity, was present. They had been rivals before; and anterior to the date of his marriage, Andrew had done odd eclipsing things. But Andrew required prompting to it; he required to be put upon his mettle. Whereas, it was more nature with Tom: nature and the absence of a wife, gave him advantages over Andrew. Besides, he had his character to maintain. He had said the word: and the first vanity of your born eccentric is, that he shall be taken for infallible.

Presently Andrew ducked his head to mark the evening clouds flushing over the court-yard of the Aurora.

'Time to be off, Tom,' he said: 'wife at home.'

'Ah!' Tom answered. 'Well, I haven't got to go to bed so early.'

'What an old rogue you are, Tom!' Andrew pushed his elbows

forward on the table amiably. 'Gad, we haven't drunk wine together since—by George! we'll have another pint.'

'Many as you like,' said Tom.

Over the succeeding pint, Andrew, in whose veins the Port was merry, favoured his brother with an imitation of Major Strike, and indicated his dislike to that officer. Tom informed him that Major Strike was speculating.

'The ass eats at my table, and treats me with contempt.'

'Just tell him that you're putting by the bones for him. He 'll want 'em.'

Then Andrew with another glance at the clouds, now violet on a grey sky, said he must really be off. Upon which Tom observed: 'Don't come here again.'

'You old rascal, Tom !' cried Andrew, swinging over the table: 'it's quite jolly for us to be hob-a-nobbing together once more. 'Gad!—no, we won't though! I promised—Harriet. Eh? What say, Tom?'

'Nother pint, Nan?'

Tom shook his head in a roguishly-cosy, irresistible way. Andrew, from a shake of denial and resolve, fell into the same; and there sat the two brothers—a jolly picture.

The hour was ten, when Andrew Cogglesby, comforted by Tom's remark, that he, Tom, had a wig, and that he, Andrew, would have a wigging, left the Aurora; and he left it singing a song. Tom Cogglesby still sat at his table, holding before him Evan's letter, of which he had got possession; and knocking it

round and round with a stroke of the forefinger, to the tune of, 'Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, 'pothecary, ploughboy, thief'; each profession being sounded as a corner presented itself to the point of his nail. After indulging in this species of incantation for some length of time, Tom Cogglesby read the letter from beginning to end, and called peremptorily for pen, ink, and paper.

CHAPTER IX
THE COUNTESS IN LOW SOCIETY

By dint of stratagems worthy of a Court intrigue, the Countess de Saldar contrived to traverse the streets of Lymport, and enter the house where she was born, unsuspected and unseen, under cover of a profusion of lace and veil and mantilla, which only her heroic resolve to keep her beauties hidden from the profane townspeople could have rendered endurable beneath the fervid summer sun. Dress in a foreign style she must, as without it she lost that sense of superiority, which was the only comfort to her in her tribulations. The period of her arrival was ten days subsequent to the burial of her father. She had come in the coach, like any common mortal, and the coachman, upon her request, had put her down at the Governor's house, and the guard had knocked at the door, and the servant had informed her that General Hucklebridge was not the governor of Lymport, nor did Admiral Combleman then reside in the town; which tidings, the coach then being out of sight, it did not disconcert the Countess to hear; and she reached her mother, having, at least, cut off communication with the object of conveyance.

The Countess kissed her mother, kissed Mrs. Fiske, and asked sharply for

Evan. Mrs. Fiske let her know that Evan was in the house.

'Where?' inquired the Countess. 'I have news of the utmost importance for him. I must see him.'

'Where is he, aunt?' said Mrs. Fiske. 'In the shop, I think; I wonder he did not see you passing, Louisa.'

The Countess went bolt down into a chair.

'Go to him, Jane,' said Mrs. Mel. 'Tell him Louisa is here, and don't return.'

Mrs. Fiske departed, and the Countess smiled.

'Thank you, Mama! you know I never could bear that odious, vulgar little woman. Oh, the heat! You talk of Portugal! And, oh! poor dear Papa! what I have suffered!'

Flapping her laces for air, and wiping her eyes for sorrow, the Countess poured a flood of sympathy into her mother's ears and then said:

'But you have made a great mistake, Mama, in allowing Evan to put his foot into that place. He—beloved of an heiress! Why, if an enemy should hear of it, it would ruin him—positively blast him—for ever. And that she loves him I have proof positive. Yes; with all her frankness, the little thing cannot conceal that from me now. She loves him! And I desire you to guess, Mama, whether rivals will not abound? And what enemy so much to be dreaded as a rival? And what revelation so awful as that he has stood in a—in a—boutique?'

Mrs. Mel maintained her usual attitude for listening. It had occurred to her that it might do no good to tell the grand lady, her daughter; of Evan's resolution, so she simply said, 'It is discipline

for him,' and left her to speak a private word with the youth.

Timidly the Countess inspected the furniture of the apartment, taking chills at the dingy articles she saw, in the midst of her heat. That she should have sprung from this! The thought was painful; still she could forgive Providence so much. But should it ever be known she had sprung from this! Alas! she felt she never could pardon such a dire betrayal. She had come in good spirits, but the mention of Evan's backsliding had troubled her extremely, and though she did not say to herself, What was the benefit resulting from her father's dying, if Evan would be so base- minded? she thought the thing indefinitely, and was forming the words on her mouth, One Harrington in a shop is equal to all! when Evan appeared alone.

'Why, goodness gracious! where's your moustache?' cried the Countess.

'Gone the way of hair!' said Evan, coldly stooping to her forehead.

'Such a distinction!' the Countess continued, reproachfully. 'Why, mon Dieu! one could hardly tell you; as you look now, from the very commonest tradesman—if you were not rather handsome and something of a figure. It's a disguise, Evan—do you know that?'

'And I 've parted with it—that 's all,' said Evan. 'No more disguises for me!'

The Countess immediately took his arm, and walked with him to a window. His face was certainly changed. Murmuring that

the air of Lymport was bad for him, and that he must leave it instantly, she bade him sit and attend to what she was about to say.

While you have been here, degenerating, Evan, day by day —as you always do out of my sight—degenerating! no less a word!—I have been slaving in your interests. Yes; I have forced the Jocelyns socially to acknowledge us. I have not slept; I have eaten bare morsels. Do abstinence and vigils clear the wits? I know not! but indeed they have enabled me to do more in a week than would suffice for a lifetime. Hark to me. I have discovered Rose's secret. Si! It is so! Rose loves you. You blush; you blush like a girl. She loves you, and you have let yourself be seen in a shop! Contrast me the two things. Oh! in verity, dreadful as it is, one could almost laugh. But the moment I lose sight of you, my instructions vanish as quickly as that hair on your superior lip, which took such time to perfect. Alas! you must grow it again immediately. Use any perfumer's contrivance. Rowland! I have great faith in Rowland. Without him, I believe, there would have been many bald women committing suicide! You remember the bottle I gave to the Count de Villa Flor? "Countess," he said to me, "you have saved this egg-shell from a crack by helping to cover it"—for so he called his head—the top, you know, was beginning to shine like an egg. And I do fear me he would have done it. Ah! you do not conceive what the dread of baldness is! To a woman death —death is preferable to baldness! Baldness is death! And a wig— a wig! Oh, horror! total extinction is better

than to rise again in a wig! But you are young, and play with hair. But I was saying, I went to see the Jocelyns. I was introduced to Sir Franks and his lady and the wealthy grandmother. And I have an invitation for you, Evan—you unmannered boy, that you do not bow! A gentle incline forward of the shoulders, and the eyes fixed softly, your upper lids drooping triflingly, as if you thanked with gentle sincerity, but were indifferent. Well, well, if you will not! An invitation for you to spend part of the autumn at Beckley Court, the ancestral domain, where there will be company the nobles of the land! Consider that. You say it was bold in me to face them after that horrible man committed us on board the vessel? A Harrington is anything but a coward. I did go and because I am devoted to your interests. That very morning, I saw announced in the paper, just beneath poor Andrew's hand, as he held it up at the breakfasttable, reading it, I saw among the deaths, Sir Abraham Harrington, of Torquay, Baronet, of quinsy! Twice that good man has come to my rescue! Oh! I welcomed him as a piece of Providence! I turned and said to Harriet, "I see they have put poor Papa in the paper." Harriet was staggered. I took the paper from Andrew, and pointed it to her. She has no readiness. She has had no foreign training. She could not comprehend, and Andrew stood on tiptoe, and peeped. He has a bad cough, and coughed himself black in the face. I attribute it to excessive bad manners and his cold feelings. He left the room. I reproached Harriet. But, oh! the singularity of the excellent fortune of such an event at such a time! It showed that our Harrington-luck had

not forsaken us. I hurried to the Jocelyns instantly. Of course, it cleared away any suspicions aroused in them by that horrible man on board the vessel. And the tears I wept for Sir Abraham, Evan, in verity they were tears of deep and sincere gratitude! What is your mouth knitting the corners at? Are you laughing?'

Evan hastily composed his visage to the melancholy that was no counterfeit in him just then.

'Yes,' continued the Countess, easily reassured, 'I shall ever feel a debt to Sir Abraham Harrington, of Torquay. I dare say we are related to him. At least he has done us more service than many a rich and titled relative. No one supposes he would acknowledge poor Papa. I can forgive him that, Evan!' The Countess pointed out her finger with mournful and impressive majesty, 'As we look down on that monkey, people of rank and consideration in society look on what poor dear Papa was.'

This was partly true, for Jacko sat on a chair, in his favourite attitude, copied accurately from the workmen of the establishment at their labour with needle and thread. Growing cognizant of the infamy of his posture, the Countess begged Evan to drive him out of her sight, and took a sniff at her smelling-bottle.

She went on: 'Now, dear Van, you would hear of your sweet Rose?'

'Not a word!' Evan hastily answered.

'Why, what does this indicate? Whims! Then you do love?'

'I tell you, Louisa, I don't want to hear a word of any of them,'

said Evan, with an angry gleam in his eyes. 'They are nothing to me, nor I to them. I—my walk in life is not theirs.'

'Faint heart! faint heart!' the Countess lifted a proverbial forefinger.

'Thank heaven, I shall have the consolation of not going about, and bowing and smirking like an impostor!' Evan exclaimed.

There was a wider intelligence in the Countess's arrested gaze than she chose to fashion into speech.

'I knew,' she said, 'I knew how the air of this horrible Lymport would act on you. But while I live, Evan, you shall not sink in the sludge. You, with all the pains I have lavished on you! and with your presence!– for you have a presence, so rare among young men in this England! You, who have been to a Court, and interchanged bows with duchesses, and I know not what besides —nay, I do not accuse you; but if you had not been a mere boy, and an English boy-poor Eugenia herself confessed to me that you had a look—a tender cleaving of the underlids—that made her catch her hand to her heart sometimes: it reminded her so acutely of false Belmarafa. Could you have had a greater compliment than that? You shall not stop here another day!'

'True,' said Evan, 'for I'm going to London to-night.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.