

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE ORDEAL OF
RICHARD FEVEREL.
VOLUME 4

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CHAPTER XXVIII

Beauty, of course, is for the hero. Nevertheless, it is not always he on whom beauty works its most conquering influence. It is the dull commonplace man into whose slow brain she drops like a celestial light, and burns lastingly. The poet, for instance, is a connoisseur of beauty: to the artist she is a model. These gentlemen by much contemplation of her charms wax critical. The days when they had hearts being gone, they are haply divided between the blonde and the brunette; the aquiline nose and the Proserpine; this shaped eye and that. But go about among simple unprofessional fellows, boors, dunderheads, and here and there you shall find some barbarous intelligence which has had just strength enough to conceive, and has taken Beauty as its Goddess, and knows but one form to worship, in its poor stupid fashion, and would perish for her. Nay, more: the man would devote all his days to her, though he is dumb as a dog. And, indeed, he is Beauty's Dog. Almost every Beauty has her Dog. The hero possesses her; the poet proclaims her; the painter puts her upon

canvas; and the faithful Old Dog follows her: and the end of it all is that the faithful Old Dog is her single attendant. Sir Hero is revelling in the wars, or in Armida's bowers; Mr. Poet has spied a wrinkle; the brush is for the rose in its season. She turns to her Old Dog then. She hugs him; and he, who has subsisted on a bone and a pat till there he squats decrepit, he turns his grateful old eyes up to her, and has not a notion that she is hugging sad memories in him: Hero, Poet, Painter, in one scrubby one! Then is she buried, and the village hears languid howls, and there is a paragraph in the newspapers concerning the extraordinary fidelity of an Old Dog.

Excited by suggestive recollections of Nooredeen and the Fair Persian, and the change in the obscure monotony of his life by his having quarters in a crack hotel, and living familiarly with West-End people—living on the fat of the land (which forms a stout portion of an honest youth's romance), Ripton Thompson breakfasted next morning with his chief at half-past eight. The meal had been fixed overnight for seven, but Ripton slept a great deal more than the nightingale, and (to chronicle his exact state) even half-past eight rather afflicted his new aristocratic senses and reminded him too keenly of law and bondage. He had preferred to breakfast at Algernon's hour, who had left word for eleven. Him, however, it was Richard's object to avoid, so they fell to, and Ripton no longer envied Hippias in bed. Breakfast done, they bequeathed the consoling information for Algernon that they were off to hear a popular preacher, and departed.

"How happy everybody looks!" said Richard, in the quiet Sunday streets.

"Yes—jolly!" said Ripton.

"When I'm—when this is over, I'll see that they are, too—as many as I can make happy," said the hero; adding softly: "Her blind was down at a quarter to six. I think she slept well!"

"You've been there this morning?" Ripton exclaimed; and an idea of what love was dawned upon his dull brain.

"Will she see me, Ricky?"

"Yes. She'll see you to-day. She was tired last night."

"Positively?"

Richard assured him that the privilege would be his.

"Here," he said, coming under some trees in the park, "here's where I talked to you last night. What a time it seems! How I hate the night!"

On the way, that Richard might have an exalted opinion of him, Ripton hinted decorously at a somewhat intimate and mysterious acquaintance with the sex. Headings of certain random adventures he gave.

"Well!" said his chief, "why not marry her?"

Then was Ripton shocked, and cried, "Oh!" and had a taste of the feeling of superiority, destined that day to be crushed utterly.

He was again deposited in Mrs. Berry's charge for a term that caused him dismal fears that the Fair Persian still refused to show her face, but Richard called out to him, and up Ripton went, unaware of the transformation he was to undergo. Hero

and Beauty stood together to receive him. From the bottom of the stairs he had his vivaciously agreeable smile ready for them, and by the time he entered the room his cheeks were painfully stiff, and his eyes had strained beyond their exact meaning. Lucy, with one hand anchored to her lover, welcomed him kindly. He relieved her shyness by looking so extremely silly. They sat down, and tried to commence a conversation, but Ripton was as little master of his tongue as he was of his eyes. After an interval, the Fair Persian having done duty by showing herself, was glad to quit the room. Her lord and possessor then turned inquiringly to Ripton.

"You don't wonder now, Rip?" he said.

"No, Richard!" Ripton waited to reply with sufficient solemnity, "indeed

I don't!"

He spoke differently; he looked differently. He had the Old Dog's eyes in his head. They watched the door she had passed through; they listened for her, as dogs' eyes do. When she came in, bonneted for a walk, his agitation was dog-like. When she hung on her lover timidly, and went forth, he followed without an idea of envy, or anything save the secret raptures the sight of her gave him, which are the Old Dog's own. For beneficent Nature requites him: His sensations cannot be heroic, but they have a fulness and a wagging delight as good in their way. And this capacity for humble unaspiring worship has its peculiar guerdon. When Ripton comes to think of Miss Random now, what will he

think of himself? Let no one despise the Old Dog. Through him doth Beauty vindicate her sex.

It did not please Ripton that others should have the bliss of beholding her, and as, to his perceptions, everybody did, and observed her offensively, and stared, and turned their heads back, and interchanged comments on her, and became in a minute madly in love with her, he had to smother low growls. They strolled about the pleasant gardens of Kensington all the morning, under the young chestnut buds, and round the windless waters, talking, and soothing the wild excitement of their hearts. If Lucy spoke, Ripton pricked up his ears. She, too, made the remark that everybody seemed to look happy, and he heard it with thrills of joy. "So everybody is, where you are!" he would have wished to say, if he dared, but was restrained by fears that his burning eloquence would commit him. Ripton knew the people he met twice. It would have been difficult to persuade him they were the creatures of accident.

From the Gardens, in contempt of Ripton's frowned protest, Richard boldly struck into the park, where solitary carriages were beginning to perform the circuit. Here Ripton had some justification for his jealous pangs. The young girl's golden locks of hair; her sweet, now dreamily sad, face; her gentle graceful figure in the black straight dress she wore; a sort of half-conventual air she had—a mark of something not of class, that was partly beauty's, partly maiden innocence growing conscious, partly remorse at her weakness and dim fear of the future it

was sowing—did attract the eye-glasses. Ripton had to learn that eyes are bearable, but eye-glasses an abomination. They fixed a spell upon his courage; for somehow the youth had always ranked them as emblems of our nobility, and hearing two exquisite eye-glasses, who had been to front and rear several times, drawl in gibberish generally imputed to lords, that his heroine was a charming little creature, just the size, but had no style,—he was abashed; he did not fly at them and tear them. He became dejected. Beauty's dog is affected by the eye-glass in a manner not unlike the common animal's terror of the human eye.

Richard appeared to hear nothing, or it was homage that he heard. He repeated to Lucy Diaper Sandoe's verses—

"The cockneys nod to each other aside,
The coxcombs lift their glasses,"

and projected hiring a horse for her to ride every day in the park, and shine among the highest.

They had turned to the West, against the sky glittering through the bare trees across the water, and the bright-edged rack. The lover, his imagination just then occupied in clothing earthly glories in celestial, felt where his senses were sharpest the hand of his darling falter, and instinctively looked ahead. His uncle Algernon was leisurely jolting towards them on his one sound leg. The dismembered Guardsman talked to a friend whose arm supported him, and speculated from time to time on the fair

ladies driving by. The two white faces passed him unobserved. Unfortunately Ripton, coming behind, went plump upon the Captain's live toe—or so he pretended, crying, "Confound it, Mr. Thompson! you might have chosen the other."

The horrible apparition did confound Ripton, who stammered that it was extraordinary.

"Not at all," said Algernon. "Everybody makes up to that fellow.

Instinct, I suppose!"

He had not to ask for his nephew. Richard turned to face the matter.

"Sorry I couldn't wait for you this morning, uncle," he said, with the coolness of relationship. "I thought you never walked so far."

His voice was in perfect tone—the heroic mask admirable.

Algernon examined the downcast visage at his side, and contrived to allude to the popular preacher. He was instantly introduced to Ripton's sister, Miss Thompson.

The Captain bowed, smiling melancholy approval of his nephew's choice of a minister. After a few stray remarks, and an affable salute to Miss Thompson, he hobbled away, and then the three sealed volcanoes breathed, and Lucy's arm ceased to be squeezed quite so much up to the heroic pitch.

This incident quickened their steps homeward to the sheltering wings of Mrs. Berry. All that passed between them on the subject comprised a stammered excuse from Ripton for his conduct, and

a good-humoured rejoinder from Richard, that he had gained a sister by it: at which Ripton ventured to wish aloud Miss Desborough would only think so, and a faint smile twitched poor Lucy's lips to please him. She hardly had strength to reach her cage. She had none to eat of Mrs. Berry's nice little dinner. To be alone, that she might cry and ease her heart of its accusing weight of tears, was all she prayed for. Kind Mrs. Berry, slipping into her bedroom to take off her things, found the fair body in a fevered shudder, and finished by undressing her completely and putting her to bed.

"Just an hour's sleep, or so," the mellifluous woman explained the case to the two anxious gentlemen. "A quiet sleep and a cup of warm tea goes for more than twenty doctors, it do—when there's the flutters," she pursued. "I know it by myself. And a good cry beforehand's better than the best of medicine."

She nursed them into a make-believe of eating, and retired to her softer charge and sweeter babe, reflecting, "Lord! Lord! the three of 'em don't make fifty! I'm as old as two and a half of 'em, to say the least." Mrs. Berry used her apron, and by virtue of their tender years took them all three into her heart.

Left alone, neither of the young men could swallow a morsel. "Did you see the change come over her?" Richard whispered. Ripton fiercely accused his prodigious stupidity.

The lover flung down his knife and fork: "What could I do? If I had said nothing, we should have been suspected. I was obliged to speak. And she hates a lie! See! it has struck her down. God

forgive me!"

Ripton affected a serene mind: "It was a fright, Richard," he said. "That's what Mrs. Berry means by flutters. Those old women talk in that way. You heard what she said. And these old women know. I'll tell you what it is. It's this, Richard!—it's because you've got a fool for your friend!"

"She regrets it," muttered the lover. "Good God! I think she fears me."

He dropped his face in his hands.

Ripton went to the window, repeating energetically for his comfort: "It's because you've got a fool for your friend!"

Sombre grew the street they had last night aroused. The sun was buried alive in cloud. Ripton saw himself no more in the opposite window. He watched the deplorable objects passing on the pavement. His aristocratic visions had gone like his breakfast. Beauty had been struck down by his egregious folly, and there he stood—a wretch!

Richard came to him: "Don't mumble on like that, Rip!" he said. "Nobody blames you."

"Ah! you're very kind, Richard," interposed the wretch, moved at the face of misery he beheld.

"Listen to me, Rip! I shall take her home to-night. Yes! If she's happier away from me!—do you think me a brute, Ripton? Rather than have her shed a tear, I'd!—I'll take her home to-night!"

Ripton suggested that it was sudden; adding from his larger

experience, people perhaps might talk.

The lover could not understand what they should talk about, but he said: "If I give him who came for her yesterday the clue? If no one sees or hears of me, what can they say? O Rip! I'll give her up. I'm wrecked for ever! What of that? Yes—let them take her! The world in arms should never have torn her from me, but when she cries—Yes! all's over. I'll find him at once."

He searched in out-of-the-way corners for the hat of resolve. Ripton looked on, wretcheder than ever.

The idea struck him:—"Suppose, Richard, she doesn't want to go?"

It was a moment when, perhaps, one who sided with parents and guardians and the old wise world, might have inclined them to pursue their righteous wretched course, and have given small Cupid a smack and sent him home to his naughty Mother. Alas!(it is The Pilgrim's Scrip interjecting) women are the born accomplices of mischief! In bustles Mrs. Berry to clear away the refectory, and finds the two knights helmed, and sees, though 'tis dusk, that they wear doubtful brows, and guesses bad things for her dear God Hymen in a twinkling.

"Dear! dear!" she exclaimed, "and neither of you eaten a scrap! And there's my dear young lady off into the prettiest sleep you ever see!"

"Ha?" cried the lover, illuminated.

"Soft as a baby!" Mrs. Berry averred. "I went to look at her this very moment, and there's not a bit of trouble in her breath.

It come and it go like the sweetest regular instrument ever made. The Black Ox haven't trod on her foot yet! Most like it was the air of London. But only fancy, if you had called in a doctor! Why, I shouldn't have let her take any of his quackery. Now, there!"

Ripton attentively observed his chief, and saw him doff his hat with a curious caution, and peer into its recess, from which, during Mrs. Berry's speech, he drew forth a little glove—dropped there by some freak of chance.

"Keep me, keep me, now you have me!" sang the little glove, and amused the lover with a thousand conceits.

"When will she wake, do you think, Mrs. Berry?" he asked.

"Oh! we mustn't go for disturbing her," said the guileful good creature. "Bless ye! let her sleep it out. And if you young gentlemen was to take my advice, and go and take a walk for to get a appetite—everybody should eat! it's their sacred duty, no matter what their feelings be! and I say it who'm no chicken!—I'll frickashee this—which is a chicken—against your return. I'm a cook, I can assure ye!"

The lover seized her two hands. "You're the best old soul in the world!" he cried. Mrs. Berry appeared willing to kiss him. "We won't disturb her. Let her sleep. Keep her in bed, Mrs. Berry. Will you? And we'll call to inquire after her this evening, and come and see her to-morrow. I'm sure you'll be kind to her. There! there!" Mrs. Berry was preparing to whimper. "I trust her to you, you see. Good-bye, you dear old soul."

He smuggled a handful of gold into her keeping, and went to

dine with his uncles, happy and hungry.

Before they reached the hotel, they had agreed to draw Mrs. Berry into their confidence, telling her (with embellishments) all save their names, so that they might enjoy the counsel and assistance of that trump of a woman, and yet have nothing to fear from her. Lucy was to receive the name of Letitia, Ripton's youngest and best-looking sister. The heartless fellow proposed it in cruel mockery of an old weakness of hers.

"Letitia!" mused Richard. "I like the name. Both begin with L. There's something soft—womanlike—in the L.'s."

Material Ripton remarked that they looked like pounds on paper. The lover roamed through his golden groves. "Lucy Feverel! that sounds better! I wonder where Ralph is. I should like to help him. He's in love with my cousin Clare. He'll never do anything till he marries. No man can. I'm going to do a hundred things when it's over. We shall travel first. I want to see the Alps. One doesn't know what the earth is till one has seen the Alps. What a delight it will be to her! I fancy I see her eyes gazing up at them.

'And oh, your dear blue eyes, that heavenward glance
With kindred beauty, banished humbleness,
Past weeping for mortality's distress—
Yet from your soul a tear hangs there in trance.
And fills, but does not fall;
Softly I hear it call
At heaven's gate, till Sister Seraphs press

To look on you their old love from the skies:

Those are the eyes of Seraphs bright on your blue eyes!

"Beautiful! These lines, Rip, were written by a man who was once a friend of my father's. I intend to find him and make them friends again. You don't care for poetry. It's no use your trying to swallow it, Rip!"

"It sounds very nice," said Ripton, modestly shutting his mouth.

"The Alps! Italy! Rome! and then I shall go to the East," the hero continued. "She's ready to go anywhere with me, the dear brave heart! Oh, the glorious golden East! I dream of the desert. I dream I'm chief of an Arab tribe, and we fly all white in the moonlight on our mares, and hurry to the rescue of my darling! And we push the spears, and we scatter them, and I come to the tent where she crouches, and catch her to my saddle, and away! —Rip! what a life!"

Ripton strove to imagine he could enjoy it.

"And then we shall come home, and I shall lead Austin's life, with her to help me. First be virtuous, Rip! and then serve your country heart and soul. A wise man told me that. I think I shall do something."

Sunshine and cloud, cloud and sunshine, passed over the lover. Now life was a narrow ring; now the distances extended, were winged, flew illimitably. An hour ago and food was hateful. Now he manfully refreshed his nature, and joined in Algernon's

encomiums on Miss Letitia Thompson.

Meantime Beauty slept, watched by the veteran volunteer of the hero's band. Lucy awoke from dreams which seemed reality, to the reality which was a dream. She awoke calling for some friend, "Margaret!" and heard one say, "My name is Bessy Berry, my love! not Margaret." Then she asked piteously where she was, and where was Margaret, her dear friend, and Mrs. Berry whispered, "Sure you've got a dearer!"

"Ah!" sighed Lucy, sinking on her pillow, overwhelmed by the strangeness of her state.

Mrs. Berry closed the frill of her nightgown and adjusted the bedclothes quietly.

Her name was breathed.

"Yes, my love?" she said.

"Is he here?"

"He's gone, my dear."

"Gone?—Oh, where?" The young girl started up in disorder.

"Gone, to be back, my love! Ah! that young gentleman!" Mrs. Berry chanted: "Not a morsel have he eat; not a drop have he drunk!"

"O Mrs. Berry! why did you not make him?" Lucy wept for the famine-struck hero, who was just then feeding mightily.

Mrs. Berry explained that to make one eat who thought the darling of his heart like to die, was a sheer impossibility for the cleverest of women; and on this deep truth Lucy reflected, with her eyes wide at the candle. She wanted one to pour her feelings

out to. She slid her hand from under the bedclothes, and took Mrs. Berry's, and kissed it. The good creature required no further avowal of her secret, but forthwith leaned her consummate bosom to the pillow, and petitioned heaven to bless them both!— Then the little bride was alarmed, and wondered how Mrs. Berry could have guessed it.

"Why," said Mrs. Berry, "your love is out of your eyes, and out of everything ye do." And the little bride wondered more. She thought she had been so very cautious not to betray it. The common woman in them made cheer together after their own April fashion. Following which Mrs. Berry probed for the sweet particulars of this beautiful love-match; but the little bride's lips were locked. She only said her lover was above her in station.

"And you're a Catholic, my dear!"

"Yes, Mrs. Berry!"

"And him a Protestant."

"Yes, Mrs. Berry!"

"Dear, dear!—And why shouldn't ye be?" she ejaculated, seeing sadness return to the bridal babe. "So as you was born, so shall ye be! But you'll have to make your arrangements about the children. The girls to worship with yet, the boys with him. It's the same God, my dear! You mustn't blush at it, though you do look so pretty. If my young gentleman could see you now!"

"Please, Mrs. Berry!" Lucy murmured.

"Why, he will, you know, my dear!"

"Oh, please, Mrs. Berry!"

"And you that can't bear the thoughts of it! Well, I do wish there was fathers and mothers on both sides and dock-ments signed, and bridesmaids, and a breakfast! but love is love, and ever will be, in spite of them."

She made other and deeper dives into the little heart, but though she drew up pearls, they were not of the kind she searched for. The one fact that hung as a fruit upon her tree of Love, Lucy had given her; she would not, in fealty to her lover, reveal its growth and history, however sadly she yearned to pour out all to this dear old Mother Confessor.

Her conduct drove Mrs. Berry from the rosy to the autumnal view of matrimony, generally heralded by the announcement that it is a lottery.

"And when you see your ticket," said Mrs. Berry, "you shan't know whether it's a prize or a blank. And, Lord knows! some go on thinking it's a prize when it turns on 'em and tears 'em. I'm one of the blanks, my dear! I drew a blank in Berry. He was a black Berry to me, my dear! Smile away! he truly was, and I a-prizin' him as proud as you can conceive! My dear!" Mrs. Berry pressed her hands flat on her apron. "We hadn't been a three months man and wife, when that man—it wasn't the honeymoon, which some can't say—that man—Yes! he kicked me. His wedded wife he kicked! Ah!" she sighed to Lucy's large eyes, "I could have borne that. A blow don't touch the heart," the poor creature tapped her sensitive side. "I went on loving of him, for I'm a soft one. Tall as a Grenadier he is, and when out of service grows his moustache.

I used to call him my body-guardsmen like a Queen! I flattered him like the fools we women are. For, take my word for it, my dear, there's nothing here below so vain as a man! That I know. But I didn't deserve it.... I'm a superior cook I did not deserve that noways." Mrs. Berry thumped her knee, and accentuated up her climax: "I mended his linen. I saw to his adornments—he called his clothes, the bad man! I was a servant to him, my dear! and there—it was nine months—nine months from the day he swear to protect and cherish and that—nine calendar months, and my gentleman is off with another woman! Bone of his bone!—pish!" exclaimed Mrs. Berry, reckoning her wrongs over vividly. "Here's my ring. A pretty ornament! What do it mean? I'm for tearin' it off my finger a dozen times in the day. It's a symbol? I call it a tomfoolery for the dead-alive to wear it, that's a widow and not a widow, and haven't got a name for what she is in any Dixonary, I've looked, my dear, and"—she spread out her arms—"Johnson haven't got a name for me!"

At this impressive woe Mrs. Berry's voice quavered into sobs. Lucy spoke gentle words to the poor outcast from Johnson. The sorrows of Autumn have no warning for April. The little bride, for all her tender pity, felt happier when she had heard her landlady's moving tale of the wickedness of man, which cast in bright relief the glory of that one hero who was hers. Then from a short flight of inconceivable bliss, she fell, shot by one of her hundred Argus-eyed fears.

"O Mrs. Berry! I'm so young! Think of me—only just

seventeen!"

Mrs. Berry immediately dried her eyes to radiance. "Young, my dear! Nonsense! There's no so much harm in being young, here and there. I knew an Irish lady was married at fourteen. Her daughter married close over fourteen. She was a grandmother by thirty! When any strange man began, she used to ask him what pattern caps grandmothers wore. They'd stare! Bless you! the grandmother could have married over and over again. It was her daughter's fault, not hers, you know."

"She was three years younger," mused Lucy.

"She married beneath her, my dear. Ran off with her father's bailiff's son. 'Ah, Berry!' she'd say, 'if I hadn't been foolish, I should be my lady now—not Granny!' Her father never forgave her—left all his estates out of the family."

"Did her husband always love her?" Lucy preferred to know.

"In his way, my dear, he did," said Mrs. Berry, coming upon her matrimonial wisdom. "He couldn't help himself. If he left off, he began again. She was so clever, and did make him so comfortable. Cook! there wasn't such another cook out of a Alderman's kitchen; no, indeed! And she a born lady! That tells ye it's the duty of all women! She had her saying 'When the parlour fire gets low, put coals on the ketchen fire!' and a good saying it is to treasure. Such is man! no use in havin' their hearts if ye don't have their stomachs."

Perceiving that she grew abstruse, Mrs. Berry added briskly: "You know nothing about that yet, my dear. Only mind me and

mark me: don't neglect your cookery. Kissing don't last: cookery do!"

Here, with an aphorism worthy a place in *The Pilgrim's Scrip*, she broke off to go possetting for her dear invalid. Lucy was quite well; very eager to be allowed to rise and be ready when the knock should come. Mrs. Berry, in her loving considerateness for the little bride, positively commanded her to lie down, and be quiet, and submit to be nursed and cherished. For Mrs. Berry well knew that ten minutes alone with the hero could only be had while the little bride was in that unattainable position.

Thanks to her strategy, as she thought, her object was gained. The night did not pass before she learnt, from the hero's own mouth, that Mr. Richards, the father of the hero, and a stern lawyer, was adverse to his union with this young lady he loved, because of a ward of his, heiress to an immense property, whom he desired his son to espouse; and because his darling Letitia was a Catholic—Letitia, the sole daughter of a brave naval officer deceased, and in the hands of a savage uncle, who wanted to sacrifice this beauty to a brute of a son. Mrs. Berry listened credulously to the emphatic narrative, and spoke to the effect that the wickedness of old people formed the excuse for the wildness of young ones. The ceremonious administration of oaths of secrecy and devotion over, she was enrolled in the hero's band, which now numbered three, and entered upon the duties with feminine energy, for there are no conspirators like women. Ripton's lieutenancy became a sinecure, his rank merely titular.

He had never been married—he knew nothing about licences, except that they must be obtained, and were not difficult—he had not an idea that so many days' warning must be given to the clergyman of the parish where one of the parties was resident. How should he? All his forethought was comprised in the ring, and whenever the discussion of arrangements for the great event grew particularly hot and important, he would say, with a shrewd nod: "We mustn't forget the ring, you know, Mrs. Berry!" and the new member was only prevented by natural complacence from shouting: "Oh, drat ye! and your ring too." Mrs. Berry had acted conspicuously in fifteen marriages, by banns, and by licence, and to have such an obvious requisite dinned in her ears was exasperating. They could not have contracted alliance with an auxiliary more invaluable, an authority so profound; and they acknowledged it to themselves. The hero marched like an automaton at her bidding; Lieutenant Thompson was rejoiced to perform services as errand-boy in the enterprise.

"It's in hopes you'll be happier than me, I do it," said the devout and charitable Berry. "Marriages is made in heaven, they say; and if that's the case, I say they don't take much account of us below!"

Her own woeful experiences had been given to the hero in exchange for his story of cruel parents.

Richard vowed to her that he would henceforth hold it a duty to hunt out the wanderer from wedded bonds, and bring him back bound and suppliant.

"Oh, he'll come!" said Mrs. Berry, pursing prophetic wrinkles:

"he'll come of his own accord. Never anywhere will he meet such a cook as Bessy Berry! And he know her value in his heart of hearts. And I do believe, when he do come, I shall be opening these arms to him again, and not slapping his impudence in the face—I'm that soft! I always was—in matrimony, Mr. Richards!"

As when nations are secretly preparing for war, the docks and arsenals hammer night and day, and busy contractors measure time by inches, and the air hums around: for leagues as it were myriads of bees, so the house and neighbourhood of the matrimonial soft one resounded in the heroic style, and knew little of the changes of light decreed by Creation. Mrs. Berry was the general of the hour. Down to Doctors' Commons she expedited the hero, instructing him how boldly to face the Law, and fib: for that the Law never could mist a fib and a bold face. Down the hero went, and proclaimed his presence. And lo! the Law danced to him its sedatest lovely bear's-dance. Think ye the Lawless susceptible to him than flesh and blood? With a beautiful confidence it put the few familiar questions to him, and nodded to his replies: then stamped the bond, and took the fee. It must be an old vagabond at heart that can permit the irrevocable to go so cheap, even to a hero. For only mark him when he is petitioned by heroes and heroines to undo what he does so easily! That small archway of Doctors' Commons seems the eye of a needle, through which the lean purse has a way, somehow, of slipping more readily than the portly; but once through, all are camels alike, the lean purse an especially big camel. Dispensing

tremendous marriage as it does, the Law can have no conscience.

"I hadn't the slightest difficulty," said the exulting hero.

"Of course not!" returns Mrs. Berry. "It's as easy, if ye're in earnest, as buying a plum bun."

Likewise the ambassador of the hero went to claim the promise of the Church to be in attendance on a certain spot, on a certain day, and there hear oath of eternal fealty, and gird him about with all its forces: which the Church, receiving a wink from the Law, obsequiously engaged to do, for less than the price of a plum-cake.

Meantime, while craftsmen and skilled women, directed by Mrs. Berry, were toiling to deck the day at hand, Raynham and Belthorpe slept,—the former soundly; and one day was as another to them. Regularly every morning a letter arrived from Richard to his father, containing observations on the phenomena of London; remarks (mainly cynical) on the speeches and acts of Parliament; and reasons for not having yet been able to call on the Grandisons. They were certainly rather monotonous and spiritless. The baronet did not complain. That cold dutiful tone assured him there was no internal trouble or distraction. "The letters of a healthful physique!" he said to Lady Blandish, with sure insight. Complacently he sat and smiled, little witting that his son's ordeal was imminent, and that his son's ordeal was to be his own. Hippias wrote that his nephew was killing him by making appointments which he never kept, and altogether neglecting him in the most shameless way, so that his ganglionic centre was in

a ten times worse state than when he left Raynham. He wrote very bitterly, but it was hard to feel compassion for his offended stomach.

On the other hand, young Tom Blaize was not forthcoming, and had despatched no tidings whatever. Farmer Blaize smoked his pipe evening after evening, vastly disturbed. London was a large place—young Tom might be lost in it, he thought; and young Tom had his weaknesses. A wolf at Belthorpe, he was likely to be a sheep in London, as yokels have proved. But what had become of Lucy? This consideration almost sent Farmer Blaize off to London direct, and he would have gone had not his pipe enlightened him. A young fellow might play truant and get into a scrape, but a young man and a young woman were sure to be heard of, unless they were acting in complicity. Why, of course, young Tom had behaved like a man, the rascal! and married her outright there, while he had the chance. It was a long guess. Still it was the only reasonable way of accounting for his extraordinary silence, and therefore the farmer held to it that he had done the deed. He argued as modern men do who think the hero, the upsetter of ordinary calculations, is gone from us. So, after despatching a letter to a friend in town to be on the outlook for son Tom, he continued awhile to smoke his pipe, rather elated than not, and mused on the shrewd manner he should adopt when Master Honeymoon did appear.

Toward the middle of the second week of Richard's absence, Tom Bakewell came to Raynham for Cassandra, and privately

handed a letter to the Eighteenth Century, containing a request for money, and a round sum. The Eighteenth Century was as good as her word, and gave Tom a letter in return, enclosing a cheque on her bankers, amply providing to keep the heroic engine in motion at a moderate pace. Tom went back, and Raynham and Lobourne slept and dreamed not of the morrow. The System, wedded to Time, slept, and knew not how he had been outraged—anticipated by seven pregnant seasons. For Time had heard the hero swear to that legalizing instrument, and had also registered an oath. Ah me! venerable Hebrew Time! he is unforgiving. Half the confusion and fever of the world comes of this vendetta he declares against the hapless innocents who have once done him a wrong. They cannot escape him. They will never outlive it. The father of jokes, he is himself no joke; which it seems the business of men to discover.

The days roll round. He is their servant now. Mrs. Berry has a new satin gown, a beautiful bonnet, a gold brooch, and sweet gloves, presented to her by the hero, wherein to stand by his bride at the altar to-morrow; and, instead of being an old wary hen, she is as much a chicken as any of the party, such has been the magic of these articles. Fathers she sees accepting the facts produced for them by their children; a world content to be carved out as it pleases the hero.

At last Time brings the bridal eve, and is blest as a benefactor. The final arrangements are made; the bridegroom does depart; and Mrs. Berry lights the little bride to her bed. Lucy stops

on the landing where there is an old clock eccentrically correct that night. 'Tis the palpitating pause before the gates of her transfiguration. Mrs. Berry sees her put her rosy finger on the One about to strike, and touch all the hours successively till she comes to the Twelve that shall sound "Wife" in her ears on the morrow, moving her lips the while, and looking round archly solemn when she has done; and that sight so catches at Mrs. Berry's heart that, not guessing Time to be the poor child's enemy, she endangers her candle by folding Lucy warmly in her arms, whimpering; "Bless you for a darling! you innocent lamb! You shall be happy! You shall!"

Old Time gazes grimly ahead.

CHAPTER XXIX

Although it blew hard when Caesar crossed the Rubicon, the passage of that river is commonly calm; calm as Acheron. So long as he gets his fare, the ferryman does not need to be told whom he carries: he pulls with a will, and heroes may be over in half-an-hour. Only when they stand on the opposite bank, do they see what a leap they have taken. The shores they have relinquished shrink to an infinite remoteness. There they have dreamed: here they must act. There lie youth and irresolution: here manhood and purpose. They are veritably in another land: a moral Acheron divides their life. Their memories scarce seem their own! The *Philosophical Geography* (about to be published) observes that each man has, one time or other, a little Rubicon—a clear or a foul water to cross. It is asked him: "Wilt thou wed this Fate, and give up all behind thee?" And "I will," firmly pronounced, speeds him over. The above-named manuscript authority informs us, that by far the greater number of caresses rolled by this heroic flood to its sister stream below, are those of fellows who have repented their pledge, and have tried to swim back to the bank they have blotted out. For though every man of us may be a hero for one fatal minute, very few remain so after a day's march even: and who wonders that Madam Fate is indignant, and wears the features of the terrible Universal Fate to him? Fail before her, either in heart or in act, and lo, how the alluring loves in

her visage wither and sicken to what it is modelled on! Be your Rubicon big or small, clear or foul, it is the same: you shall not return. On—or to Acheron!— -I subscribe to that saying of The Pilgrim's Scrip:

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