GEORGE MEREDITH

DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS. VOLUME 4

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Meredith G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER XXVII
CONTAINS MATTER FOR SUBSEQUENT EXPLOSION

Among the various letters inundating Sir Lukin Dunstane upon the report of the triumph of surgical skill achieved by Sir William Macpherson and Mr. Lanyan Thomson, was one from Lady Wathin, dated Adlands, an estate of Mr. Quintin Manx's in Warwickshire, petitioning for the shortest line of reassurance as to the condition of her dear cousin, and an intimation of the period when it might be deemed possible for a relative to call and offer her sincere congratulations: a letter deserving a personal reply, one would suppose. She received the following, in a succinct female hand corresponding to its terseness; every 't' righteously crossed, every 'i' punctiliously dotted, as she remarked to Constance Asper, to whom the communication was transferred for perusal:

> 'DEAR LADY WATHIN,—Lady Dunstane is gaining strength. The measure of her pulse indicates favourably. She shall be informed in good time of your solicitude for her recovery. The day cannot yet be named for visits of any kind. You will receive information as soon as the house is open.
>
> 'I have undertaken the task of correspondence, and beg you to believe me,
>
> *'Very truly yours,*
>
> *'D. A. WARWICK.'*

Miss Asper speculated on the handwriting of her rival. She obtained permission to keep the letter, with the intention of transmitting it per post to an advertising interpreter of character in caligraphy.

Such was the character of the fair young heiress, exhibited by her performances much more patently than the run of a quill would reveal it.

She said, 'It is rather a pretty hand, I think.'

'Mrs. Warwick is a practised writer,' said Lady Wathin. 'Writing is her profession, if she has any. She goes to nurse my cousin. Her husband says she is an excellent nurse. He says what he can for her. But you must be in the last extremity, or she is ice. His appeal to her has been totally disregarded. Until he drops down in the street, as his doctor expects him to do some day, she will continue her course; and even then . . .' An adventuress desiring her freedom! Lady Wathin looked. She was too devout a woman to say what she thought. But she knew the world to be very wicked. Of Mrs. Warwick, her opinion was formed. She would not have charged the individual creature with a criminal design; all she did was to stuff the person her virtue abhorred with the wickedness of the world, and that is a common process in antipathy.

She sympathized, moreover, with the beautiful devotedness of the wealthy heiress to her ideal of man. It had led her to make the acquaintance of old Lady Dacier, at the house in town, where Constance Asper had first met Percy; Mrs. Grafton Winstanley's house, representing neutral territory or debateable land for the occasional intercourse of the upper class and the climbing in the professions or in commerce; Mrs. Grafton Winstanley being on the edge of aristocracy by birth, her husband, like Mr. Quintin Manx, a lord of fleets. Old Lady Dacier's bluntness in speaking of her grandson would have shocked Lady Wathin as much as it astonished, had she been less of an ardent absorber of aristocratic manners. Percy was plainly called a donkey, for hanging off and on with a handsome girl of such expectations as Miss Asper. 'But what you can't do with a horse, you can't hope to do with a donkey.' She added that she had come for the purpose of seeing the heiress, of whose points of

person she delivered a judgement critically appreciative as a horsefancier's on the racing turf. 'If a girl like that holds to it, she's pretty sure to get him at last. It 's no use to pull his neck down to the water.'

Lady Wathin delicately alluded to rumours of an entanglement, an admiration he had, ahem.

'A married woman,' the veteran nodded. 'I thought that was off? She must be a clever intriguer to keep him so long.'

'She is undoubtedly clever,' said Lady Wathin, and it was mumbled in her hearing: 'The woman seems to have a taste for our family.'

They agreed that they could see nothing to be done. The young lady must wither, Mrs. Warwick have her day. The veteran confided her experienced why to Lady Wathin: 'All the tales you tell of a woman of that sort are sharp sauce to the palates of men.'

They might be, to the men of the dreadful gilded idle class!

Mrs. Warwick's day appeared indefinitely prolonged, judging by Percy Dacier's behaviour to Miss Asper. Lady Wathin watched them narrowly when she had the chance, a little ashamed of her sex, or indignant rather at his display of courtliness in exchange for her open betrayal of her preference. It was almost to be wished that she would punish him by sacrificing herself to one of her many brilliant proposals of marriage. But such are women!—precisely because of his holding back he tightened the cord attaching him to her tenacious heart. This was the truth. For the rest, he was gracefully courteous; an observer could perceive the charm he exercised. He talked with a ready affability, latterly with greater social ease; evidently not acting the indifferent conqueror, or so consummately acting it as to mask the air. And yet he was ambitious, and he was not rich. Notoriously was he ambitious, and with wealth to back him, a great entertaining house, troops of adherents, he would gather influence, be propelled to leadership. The vexation of a constant itch to speak to him on the subject, and the recognition, that he knew it all as well as she, tormented Lady Wathin. He gave her comforting news of her dear cousin in the Winter.

'You have heard from Mrs. Warwick?' she said.

He replied, 'I had the latest from Mr. Redworth.'

'Mrs. Warwick has relinquished her post?'

'When she does, you may be sure that Lady Dunstane is, perfectly reestablished.'

'She is an excellent nurse.'

'The best, I believe.'

'It is a good quality in sickness.'

'Proof of good all through.'

'Her husband might have the advantage of it. His state is really pathetic. If she has feeling, and could only be made aware, she might perhaps be persuaded to pass from the friendly to the wifely duty.'

Mr. Dacier bent his head to listen, and he bowed.

He was fast in the toils; and though we have assurance that evil cannot triumph in perpetuity, the aspect of it throning provokes a kind of despair. How strange if ultimately the lawyers once busy about the uncle were to take up the case of the nephew, and this time reverse the issue, by proving it! For poor Mr. Warwick was emphatic on the question of his honour. It excited him dangerously. He was long-suffering, but with the slightest clue terrible. The unknotting of the entanglement might thus happen—and Constance Asper would welcome her hero still.

Meanwhile there was actually nothing to be done: a deplorable absence of motive villainy; apparently an absence of the beneficent Power directing events to their proper termination. Lady Wathin heard of her cousin's having been removed to Cowes in May, for light Solent and Channel voyages on board Lord Esquart's yacht. She heard also of heavy failures and convulsions in the City of London, quite unconscious that the Fates, or agents of the Providence she invoked to precipitate the catastrophe, were then beginning cavernously their performance of the part of villain in Diana's history.

Diana and Emma enjoyed happy quiet sailings under May breezes on the many-coloured South-western waters, heart in heart again; the physical weakness of the one, the moral weakness of the other, creating that mutual dependency which makes friendship a pulsating tie. Diana's confession had come of her letter to Emma. When the latter was able to examine her correspondence, Diana brought her the heap for perusal, her own sealed scribble, throbbing with all the fatal might-have-been, under her eyes. She could have concealed and destroyed it. She sat beside her friend, awaiting her turn, hearing her say at the superscription: 'Your writing, Tony?' and she nodded. She was asked: 'Shall I read it?' She answered: 'Read.' They were soon locked in an embrace. Emma had no perception of coldness through those brief dry lines; her thought was of the matter.

'The danger is over now?' she said.

'Yes, that danger is over now.'

'You have weathered it?'

'I love him.'

Emma dropped a heavy sigh in pity of her, remotely in compassion for Redworth, the loving and unbeloved. She was too humane and wise of our nature to chide her Tony for having her sex's heart. She had charity to bestow on women; in defence of them against men and the world, it was a charity armed with the weapons of battle. The wife madly stripped before the world by a jealous husband, and left chained to the rock, her youth wasting, her blood arrested, her sensibilities chilled and assailing her under their multitudinous disguises, and for whom the world is merciless, called forth Emma's tenderest commiseration; and that wife being Tony, and stricken with the curse of love, in other circumstances the blessing, Emma bled for her.

'But nothing desperate?' she said.

'No; you have saved me.'

'I would knock at death's doors again, and pass them, to be sure of that.'

'Kiss me; you may be sure. I would not put my lips to your cheek if there were danger of my faltering.'

'But you love him.'

'I do: and because I love him I will not let him be fettered to me.'

'You will see him.'

'Do not imagine that his persuasions undermined your Tony. I am subject to panics.'

'Was it your husband?'

'I had a visit from Lady Wathin. She knows him. She came as peacemaker. She managed to hint at his authority. Then came a letter from him—of supplication, interpenetrated with the hint: a suffused atmosphere. Upon that; unexpected by me, my—let me call him so once, forgive me!—lover came. Oh! he loves me, or did then. Percy! He had been told that I should be claimed. I felt myself the creature I am—a wreck of marriage. But I fancied I could serve him:—I saw golden. My vanity was the chief traitor. Cowardice of course played a part. In few things that we do, where self is concerned, will cowardice not be found. And the hallucination colours it to seem a lovely heroism. That was the second time Mr. Redworth arrived. I am always at crossways, and he rescues me; on this occasion unknowingly.'

'There's a divinity . . .' said Emma. ' When I think of it I perceive that Patience is our beneficent fairy godmother, who brings us our harvest in the long result.'

'My dear, does she bring us our labourers' rations, to sustain us for the day?' said Diana.'

'Poor fare, but enough.'

'I fear I was born godmotherless.'

'You have stores of patience, Tony; only now and then fits of desperation.'

'My nature's frailty, the gap in it: we will give it no fine names —they cover our pitfalls. I am open to be carried on a tide of unreasonableness when the coward cries out. But I can say, dear, that after one rescue, a similar temptation is unlikely to master me. I do not subscribe to the world's

decrees for love of the monster, though I am beginning to understand the dues of allegiance. We have ceased to write letters. You may have faith in me.'

'I have, with my whole soul,' said Emma.

So the confession closed; and in the present instance there were not any forgotten chambers to be unlocked and ransacked for addenda confessions.

The subjects discoursed of by the two endeared the hours to them. They were aware that the English of the period would have laughed a couple of women to scorn for venturing on them, and they were not a little hostile in consequence, and shot their epigrams profusely, applauding the keener that appeared to score the giant bulk of their intolerant enemy, who holds the day, but not the morrow. Us too he holds for the day, to punish us if we have temporal cravings. He scatters his gifts to the abject; tossing to us rebels bare dog-biscuit. But the life of the spirit is beyond his region; we have our morrow in his day when we crave nought of him. Diana and Emma delighted to discover that they were each the rebel of their earlier and less experienced years; each a member of the malcontent minor faction, the salt of earth, to whom their salt must serve for nourishment, as they admitted, relishing it determinedly, not without gratification.

Sir Lukin was busy upon his estate in Scotland. They summoned young Arthur Rhodes to the island, that he might have a taste of the new scenes. Diana was always wishing for his instruction and refreshment; and Redworth came to spend a Saturday and Sunday with them, and showed his disgust of the idle boy, as usual, at the same time consulting them on the topic of furniture for the Berkshire mansion he had recently bought, rather vaunting the Spanish pictures his commissioner in Madrid was transmitting. The pair of rebels, vexed by his treatment of the respectful junior, took him for an incarnation of their enemy, and pecked and worried the man astonishingly. He submitted to it like the placable giant. Yes, he was a Liberal, and furnishing and decorating the house in the stability of which he trusted. Why not? We must accept the world as it is, try to improve it by degrees.—Not so: humanity will not wait for you, the victims are shrieking beneath the bricks of your enormous edifice, behind the canvas of your pictures. 'But you may really say that luxurious yachting is an odd kind of insurgency,' avowed Diana. 'It's the tangle we are in.'

'It's the coat we have to wear; and why fret at it for being comfortable?'

'I don't half enough, when I think of my shivering neighbours.'

'Money is of course a rough test of virtue,' said Redworth. 'We have no other general test.'

Money! The ladies proclaimed it a mere material test; Diana, gazing on sunny sea, with an especial disdain. And name us your sort of virtue. There is more virtue in poverty, He denied that. Inflexibly British, he declared money, and also the art of getting money, to be hereditary virtues, deserving of their reward. The reward a superior wealth and its fruits? Yes, the power to enjoy and spread enjoyment: and let idleness envy both! He abused idleness, and by implication the dilettante insurgency fostering it. However, he was compensatingly heterodox in his view of the Law's persecution of women; their pertinacious harpings on the theme had brought him to that; and in consideration of the fact, as they looked from yacht to shore, of their being rebels participating largely in the pleasures of the tyrant's court, they allowed him to silence them, and forgave him.

Thoughts upon money and idleness were in confusion with Diana. She had a household to support in London, and she was not working; she could not touch THE CANTATRICE while Emma was near. Possibly, she again ejaculated, the Redworths of the world were right: the fruitful labours were with the mattock and hoe, or the mind directing them. It was a crushing invasion of materialism, so she proposed a sail to the coast of France, and thither they flew, touching Cherbourg, Alderney, Sark, Guernsey, and sighting the low Brittany rocks. Memorable days to Arthur Rhodes. He saw perpetually the one golden centre in new scenes. He heard her voice, he treasured her sayings; her gestures, her play of lip and eyelid, her lift of head, lightest movements, were imprinted on him, surely as the heavens are mirrored in the quiet seas, firmly and richly as earth answers to the sprinkled grain. For he was blissfully athirst, untroubled by a hope. She gave him more than she knew of: a present

that kept its beating heart into the future; a height of sky, a belief in nobility, permanent through manhood down to age. She was his foam-born Goddess of those leaping waters; differently hued, crescented, a different influence. He had a happy week, and it charmed Diana to hear him tell her so. In spite of Redworth, she had faith in the fruit- bearing powers of a time of simple happiness, and shared the youth's in reflecting it. Only the happiness must be simple, that of the glass to the lovely face: no straining of arms to retain, no heaving of the bosom in vacancy.

His poverty and capacity for pure enjoyment led her to think of him almost clingingly when hard news reached her from the quaint old City of London, which despises poverty and authorcraft and all mean adventurers, and bows to the lordly merchant, the mighty financier, Redworth's incarnation of the virtues. Happy days on board the yacht Clarissa! Diana had to recall them with effort. They who sow their money for a promising high percentage have built their habitations on the sides of the most eruptive mountain in Europe. AEtna supplies more certain harvests, wrecks fewer vineyards and peaceful dwellings. The greed of gain is our volcano. Her wonder leapt up at the slight inducement she had received to embark her money in this Company: a South-American mine, collapsed almost within hearing of the trumpets of prospectus, after two punctual payments of the half-yearly interest. A Mrs. Ferdinand Cherson, an elder sister of the pretty Mrs. Fryar-Gunnett, had talked to her of the cost of things one afternoon at Lady Singleby's garden-party, and spoken of the City as the place to help to swell an income, if only you have an acquaintance with some of the chief City men. The great mine was named, and the rush for allotments. She knew a couple of the Directors. They vowed to her that ten per cent. was a trifle; the fortune to be expected out of the mine was already clearly estimable at forties and fifties. For their part they anticipated cent. per cent. Mrs. Cherson said she wanted money, and had therefore invested in the mine. It seemed so consequent, the cost of things being enormous! She and her sister Mrs. Fryar-Gunnett owned husbands who did their bidding, because of their having the brains, it might be understood. Thus five thousand pounds invested would speedily bring five thousand pounds per annum. Diana had often dreamed of the City of London as the seat of magic; and taking the City's contempt for authorcraft and the intangible as, from its point of view, justly founded, she had mixed her dream strangely with an ancient notion of the City's probity. Her broker's shaking head did not damp her ardour for shares to the full amount of her ability to purchase. She remembered her satisfaction at the allotment; the golden castle shot up from this fountain mine. She had a frenzy for mines and fished in some English with smaller sums. 'I am now a miner,' she had exclaimed, between dismay at her audacity and the pride of it. Why had she not consulted Redworth? He would peremptorily have stopped the frenzy in its first intoxicating effervescence. She, like Mrs. Cherson, like all women who have plunged upon the cost of things, wanted money. She naturally went to the mine. Address him for counsel in the person of dupe, she could not; shame was a barrier. Could she tell him that the prattle of a woman, spendthrift as Mrs. Cherson, had induced her to risk her money? Latterly the reports of Mrs. Fryar-Gunnett were not of the flavour to make association of their names agreeable to his hearing.

She had to sit down in the buzz of her self-reproaches and amazement at the behaviour of that reputable City, shrug, and recommence the labour of her pen. Material misfortune had this one advantage; it kept her from speculative thoughts of her lover, and the meaning of his absence and, silence.

Diana's perusal of the incomplete CANTATRICE was done with the cold critical eye interpreting for the public. She was forced to write on nevertheless, and exactly in the ruts of the foregoing matter. It propelled her. No longer perversely, of necessity she wrote her best, convinced that the work was doomed to unpopularity, resolved that it should be at least a victory in style. A fit of angry cynicism now and then set her composing phrases as baits for the critics to quote, condemnatory of the attractiveness of the work. Her mood was bad. In addition, she found Whitmonby cool; he complained of the coolness of her letter of adieu; complained of her leaving London so long. How could she expect to be his Queen of the London Salon if she lost touch of the topics? He made no

other allusion. They were soon on amicable terms, at the expense of flattering arts that she had not hitherto practised. But Westlake revealed unimagined marvels of the odd corners of the masculine bosom. He was the man of her circle the neatest in epigram, the widest of survey, an Oriental traveller, a distinguished writer, and if not personally bewitching, remarkably a gentleman of the world. He was wounded; he said as much. It came to this: admitting that he had no claims, he declared it to be unbearable for him to see another preferred. The happier was unmentioned, and Diana scraped his wound by rallying him. He repeated that he asked only to stand on equal terms with the others; her preference of one was past his tolerance. She told him that since leaving Lady Dunstane she had seen but Whitmonby, Wilmers, and him. He smiled sarcastically, saying he had never had a letter from her, except the formal one of invitation.

'Powers of blarney, have you forsaken a daughter of Erin?' cried Diana. 'Here is a friend who has a craving for you, and I talk sense to him. I have written to none of my set since I last left London.'

She pacified him by doses of cajolery new to her tongue. She liked him, abhorred the thought of losing any of her friends, so the cajoling sentences ran until Westlake betrayed an inflammable composition, and had to be put out, and smoked sullenly. Her resources were tried in restoring him to reason. The months of absence from London appeared to have transformed her world. Tonans was moderate. The great editor rebuked her for her prolonged absence from London, not so much because it discrowned her as Queen of the Salon, but candidly for its rendering her service less to him. Everything she knew of men and affairs was to him stale.

'How do you get to the secrets?' she asked.

'By sticking to the centre of them,' he said.

'But how do you manage to be in advance and act the prophet?'

'Because I will have them at any price, and that is known.'

She hinted at the peccant City Company.

'I think I have checked the mining mania, as I did the railway,' said he; 'and so far it was a public service. There's no checking of maniacs.'

She took her whipping within and without. 'On another occasion I shall apply to you, Mr. Tonans.'

'Ah, there was a time when you could have been a treasure to me,' he rejoined; alluding of course to the Dannisburgh days.

In dejection, as she mused on those days, and on her foolish ambition to have a London house where her light might burn, she advised herself, with Redworth's voice, to quit the house, arrest expenditure, and try for happiness by burning and shining in the spirit: devoting herself, as Arthur Rhodes did, purely to literature. It became almost a decision.

Percy she had still neither written to nor heard from, and she dared not hope to meet him. She fancied a wish to have tidings of his marriage: it would be peace; if in desolation. Now that she had confessed and given her pledge to Emma, she had so far broken with him as to render the holding him chained a cruelty, and his reserve whispered of a rational acceptance of the end between them. She thanked him for it; an act whereby she was: instantly melted to such softness that a dread of him haunted her. Coward, take up your burden for armour! she called to her poor dungeoned self wailing to have common nourishment. She knew how prodigiously it waxed on crumbs; nay, on the imagination of small morsels. By way of chastizing it, she reviewed her life, her behaviour to her husband, until she sank backward to a depth deprived of air and light. That life with her husband was a dungeon to her nature deeper than any imposed by present conditions. She was then a revolutionary to reach to the breath of day. She had now to be, only not a coward, and she could breathe as others did. 'Women who sap the moral laws pull down the pillars of the temple on their sex,' Emma had said. Diana perceived something of her personal debt to civilization. Her struggles passed into the doomed CANTATRICE occupying days and nights under pressure for immediate payment; the silencing of friend Debit, ridiculously calling himself Credit, in contempt of sex and conduct, on the ground, that

he was he solely by virtue of being she. He had got a trick of singing operatic solos in the form and style of the delightful tenor Tellio, and they were touching in absurdity, most real in unreality. Exquisitely trilled, after Tellio's manner,

'The tradesmen all beseech ye,
The landlord, cook and maid,
Complete THE CANTATRICE,
That they may soon be paid.'

provoked her to laughter in pathos. He approached, posturing himself operatically, with perpetual new verses, rhymes to Danvers, rhymes to Madame Sybille, the cook. Seeing Tellio at one of Henry Wilmers' private concerts, Diana's lips twitched to dimples at the likeness her familiar had assumed. She had to compose her countenance to talk to him; but the moment of song was the trial. Lady Singleby sat beside her, and remarked:

'You have always fun going on in you!' She partook of the general impression that Diana Warwick was too humorous to nurse a downright passion.

Before leaving, she engaged Diana to her annual garden-party of the closing season, and there the meeting with Percy occurred, not unobserved. Had they been overheard, very little to implicate them would have been gathered. He walked in full view across the lawn to her, and they presented mask to mask.

'The beauty of the day tempts you at last, Mrs. Warwick.'

'I have been finishing a piece of work.'

Lovely weather, beautiful dresses: agreed. Diana wore a yellow robe with a black bonnet, and he commented on the becoming hues; for the first time, he noticed her dress! Lovely women? Dacier hesitated. One he saw. But surely he must admire Mrs. Fryar-Gunnett? And who steps beside her, transparently fascinated, with visage at three-quarters to the rays within her bonnet? Can it be Sir Lukin Dunstane? and beholding none but his charmer!

Dacier withdrew his eyes thoughtfully from the spectacle, and moved to woo Diana to a stroll. She could not restrain her feet; she was out of the ring of her courtiers for the moment. He had seized his opportunity.

'It is nearly a year!' he said.

'I have been nursing nearly all the time, doing the work I do best.'

'Unaltered?'

'A year must leave its marks.'

'Tony!'

'You speak of a madwoman, a good eleven months dead. Let her rest.

Those are the conditions.'

'Accepted, if I may see her.'

'Honestly accepted?'

'Imposed fatally, I have to own. I have felt with you: you are the wiser. But, admitting that, surely we can meet. I may see you?'

'My house has not been shut.'

'I respected the house. I distrusted myself.'

'What restores your confidence?'

'The strength I draw from you.'

One of the Beauties at a garden-party is lucky to get as many minutes as had passed in quietness. Diana was met and captured. But those last words of Percy's renewed her pride in him by suddenly building a firm faith in herself. Noblest of lovers! she thought, and brooded on the little that had been spoken, the much conveyed, for a proof of perfect truthfulness.

The world had watched them. It pronounced them discreet if culpable; probably cold to the passion both. Of Dacier's coldness it had no doubt, and Diana's was presumed from her comical flights of speech. She was given to him because of the known failure of her other adorers. He in the front rank of politicians attracted her with the lustre of his ambition; she him with her mingling of talent and beauty. An astute world; right in the main, owing to perceptions based upon brute nature; utterly astray in particulars, for the reason that it takes no count of the soul of man or woman. Hence its glee at a catastrophe; its poor stock of mercy. And when no catastrophe follows, the prophet, for the honour of the profession, must decry her as cunning beyond aught yet revealed of a serpent sex.

Save for a word or two, the watchman might have overheard and trumpeted his report of their interview at Diana's house. After the first pained breathing, when they found themselves alone in that room where they had plighted their fortunes, they talked allusively to define the terms imposed on them by Reason. The thwarted step was unmentioned; it was a past madness. But Wisdom being recognized, they could meet. It would be hard if that were denied! They talked very little of their position; both understood the mutual acceptance of it; and now that he had seen her and was again under the spell, Dacier's rational mind, together with his delight in her presence, compelled him honourably to bow to the terms. Only, as these were severe upon lovers, the innocence of their meetings demanded indemnification in frequency.

'Come whenever you think I can be useful,' said Diana.

They pressed hands at parting, firmly and briefly, not for the ordinary dactylology of lovers, but in sign of the treaty of amity.

She soon learnt that she had tied herself to her costly household.

CHAPTER XXVIII
DIALOGUE ROUND THE SUBJECT OF A PORTRAIT, WITH SOME INDICATIONS OF THE TASK FOR DIANA

An enamoured Egeria who is not a princess in her worldly state nor a goddess by origin has to play one of those parts which strain the woman's faculties past naturalness. She must never expose her feelings to her lover; she must make her counsel weighty—otherwise she is little his nymph of the pure wells, and what she soon may be, the world will say. She has also, most imperatively, to dazzle him without the betrayal of artifice, where simple spontaneousness is beyond conjuring. But feelings that are constrained becloud the judgement besides arresting the fine jet of delivery wherewith the mastered lover is taught through his ears to think himself prompted, and submit to be controlled, by a creature super- feminine. She must make her counsel so weighty in poignant praises as to repress impulses that would rouse her own; and her betraying impulsiveness was a subject of reflection to Diana after she had given Percy Dacier, metaphorically, the key of her house. Only as true Egeria could she receive him. She was therefore grateful, she thanked and venerated this noblest of lovers for his not pressing to the word of love, and so strengthening her to point his mind, freshen his moral energies and inspirit him. His chivalrous acceptance of the conditions of their renewed intimacy was a radiant knightliness to Diana, elevating her with a living image for worship:—he so near once to being the absolute lord of her destinies! How to reward him, was her sole dangerous thought. She prayed and strove that she might give him of her best, to practically help him; and she had reason to suppose she could do it, from the visible effect of her phrases. He glistened in repeating them; he had fallen into the habit; before witnesses too; in the presence of Miss Paynham, who had taken earnestly to the art of painting, and obtained her dear Mrs. Warwick's promise of a few sittings for the sketch of a portrait, near the close of the season. 'A very daring thing to attempt,' Miss Paynham said, when he was comparing her first outlines and the beautiful breathing features. 'Even if one gets the face, the lips will seem speechless, to those who know her.'

'If they have no recollection,' said Dacier.

'I mean, the endeavour should be to represent them at the moment of speaking.'

'Put it into the eyes.' He looked at the eyes.

She looked at the mouth. 'But it is the mouth, more than the eyes.'

He looked at the face. 'Where there is character, you have only to study it to be sure of a likeness.'

'That is the task, with one who utters jewels, Mr. Dacier.'

'Bright wit, I fear, is above the powers of your art.'

'Still I feel it could be done. See—now—that!'

Diana's lips had opened to say: 'Confess me a model model: I am dissected while I sit for portrayal. I must be for a moment like the frog of the two countrymen who were disputing as to the manner of his death, when he stretched to yawn, upon which they agreed that he had defeated the truth for both of them. I am not quite inanimate.'

'Irish countrymen,' said Dacier.

'The story adds, that blows were arrested; so confer the nationality as you please.'

Diana had often to divert him from a too intent perusal of her features with sparkles and stories current or invented to serve the immediate purpose.

Miss Paynham was Mrs. Warwick's guest for a fortnight, and observed them together. She sometimes charitably laid down her pencil and left them, having forgotten this or that. They were conversing of general matters with their usual crisp precision on her return, and she was rather like the two countrymen, in debating whether it was excess of coolness or discreetness; though she was

convinced of their inclinations, and expected love some day to be leaping up. Diana noticed that she had no reminder for leaving the room when it was Mr. Redworth present. These two had become very friendly, according to her hopes; and Miss Paynham was extremely solicitous to draw suggestions from Mr. Redworth and win his approval.

'Do I appear likely to catch the mouth now, do you think, Mr. Redworth?'

He remarked, smiling at Diana's expressive dimple, that the mouth was difficult to catch. He did not gaze intently. Mr. Redworth was the genius of friendship, 'the friend of women,' Mrs. Warwick had said of him. Miss Paynham discovered it, as regarded herself. The portrait was his commission to her, kindly proposed, secretly of course, to give her occupation and the chance of winning a vogue with the face of a famous Beauty. So many, however, were Mrs. Warwick's visitors, and so lively the chatter she directed, that accurate sketching was difficult to an amateurish hand. Whitmonby, Sullivan Smith, Westlake, Henry Wilmers, Arthur Rhodes, and other gentlemen, literary and military, were almost daily visitors when it became known that the tedium of the beautiful sitter required beguiling and there was a certainty of finding her at home. On Mrs. Warwick's Wednesday numerous ladies decorated the group. Then was heard such a rillet of dialogue without scandal or politics, as nowhere else in Britain; all vowed it subsequently; for to the remembrance it seemed magical. Not a breath of scandal, and yet the liveliest flow. Lady Pennon came attended by a Mr. Alexander Hepburn, a handsome Scot, at whom Dacier shot one of his instinctive keen glances, before seeing that the hostess had mounted a transient colour. Mr. Hepburn, in settling himself on his chair rather too briskly, contrived the next minute to break a precious bit of China standing by his elbow; and Lady Pennon cried out, with sympathetic anguish: 'Oh, my dear, what a trial for you!'

'Brittle is foredoomed,' said Diana, unruffled.

She deserved compliments, and would have had them if she had not wounded the most jealous and petulant of her courtiers.

'Then the Turk is a sapient custodian!' said Westlake, vexed with her flush at the entrance of the Scot.

Diana sedately took his challenge. 'We, Mr. Westlake, have the philosophy of ownership.'

Mr. Hepburn penitentially knelt to pick up the fragments, and Westlake murmured over his head: 'As long as it is we who are the cracked.'

'Did we not start from China?'

'We were consequently precipitated to Stamboul.'

'You try to elude the lesson.'

'I remember my first paedagogue telling me so when he rapped the book on my cranium.'

'The mark of the book is not a disfigurement.'

It was gently worded, and the shrewder for it. The mark of the book, if not a disfigurement, was a characteristic of Westlake's fashion of speech. Whitmonby nodded twice, for signification of a palpable hit in that bout; and he noted within him the foolishness of obtruding the remotest allusion to our personality when crossing the foils with a woman. She is down on it like the lightning, quick as she is in her contracted circle, politeness guarding her from a riposte.

Mr. Hepburn apologized very humbly, after regaining his chair. Diana smiled and said: 'Incidents in a drawing-room are prize-shots at Dulness.'

'And in a dining-room too,' added Sullivan Smith. 'I was one day at a dinner-party, apparently of undertakers hired to mourn over the joints and the birds in the dishes, when the ceiling came down, and we all sprang up merry as crickets. It led to a pretty encounter and a real prize-shot.'

'Does that signify a duel?' asked Lady Pennon.

''Twould be the vulgar title, to bring it into discredit with the populace, my lady.'

'Rank me one of the populace then! I hate duelling and rejoice that it is discountenanced.'

'The citizens, and not the populace, I think Mr. Sullivan Smith means,' Diana said. 'The citizen is generally right in morals. My father also was against the practice, when it raged at its "prettiest." I

have heard him relate a story of a poor friend of his, who had to march out for a trifle, and said, as he accepted the invitation, "It's all nonsense!" and walking to the measured length, "It's all nonsense, you know!" and when lying on the ground, at his last gasp, "I told you it was all nonsense!"'

Sullivan Smith leaned over to Whitmonby and Dacier amid the ejaculations, and whispered: 'A lady's way of telling the story!—and excuseable to her:—she had to Jonah the adjective. What the poor fellow said was—' He murmured the sixty-pounder adjective, as in the belly of the whale, to rightly emphasize his noun.

Whitmonby nodded to the superior relish imparted by the vigour of masculine veracity in narration. 'A story for its native sauce piquante,' he said.

'Nothing without it!'

They had each a dissolving grain of contempt for women compelled by their delicacy to spoil that kind of story which demands the piquant accompaniment to flavour it racily and make it passable. For to see insipid mildness complacently swallowed as an excellent thing, knowing the rich smack of savour proper to the story, is your anecdotal gentleman's annoyance. But if the anecdote had supported him, Sullivan Smith would have let the expletive rest.

Major Carew Mahoney capped Mrs. Warwick's tale of the unfortunate duellist with another, that confessed the practice absurd, though he approved of it; and he cited Lord Larrian's opinion: 'It keeps men braced to civil conduct.'

'I would not differ with the dear old lord; but no! the pistol is the sceptre of the bully,' said Diana.

Mr. Hepburn, with the widest of eyes on her in perpetuity, warmly agreed; and the man was notorious among men for his contrary action.

'Most righteously our Princess Egeria distinguishes her reign by prohibiting it,' said Lady Singleby.

'And how,' Sullivan Smith sighed heavily, 'how, I'd ask, are ladies to be protected from the bully?'

He was beset: 'So it was all for us? all in consideration for our benefit?'

He mournfully exclaimed: 'Why, surely!'

'That is the funeral apology of the Rod, at the close of every barbarous chapter,' said Diana.

'Too fine in mind, too fat in body; that is a consequence with men, dear madam. The conqueror stands to his weapons, or he loses his possessions.'

'Mr. Sullivan Smith jumps at his pleasure from the special to the general, and will be back, if we follow him, Lady Pennon. It is the trick men charge to women, showing that they can resemble us.'

Lady Pennon thumped her knee. 'Not a bit. There's no resemblance, and they know nothing of us.'

'Women are a blank to them, I believe,' said Whitmonby, treacherously bowing;—and Westlake said:

'Traces of a singular scrawl have been observed when they were held in close proximity to the fire.'

'Once, on the top of a coach,' Whitmonby resumed, 'I heard a comely dame of the period when summers are ceasing threatened by her husband with a divorce, for omitting to put sandwiches in their luncheon-basket. She made him the inscrutable answer: "Ah, poor man! you will go down ignorant to your grave!" We laughed, and to this day I cannot tell you why.'

'That laugh was from a basket lacking provision; and I think we could trace our separation to it,' Diana said to Lady Pennon, who replied: 'They expose themselves; they get no nearer to the riddle.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.