

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE AMAZING
MARRIAGE.
VOLUME 2

George Meredith

The Amazing Marriage. Volume 2

«Public Domain»

Meredith G.

The Amazing Marriage. Volume 2 / G. Meredith — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER X	5
CHAPTER XI	10
CHAPTER XII	15
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	16

George Meredith

The Amazing Marriage – Volume 2

CHAPTER X

SMALL CAUSES

A clock sounded one of the later morning hours of the night as Gower Woodseer stood at his hotel door, having left Fleetwood with a band of revellers. The night was now clear. Stars were low over the ridge of pines, dropped to a league of our strange world to record the doings. Beneath this roof lay the starry She. He was elected to lie beneath it also: and he beheld his heavenly lady floating on the lull of soft white cloud among her sister spheres. After the way of imaginative young men, he had her features more accurately now she was hidden, and he idealized her more. He could escape for a time from his coil of similes and paint for himself the irids of her large, long, grey eyes darkly rimmed; purest water-grey, lucid within the ring, beneath an arch of lashes. He had them fast; but then he fell to contemplating their exceeding rareness; And the mystery of the divinely grey swung a kindled fancy to the flight with some queen-witch of woods, of whom a youth may dream under the spell of twilights, East or West, among forest branches.

She had these marvellous eyes and the glamour for men. She had not yet met a man with the poetical twist in the brain to prize her elementally. All admitted the glamour; none of her courtiers were able to name it, even the poetical head giving it a name did not think of the witch in her looks as a witch in her deeds, a modern daughter of the mediaeval. To her giant squire the eyes of the lady were queer: they were unlit glass lamps to her French suppliant; and to the others, they were attractively uncommon; the charm for them being in her fine outlines, her stature, carriage of her person, and unalterable composure; particularly her latent daring. She had the effect on the general mind of a lofty crag- castle with a history. There was a whiff of gunpowder exciting the atmosphere in the anecdotal part of the history known.

Woodseer sat for a certain time over his note-book. He closed it with a thrilling conceit of the right thing written down; such as entomologists feel when they have pinned the rare insect. But what is butterfly or beetle compared with the chiselled sentences carved out of air to constitute us part owner of the breathing image and spirit of an adored fair woman? We repeat them, and the act of repeating them makes her come close on ours, by virtue of the eagle thought in the stamped gold of the lines.

Then, though she is not ever to be absolutely ours (and it is an impoverishing desire that she should be), we have beaten out the golden sentence—the essential she and we in one. But is it so precious after all? A suspicious ring of an adjective drops us on a sickening descent.

The author dashed at his book, examined, approved, keenly enjoyed, and he murderously scratched the adjective. She stood better without it, as a bright planet star issuing from clouds, which are perhaps an adornment to our hackneyed moon. This done, he restored the book to his coat's breast-pocket, smiling or sneering at the rolls of bank-notes there, disdaining to count them. They stuffed an inner waistcoat pocket and his trousers also. They at any rate warranted that we can form a calculation of the chances, let Lord Fleetwood rave as he may please.

Woodseer had caught a glimpse of the elbow-point of his coat when flinging it back to the chair. There was distinctly abrasion. Philosophers laugh at such things. But they must be the very ancient pallium philosophers, ensconced in tubs, if they pretend to merriment over the spectacle of nether garments gapped at the spot where man is most vulnerable. He got loose from them and held them up to the candle, and the rays were admitted, neither winking nor peeping. Serviceable old clothes, no doubt. Time had not dealt them the final kick before they scored a good record.

They dragged him, nevertheless, to a sort of confession of some weakness, that he could not analyze for the swirl of emotional thoughts in the way; and they had him to the ground. An eagle of the poetic becomes a mere squat toad through one of these pretty material strokes. Where then is Philosophy? But who can be philosopher and the fervent admirer of a glorious lady? Ask again, who in that frowzy garb can presume to think of her or stand within fifty miles of her orbit?

A dreary two hours brought round daylight. Woodseer quitted his restless bed and entered the abjured habiliments, chivalrous enough to keep from denouncing them until he could cast the bad skin they now were to his uneasy sensations. He remembered having stumbled and fallen on the slope of the hill into this vale, and probably then the mischief had occurred though a brush would have, been sufficient, the slightest collision. Only, it was odd that the accident should have come to pass just previous to his introduction. How long antecedent was it? He belaboured his memory to reckon how long it was from the moment of the fall to the first sight of that lady.

His window looked down on the hotel stable-yard. A coach-house door was open. Odd or not—and it certainly looked like fate—that he should be bowing to his lady so shortly after the mishap expelling him, he had to leave the place. A groom in the yard was hailed, and cheerily informed him he could be driven to Carlsruhe as soon as the coachman had finished his breakfast. At Carlsruhe a decent refitting might be obtained, and he could return from exile that very day, thanks to the praiseworthy early hours of brave old Germany.

He had swallowed a cup of coffee with a roll of stale bread, in the best of moods, and entered his carriage; he was calling the order to start when a shout surprised his ear: 'The fiddler bolts!'

Captain Abrane's was the voice. About twenty paces behind, Abrane, Fleetwood, and one whom they called Chummy Potts, were wildly waving arms. Woodseer could hear the captain's lowered roar: 'Race you, Chummy, couple of louis, catch him first!' The two came pelting up to the carriage abreast.

They were belated revellers, and had been carelessly strolling under the pinky cloudlets bedward, after a prolonged carousal with the sons and daughters of hilarious nations, until the apparition of Virgin Luck on the wing shocked all prospect of a dead fight with the tables that day.

'Here, come, no, by Jove, you, Mr. Woodsir! won't do, not a bit! can't let you go,' cried Abrane, as he puffed. 'What! cut and run and leave us, post winnings—bankers—knock your luck on the head! What a fellow! Can't let you. Countess never forgive us. You promised—swore it—play for her. Struck all ahead to hear of your play! You've got the trick. Her purse for you in my pocket. Never a fellow played like you. Cool as a cook over a-gridiron! Comme un phare! St. Ombre says—that Frenchman. You astonished the Frenchman! And now cut and run? Can't allow it. Honour of the country at stake.'

'Hands off!' Woodseer bellowed, feeling himself a leaky vessel in dock, his infirmities in danger of exposure. 'If you pull!—what the deuce do you want? Stop!'

'Out you come,' said the giant, and laughed at the fun to his friends, who were entirely harmonious when not violently dissenting, as is the way with Night's rollickers before their beds have reconciled them to the day-beams.

Woodseer would have had to come and was coming; he happened to say:

'Don't knock my pipe out of my mouth,' and touched a chord in the giant.

'All—right; smoke your pipe,' was answered to his remonstrance.

During the amnesty, Fleetwood inquired: 'Where are you going?'

'Far a drive,—to be sure. Don't you see!'

'You'll return?'

'I intend to return.'

'He's beastly excited,' quoth Abrane.

Fleetwood silenced him, though indeed Woodseer appeared suspiciously restive.

'Step down and have a talk with me before you start. You're not to go yet.'

'I must. I'm in a hurry.'

'What 's the hurry?'

'I want to smoke and think.'

'Takes a carriage on the top of the morning to smoke and think! Hark at that!' Abrane sang out. 'Oh, come along quietly, you fellow, there's a good fellow! It concerns us all, every man Jack; we're all bound up in your fortunes. Fellow with luck like yours can't pretend to behave independently. Out of reason!'

'Do you give me your word you return?' said Fleetwood.

Woodseer replied: 'Very well, I do; there, I give my word. Hang it! now I know what they mean by "anything for a quiet life." Just a shake brings us down on that cane-bottomed chair!'

'You return to-day?'

'To-day, yes, yes.'

Fleetwood signified the captive's release; and Abrane immediately suggested:

'Pop old Chummy in beside the fellow to mount guard.'

Potts was hustled and precipitated into the carriage by the pair, with whom he partook this last glimmer of their night's humorous extravagances, for he was an easy creature. The carriage drove off.

'Keep him company!' they shouted.

'Escort him back!' said he, nodding.

He remarked to Woodseer: 'With your permission,' concerning the seat he took, and that 'a draught of morning air would do him good.' Then he laughed politely, exchanged wavy distant farewells with his comrades, touched a breast-pocket for his case of cigars, pulled forth one, obtained 'the loan of a light,' blew clouds and fell into the anticipated composure, quite understanding the case and his office.

Both agreed as to the fine morning it was. Woodseer briefly assented to his keeper's reiterated encomium on the morning, justified on oath. A fine morning, indeed. 'Damned if I think I ever saw so fine a morning!' Potts cried. He had no other subject of conversation with this hybrid: and being equally disposed for hot discourse or for sleep, the deprivation of the one and the other forced him to seek amusement in his famous reading of character; which was profound among the biped equine, jockeys, turfmen, sharpers, pugilists, demireps. He fronted Woodseer with square shoulders and wide knees, an elbow on one, a fist on the other, engaged in what he termed the 'prodding of his eel,' or 'nicking of his man,' a method of getting straight at the riddle of the fellow by the test of how long he could endure a flat mute stare and return look for look unblinking. The act of smoking fortifies and partly covers the insolence. But if by chance an equable, not too narrowly focussed, counterstare is met, our impertinent inquisitor may resemble the fisherman pulled into deep waters by his fish. Woodseer perused his man, he was not attempting to fathom him: he had besides other stuff in his head. Potts had naught, and the poor particle he was wriggled under detection.

'Tobacco before breakfast!' he said disgustedly tossing his cigar to the road. 'Your pipe holds on. Bad thing, I can tell you, that smoking on an empty stomach. No trainer'd allow it, not for a whole fee or double. Kills your wind. Let me ask you, my good sir, are you going to turn? We've sat a fairish stretch. I begin to want my bath and a shave, linen and coffee. Thirsty' as a dog.'

He heard with stupefaction, that he could alight on the spot, if he pleased, otherwise he would be driven into Carlsruhe. And now they had a lingual encounter, hot against cool; but the eyes of Chummy Potts having been beaten, his arguments and reproaches were not backed by the powerful looks which are an essential part of such eloquence as he commanded. They fled from his enemy's curiously, even while he was launching epithets. His pathetic position subjected him to beg that Woodseer would direct the driver to turn, for he had no knowledge of 'their German lingo.' And said he: 'You've nothing to laugh at, that I can see. I'm at your mercy, you brute; caught in a trap. I never walk;—and the sun fit to fry a mackerel along that road! I apologize for abusing you; I can't do more. You're an infernally clever player—there! And, upon my soul, I could drink ditchwater! But if you're going in for transactions at Carlsruhe, mark my words, your luck's gone. Laugh as much as you like.'

Woodseer happened to be smiling over the excellent reason for not turning back which inflicted the wofulness. He was not without sympathy for a thirsty wretch, and guessing, at the sight of an avenue of limes to the left of the road, that a wayside inn was below, he said: 'You can have coffee or beer in two minutes,' and told the driver where to pull up.

The sight of a grey-jacketed, green-collared sportsman, dog at heel, crossing the flat land to the hills of the forest, pricked him enviously, and caused him to ask what change had come upon him, that he should be hurrying to a town for a change of clothes. Just as Potts was about to jump out, a carriage, with a second behind it, left the inn door. He rubbed a hand on his unshaven chin, tried a glance at his shirt-front, and remarking: 'It won't be any one who knows me,' stood to let the carriages pass. In the first were a young lady and a gentleman: the lady brilliantly fair, an effect of auburn hair and complexion, despite the signs of a storm that had swept them and had not cleared from her eyelids. Apparently her maid, a damsel sitting straight up, occupied the carriage following; and this fresh-faced young person twice quickly and bluntly bent her head as she was driven by. Potts was unacquainted with the maid. But he knew the lady well, or well enough for her inattention to be the bigger puzzle. She gazed at the Black Forest hills in the steadiest manner, with eyes betraying more than they saw; which solved part of the puzzle, of course. Her reasons for declining to see him were exposed by the presence of the gentleman beside her. At the same time, in so highly bred a girl, a defenceless exposure was unaccountable. Half a nod and the shade of a smile would have been the proper course; and her going along on the road to the valley seemed to say it might easily have been taken; except that there had evidently been a bit of a scene.

Potts ranked Henrietta's beauty far above her cousin Livia's. He was therefore personally offended by her disregard of him, and her bit of a scene with the fellow carrying her off did him injury on behalf of his friend Fleetwood. He dismissed Woodseer curtly. Thirsting more to gossip than to drink, he took a moody draught of beer at the inn, and by the aid of a conveyance, hastily built of rotten planks to serve his needs, and drawn by a horse of the old wars,' as he reported on his arrival at Baden,—reached that home of the maltreated innocents twenty minutes before the countess and her party were to start for lunch up the Lichtenthal. Naturally, he was abused for letting his bird fly: but as he was shaven, refreshed, and in clean linen, he could pull his shirt- cuffs and take seat at his breakfast-table with equanimity while Abrane denounced him.

'I'll bet you the fellow's luck has gone,' said Potts. 'He 's no new hand and you don't think him so either, Fleet. I've looked into the fellow's eye and seen a leery old badger at the bottom of it. Talks vile stuff. However, 'perhaps I didn't drive out on that sweltering Carlsruhe road for nothing.'

He screwed a look at the earl, who sent Abrane to carry a message and heard the story Potts had to tell.

'Henrietta Fakenham! no mistake about her; driving out from a pothouse; man beside her, military man; might be a German. And, if you please, quite unacquainted with your humble servant, though we were as close as you to me. Something went wrong in that pothouse. Red eyes. There had been a scene, one could swear. Behind the lady another carriage, and her maid. Never saw the girl before, and sets to bowing and smirking at me, as if I was the-fellow of all others! Comical. I made sure they were bound for this place. They were on the Strasburg road. No sign of them?'

'You speak to me?' said Fleetwood.

Potts muttered. He had put his foot into it.

'You have a bad habit of speaking to yourself,' Fleetwood remarked, and left him. He suffered from the rustics he had to deal with among his class, and it was not needed that he should thunder at them to make his wrath felt.

Livia swam in, asking: 'What has come to Russett? He passed me in one of his black fits.'

The tale of the Carlsruhe road was repeated by Potts. She reproved him. 'How could you choose Russett for such a report as that! The admiral was on the road behind. Henrietta—you're sure it was she? German girls have much the same colouring. The gentleman with her must have been one of

the Court equerries. They were driving to some chateau or battlefield the admiral wanted to inspect. Good-looking man? Military man?

'Oh! the man! pretty fair, I dare say,' Potts rejoined. 'If it wasn't Henrietta Fakenham, I see with the back of my head. German girl! The maid was a German girl.'

'That may well be,' said Livia.

She conceived the news to be of sufficient importance for her to countermand the drive up the Lichtenthal, and take the Carlsruhe road instead; for Henrietta was weak, and Chillon Kirby an arch-plotter, and pleader too, one of the desperate lovers. He was outstaying his leave of absence already, she believed; he had to be in England. If he feared to lose Henrietta, he would not hesitate to carry her off. Livia knew him, and knew the power of his pleading with a firmer woman than Henrietta.

CHAPTER XI

THE PRISONER OF HIS WORD

Nothing to rouse alarm was discovered at Carlsruhe. Livia's fair cousin was there with the red-haired gaunt girl of the mountains; and it was frankly stated by Henrietta, that she had accompanied the girl a certain distance along the Strasburg road, for her to see the last of her brother Chillon on his way to England. Livia was not the woman to push inquiries. On that subject, she merely said, as soon as they were alone together:

'You seem to have had the lion's share of the parting.'

'Yes, we passed Mr. Chumley Potts,' was Henrietta's immediate answer; and her reference to him disarmed Livia.

They smiled at his name transiently, but in agreement: the tattler-spout of their set was, a fatal person to encounter, and each deemed the sudden apparition of him in the very early morning along the Carlsruhe road rather magical.

'You place particular confidence in Russett's fidelity to his word, Riette—as you have been hearing yourself called. You should be serious by this time. Russett won't bear much more. I counted on the night of the Ball for the grand effect. You will extinguish every woman there—and if he is absent?'

'I shall excuse him.'

'You are not in a position to be so charitable. You ought to know your position, and yourself too, a little better than you do. How could you endure poverty? Chillon Kirby stands in his uniform, and all's told. He can manoeuvre, we know. He got the admiral away to take him to those reviews cleverly. But is he thinking of your interests when he does it? He requires twenty years of active service to give you a roof to your head. I hate such allusions. But look for a moment at your character: you must have ordinary luxuries and pleasures, and if you were to find yourself grinding against common necessities—imagine it! Russett is quite manageable. He is, trust me! He is a gentleman; he has more ability than most young men: he can do anything he sets his mind to do. He has his great estates and fortune all in his own hands. We call him eccentric. He is only young, with a lot of power. Add, he's in love, and some one distracts him. Not love, do you say?—you look it. He worships. He has no chance given him to show himself at his best. Perhaps he is off again now. Will you bet me he is not?'

'I should incline to make the bet, if I betted,' said Henrietta. 'His pride is in his word, and supposing he's in love, it's with his pride, which never quits him.'

'There's firmness in a man who has pride of that kind. You must let me take you back to Baden. I hold to having you with me to-day. You must make an appearance there. The admiral will bring us his Miss Kirby to-morrow, if he is bound to remain here to-night. There's no harm in his bachelor dinners. I suspect his twinges of gout come of the prospect of affairs when he lands in England. Remember our bill with Madame Clemence. There won't be the ghost of a bank-note for me if Russett quits the field; we shall all be stranded.'

Henrietta inquired: 'Does it depend on my going with you to-day?'

'Consider, that he is now fancying a thousand things. We won't talk of the road to Paris.'

A shot of colour swept over Henrietta.

'I will speak to papa:—if he can let me go. He has taken to Miss Kirby.'

'Does she taste well?'

Henrietta debated. 'It's impossible to dislike her. Oh! she is wild! She knows absolutely nothing of the world. She can do everything we can't—or don't dare to try.—Men would like her. Papa's beginning to doat. He says she would have made a first-rate soldier. She fears blood as little as her

morning cup of milk. One of the orderlies fell rather badly from a frightened horse close by our carriage. She was out in a moment and had his head on her lap, calling to papa to keep the carriage fast and block the way of the squadron, for the man's leg was hurt. I really thought we were lost. At these manoeuvres anything may happen, at any instant. Papa will follow the horse-artillery. You know his vanity to be a military quite as much as a naval commander like the Greeks and Romans, he says. We took the bruised man into our carriage and drove him to camp, Carinthia nursing him on the way.'

'Carinthia! She's well fitted with her name. What with her name and her hair and her build and her singular style of attire, one wonders at her coming into civilized parts. She 's utterly unlike Chillon.'

Henrietta reddened at the mention of one of her own thoughts in the contrasting of the pair.

They had their points of likeness, she said.

It did not concern Livia to hear what these were. Back to Baden, with means to procure the pleasant shocks of the galvanic battery there, was her thought; for she had a fear of the earl's having again departed in a huff at Henrietta's behaviour.

The admiral consented that his daughter should go, as soon as he heard that Miss Kirby was to stay. He had when a young man met her famous father; he vowed she was the Old Buccaneer young again in petticoats and had made prize of an English man-of-war by storm; all the profit, however, being his. This he proved with a courteous clasp of the girl and a show of the salute on her cheek, which he presumed to take at the night's farewell. 'She's my tonic,' he proclaimed heartily. She seemed to Livia somewhat unstrung and toneless. The separation from her brother in the morning might account for it. And a man of the admiral's age could be excused if he exalted the girl. Senility, like infancy, is fond of plain outlines for the laying on of its paints. The girl had rugged brows, a short nose, red hair; no young man would look at her twice. She was utterly unlike Chillon! Kissing her hand to Henrietta from the steps of the hotel, the girl's face improved.

Livia's little squire, Sir Meeson Corby, ejaculated as they were driving down the main street, 'Fleetwood's tramp! There he goes. Now see, Miss Fakenham, the kind of object Lord Fleetwood picks up and calls friend!— calls that object friend! . . . But, what? He has been to a tailor and a barber!'

'Stop the coachman. Run, tell Mr. Woodseer I wish him to join us,' Livia said, and Sir Meeson had to thank his tramp for a second indignity. He protested, he simulated remonstrance,—he had to go, really feeling a sickness.

The singular-looking person, whose necessities or sense of the decencies had, unknown to himself and to the others, put them all in motion that day, swung round listening to the challenge to arms, as the puffy little man's delivery of the countess's message sounded. He was respectably clad, he thought, in the relief of his escape from the suit of clothes discarded, and he silently followed Sir Meeson's trot to the carriage. 'Should have mistaken you for a German to-day, sir,' the latter said, and trotted on.

'A stout one,' Woodseer replied, with his happy indifference to his exterior.

His dark lady's eyes were kindly overlooking, like the heavens. Her fair cousin, to whom he bowed, awakened him to a perception of the spectacle causing the slight, quick arrest of her look, in an astonishment not unlike the hiccup in speech, while her act of courtesy proceeded. At once he was conscious of the price he paid for respectability, and saw the Teuton skin on the slim Cambrian, baggy at shoulders, baggy at seat, pinched at the knees, short at the heels, showing outrageously every spot where he ought to have been bigger or smaller. How accept or how reject the invitation to drive in such company to Baden!

'You're decided enough, sir, in your play, they tell me,' the vindictive little baronet commented on his hesitation, and Woodseer sprang to the proffered vacant place. But he had to speak of his fly waiting for him at the steps of a certain hotel.

'Best hotel in the town!' Sir Beeson exclaimed pointedly to Henrietta, reading her constraint with this comical object before her. It was the admiral's hotel they stopped at.

'Be so good as to step down and tell the admiral he is to bring Madame Clemence in his carriage to-morrow; and on your way, you will dismiss Mr. Woodseer's fly,' Livia mildly addressed her squire. He stared: again he had to go, muttering: 'That nondescript's footman!' and his mischance in being checked and crossed and humiliated perpetually by a dirty-fisted vagabond impostor astounded him. He sent the flyman to the carriage for orders.

Admiral Fakenham and Carinthia descended. Sir Meeson heard her cry out: 'Is it you!' and up stood the pretentious lout in the German sack, affecting the graces of a born gentleman fresh from Paris,—bowing, smirking, excusing himself for something; and he jumped down to the young lady, he talked intimately with her, with a joker's air; he roused the admiral to an exchange of jokes, and the countess and Miss Fakenham more than smiled; evidently at his remarks, unobservant of the preposterous figure he cut. Sir Meeson Corby had intimations of the disintegration of his country if a patent tramp burlesquing in those clothes could be permitted to amuse English ladies of high station, quite at home with them. Among the signs of England's downfall, this was decidedly one. What to think of the admiral's favourite when, having his arm paternally on her shoulder, she gave the tramp her hand at parting, and then blushed! All that the ladies had to say about it was, that a spread of colour rather went to change the character of her face.

Carinthia had given Woodseer her hand and reddened under the recollection of Chillon's words to her as they mounted the rise of the narrow vale, after leaving the lame gentleman to his tobacco on the grass below the rocks. Her brother might have counselled her wisely and was to be obeyed. Only, the great pleasure in seeing the gentleman again inspired gratitude: he brought the scene to her; and it was alive, it chatted and it beckoned; it neighboured her home; she had passed it on her walk away from her home; the gentleman was her link to the mountain paths; he was just outside an association with her father and mother. At least, her thinking of them led to him, he to them. Now that she had lost Chillon, no one was near to do so much. Besides, Chillon loved Henrietta; he was her own. His heart was hers and his mind his country's. This gentleman loved the mountains; the sight of him breathed mountain air. To see him next day was her anticipation: for it would be at the skirts of hilly forest land, where pinetrees are a noble family, different from the dusty firs of the weariful plains, which had tired her eyes of late.

Baden was her first peep at the edges of the world since she had grown to be a young woman. She had but a faint idea of the significance of gambling. The brilliant lights, the band music, the sitting groups and company of promenaders were novelties; the Ball of the ensuing night at the Schloss would be a wonder, she acknowledged in response to Henrietta, who was trying to understand her; and she admired her ball-dress, she said, looking unintelligently when she heard that she would be guilty of slaying numbers of gentlemen before the night was over. Madame Clemence thought her chances in that respect as good as any other young lady's, if only she could be got to feel interested. But at a word of the pine forest, and saying she intended to climb the hills early with the light in the morning, a pointed eagerness flushed Carinthia, the cold engraving became a picture of colour.

She was out with the earliest light. Yesterday's parting between Chillon and Henrietta had taught her to know some little about love; and if her voice had been heeded by Chillon's beloved, it would not have been a parting. Her only success was to bring a flood of tears from Henrietta. The tears at least assured her that her brother's beautiful girl had no love for the other one,—the young nobleman of the great wealth, who was to be at the Ball, and had 'gone flying,' Admiral Fakenham shrugged to say; for Lord Fleetwood was nowhere seen.

The much talk of him on the promenade overnight fetched his name to her thoughts; he scarcely touched a mind that her father filled when she was once again breathing early morning air among the stems of climbing pines, broken alleys of the low-sweeping spruce branches and the bare straight shafts carrying their heads high in the march upward. Her old father was arch-priest of such forest land, always recoverable to her there. The suggestion of mountains was enough to make her mind play, and her old father and she were aware of one another without conversing in speech. He pointed

at things to observe; he shared her satisfied hunger for the solitudes of the dumb and growing and wild sweet-smelling. He would not let a sorrowful thought backward or an apprehensive idea forward disturb the scene. A half-uprooted pine-tree stem propped mid-fall by standing comrades, and the downy drop to ground and muted scurry up the bark of long-brush squirrels, cocktail on the wary watch, were noticed by him as well as by her; even the rotting timber drift, bark and cones on the yellow pine needles, and the tortuous dwarf chestnut pushing level out, with a strain of the head up, from a crevice of mossed rock, among ivy and ferns; he saw what his girl saw. Power of heart was her conjuring magician.

She climbed to the rock-slabs above. This was too easily done. The poor bit of effort excited her frame to desire a spice of danger, her walk was towering in the physical contempt of a mountain girl for petty lowland obstructions. And it was just then, by the chance of things—by the direction of events, as Dame Gossip believes it to be—while colour, expression, and her proud stature marked her from her sex, that a gentleman, who was no other than Lord Fleetwood, passed Carinthia, coming out of the deeper pine forest.

Some distance on, round a bend of the path, she was tempted to adventure by a projected forked head of a sturdy blunted and twisted little rock- fostered forest tree pushing horizontally for growth about thirty feet above the lower ground. She looked on it, and took a step down to the stem soon after.

Fleetwood had turned and followed, merely for the final curious peep at an unexpected vision; he had noticed the singular shoot of thick timber from the rock, and the form of the goose-neck it rose to, the sprout of branches off the bill in the shape of a crest. And now a shameful spasm of terror seized him at sight of a girl doing what he would have dreaded to attempt. She footed coolly, well-balanced, upright. She seated herself.

And there let her be. She was a German girl, apparently. She had an air of breeding, something more than breeding. German families of the nobles give out, here and there, as the Great War showed examples of, intrepid young women, who have the sharp lines of character to render them independent of the graces. But, if a young woman out alone in the woods was hardly to be counted among the well-born, she held rank above them. Her face and bearing might really be taken to symbolize the forest life. She was as individual a representative as the Tragic and Comic masks, and should be got to stand between them for sign of the naturally straight- growing untrained, a noble daughter of the woods.

Not comparable to Henrietta in feminine beauty, she was on an upper plateau, where questions as to beauty are answered by other than the shallow aspect of a girl. But would Henrietta eclipse her if they were side by side? Fleetwood recalled the strange girl's face. There was in it a savage poignancy in serenity unexampled among women—or modern women. One might imagine an apotheosis of a militant young princess of Goths or Vandals, the glow of blessedness awakening her martial ardours through the languor of the grave:—Woodseer would comprehend and hit on the exact image to portray her in a moment, Fleetwood thought, and longed for that fellow.

He walked hurriedly back to the stunted rock tree. The damsel had vanished. He glanced below. She had not fallen. He longed to tell Woodseer he had seen a sort of Carinthia sister, cousin, one of the family. A single glimpse of her had raised him out of his grovelling perturbations, cooled and strengthened him, more than diverting the course of the poison Henrietta infused, and to which it disgraced him to be so subject. He took love unmanfully; the passion struck at his weakness; in wrath at the humiliation, if only to revenge himself for that, he could be fiendish; he knew it, and loathed the desired fair creature who caused and exposed to him these cracks in his nature, whence there came a brimstone stench of the infernal pits. And he was made for better. Of this he was right well assured. Superior to station and to wealth, to all mundane advantages, he was the puppet of a florid puppet girl; and he had slept at the small inn of a village hard by, because it was intolerable to him to see the face that had been tearful over her lover's departure, and hear her praises of the man she trusted to keep his word, however grievously she wounded him.

He was the prisoner of his word;—rather like the donkeys known as married men: rather more honourable than most of them. He had to be present at the ball at the Schloss and behold his loathed Henrietta, suffer torture of chains to the rack, by reason of his having promised the bitter coquette he would be there. So hellish did the misery seem to him, that he was relieved by the prospect of lying a whole day long in loneliness with the sunshine of the woods, occasionally conjuring up the antidote face of the wood-sprite before he was to undergo it. But, as he was not by nature a dreamer, only dreamed of the luxury of being one, he soon looked back with loathing on a notion of relief to come from the state of ruminating animal, and jumped up and shook off another of men's delusions—that they can, if they have the heart to suffer pain, deaden it with any semi-poetical devices, similar to those which Rufus Abrane's 'fiddler fellow' practised and was able to carry out because he had no blood. The spite of a present entire opposition to Woodseer's professed views made him exult in the thought, that the mouther of sentences was likely to be at work stultifying them and himself in the halls there below during the day. An imp of mischief offered consolatory sport in those halls of the Black Goddess; already he regarded his recent subservience to the conceited and tripped peripatetic philosopher as among the ignominies he had cast away on his road to a general contempt; which is the position of a supreme elevation for particularly sensitive young men.

Pleasure in the scenery had gone, and the wood-sprite was a flitted vapour; he longed to be below there, observing Abrane and Potts and the philosopher confounded, and the legible placidity of Countess Livia. Nevertheless, he hung aloft, feeding where he could, impatient of the solitudes, till night, when, according to his guess, the ladies were at their robing.

Half the fun was over: but the tale of it, narrated in turn by Abrane and his Chummy Potts on the promenade, was a very good half. The fiddler had played for the countess and handed her back her empty purse, with a bow and a pretty speech. Nothing had been seen of him since. He had lost all his own money besides. 'As of course he would,' said Potts. 'A fellow calculating the chances catches at a knife in the air.'

'Every franc-piece he had!' cried Abrane. 'And how could the jackass expect to keep his luck! Flings off his old suit and comes back here with a rig of German bags—you never saw such a figure!—Shoreditch Jew's holiday!—why, of course, the luck wouldn't stand that.'

They confessed ruefully to having backed him a certain distance, notwithstanding. 'He took it so coolly, just as if paying for goods across a counter.'

'And he had something to bear, Braney, when you fell on him,' said Potts, and murmured aside: 'He can be smartish. Hears me call Braney Rufus, and says he, like a fellow-chin on his fiddle—"Captain Mountain, Rufus Mus". Not bad, for a counter.'"

Fleetwood glanced round: he could have wrung Woodseer's hand. He saw young Cressett instead, and hailed him: 'Here you are, my gallant! You shall flash your maiden sword tonight. When I was under your age by a long count, I dealt sanctimoniousness a flick o' the cheek, and you shall, and let 'em know you're a man. Come and have your first boar-hunt along with me. Petticoats be hanged.'

The boy showed some recollection of the lectures of his queen, but he had not the vocables for resistance to an imperative senior at work upon sneaking inclinations. 'Promised Lady F.'—do you hear him?' Fleetwood called to the couple behind; and as gamblers must needs be parasites, manly were the things they spoke to invigorate the youthful plunger and second the whim of their paymaster.

At half-past eleven, the prisoner of his word entered under the Schloss partico, having vowed to himself on the way, that he would satisfy the formulas to gain release by a deferential bow to the great personages, and straightway slip out into the heavenly starlight, thence down among the jolly Parisian and Viennese Bacchanals.

CHAPTER XII

HENRIETTA'S LETTER TREATING OF THE GREAT EVENT

By the first light of an autumn morning, Henrietta sat at her travelling- desk, to shoot a spark into the breast of her lover with the story of the great event of the night. For there had been one, one of our biggest, beyond all tongues and trumpets and possible anticipations. Wonder at it hammered on incredulity as she wrote it for fact, and in writing had vision of her lover's eyes over the page.

'Monsieur Du Lac!

'Grey Dawn. 'You are greeted. This, if you have been tardy on the journey home, will follow close on the heels of the prowest, I believe truest, of knights, and bear perhaps to his quick mind some help to the solution he dropped a hint of seeking.

'The Ball in every way a success. Grand Duke and Duchess perfect in courtesy, not a sign of the German morgue. Livia splendid. Compared to Day and Night. But the Night eclipses the Day. A summer sea of dancing.

Who, think you, eclipsed those two?

'I tell you the very truth when I say your Carinthia did. If you had seen her,—the "poor dear girl" you sigh to speak of,—with the doleful outlook on her fortunes: "portionless, unattractive!" Chillon, she was magical!

You cannot ever have seen her irradiated with happiness. Her pleasure in the happiness of all around her was part of the charm. One should be a poet to describe her. It would task an artist to paint the rose-crystal she became when threading her way through the groups to be presented. This is not meant to say that she looked beautiful. It was the something above beauty—more unique and impressive—like the Alpine snow-cloak towering up from the flowery slopes you know so well and I a little.

'You choose to think, is it Riette who noticed my simple sister so closely before . . .? for I suppose you to be reading this letter a second time and reflecting as you read. In the first place, acquaintance with her has revealed that she is not the simple person—only in her manner. Under the beams of subsequent events, it is true I see her more picturesquely. But I noticed also just a suspicion of the "grenadier" stride when she was on the march to make her curtsy. But Livia had no cause for chills and quivers. She was not the very strange bird requiring explanatory excuses; she dances excellently, and after the first dance, I noticed she minced her steps in the walk with her partner. She catches the tone readily. If not the image of her mother, she has inherited her mother's bent for the graces; she needs but a small amount of practice.

'Take my assurance of that; and you know who has critical eyes. Your anxiety may rest; she is equal to any station.

'As expected by me, my Lord Tyrant appeared, though late, near midnight. I saw him bowing to the Ducal party. Papa had led your "simple sister" there. Next I saw the Tyrant and Carinthia conversing. Soon they were dancing together, talking interestedly, like cheerful comrades. Whatever his faults, he has the merit of being a man of his word. He said he would come, he did not wish to come, and he came.

'His word binds him—I hope not fatally; irrevocably, it certainly does. There is charm of character in that. His autocrat airs can be forgiven to a man who so profoundly respects his word.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.