GEORGE MEREDITH

LORD ORMONT AND HIS AMINTA. VOLUME 3

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Содержание

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CHAPTER XII
MORE OF CUPER'S BOYS

Entering the dining-room at the appointed minute in a punctual household, Mrs. Lawrence informed the company that she had seen a Horse Guards orderly at the trot up the street. Weyburn said he was directing a boy to ring the bell of the house for him. Lord Ormont went to the window.

'Amends and honours?' Mrs. Lawrence hummed and added an operatic flourish of an arm. Something like it might really be imagined. A large square missive was handed to the footman. Thereupon the orderly trotted off.

My lord took seat at table, telling the footman to lay 'that parcel' beside the clock on the mantelpiece. Aminta and Mrs. Lawrence gave out a little cry of bird or mouse, pitiable to hear: they could not wait, they must know, they pished at sight of plates. His look deferred to their good pleasure, like the dead hand of a clock under key; and Weyburn placed the missive

before him, seeing by the superscription that it was not official.

It was addressed, in the Roman hand of a boy's copybook writing, to

> General the Earl of Ormont, I.C.B., etc.,
> Horse Guards,
> London.'

The earl's eyebrows creased up over the address; they came down low on the contents.

He resumed his daily countenance. 'Nothing of importance,' he said to the ladies.

Mrs. Lawrence knocked the table with her knuckles. Aminta put out a hand, in sign of her wish.

'Pray let me see it.'

'After lunch will do.'

'No, no, no! We are women—we are women,' cried Mrs. Lawrence.

'How can it concern women?'

'As well ask how a battle-field concerns them!'

'Yes, the shots hit us behind you,' said Aminta; and she, too, struck the table.

He did not prolong their torture. Weyburn received the folio sheet and passed it on. Aminta read. Mrs. Lawrence jumped from her chair and ran to the countess's shoulder; her red lips formed the petitioning word to the earl for the liberty she was bent to take.

'Peep? if you like,' my lord said, jesting at the blank she would

find, and soft to the pretty play of her mouth.

When the ladies had run to the end of it, he asked them: 'Well; now then?'

'But it's capital—the dear laddies!' Mrs. Lawrence exclaimed.

Aminta's eyes met Weyburn's.

She handed him the sheet of paper; upon the transmission of which empty thing from the Horse Guards my lord commented: 'An orderly!'

Weyburn scanned it rapidly, for the table had been served.

The contents were these:

'HIGH BRENT NEAR ARTSWELL.

'April 7th.

'To GENERAL THE EARL OF ORMONT

'Cavalry.

'May it please your Lordship, we, the boys of Mr. Cuper's school, are desirous to bring to the notice of the bravest officer England possesses now living, a Deed of Heroism by a little boy and girl, children of our school laundress, aged respectively eight and six, who, seeing a little fellow in the water out of depth, and sinking twice, before the third time jumped in to save him, though unable to swim themselves; the girl aged six first, we are sorry to say; but the brother, Robert Coop, followed her example, and together they made a line, and she caught hold of the drowning boy, and he held her petycoats, and so they pulled. We have seen the place: it is not a nice one. They got him ashore at last. The park-keeper here going along found them dripping, rubbing his hands, and blowing into

his nostrils. Name, T. Shellen, son of a small cobbler here, and recovered.

'May it please your Lordship, we make bold to apply, because you have been for a number of years, as far as the oldest can recollect, the Hero of our school, and we are so bold as to ask the favour of General Lord Ormont's name to head a subscription we are making to circulate for the support of their sick mother, who has fallen ill. We think her a good woman. Gentlemen and ladies of the neighbourhood are willing to subscribe. If we have a great name to head the list, we think we shall make a good subscription. Names:—

'Martha Mary Coop, mother.

'Robert Coop.

'Jane Coop, the girl, aged six.

'If we are not taking too great a liberty, a subscription paper will

follow. We are sure General the Earl of Ormont's name will help to

make them comfortable.

'We are obediently and respectfully,

'DAVID GOWEN,

'WALTER BENCH,

'JAMES PANNERS PARSONS,

'And seven others.'

Weyburn spared Aminta an answering look, that would have been a begging of Browny to remember Matey.

'It 's genuine,' he said to Mrs. Lawrence, as he attacked his plate with the gusto for the repast previously and benignly

observed by her. 'It ought to be the work of some of the younger fellows.'

'They spell correctly, on the whole.'

'Excepting,' said my lord, 'an article they don't know much about yet.'

Weyburn had noticed the word, and he smiled. 'Said to be the happy state! The three signing their names are probably what we called bellman and beemen, collector, and heads of the swarm-enthusiasts. If it is not the work of some of the younger hands, the school has levelled on minors. In any case it shows the school is healthy.'

'I subscribe,' said Mrs. Lawrence.

'The little girl aged six shall have something done for her,' said Aminta, and turned her eyes on the earl.

He was familiar with her thrilled voice at a story of bravery. He said—

'The boys don't say the girl's brother turned tail.'

'Only that the girl's brother aged eight followed the lead of the little girl aged six,' Mrs. Lawrence remarked. 'Well, I like the schoolboys, too—"we are sorry to say!" But they 're good lads. Boys who can appreciate brave deeds are capable of doing them.'

'Speak to me about it on Monday,' the earl said to Weyburn.

He bowed, and replied—

'I shall have the day to-morrow. I 'll walk it and call on Messrs.' (he glanced at the paper) 'Gowen, Bench, and Parsons. I have a German friend in London anxious to wear his legs down

stumpier.'

'The name of the school?'

'It is called Cuper's.'

Aminta, on hearing the name of Cuper a second time, congratulated herself on the happy invention of her pretext to keep Mrs. Pagnell from the table at midday. Her aunt had a memory for names: what might she not have exclaimed! There would have been little in it, but it was as well that the 'boy of the name of Weyburn' at Cuper's should be unmentioned. By an exaggeration peculiar to a disgust in fancy, she could hear her aunt vociferating 'Weyburn!' and then staring at Mr. Weyburn opposite—perhaps not satisfied with staring.

He withdrew after his usual hearty meal, during which his talk of boys and their monkey tricks, and what we can train them to, had been pleasant generally, especially to Mrs. Lawrence. Aminta was carried back to the minute early years at High Brent. A line or two of a smile touched her cheek.

'Yes, my dear countess, that is the face I want for Lady de Culme to-day,' said Mrs. Lawrence.' She likes a smiling face. Aunty—aunty has always been good; she has never been prim. I was too much for her, until I reflected that she was very old, and deserved to know the truth before she left us; and so I went to her; and then she said she wished to see the Countess of Ormont, because of her being my dearest friend. I fancy she entertains an 'arriere' idea of proposing her flawless niece Gracey, Marchioness of Fencaster, to present you. She 's quite

equal to the fatigue herself. You 'll rejoice in her anecdotes. People were virtuous in past days: they counted their sinners. In those days, too, as I have to understand, the men chivalrously bore the blame, though the women were rightly punished. Now, alas! the initiative is with the women, and men are not asked for chivalry. Hence it languishes. Lady de Culme won't hear of the Queen of Blondes; has forbidden her these many years!'

Lord Ormont, to whom the lady's prattle was addressed, kept his visage moveless, except in slight jerks of the brows.

'What queen?'

'You insist upon renewing my old, old pangs of jealousy, my dear lord! The Queen of Cyprus, they called her, in the last generation; she fights our great duellist handsomely.'

'My dear Mrs. Lawrence!'

'He triumphs finally, we know, but she beats him every round.'

'It 's only tattle that says the duel has begun.'

'May is the month of everlasting beauty! There 's a widower marquis now who claims the right to cast the glove to any who dispute it.'

'Mrs. May is too good-looking to escape from scandal.'

'Amy May has the good looks of the Immortals.'

'She can't be thirty.'

'In the calendar of women she counts thirty-four.'

'Malignity! Her husband's a lucky man.'

'The shots have proved it.'

Lord Ormont nodded his head over the hopeless task of

defending a woman from a woman, and their sharp interchange ceased. But the sight of his complacency in defeat told Aminta that he did not respect his fair client: it drew a sketch of the position he allotted his wife before the world side by side with this Mrs. Amy May, though a Lady de Culme was persuaded to draw distinctions.

He had, however, quite complacently taken the dose intended for him by Mrs. Lawrence, who believed that the system of gently forcing him was the good one.

The ladies drove away in the afternoon. The earl turned his back on manuscript. He sent for a couple of walking sticks, and commanded Weyburn to go through his parades. He was no tyro, merely out of practice, and unacquainted with the later, simpler form of the great master of the French school, by which, at serious issues, the guarding of the line can be more quickly done: as, for instance, the 'parade de septime' supplanting the slower 'parade de prime;' the 'parade de quarte' having advantage over the 'parade de quince;' the 'parade de tierce' being readier and stronger than the 'parade de sixte;' the same said for the 'parade de seconde' instead of the weak 'parade d'octave.'

These were then new points of instruction. Weyburn demonstrated them as neatly as he could do with his weapon.

'Yes, the French think,' Lord Ormont said, grasping the stick to get conviction of thumb-strength and finger-strength from the parades advocated; 'their steel would thread the ribs of our louts before: they could raise a cry of parry; so here they 're

pleased to sneer at fencing, as if it served no purpose but the duel. Fencing, for one thing, means, that with a good stick in his hand, a clever fencer can double up a giant or two, grant him choice of ground. Some of our men box; but the sword's the weapon for an officer, and precious few of 'em are fit for more than to kick the scabbard. Slashing comes easier to them: a plaguey cut, if it does cut—say, one in six. Navy too. Their cutlass-drill is like a woman's fling of the arm to fetch a slap from behind her shoulder. Pinking beats chopping. These English 'll have their lesson. It 's like what you call good writing: the simple way does the business, and that's the most difficult to learn, because you must give your head to it, as those French fellows do. 'Trop de finesse' is rather their fault. Anything's better than loutishness. Well! the lesson 'll come.'

He continued. He spoke as he thought: he was not speaking what he was thinking. His mind was directed on the visit of Aminta to Lady de Culme, and the tolerably wonderful twist whereby Mrs. Lawrence Finchley had vowed herself to his girl's interests. And he blamed neither of them; only he could not understand how it had been effected, for Aminta and Mrs. Lawrence had not been on such particularly intimate terms last week or yesterday. His ejaculation, 'Women!' was, as he knew, merely ignorance roaring behind a mask of sarcasm. But it allied him with all previous generations on the male side, and that was its virtue. His view of the shifty turns of women got no further, for the reason that he took small account of the operations of the

feelings, to the sole exercise of which he by system condemned the sex.

He was also insensibly half a grain more soured by the homage of those poor schoolboys, who called to him to take it for his reward in a country whose authorities had snubbed, whose Parliament had ignored, whose Press had abused him. The ridiculous balance made him wilfully oblivious that he had seen his name of late eulogized in articles and in books for the right martial qualities. Can a country treating a good soldier—not serving it for pay—in so scurvy a fashion, be struck too hard with our disdain? One cannot tell it in too plain a language how one despises its laws, its moralities, its sham of society. The Club, some choice anecdotists, two or three listeners to his dolences clothed as diatribes; a rubber, and the sight of his girl at home, composed, with a week's shooting now and then, his round of life now that she refused to travel. What a life for a soldier in his vigour. Weyburn was honoured by the earl's company on the walk to Chiallo's. In the street of elegant shops they met Lord Adderwood, and he, as usual, appeared in the act of strangling one of his flock of yawns, with gentlemanly consideration for the public. Exercise was ever his temporary specific for these incurables. Flinging off his coat, he cast away the cynic style engendering or engendered by them. He and Weyburn were for a bout. Sir John Randeller and Mr. Morsfield were at it, like Bull in training and desperado foiled. A French 'maitre d'armes,' famed in 'escrime,' standing near Captain Chiallo, looked amused in the

eyes, behind a mask of professional correctness. He had come on an excursion for the display of his art. Sir John's very sturdy defence was pierced. Weyburn saluted the Frenchman as an acquaintance, and they shook hands, chatted, criticized, nodded. Presently he and his adversary engaged, vizored and in their buckram, and he soon proved to be too strong for Adderwood, as the latter expected and had notified to Lord Ormont before they crossed the steel. My lord had a pleasant pricking excitement in the sound. There was a pretty display between Weyburn and the 'escrimeur,' who neatly and kindly trifled, took a point and returned one, and at the finish complimented him. The earl could see that he had to be sufficiently alert.

Age mouthed an ugly word to the veteran insensible of it in his body, when a desire to be one with these pairs of nimble wrists and legs was like an old gamecock shown the pit and put back into the basket. He left the place, carrying away an image of the coxcombical attitudinizing of the man Morsfield at the salut, upon which he brought down his powers of burlesque.

My lord sketched the scene he had just quitted to a lady who had stopped her carriage. She was the still beautiful Mrs. Amy May, wife of the famous fighting captain. Her hair was radiant in a shady street; her eyelids tenderly toned round the almond enclosure of blue pebbles, bright as if shining from the seawash. The lips of the fair woman could be seen to say that they were sweet when, laughing or discoursing, they gave sight of teeth proudly her own, rivalling the regularity of the grin of dentistry.

A Venus of nature was melting into a Venus of art, and there was a decorous concealment of the contest and the anguish in the process, for which Lord Ormont liked her well enough to wink benevolently at her efforts to cheat the world at various issues, and maintain her duel with Time. The world deserved that she should beat it, even if she had been all deception.

She let the subject of Mr. Morsfield pass without remark from her, until the exhaustion of open-air topics hinted an end of their conversation, and she said—

'We shall learn next week what to think if the civilians. I have heard Mr. Morsfield tell that he is 'de premiere force.' Be on your guard.

You are to know that I never forget a service, and you did me one once.'

'You have reason . . . ?' said the earl.

'If anybody is the dragon to the treasure he covets he is a spadassin who won't hesitate at provocations. Adieu.'

Lord Ormont's eye had been on Mr. Morsfield. He had seen what Mrs. Pagnell counselled her niece to let, him see. He thanked Mr. Morsfield for a tonic that made him young with anticipations of bracing; and he set his head to work upon an advance half-way to meet the gentleman, and safely exclude his wife's name.

Monday brought an account of Cuper's boys. Aminta received it while the earl was at his papers for the morning's news of the weightier deeds of men.

They were the right boys, Weyburn said; his interview with Gowen, Bench, Parsons, and the others assured him that the school was breathing big lungs. Mr. Cuper, too, had spoken well of them.

'You walked the twenty miles?' Aminta interrupted him.

'With my German friend: out and home: plenty of time in the day. He has taken to English boys, but asks why enthusiasm and worship of great deeds don't grow upward from them to their elders. And I, in turn, ask why Germans insist on that point more even than the French do.'

'Germans are sentimental. But the English boys he saw belonged to a school with traditions of enthusiasm sown by some one. The school remembered?'

'Curiously, Mr. Cuper tells me, the hero of the school has dropped and sprung up, stout as ever, twice—it tells me what I wish to believe— since Lord Ormont led their young heads to glory. He can't say how it comes. The tradition's there, and it 's kindled by some flying spark.'

'They remember who taught the school to think of Lord Ormont?'

'I 'm a minor personage. I certainly did some good, and that 's a push forward.'

'They speak of you?'

It was Aminta more than the Countess of Ormont speaking to him.

'You take an interest in the boys,' he said, glowing. 'Yes, well,

they have their talks. I happened to be a cricketer, counting wickets and scores. I don't fancy it's remembered that it was I preached my lord. A day of nine wickets and one catch doesn't die out of a school. The boy Gowen was the prime spirit in getting up the subscription for the laundress. But Bench and Parsons are good boys, too.'

He described them, dwelt on them. The enthusiast, when not lyrical, is perilously near to boring. Aminta was glad of Mrs. Lawrence's absence. She had that feeling because Matthew Weyburn would shun talk of himself to her, not from a personal sense of tedium in hearing of the boys; and she was quaintly reminded by suggestions, coming she knew not whence, of a dim likeness between her and these boys of the school when their hero dropped to nothing and sprang up again brilliantly—a kind of distant cousinship, in her susceptibility to be kindled by so small a flying spark as this one on its travels out of High Brent. Moreover, the dear boys tied her to her girlhood, and netted her fleeting youth for the moth-box. She pressed to hear more and more of them, and of the school- laundress Weyburn had called to see, and particularly of the child, little Jane, aged six. Weyburn went to look at the sheet of water to which little Jane had given celebrity over the county. The girl stood up to her shoulders when she slid off the bank and made the line for her brother to hold, he in the water as well. Altogether, Cuper's boys were justified in promoting a subscription, the mother being helpless.

'Modest little woman,' he said of Jane. 'We'll hope people

won't spoil her. Don't forget, Lady Ormont, that the brother did his part; he had more knowledge of the danger than she.'

'You will undertake to convey our subscriptions? Lord Ormont spoke of the little ones and the schoolboys yesterday.'

'I'll be down again among them next Sunday, Lady Ormont. On the Monday I go to Olmer.'

'The girls of High Brent subscribe?'

There was a ripple under Weyburn's gravity.

'Messrs. Gowen, Bench, and Parsons thought proper to stop Miss Vincent at the head of her detachment in the park.'

'On the Sunday?'

'And one of them handed her a paper containing a report of their interview with Mrs. Coop and a neat eulogy of little Jane. But don't suspect them, I beg. I believe them to be good, honest fellows. Bench, they say, is religious; Gowen has written verses; Parsons generally harum-scarum. They're boyish in one way or another, and that'll do. The cricket of the school has been low: seems to be reviving.'

'Mr. Weyburn,' said the countess, after a short delay—and Aminta broke through—'it pleases me to hear of them, and think they have not forgotten you, or, at least, they follow the lead you gave. I should like to know whether an idea I have is true: Is much, I mean constant, looking down on young people likely to pull one's mind down to their level?'

'Likely enough to betray our level, if there 's danger,' he murmured. 'Society offers an example that your conjecture is not

unfounded, Lady Ormont. But if we have great literature and an interest in the world's affairs, can there be any fear of it? The schoolmaster ploughs to make a richer world, I hope. He must live with them, join with them in their games, accustom them to have their heads knocked with what he wants to get into them, leading them all the while, as the bigger schoolfellow does, if he is a good fellow. He has to be careful not to smell of his office. Doing positive good is the business of his every day—on a small scale, but it 's positive, if he likes his boys. 'Avaunt favouritism!' he must like all boys. And it 's human nature not so far removed from the dog; only it's a supple human nature: there 's the beauty of it. We train it. Nothing is more certain than that it will grow upward. I have the belief that I shall succeed, because I like boys, and they like me. It always was the case.'

'I know,' said Aminta.

Their eyes met. She looked moved at heart behind that deep forest of her chestnut eyes.

'And I think I can inspire confidence in fathers and mothers,' he resumed.' I have my boys already waiting for me to found the school. I was pleased the other day: an English friend brought an Italian gentleman to see me and discuss my system, up at Norwood, at my mother's —a Signor Calliani. He has a nephew; the parents dote on him. The uncle confesses that the boy wants —he has got hold of our word—"pluck." We had a talk. He has promised to send me the lad when I am established in Switzerland.'

'When?' said Aminta.

'A relative from whom a Reversion comes is near the end. It won't be later than September that I shall go. My Swiss friend has the school, and would take me at once before he retires.'

'You make friends wherever you go,' said Aminta.

'Why shouldn't everybody? I'm convinced it's because I show people I mean well, and I never nurse an injury, great or small. And besides, they see I look forward. I do hope good for the world. If at my school we have all nationalities—French boys and German, Italian, Russian, Spaniard—without distinction of race and religion and station, and with English intermixing—English games, English sense of honour and conception of gentleman—we shall help to nationalize Europe. Emile Grenat, Adolf Fleischer, and an Italian, Vincentino Chiuse, are prepared to start with me: and they are men of attainments; they will throw up their positions; they will do me the honour to trust to my leadership. It's not scaling Alps or commanding armies, true.'

'It may be better,' said Aminta, and thought as she spoke.

'Slow work, if we have a taste for the work, doesn't dispirit. Otherwise, one may say that an African or South American traveller has a more exciting time. I shall manage to keep my head on its travels.'

'You have ideas about the education of girls?'

'They can't be carried out unaided.'

'Aid will come.'

Weyburn's confidence, high though it was, had not mounted

to that pitch.

'One may find a mate,' he said. The woman to share and practically to aid in developing such ideas is not easily found: that he left as implied.

Aminta was in need of poetry; but the young schoolmaster's plain, well- directed prose of the view of a business in life was welcome to her.

Lord Ormont entered the room. She reminded him of the boys of High Brent and the heroine Jane. He was ready to subscribe his five-and-twenty guineas, he said. The amount of the sum gratified Weyburn, she could see. She was proud of her lord, and of the boys and the little girl; and she would have been happy to make the ardent young schoolmaster aware of her growing interest in the young.

The night before the earl's departure on the solitary expedition to which she condemned him, he surprised her with a visit of farewell, so that he need not disturb her in the early morning, he said. She was reading beside her open jewel-box, and she closed it with the delicate touch of a hand turned backward while listening to him, with no sign of nervousness.

CHAPTER XIII
WAR AT OLMER

Lively doings were on the leap to animate Weyburn at Olmer during Easter week. The Rev. Mr. Hampton-Evey, rector of Barborough, on hearing that Lady Charlotte Eglett was engaged in knocking at the doors of litigation with certain acts that constituted distinct breaches of the law and the peace, and were a violation of the rights of her neighbour, Mr. Gilbert Addicote, might hope that the troublesome parishioner whom he did not often number among his congregation would grant him a term of repose. Therein he was deceived. Alterations and enlargements of the church, much required, had necessitated the bricking up of a door regarded by the lady as the private entrance to the Olmer pew. She sent him notice of her intention to batter at the new brickwork; so there was the prospect of a pew-fight before him. But now she came to sit under him every Sunday; and he could have wished her absent; for she diverted his thoughts from piety to the selections of texts applicable in the case of a woman who sat with arms knotted, and the frown of an intemperate schoolgirl forbidden speech; while her pew's firelight startlingly at intervals danced her sinister person into view, as from below. The lady's inaccessible and unconquerable obtuseness to exhortation informed the picture with an evil spirit

that cried for wrestlings.

Regularly every week-day she headed the war now rageing between Olmer and Addicotes, on the borders of the estates. It was open war, and herself to head the cavalry. Weyburn, driving up a lane in the gig she had sent to meet the coach, beheld a thicket of countrymen and boys along a ridge; and it swayed and broke, and through it burst the figure of a mounted warrior woman at the gallop, followed by what bore an appearance of horse and gun, minus carriage, drivers at the flanks cracking whips on foot. Off went the train, across a small gorse common, through a gate.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.