

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

ONE OF OUR
CONQUERORS.
VOLUME 1

George Meredith
One of Our Conquerors. Volume 1

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36092997
One of Our Conquerors – Volume 1:*

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	16
CHAPTER III	24
CHAPTER IV	35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	42

George Meredith

One of Our Conquerors – Volume 1

CHAPTER I

ACROSS LONDON BRIDGE

A gentleman, noteworthy for a lively countenance and a waistcoat to match it, crossing London Bridge at noon on a gusty April day, was almost magically detached from his conflict with the gale by some sly strip of slipperiness, abounding in that conduit of the markets, which had more or less adroitly performed the trick upon preceding passengers, and now laid this one flat amid the shuffle of feet, peaceful for the moment as the uncomplaining who have gone to Sabrina beneath the tides. He was unhurt, quite sound, merely astonished, he remarked, in reply to the inquiries of the first kind helper at his elbow; and it appeared an acceptable statement of his condition. He laughed, shook his coat-tails, smoothed the back of his head rather thoughtfully, thankfully received his runaway hat, nodded bright beams to right and left, and making light of the muddy stigmas imprinted by the pavement, he scattered another shower

of his nods and smiles around, to signify, that as his good friends would wish, he thoroughly felt his legs and could walk unaided. And he was in the act of doing it, questioning his familiar behind the waistcoat amazedly, to tell him how such a misadventure could have occurred to him of all men, when a glance below his chin discomposed his outward face. 'Oh, confound the fellow!' he said, with simple frankness, and was humorously ruffled, having seen absurd blots of smutty knuckles distributed over the maiden waistcoat.

His outcry was no more than the confidential communication of a genial spirit with that distinctive article of his attire. At the same time, for these friendly people about him to share the fun of the annoyance, he looked hastily brightly back, seeming with the contraction of his brows to frown, on the little band of observant Samaritans; in the centre of whom a man who knew himself honourably unclean, perhaps consequently a bit of a political jewel, hearing one of their number confounded for his pains, and by the wearer of a superfine dashing-white waistcoat, was moved to take notice of the total deficiency of gratitude in this kind of gentleman's look and pocket. If we ask for nothing for helping gentlemen to stand upright on their legs, and get it, we expect civility into the bargain. Moreover, there are reasons in nature why we choose to give sign of a particular surliness when our wealthy superiors would have us think their condescending grins are cordials.

The gentleman's eyes were followed on a second hurried

downward grimace, the necessitated wrinkles of which could be stretched by malevolence to a semblance of haughty disgust; reminding us, through our readings in journals, of the wicked overblown Prince Regent and his Court, together with the view taken of honest labour in the mind of supercilious luxury, even if indebted to it freshly for a trifle; and the hoar-headed nineteenth-century billow of democratic ire craved the word to be set swelling.

'Am I the fellow you mean, sir?' the man said.

He was answered, not ungraciously: 'All right, my man.'

But the balance of our public equanimity is prone to violent antic bobbings on occasions when, for example, an ostentatious garment shall appear disdainful our class and ourself, and coin of the realm has not usurped command of one of the scales: thus a fairly pleasant answer, cast in persuasive features, provoked the retort:

'There you're wrong; nor wouldn't be.'

'What's that?' was the gentleman's musical inquiry.

'That's flat, as you was half a minute ago,' the man rejoined.

'Ah, well, don't be impudent,' the gentleman said, by way of amiable remonstrance before a parting.

'And none of your dam punctilio,' said the man.

Their exchange rattled smartly, without a direct hostility, and the gentleman stepped forward.

It was observed in the crowd, that after a few paces he put two fingers on the back of his head.

They might suppose him to be condoling with his recent mishap. But, in fact, a thing had occurred to vex him more than a descent upon the pavement or damage to his waistcoat's whiteness: he abominated the thought of an altercation with a member of the mob; he found that enormous beat comprehensible only when it applauded him; and besides he wished it warmly well; all that was good for it; plentiful dinners, country excursions, stout menagerie bars, music, a dance, and to bed: he was for patting, stroking, petting the mob, for tossing it sops, never for irritating it to show an eye-tooth, much less for causing it to exhibit the grinders: and in endeavouring to get at the grounds of his dissension with that dirty-fisted fellow, the recollection of the word punctilio shot a throb of pain to the spot where his mishap had rendered him susceptible. Headache threatened—and to him of all men! But was there ever such a word for drumming on a cranium? Puzzles are presented to us now and then in the course of our days; and the smaller they are the better for the purpose, it would seem; and they come in rattle-boxes, they are actually children's toys, for what they contain, but not the less do they buzz at our understandings and insist that they break or we, and, in either case, to show a mere foolish idle rattle in hollowness. Or does this happen to us only after a fall?

He tried a suspension of his mental efforts, and the word was like the clapper of a disorderly bell, striking through him, with reverberations, in the form of interrogations, as to how he, of all men living, could by any chance have got into a wrangle, in a

thoroughfare, on London Bridge, of all places in the world!—he, so popular, renowned for his affability, his amiability; having no dislike to common dirty dogs, entirely the reverse, liking them and doing his best for them; and accustomed to receive their applause. And in what way had he offered a hint to bring on him the charge of punctilio?

'But I am treating it seriously!' he said, and jerked a dead laugh while fixing a button of his coat.

That he should have treated it seriously, furnished next the subject of cogitation; and here it was plainly suggested, that a degradation of his physical system, owing to the shock of the fall, must be seen and acknowledged; for it had become a perverted engine, to pull him down among the puerilities, and very soon he was worrying at punctilio anew, attempting to read the riddle of the application of it to himself, angry that he had allowed it to be the final word, and admitting it a famous word for the closing of a controversy:—it banged the door and rolled drum-notes; it deafened reason. And was it a London cockney crow-word of the day, or a word that had stuck in the fellow's head from the perusal of his pothouse newspaper columns?

Furthermore, the plea of a fall, and the plea of a shock from a fall, required to account for the triviality of the mind, were humiliating to him who had never hitherto missed a step, or owned to the shortest of collapses. This confession of deficiency in explosive repartee—using a friend's term for the ready gift—was an old and a rueful one with Victor Radnor. His godmother

Fortune denied him that. She bestowed it on his friend Fenellan, and little else. Simeon Fenellan could clap the halter on a coltish mob; he had positively caught the roar of cries and stilled it, by capping the cries in turn, until the people cheered him; and the effect of the scene upon Victor Radnor disposed him to rank the gift of repartee higher than a certain rosily oratorical that he was permitted to tell himself he possessed, in bottle if not on draught. Let it only be explosive repartee: the well-fused bomb, the bubble to the stone, echo round the horn. Fenellan, would have discharged an extinguisher on punctilio in emission. Victor Radnor was unable to cope with it reflectively.

No, but one doesn't like being beaten by anything! he replied to an admonishment of his better mind, as he touched his two fingers, more significantly dubious than the whole hand, at the back of his head, and checked or stemmed the current of a fear. For he was utterly unlike himself; he was dwelling on a trifle, on a matter discernibly the smallest, an incident of the streets; and although he refused to feel a bump or any responsive notification of a bruise, he made a sacrifice of his native pride to his intellectual, in granting that he must have been shaken, so childishly did he continue thinking.

Yes, well, and if a tumble distorts our ideas of life, and an odd word engrosses our speculations, we are poor creatures, he addressed another friend, from whom he stood constitutionally in dissent naming him Colney; and under pressure of the name, reviving old wrangles between them upon man's present

achievements and his probable destinies: especially upon England's grandeur, vitality, stability, her intelligent appreciation of her place in the universe; not to speak of the historic dignity of London City. Colney had to be overcome afresh, and he fled, but managed, with two or three of his bitter phrases, to make a cuttle-fish fight of it, that oppressively shadowed his vanquisher:

The Daniel Lambert of Cities: the Female Annuitant of Nations:—and such like, wretched stuff, proper to Colney Durance, easily dispersed and out-laughed when we have our vigour. We have as much as we need of it in summoning a contemptuous Pooh to our lips, with a shrug at venomous dyspepsia.

Nevertheless, a malignant sketch of Colney's, in the which Hengist and Horsa, our fishy Saxon originals, in modern garb of liveryman and gaitered squire, flat-headed, paunchy, assiduously servile, are shown blacking Ben-Israel's boots and grooming the princely stud of the Jew, had come so near to Victor Radnor's apprehensions of a possible, if not an impending, consummation, that the ghastly vision of the Jew Dominant in London City, over England, over Europe, America, the world (a picture drawn in literary sepia by Colney: with our poor hang neck population uncertain about making a bell-rope of the forelock to the Satyr-snouty master; and the Norman Lord de Warenne handing him for a lump sum son and daughter, both to be Hebraized in their different ways), fastened on the most mercurial of patriotic men, and gave him a whole-length plunge into despondency.

It lasted nearly a minute. His recovery was not in this instance due to the calling on himself for the rescue of an ancient and glorious country; nor altogether to the spectacle of the shipping, over the parapet, to his right: the hundreds of masts rising out of the merchant river; London's unrivalled mezzotint and the City' rhetorician's inexhaustible argument: he gained it rather from the imperious demand of an animated and thirsty frame for novel impressions. Commonly he was too hot with his business, and airy fancies above it when crossing the bridge, to reflect in freshness on its wonders; though a phrase could spring him alive to them; a suggestion of the Foreigner, jealous, condemned to admire in despair of outstripping, like Satan worsted; or when a Premier's fine inflation magnified the scene at City banquets—exciting while audible, if a waggery in memory; or when England's cherished Bard, the Leading Article, blew bellows, and wind primed the lieges.

That a phrase on any other subject was of much the same effect, in relation to it, may be owned; he was lightly kindled. The scene, however, had a sharp sparkle of attractiveness at the instant. Down went the twirling horizontal pillars of a strong tide from the arches of the bridge, breaking to wild water at a remove; and a reddish Northern cheek of curdling pipeing East, at shrilly puffs between the Tower and the Custom House, encountered it to whip and ridge the flood against descending tug and long tail of stern-ajerk empty barges; with a steamer slowly nosing round off the wharf-cranes, preparing to swirl the screw; and

half-bottom-upward boats dancing harpooner beside their whale; along an avenue, not fabulously golden, of the deputy masts of all nations, a wintry woodland, every rag aloft curling to volume; and here the spouts and the mounds of steam, and rolls of brown smoke there, variously undulated, curved to vanish; cold blue sky ashift with the whirl and dash of a very Tartar cavalry of cloud overhead.

Surely a scene pretending to sublimity?

Gazeing along that grand highway of the voyageing forest, your London citizen of good estate has reproached his country's poets for not pouring out, succinctly and melodiously, his multitudinous larvae of notions begotten by the scene. For there are times when he would, pay to have them sung; and he feels them big; he thinks them human in their bulk; they are Londinensian; they want but form and fire to get them scored on the tablets of the quotable at festive boards. This he can promise to his poets. As for elsewhere than at the festive, Commerce invoked is a Goddess that will have the reek of those boards to fill her nostrils, and poet and alderman alike may be dedicate to the sublime, she leads them, after two sniffs of an idea concerning her, for the dive into the turtle-tureen. Heels up they go, poet first—a plummet he!

And besides it is barely possible for our rounded citizen, in the mood of meditation, to direct his gaze off the bridge along the waterway North-eastward without beholding as an eye the glow of whitebait's bow-window by the riverside, to the front of

the summer sunset, a league or so down stream; where he sees, in memory savours, the Elysian end of Commerce: frontispiece of a tale to fetch us up the out-wearied spectre of old Apicius; yea, and urge Crispinus to wheel his purse into the market for the purchase of a costlier mullet!

But is the Jew of the usury gold becoming our despot-king of Commerce?

In that case, we do not ask our country's poets to compose a single stanza of eulogy's rhymes—far from it. Far to the contrary, we bid ourselves remember the sons of whom we are; instead of revelling in the fruits of Commerce, we shoot scornfully past those blazing bellied windows of the aromatic dinners, and beyond Thames, away to the fishermen's deeps, Old England's native element, where the strenuous ancestry of a race yet and ever manful at the stress of trial are heard around and aloft whistling us back to the splendid strain of muscle, and spray fringes cloud, and strong heart rides the briny scoops and hillocks, and Death and Man are at grip for the haul.

There we find our nationality, our poetry, no Hebrew competing.

We do: or there at least we left it. Whether to recover it when wanted, is not so certain. Humpy Hengist and dumpy Horsa, quitting ledger and coronet, might recur to their sea bowlegs and red-stubble chins, might take to their tarpaulins again; they might renew their manhood on the capture of cod; headed by Harald and Hardiknut, they might roll surges to overwhelm a Dominant

Jew clean gone to the fleshpots and effeminacy. Aldermen of our ancient conception, they may teach him that he has been backsliding once more, and must repent in ashes, as those who are for jewels, titles, essences, banquets, for wallowing in slimy spawn of lucre, have ever to do. They dispossess him of his greedy gettings.

And how of the Law?

But the Law is always, and must ever be, the Law of the stronger.

—Ay, but brain beats muscle, and what if the Jew should prove to have superior power of brain? A dreaded hypothesis! Why, then you see the insurgent Saxon seamen (of the names in two syllables with accent on the first), and their Danish captains, and it may be but a remnant of high-nosed old Norman Lord de Warenne beside them, in the criminal box: and presently the Jew smoking a giant regalia cigar on a balcony giving view of a gallows-tree. But we will try that: on our side, to back a native pugnacity, is morality, humanity, fraternity—nature's rights, aha! and who withstands them? on his, a troop of mercenaries!

And that lands me in Red Republicanism, a hop and a skip from Socialism! said Mr. Radnor, and chuckled ironically at the natural declivity he had come to. Still, there was an idea in it . . .

A short run or attempt at running after the idea, ended in pain to his head near the spot where the haunting word punctilio caught at any excuse for clamouring.

Yet we cannot relinquish an idea that was ours; we are vowed

to the pursuit of it. Mr. Radnor lighted on the tracks, by dint of a thought flung at his partner Mr. Inchling's dread of the Jews. Inchling dreaded Scotchmen as well, and Americans, and Armenians, and Greeks: latterly Germans hardly less; but his dread of absorption in Jewry, signifying subjection, had often precipitated a deplorable shrug, in which Victor Radnor now perceived the skirts of his idea, even to a fancy that something of the idea must have struck Inchling when he shrugged: the idea being . . . he had lost it again. Definition seemed to be an extirpation enemy of this idea, or she was by nature shy. She was very feminine; coming when she willed and flying when wanted. Not until nigh upon the close of his history did she return, full-statured and embraceable, to Victor Radnor.

CHAPTER II

THROUGH THE VAGUE TO THE INFINITELY LITTLE

The fair dealing with readers demands of us, that a narrative shall not proceed at slower pace than legs of a man in motion; and we are still but little more than midway across London Bridge. But if a man's mind is to be taken as a part of him, the likening of it, at an introduction, to an army on the opening march of a great campaign, should plead excuses for tardy forward movements, in consideration of the large amount of matter you have to review before you can at all imagine yourselves to have made his acquaintance. This it is not necessary to do when you are set astride the enchanted horse of the Tale, which leaves the man's mind at home while he performs the deeds befitting him: he can indeed be rapid. Whether more active, is a question asking for your notions of the governing element in the composition of man, and of his present business here. The Tale inspires one's earlier ardours, when we sped without baggage, when the Impossible was wings to imagination, and heroic sculpture the simplest act of the chisel. It does not advance, 'tis true; it drives the whirligig circle round and round the single existing central point; but it is enriched with applause of the boys and girls of both ages in this land; and all the English critics heap their honours on its brave

old Simplicity: our national literary flag, which signalizes us while we float, subsequently to flap above the shallows. One may sigh for it. An ill-fortuned minstrel who has by fateful direction been brought to see with distinctness, that man is not as much comprised in external features as the monkey, will be devoted to the task of the fuller portraiture.

After his ineffectual catching at the volatile idea, Mr. Radnor found repose in thoughts of his daughter and her dear mother. They had begged him to put on an overcoat this day of bitter wind, or a silken kerchief for the throat. Faithful to the Spring, it had been his habit since boyhood to show upon his person something of the hue of the vernal month, the white of the daisied meadow, and although he owned a light overcoat to dangle from shoulders at the Opera crush, he declined to wear it for protection. His gesture of shaking and expanding whenever the tender request was urged on him, signified a physical opposition to the control of garments. Mechanically now, while doating in fancy over the couple beseeching him, he loosened the button across his defaced waistcoat, exposed a large measure of chest to flaws of a wind barbed on Norwegian peaks by the brewers of cough and catarrh—horrid women of the whistling clouts, in the pay of our doctors. He braved them; he starved the profession. He was that man in fifty thousand who despises hostile elements and goes unpunished, calmly erect among a sneezing and tumbled host, as a lighthouse overhead of breezy fleets. The coursing of his blood was by comparison electrical;

he had not the sensation of cold, other than that of an effort of the elements to arouse him; and so quick was he, through this fine animation, to feel, think, act, that the three successive tributaries of conduct appeared as an irreflective flash and a gamester's daring in the vein to men who had no deep knowledge of him and his lightning arithmetic for measuring, sounding, and deciding.

Naturally he was among the happiest of human creatures; he willed it so, with consent of circumstances; a boisterous consent, as when votes are reckoned for a favourite candidate: excepting on the part of a small band of black dissentients in a corner, a minute opaque body, devilish in their irreconcilability, who maintain their struggle to provoke discord, with a cry disclosing the one error of his youth, the sole bad step chargeable upon his antecedents. But do we listen to them? Shall we not have them turned out? He gives the sign for it; and he leaves his buoying constituents to outroar them: and he tells a friend that it was not, as one may say, an error, although an erratic step: but let us explain to our bosom friend; it was a step quite unregretted, gloried in; a step deliberately marked, to be done again, were the time renewed: it was a step necessitated (emphatically) by a false preceding step; and having youth to plead for it, in the first instance, youth and ignorance; and secondly, and O how deeply truly! Love. Deep true love, proved by years, is the advocate.

He tells himself at the same time, after lending ear to the advocate's exordium and a favourite sentence, that, judged by the Powers (to them only can he expose the whole skeleton-

cupboard of the case), judged by those clear-sighted Powers, he is exonerated.

To be exonerated by those awful Powers, is to be approved.

As to that, there is no doubt: whom they, all-seeing, discerning as they do, acquit they justify.

Whom they justify, they compliment.

They, seeing all the facts, are not unintelligent of distinctions, as the world is.

What, to them, is the spot of the error?—admitting it as an error. They know it for a thing of convention, not of Nature. We stand forth to plead it in proof of an adherence to Nature's laws: we affirm, that far from a defilement, it is an illumination and stamp of nobility. On the beloved who shares it with us, it is a stamp of the highest nobility. Our world has many ways for signifying its displeasure, but it cannot brand an angel.

This was another favourite sentence of Love's grand oration for the defence. So seductive was it to the Powers who sat in judgement on the case, that they all, when the sentence came, turned eyes upon the angel, and they smiled.

They do not smile on the condemnable.

She, then, were he rebuked, would have strength to uplift him. And who, calling her his own, could be placed in second rank among the blissful!

Mr. Radnor could rationally say that he was made for happiness; he flew to it, he breathed, dispensed it. How conceive the clear-sighted celestial Powers as opposing his claim to that

estate? Not they. He knew, for he had them safe in the locked chamber of his breast, to yield him subservient responses. The world, or Puritanic members of it, had pushed him to the trial once or twice—or had put on an air of doing so; creating a temporary disturbance, ending in a merry duet with his daughter Nesta Victoria: a glorious trio when her mother Natalia, sweet lily that she was, shook the rainwater from her cup and followed the good example to shine in the sun.

He had a secret for them.

Nesta's promising soprano, and her mother's contralto, and his baritone—a true baritone, not so well trained as their accurate notes—should be rising in spirited union with the curtain of that secret: there was matter for song and concert, triumph and gratulation in it. And during the whole passage of the bridge, he had not once cast thought on a secret so palpitating, the cause of the morning's expedition and a long year's prospect of the present day! It seemed to have been knocked clean out of it—punctilioed out, Fenellan might say. Nor had any combinations upon the theme of business displaced it. Just before the fall, the whole drama of the unfolding of that secret was brilliant to his eyes as a scene on a stage.

He refused to feel any sensible bruise on his head, with the admission that he perhaps might think he felt one which was virtually no more than the feeling of a thought;—what his friend Dr. Peter Yatt would define as feeling a rotifer astir in the curative compartment of a homoeopathic globule: and a playful

fancy may do that or anything. Only, Sanity does not allow the infinitely little to disturb us.

Mr. Radnor had a quaint experience of the effects of the infinitely little while threading his way to a haberdasher's shop for new white waistcoats. Under the shadow of the representative statue of City Corporations and London's majesty, the figure of Royalty, worshipful in its marbled redundancy, fronting the bridge, on the slope where the seas of fish and fruit below throw up a thin line of their drift, he stood contemplating the not unamiable, reposefully-jolly, Guelphic countenance, from the loose jowl to the bent knee, as if it were a novelty to him; unwilling to trust himself to the roadway he had often traversed, equally careful that his hesitation should not be seen. A trifle more impressible, he might have imagined the smoky figure and magnum of pursiness barring the City against him. He could have laughed aloud at the hypocrisy behind his quiet look of provincial wonderment at London's sculptor's art; and he was partly tickled as well by the singular fit of timidity enchaining him. Cart, omnibus, cab, van, barrow, donkey-tray, went by in strings, broken here and there, and he could not induce his legs to take advantage of the gaps; he listened to a warning that he would be down again if he tried it, among those wheels; and his nerves clutched him, like a troop of household women, to keep him from the hazard of an exposure to the horrid crunch, pitiless as tiger's teeth; and we may say truly, that once down, or once out of the rutted line, you are food for lion and jackal—the forces of

the world will have you in their mandibles.

An idea was there too; but it would not accept pursuit.

'A pretty scud overheard?' said a voice at his ear.

'For fine!—to-day at least,' Mr. Radnor affably replied to a stranger; and gazing on the face of his friend Fenellan, knew the voice, and laughed: 'You?' He straightened his back immediately to cross the road, dismissing nervousness as a vapour, asking, between a cab and a van: 'Anything doing in the City?' For Mr. Fenellan's proper station faced Westward.

The reply was deferred until they had reached the pavement, when Mr. Fenellan said: 'I'll tell you,' and looked a dubious preface, to his friend's thinking.

But it was merely the mental inquiry following a glance at mud-spots on the coat.

'We'll lunch; lunch with me, I must eat, tell me then,' said Mr. Radnor, adding within himself: 'Emptiness! want of food!' to account for recent ejaculations and qualms. He had not eaten for a good four hours.

Fenellan's tone signified to his feverish sensibility of the moment, that the matter was personal; and the intimation of a touch on domestic affairs caused sinkings in his vacuity, much as though his heart were having a fall.

He mentioned the slip on the bridge, to explain his: need to visit a haberdasher's shop, and pointed at the waistcoat.

Mr. Fenellan was compassionate over the 'Poor virgin of the smoky city!'

'They have their ready-made at these shops—last year's: perhaps, never mind, do for the day,' said Mr. Radnor, impatient for eating, now that he had spoken of it. 'A basin of turtle; I can't wait. A brush of the coat; mud must be dry by this time. Clear turtle, I think, with a bottle of the Old Veuve. Not bad news to tell? You like that Old Veuve?'

'Too well to tell bad news of her,' said Mr. Fenellan in a manner to reassure his friend, as he intended. 'You wouldn't credit it for the Spring of the year, without the spotless waistcoat?'

'Something of that, I suppose.' And so saying, Mr. Radnor entered the shop of his quest, to be complimented by the shopkeeper, while the attendants climbed the ladder to upper stages for white-waistcoat boxes, on his being; the first bird of the season; which it pleased him to hear; for the smallest of our gratifications in life could give a happy tone to this brightly-constituted gentleman.

CHAPTER III

OLD VEUVE

They were known at the house of the turtle and the attractive Old Veuve: a champagne of a sobered sweetness, of a great year, a great age, counting up to the extremer maturity attained by wines of stilly depths; and their worthy comrade, despite the wanton sparkles, for the promoting of the state of reverential wonderment in rapture, which an ancient wine will lead to, well you wot. The silly girly sugary crudity his given way to womanly suavity, matronly composure, with yet the sparkles; they ascend; but hue and flavour tell of a soul that has come to a lodgement there. It conducts the youthful man to temples of dusky thought: philosophers partaking of it are drawn by the arms of garlanded nymphs about their necks into the fathomless of inquiries. It presents us with a sphere, for the pursuit of the thing we covet most. It bubbles over mellowness; it has, in the marriage with Time, extracted a spice of individuality from the saccharine: by miracle, one would say, were it not for our knowledge of the right noble issue of Time when he and good things unite. There should be somewhere legends of him and the wine- flask. There must be meanings to that effect in the Mythology, awaiting unravelment. For the subject opens to deeper than cellars, and is a tree with vast ramifications of the roots and the spreading growth, whereon

half if not all the mythic Gods, Inferior and Superior, Infernal and Celestial, might be shown sitting in concord, performing in concert, harmoniously receiving sacrificial offerings of the black or the white; and the black not extinguishing the fairer fellow. Tell us of a certainty that Time has embraced the wine-flask, then may it be asserted (assuming the great year for the wine, i.e. combinations above) that a speck of the white within us who drink will conquer, to rise in main ascension over volumes of the black. It may, at a greater venture, but confidently, be said in plain speech, that the Bacchus of auspicious birth induces ever to the worship of the loftier Deities.

Think as you will; forbear to come hauling up examples of malarious men, in whom these pourings of the golden rays of life breed fogs; and be moved, since you are scarcely under an obligation to hunt the meaning, in tolerance of some dithyrambic inebriety of narration (quiverings of the reverent pen) when we find ourselves entering the circle of a most magnetic polarity. Take it for not worse than accompanying choric flourishes, in accord with Mr. Victor Radnor and Mr. Simeon Fenellan at their sipping of the venerable wine.

Seated in a cosy corner, near the grey City window edged with a sooty maze, they praised the wine, in the neuter and in the feminine; that for the glass, this for the widow-branded bottle: not as poets hymning; it was done in the City manner, briefly, part pensively, like men travelling to the utmost bourne of flying flavour (a dell in infinite nether), and still masters of themselves

and at home.

Such a wine, in its capturing permeation of us, insists on being for a time a theme.

'I wonder!' said Mr. Radnor, completely restored, eyeing his half-emptied second glass and his boon-fellow.

'Low!' Mr. Fenellan shook his head.

'Half a dozen dozen left?'

'Nearer the half of that. And who's the culprit?'

'Old days! They won't let me have another dozen out of the house now.'

'They'll never hit on such another discovery in their cellar, unless they unearth a fifth corner.'

'I don't blame them for making the price prohibitive. And sound as ever!'

Mr. Radnor watched the deliberate constant ascent of bubbles through their rose-topaz transparency. He drank. That notion of the dish of turtle was an inspiration of the right: he ought always to know it for the want of replenishment when such a man as he went quaking. His latest experiences of himself were incredible; but they passed, as the dimples of the stream. He finished his third glass. The bottle, like the cellar-wine, was at ebb: unlike the cellar-wine, it could be set flowing again: He prattled, in the happy ignorance of compulsion:

'Fenellan, remember, I had a sort of right to the wine—to the best I could get; and this Old Veuve, more than any other, is a bridal wine! We heard of Giulia Sanfredini's marriage to

come off with the Spanish Duke, and drank it to the toast of our little Nesta's godmother. I 've told you. We took the girl to the Opera, when quite a little one—that high:—and I declare to you, it was marvellous! Next morning after breakfast, she plants herself in the middle of the room, and strikes her attitude for song, and positively, almost with the Sanfredini's voice—illusion of it, you know,—trills us out more than I could have believed credible to be recollected by a child. But I've told you the story. We called her Fredi from that day. I sent the diva, with excuses and compliments, a nuptial present-necklace, Roman goldwork, locket-pendant, containing sunny curl, and below a fine pearl; really pretty; telling her our grounds for the liberty. She replied, accepting the responsible office; touching letter—we found it so; framed in Fredi's room, under her godmother's photograph. Fredi has another heroine now, though she worships her old one still; she never abandons her old ones. You've heard the story over and over!

Mr. Fenellan nodded; he had a tenderness for the garrulity of Old Veuve, and for the damsel. Chatter on that subject ran pleasantly with their entertainment.

Mr. Radnor meanwhile scribbled, and despatched a strip of his Note-book, bearing a scrawl of orders, to his office. He was now fully himself, benevolent, combative, gay, alert for amusement or the probing of schemes to the quick, weighing the good and the bad in them with his fine touch on proportion.

'City dead flat? A monotonous key; but it's about the same

as fetching a breath after a run; only, true, it lasts too long—not healthy! Skepsey will bring me my letters. I was down in the country early this morning, looking over the house, with Taplow, my architect; and he speaks fairly well of the contractors. Yes, down at Lakelands; and saw my first lemon butterfly in a dell of sunshine, out of the wind, and had half a mind to catch it for Fredi,—and should have caught it myself, if I had! The truth is, we three are country born and bred; we pine in London. Good for a season; you know my old feeling. They are to learn the secret of Lakelands to-morrow. It 's great fun; they think I don't see they've had their suspicion for some time. You said—somebody said—"the eye of a needle for what they let slip of their secrets, and the point of it for penetrating yours":—women. But no; my dear souls didn't prick and bother. And they dealt with a man in armour. I carry them down to Lakelands to-morrow, if the City's flat.'

'Keeping a secret's the lid on a boiling pot with you,' Mr. Fenellan said; and he mused on the profoundness of the flavour at his lips.

'I do it.'

'You do: up to bursting at the breast.'

'I keep it from Colney!'

'As Vesuvius keeps it from Palmieri when shaking him.'

'Has old Colney an idea of it?'

'He has been foretelling an eruption of an edifice.'

The laugh between them subsided to pensiveness.

Mr. Fenellan's delay in the delivery of his news was eloquent to reveal the one hateful topic; and this being seen, it waxed to such increase of size with the passing seconds, that prudence called for it.

'Come!' said Mr. Radnor.

The appeal was understood.

'Nothing very particular. I came into the City to look at a warehouse they want to mount double guard on. Your idea of the fireman's night-patrol and wires has done wonders for the office.'

'I guarantee the City if all my directions are followed.'

Mr. Fenellan's remark, that he had nothing very particular to tell, reduced it to the mere touch upon a vexatious matter, which one has to endure in the ears at times; but it may be postponed. So Mr. Radnor encouraged him to talk of an Insurance Office Investment. Where it is all bog and mist, as in the City to-day, the maxim is, not to take a step, they agreed. Whether it was attributable to an unconsumed glut of the markets, or apprehension of a panic, had to be considered. Both gentlemen were angry with the Birds on the flags of foreign nations, which would not imitate a sawdust Lion to couch reposefully. Incessantly they scream and sharpen talons.

'They crack the City bubbles and bladders, at all events,' Mr. Fenellan said. 'But if we let our journals go on making use of them, in the shape of sham hawks overhead, we shall pay for their one good day of the game with our loss of the covey. An unstable

London's no world's market- place.'

'No, no; it's a niggardly national purse, not the journals,' Mr. Radnor said. 'The journals are trading engines. Panics are grist to them; so are wars; but they do their duty in warning the taxpayer and rousing Parliament. Dr. Schlessien's right: we go on believing that our God Neptune will do everything for us, and won't see that Steam has paralyzed his Trident: good! You and Colney are hard on Schlessien—or at him, I should say. He's right: if we won't learn that we have become Continentals, we shall be marched over. Laziness, cowardice, he says.'

'Oh, be hanged!' interrupted Fenellan. 'As much of the former as you like. He 's right about our "individualismus" being another name for selfishness, and showing the usual deficiency in external features; it's an individualism of all of a pattern, as when a mob cuts its lucky, each fellow his own way. Well, then, conscript them, and they'll be all of a better pattern. The only thing to do, and the cheapest. By heaven! it's the only honourable thing to do.'

Mr. Radnor disapproved. 'No conscription here.'

'Not till you've got the drop of poison in your blood, in the form of an army landed. That will teach you to catch at the drug.'

'No, Fenellan! Besides they've got to land. I guarantee a trusty army and navy under a contract, at two-thirds of the present cost. We'll start a National Defence Insurance Company after the next panic.'

'During,' said Mr. Fenellan, and there was a flutter of laughter at the unobtrusive hint for seizing Dame England in the mood.

Both dropped a sigh.

'But you must try and run down with us to Lakelands to-morrow,' Mr. Radnor resumed on a cheerfuller theme. 'You have not yet seen all I 've done there. And it 's a castle with a drawbridge: no exchangeing of visits, as we did at Craye Farm and at Creckholt; we are there for country air; we don't court neighbours at all—perhaps the elect; it will depend on Nataly's wishes. We can accommodate our Concert-set, and about thirty or forty more, for as long as they like. You see, that was my intention—to be independent of neighbouring society. Madame Callet guarantees dinners or hot suppers for eighty—and Armandine is the last person to be recklessly boasting.—When was it I was thinking last of Armandine?' He asked himself that, as he rubbed at the back of his head.

Mr. Fenellan was reading his friend's character by the light of his remarks and in opposition to them, after the critical fashion of intimates who know as well as hear: but it was amiably and trippingly, on the dance of the wine in his veins.

His look, however, was one that reminded; and Mr. Radnor cried: 'Now! whatever it is!'

'I had an interview: I assure you,' Mr. Fenellan interposed to pacify: 'the smallest of trifles, and to be expected: I thought you ought to know it:—an interview with her lawyer; office business, increase of Insurance on one of her City warehouses.'

'Speak her name, speak the woman's name; we're talking like a pair of conspirators,' exclaimed Mr. Radnor.

'He informed me that Mrs. Burman has heard of the new mansion.'

'My place at Lakelands?'

Mr. Radnor's clear-water eyes hardened to stony as their vision ran along the consequences of her having heard it.

'Earlier this time!' he added, thrummed on the table, and thumped with knuckles. 'I make my stand at Lakelands for good! Nothing mortal moves me!'

'That butler of hers—'

'Jarniman, you mean: he's her butler, yes, the scoundrel—h'm-pah! Heaven forgive me! she's an honest woman at least; I wouldn't rob her of her little: fifty-nine or sixty next September, fifteenth of the month! with the constitution of a broken drug-bottle, poor soul! She hears everything from Jarniman: he catches wind of everything. All foreseen, Fenellan, foreseen. I have made my stand at Lakelands, and there's my flag till it's hauled down over Victor Radnor. London kills Nataly as well as Fredi—and me: that is—I can use the words to you—I get back to primal innocence in the country. We all three have the feeling. You're a man to understand. My beasts, and the wild flowers, hedge-banks, and stars. Fredi's poetess will tell you. Quiet waters reflecting. I should feel it in Paris as well, though they have nightingales in their Bois. It's the rustic I want to bathe me; and I had the feeling at school, biting at Horace. Well, this is my Sabine Farm, rather on a larger scale, for the sake of friends. Come, and pure air, water from the springs, walks and rides in

lanes, high sand-lanes; Nataly loves them; Fredi worships the old roots of trees: she calls them the faces of those weedy sandy lanes. And the two dear souls on their own estate, Fenellan! And their poultry, cows, cream. And a certain influence one has in the country socially. I make my stand on a home—not empty punctilio.'

Mr. Fenellan repeated, in a pause, 'Punctilio,' and not emphatically.

'Don't bawl the word,' said Mr. Radnor, at the drum of whose ears it rang and sang. 'Here in the City the woman's harmless; and here,' he struck his breast. 'But she can shoot and hit another through me. Ah, the witch!—poor wretch! poor soul! Only, she's malignant. I could swear! But Colney 's right for once in something he says about oaths—"dropping empty buckets," or something.'

"Empty buckets to haul up impotent demons, whom we have to pay as heavily as the ready devil himself," Mr. Fenellan supplied the phrase. 'Only, the moment old Colney moralizes, he's what the critics call sententious. We've all a parlous lot too much pulpit in us.'

'Come, Fenellan, I don't think . . .'

'Oh, yes, but it's true of me too.'

'You reserve it for your enemies.'

'I'd like to distract it a bit from the biggest of 'em.' He pointed finger at the region of the heart.

'Here we have Skepsey,' said Mr. Radnor, observing the rapid

approach of a lean small figure, that in about the time of a straight-aimed javelin's cast, shot from the doorway to the table.

CHAPTER IV

THE SECOND BOTTLE

This little dart of a man came to a stop at a respectful distance from his master, having the look of an arrested needle in mechanism. His lean slip of face was an illumination of vivacious grey from the quickest of prominent large eyes. He placed his master's letters legibly on the table, and fell to his posture of attention, alert on stiff legs, the hands like sucking-cubs at play with one another.

Skepsey waited for Mr. Fenellan to notice him.

'How about the Schools for Boxing?' that gentleman said.

Deploring in motion the announcement he had to make, Skepsey replied: 'I have a difficulty in getting the plan treated seriously: a person of no station:—it does not appear of national importance. Ladies are against. They decline their signatures; and ladies have great influence; because of the blood; which we know is very slight, rather healthy than not; and it could be proved for the advantage of the frailer sex. They seem to be unaware of their own interests—ladies. The contention all around us is with ignorance. My plan is written; I have shown it, and signatures of gentlemen, to many of our City notables favourable in most cases: gentlemen of the Stock Exchange highly. The clergy and the medical profession are quite with me.'

'The surgical, perhaps you mean?'

'Also, sir. The clergy strongly.'

'On the grounds of—what, Skepsey?'

'Morality. I have fully explained to them:—after his work at the desk all day, the young City clerk wants refreshment. He needs it, must have it. I propose to catch him on his way to his music-halls and other places, and take him to one of our establishments. A short term of instruction, and he would find a pleasure in the gloves; it would delight him more than excesses—beer and tobacco. The female in her right place, certainly.' Skepsey supplicated honest interpretation of his hearer, and pursued

'It would improve his physical strength, at the same time add to his sense of personal dignity.'

'Would you teach females as well—to divert them from their frivolities?'

'That would have to be thought over, sir. It would be better for them than using their nails.'

'I don't know, Skepsey: I'm rather a Conservative there.'

'Yes; with regard to the female, sir: I confess, my scheme does not include them. They dance; that is a healthy exercise. One has only to say, that it does not add to the national force, in case of emergency. I look to that. And I am particular in proposing an exercise independent of—I have to say—sex. Not that there is harm in sex. But we are for training. I hope my meaning is clear?'

'Quite. You would have boxing with the gloves to be a kind

of monastic recreation.'

'Recreation is the word, sir; I have often admired it,' said Skepsey, blinking, unsure of the signification of monastic.

'I was a bit of a boxer once,' Mr. Fenellan said, conscious of height and breadth in measuring the wisp of a figure before him.

'Something might be done with you still, sir.'

Skepsey paid him the encomium after a respectful summary of his gifts in a glimpse. Mr. Fenellan bowed to him.

Mr. Radnor raised head from the notes he was pencilling upon letters perused.

'Skepsey's craze: regeneration of the English race by boxing—nucleus of a national army?'

'To face an enemy at close quarters—it teaches that, sir. I have always been of opinion, that courage may be taught. I do not say heroism. And setting aside for a moment thoughts of an army, we create more valuable citizens. Protection to the weak in streets and by-places—shocking examples of ruffians maltreating women, in view of a crowd.'

'One strong man is an overmatch for your mob,' said Mr. Fenellan.

Skepsey toned his assent to the diminishing thinness where a suspicion of the negative begins to wind upon a distant horn.

'Knowing his own intentions; and before an ignorant mob:—strong, you say, sir? I venture my word that a, decent lad, with science, would beat him. It is a question of the study and practice of first principles.'

'If you were to see a rascal giant mishandling a woman?' Skepsey conjured the scene by bending his head and peering abstractedly, as if over spectacles.

'I would beg him to abstain, for his own sake.'

Mr. Fenellan knew that the little fellow was not boasting.

'My brother Dartrey had a lesson or two from you in the first principles,

I think?'

'Captain Dartrey is an athlete, sir: exceedingly quick and clever; a hard boxer to beat.'

'You will not call him captain when you see him; he has dismissed the army.'

'I much regret it, sir, much, that we have lost him. Captain Dartrey Fenellan was a beautiful fencer. He gave me some instruction; unhappily, I have to acknowledge, too late. It is a beautiful art. Captain Dartrey says, the French excel at it. But it asks for a weapon, which nature has not given: whereas the fists . . .'

'So,' Mr. Radnor handed notes and papers to Skepsey: 'No sign of life?'

'It is not yet seen in the City, sir.'

'The first principles of commercial activity have retreated to earth's maziest penetralia, where no tides are! is it not so, Skepsey?' said Mr. Fenellan, whose initiative and exuberance in loquency had been restrained by a slight oppression, known to guests; especially to the guest in the earlier process of his

magnification and illumination by virtue of a grand old wine; and also when the news he has to communicate may be a stir to unpleasant heaps. The shining lips and eyes of his florid face now proclaimed speech, with his Puckish fancy jack-o'-lanterning over it. 'Business hangs to swing at every City door, like a ragshop Doll, on the gallows of overproduction. Stocks and Shares are hollow nuts not a squirrel of the lot would stop to crack for sight of the milky kernel mouldered to beard.

Percentage, like a cabman without a fare, has gone to sleep inside his vehicle. Dividend may just be seen by tiptoe: stockholders, twinkling heels over the far horizon. Too true!— and our merchants, brokers, bankers, projectors of Companies, parade our City to remind us of the poor steamed fellows trooping out of the burst-boiler-room of the big ship Leviathan, in old years; a shade or two paler than the crowd o' the passengers, apparently alive and conversible, but corpses, all of them to lie their length in fifteen minutes.'

'And you, Fenellan?' cried his host, inspired for a second bottle by the lovely nonsense of a voluble friend wound up to the mark.

'Doctor of the ship! with this prescription!' Mr. Fenellan held up his glass.

'Empty?'

Mr. Fenellan made it completely so. 'Confident!' he affirmed. An order was tossed to the waiter, and both gentlemen screwed their lips in relish of his heavy consent to score off

another bottle from the narrow list.

'At the office in forty minutes,' Skepsey's master nodded to him and shot him forth, calling him back: 'By the way, in case a man named Jarniman should ask to see me, you turn him to the rightabout.'

Skepsey repeated: 'Jarniman !' and flew.

'A good servant,' Mr. Radnor said. 'Few of us think of our country so much, whatever may be said of the specific he offers. Colney has impressed him somehow immensely: he studies to write too; pushes to improve himself; altogether a worthy creature.'

The second bottle appeared. The waiter, in sincerity a reluctant executioner, heightened his part for the edification of the admiring couple.

'Take heart, Benjamin,' said Mr. Fenellan; 'it's only the bottle dies; and we are the angels above to receive the spirit.'

'I'm thinking of the house,' Benjamin replied. He told them that again.

'It 's the loss of the fame of having the wine, that he mourns. But, Benjamin,' said Mr. Fenellan, 'the fame enters into the partakers of it, and we spread it, and perpetuate it for you.'

'That don't keep a house upright,' returned Benjamin.

Mr. Fenellan murmured to himself: 'True enough, it 's elegy—though we perform it through a trumpet; and there's not a doubt of our being down or having knocked the world down, if we're loudly praised.'

Benjamin waited to hear approval sounded on the lips uncertain as a woman is a wine of ticklish age. The gentlemen nodded, and he retired.

A second bottle, just as good as the first, should, one thoughtlessly supposes, procure us a similar reposeful and excursive enjoyment, as of men lying on their backs and flying imagination like a kite. The effect was quite other. Mr. Radnor drank hastily and spoke with heat: 'You told me All? tell me that!'

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.