# GEORGE MEREDITH

SANDRA BELLONI. VOLUME 5

George Meredith

# Sandra Belloni. Volume 5

**Meredith G.**

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# George Meredith
# Sandra Belloni – Volume 5

## CHAPTER XXXIV

Lady Charlotte was too late for Emilia, when she went forth to her to speak for Wilfrid. She found the youth Braintop resting heavily against a tree, muttering to himself that he had no notion where he was, as an excuse for his stationary posture, while the person he presumed he should have detained was being borne away. Near him a scrap of paper lay on the ground, struck out of darkness by long slips of light from the upper windows. Thinking this might be something purposely dropped, she took possession of it; but a glance subsequently showed her that the writing was too fervid for a female hand. "Or does the girl write in that way?" she thought. She soon decided that it was Wilfrid who had undone her work in the line of thirsty love-speech. "How can a little fool read them and not believe any lie that he may tell!" she cried to herself. She chose to say contemptuously: "It's like a child proclaiming he is hungry." That it was couched in bad taste she positively conceived— taking the paper up again and again to correct her memory. The termination, "Your lover," appeared to her, if not laughable, revolting. She was uncertain in her sentiments at this point.

Was it amusing? or simply execrable? Some charity for the unhappy document Lady Charlotte found when she could say: "I suppose this is the general run of the kind of again." "Was it?" she reflected; and drank at the words again. "No," she came to think; "men don't commonly write as he does, whoever wrote this." She had no doubt that it was Wilfrid. By fits her wrath was directed against him. "It's villany," she said. But more and more frequently a crouching abject longing to call the words her own—to have them poured into her heart and brain—desire for the intoxication of the naked speech of love usurped her spirit of pride, until she read with envious tears, half loathing herself, but fascinated and subdued: "Mine! my angel! You will see me to-morrow.—Your Lover."

Of jealousy she felt very little—her chief thought coming like a wave over her: "Here is a man that can love!"

She was a woman of chaste blood, which spoke to her as shyly as a girl's, now that it was in tumult: so indeed that, pressing her heart, she thought youth to have come back, and feasted on the exultation we have when, at an odd hour, we fancy we have cheated time. The sensation of youth and strength seemed to set a seal of lawfulness and naturalness, hitherto wanting, on her feeling for Wilfrid. "I can help him," she thought. "I know where he fails, and what he can do. I can give him position, and be worth as much as any woman can be to a man." Thus she justified the direction taken by the new force in her.

Two days later Wilfrid received a letter from Lady Charlotte, saying that she, with a chaperon, had started to join her brother at the yacht- station, according to appointment. Amazed and utterly discomfited, he looked about for an escape; but his father, whose plea of sickness had kept him from pursuing Emilia, petulantly insisted that he should go down to Lady Charlotte. Adela was ready to go. There were numbers either going or now on the spot, and the net was around him. Cornelia held back, declaring that her place was by her father's side. Fine Shades were still too dominant at Brookfield for anyone to tell her why she stayed.

With anguish so deep that he could not act indifference, Wilfrid went on his miserable expedition—first setting a watch over Mr. Pericles, the which, in connection with the electric telegraph, was to enable him to join that gentleman speedily, whithersoever he might journey. He was not one to be deceived by the Greek's mask in running down daily to Brookfield. A manoeuvre like that was poor; and besides, he had seen the sallow eyes give a twinkle more than once.

Now, on the Besworth night, Georgiana Ford had studied her brother Merthyr's face when Emilia's voice called for Wilfrid. Her heart was touched; and, in the midst of some little invidious wonder at the power of a girl to throw her attraction upon such a man, she thought, as she hoped, that probably it was due to the girl's Italian blood. Merthyr was not unwilling to speak of her, and say what he feared and desired for Emilia's sake; and Georgiana read, by this mark of confidence, how sincerely she was loved and trusted by him. "One never can have more than half of a man's heart," she thought—adding, "It's our duty to deserve that, nevertheless."

She was mystified. Say that Merthyr loved a girl, whom he certainly distinguished with some visible affection, what sort of man must he be that was preferred to Merthyr? And this set Georgiana at work thinking of Wilfrid. "He has at times the air of a student. He is one who trusts his own light too exclusively. Is he godless?" She concluded: "He is a soldier, and an officer with brains—a good class:" Rare also. Altogether, though Emilia did not elevate herself in this lady's mind by choosing Wilfrid when she might have had Merthyr, the rivalry of the two men helped to dignify the one of whom she thought least. Might she have had Merthyr? Georgiana would not believe it—that is to say, she shut the doors and shot the bolts, the knocking outside went on.

Her brother had told her the whole circumstances of Emilia's life and position. When he said, "Do what you can for her," she knew that it was not the common empty phrase. Young as she was, simple in habits, clear in mind, open in all practices of daily life, she was no sooner brought into an active course than astuteness and impetuosity combined wonderfully in her. She did not tell Merthyr that she had done anything to discover Emilia, and only betrayed that she was moving at all in a little conversation they had about a meeting at the house of his friend Marini, an Italian exile.

"Possibly Belloni goes there," said Merthyr. "I wonder whether Marini knows anything of him. They have a meeting every other night."

Georgiana replied: "He went there and took his daughter the night after we were at Besworth. He took her to be sworn in."

"Still that old folly of Marini's!" cried Merthyr, almost wrathfully. He had some of the English objection to the mixing-up of women in political matters.

Georgiana instantly addressed herself to it: "He thinks that the country must be saved by its women as well as its men; and if they have not brains and steadfast devotion, he concludes that the country will not be saved. But he gives them their share of the work; and, dearest, has he had reason to repent it?"

"No," Merthyr was forced to admit—taking shelter in his antipathy to the administration of an oath to women. And consider that this is a girl!"

"The oaths of girls are sometimes more binding on them than the oaths of women."

"True, it affects their imaginations vividly; but it seems childish.

Does she have to kiss a sword and a book?"

Merthyr made a gesture like a shrug, with a desponding grimace.

"You know," answered Georgiana, smiling, "that I was excused any formula, by special exemption. I have no idea of what is done. Water, salt, white thorns, and other Carbonaro mysteries may be in use or not: I think no worse of the cause, whatever is done."

"I love the cause," said Merthyr. "I dislike this sort of conspiratorial masque Marini and his Chief indulge in. I believe it sustains them, and there's its only use."

"I," said Georgiana, "love the cause only from association with it; but in my opinion Marini is right. He deals with young and fervent minds, that require a ceremony to keep them fast—yes, dear, and women more than others do. After that, they cease to have to rely upon themselves—a reliance their good instinct teaches them is frail. There, now; have I put my sex low enough?"

She slid her head against her brother's shoulder. If he had ever met a man worthy of her, Merthyr would have sighed to feel that all her precious love was his own.

"Is there any likelihood that Belloni will be there tonight?" he asked.

She shook her head. "He has not been there since. He went for that purpose."

"Perhaps Marini is right, after all," said Merthyr, smiling.

Georgiana knew what he meant, and looked at him fondly.

"But I have never bound you to an oath," he resumed, in the same tone.

"I dare say you consider me a little different from most," said Georgiana. She had as small reserve with her brother as vanity, and could even tell him what she thought of her own worth without depreciating it after the fashion of chartered hypocrites.

Mr. Powys wrote to Marini to procure him an interview with Belloni as early as possible, and then he and Georgiana went down to Lady Charlotte.

Letters from Adela kept the Brookfield public informed of the doings on board the yacht. Before leaving home, Wilfrid with Arabella's concurrence certainly—at her instigation, as he thought—had led his father to imagine, on tolerably good grounds, that Mrs. Chump had quitted Brookfield to make purchases for her excursion on lively waters, and was then awaiting him at the appointed station. One of the old man's intermittent nervous fits had frightened them into the quasi-fabrication of this little innocent tale. The doctor's words were that Mr. Pole was to be crossed in nothing—"Not even if it should appear to be of imminent necessity that I should see him, and he refuses." The man of science stated that the malady originated in some long continued pressure of secret apprehension. Both Wilfrid and Arabella conceived that persuasion alone was wanted to send Mrs. Chump flying to the yacht; so they had less compunction in saying, "She is there."

And here began a terrible trial for the children of Nine Shades. To save a father they had to lie grievously—to continue the lie from day to day- -to turn it from a lie extensive and inappreciable to the lie minute and absolute. Then, to get a particle of truth out of this monstrous lie, they had to petition in utter humiliation the woman they had scorned, that she would return among them and consider their house her own. No answer came from Mrs. Chump; and as each day passed, the querulous invalid, still painfully acting the man in health, had to be fed with fresh lies; until at last, writing of one of the scenes in Brookfield, Arabella put down the word in all its unblessed aboriginal bluntness, and did not ask herself whether she shrank from it. "Lies!" she wrote. "What has happened to Bella?" thought Adela, in pure wonder. Salt-air and dazzling society kept all idea of penance from this vivacious young person. It was queer that Sit Twickenham should be at the seaside, instead of at Brookfield, wooing; but a man's physical condition should be an excuse for any intermission of attentions. "Now that I know him better," wrote Adela, "I think him the pink of chivalry; and of this I am sure I can convince you, Bella, C. will be blessed indeed; for a delicate nature in a man of the world is a treasure. He has a beautiful little vessel of his own sailing beside us."

Arabella was critic enough to smile at this last. On the whole she was passably content for the moment, in a severe fashion, save to feel herself the dreadful lying engine and fruitlessly abject person that she had become.

We imagine that when souls have had a fall, they immediately look up and contrast their present with their preceding position. This does not occur. The lower their fall, the less, generally, their despair, for despair is a business of the Will, and when they come heavily upon their humanity, they get something of the practical seriousness of nature. If they fall very low, the shock and the sense that they are still on their feet make them singularly earnest to set about the plain plan of existence—getting air for their lungs and elbow-room. Contrast, that mother of melancholy, comes when they are some way advanced upon the upward scale. The Poles did not look up to their lost height, but merely exerted their faculties to go forward; and great as their ambition had been in them, now that it was suddenly blown to pieces, they did not sit and weep, but strove in a stunned way to work ahead. The truth is, that we rarely indulge in melancholy until we can take it as a luxury: little people never do, and they, when we have not put them on their guard, are humankind naked.

The yachting excursions were depicted vividly by Adela, and were addressed as a sort of reproach to the lugubrious letters of her sister. She said pointedly once: "Really, if we are to be

miserable, I turn Catholic and go into a convent." The strange thing was that Arabella imagined her letters to be rather of a cheerful character. She related the daily events at Brookfield:—the change in her father's soups, and his remarks on them, and which he preferred; his fight with his medicine, and declaration that he was as sound as any man on shore; the health of the servants; Mr. Marter the curate's call with a Gregorian chant; doubts of his orthodoxy; Cornelia's lonely walks and singular appetite; the bills, and so forth—ending, "What is to be said further of her?"

In return, Adela's delight was to date each day from a different port, to which, catching the wind, the party had sailed, and there slept. The ladies were under the protecting wing of the Hon. Mrs. Bayruffle, a smooth woman of the world. "You think she must have sinned in her time, but are certain it will never be known," wrote Adela. "I do confess, kind as she is, she does me much harm; for when she is near me I begin to think that Society is everything. Her tact is prodigious; it is never seen—only felt. I cannot describe her influence; yet it leads to nothing. I cannot absolutely respect her; but I know I shall miss her acutely when we part. What charm does she possess? I call her the Hon. Mrs. Heathen—Captain G., the Hon. Mrs. Balm. I know you hate nicknames. Be merciful to people yachting. What are we to do? I would look through a telescope all day and calculate the number of gulls and gannets we see; but I am not so old as Sir T., and that occupation could not absorb me. I begin to understand Lady Charlotte and her liking for Mr. Powys better. He is ready to play or be serious, as you please; but in either case 'Merthyr is never a buffoon nor a parson'—Lady C. remarked this morning; and that describes him, if it were not for the detestable fling at the clergy, which she never misses. It seems in her blood to think that all priests are hypocrites. What a little boat to be in on a stormy sea, Bella! She appears to have no concern about it. Whether she adores Wilfrid or not I do not pretend to guess. She snubs him—a thing he would bear from nobody but her. I do believe he feels flattered by it. He is chiefly attentive to Miss Ford, whom I like and do not like, and like and do not like—but do like. She is utterly cold, and has not an affection on earth. Sir T.—I have not a dictionary—calls her a fair clictic, I think. (Let even Cornelia read hard, or woe to her in their hours of privacy!—his vocabulary grows distressingly rich the more you know him. I am not uneducated, but he introduces me to words that seem monsters; I must pretend to know them intimately.) Well, whether a clictic or not—and pray, burn this letter, lest I should not have the word correct—she has the air of a pale young princess above any creature I have seen in the world. I know it has struck Wilfred also; my darling and I are ever twins in sentiment. He converses with Miss Ford a great deal. Lady C. is peculiarly civil to Captain G. We scud along, and are becalmed. 'Having no will of our own, we have no knowledge of contrary winds,' as Mr. Powys says.—The word is 'eclictic,' I find. I ventured on it, and it was repeated; and I heard that I had missed a syllable. Ask C. to look it out—I mean, to tell me they mining on a little slip of paper in your next. I would buy a pocket-dictionary at one of the ports, but you are never alone. "Aesthetic," we know. Mr. Barrett used to be of service for this sort of thing. I admit I am inferior to Mrs. Bayruffle, who, if men talk difficult words in her presence, holds her chin above the conversation, and seems to shame them. I love to learn—I love the humility of learning. And there is something divine in the idea of a teacher. I listen to Sir T. on Parliament and parties, and chide myself if my interest flags. His algebra-puzzles, or Euclid-puzzles in figures—sometimes about sheep-boys and sheep, and hurdles or geese, oxen or anything—are delicious: he quite masters the conversation with them. I disagree with Mrs. Bayruffle when she complains that they are posts in the way of speech. There is a use in all men; and though she is an acknowledged tactician materially, she cannot see she has in Sir T. a quality necessary to intellectual conversation, if she knew how to employ it."

Remarks of this nature read very oddly to Arabella, insomuch that she would question herself at times, in forced seriousness, whether she had dreamed that an evil had befallen Brookfield, or whether Adela were forgetting that it had, in a dream. One day she enclosed a letter from her father to Mrs. Chump. Adela did not forge a reply; but she had the audacity to give the words of a message from the woman (in which Mrs. Chump was supposed to say that she could not write while she was

being tossed about.) "We must carry it on," Adela told her sister, with horrible bluntness. The message savoured strongly of Mrs. Chump. It was wickedly clever. Arabella resolved to put it by; but morning after morning she saw her father's anxiety for the reply mounting to a pitch of fever. She consulted with Cornelia, who said, "No; never do such a thing!" and subsequently, with a fainter firmness, repeated the negative monosyllable. Arabella, in her wretchedness, became endued with remorseless discernment. "It means that Cornelia would never do it herself," she thought; and, comforted haply by reflecting that for their common good she could do it, she did it. She repeated an Irish message. Her father calmed immediately, making her speak it over twice. He smiled, and blinked his bird's-eyes pleasurably: "Ah! that's Martha," he said, and fell into a state of comparative repose. For some hours a sensation of bubbling hot-water remained about the sera of Arabella. Happily Mrs. Chump in person did not write.

A correspondence now commenced between the fictitious Mrs. Chump on sea and Mr. Pole, dyspeptic, in his armchair. Arabella took the doctor aside to ask him, if in a hypothetical instance, it would really be dangerous to thwart or irritate her father. She asked the curate if he deemed it wicked to speak falsely to an invalid for the invalid's benefit. The spiritual and bodily doctors agreed that occasion altered and necessity justified certain acts. So far there was comfort. But the task of assisting in this correspondence, and yet more, the contemplation of Adela's growing delight in it (she would now use Irish words, vulgar words, words expressive of physical facts; airing her natural wit in Irish as if she had found a new weapon), became a bitter strain on Arabella's mind, and she was compelled to make Cornelia take her share of the burden. "But I cannot conceal—I cannot feign," said Cornelia. Arabella looked at her, whom she knew to be feigning, thinking, "Must I lose my high esteem of both my sisters?" Action alone saved her from denuding herself of this garment."

"That night!" was now the allusion to the scene at Besworth. It stood for all the misery they suffered; nor could they see that they had since made any of their own.

A letter with the Dover postmark brought exciting news.

A debate had been held on board the yacht. Wilfrid and Lady Charlotte gave their votes for the Devon coast. All were ready to be off, when Miss Ford received a telegram from shore, and said, "No; it must be Dover." Now, Mrs. Chump's villa was on the Devon coast. Lady Charlotte had talked to Wilfrid about her, and in the simplest language had said that she must be got on board. This was the reason of their deciding for Devon. But Georgiana stood for Dover; thither Merthyr said that he must go, whether be sailed or went on land. By a simultaneous reading of Georgiana's eyes, both Wilfrid and Lady Charlotte saw what was meant by her decision. Wilfrid at once affected to give way, half-protestingly. "And this," wrote Adela, "taught me that he was well pleased to abandon the West for the East. Lady C. favoured him with a look such as I could not have believed I should ever behold off the stage. There was a perfect dagger in her eyes. She fought against Dover: do men feel such compliments as these? They are the only true ones! She called the captain to witness that the wind was not for Dover she called the mate: she was really eloquent—yes, and handsome. I think Wilfrid thought so; or the reason far the opposition to Dover impressed my brother. I like him to be made to look foolish, for then he retrieves his character so dashingly—always. His face was red, and he seemed undecided—was—until one taunt (it must have been a taunt), roused him up. They exchanged about six sentences—these two. I cannot remember them, unhappily; but for neatness and irony, never was anything so delicious heard. They came sharp as fencing-thrusts; and you could really believe, if you liked, that they were merely stating grounds for diverse opinions. Of course we sailed East, reaching Dover at ten; and the story is this—I knew Emilia was in it:—Tracy Runningbrook had been stationed at Dover ten days by Miss Ford, to intercept Emilia's father, if he should be found taking her to the Continent by that route. He waited, and met them at last on the Esplanade. He telegraphed to Miss Ford and a Signor Marini (we were wrong in not adding illustrious exiles to our list), while he invited them to dine, and detained them till the steamboat was starting; and Signor Marini came down by rail in a great hurry, and would not let Emilia be taken away. There was a

quarrel; but, by some mysterious power that he possesses, this Signor Marini actually prevented the father from taking his child. Mysterious? But is anything more mysterious than Emilia's influence? I cannot forget what she was ere we trained her; and when I think that we seem to be all—all who come near her—connected with her fortunes! Explain it if you can. I know it is not her singing; I know it is not her looks. Captivations she does not deal in. Is it the magic of indifference? No; for then some one whom you know and who longs to kiss her bella Bella now would be dangerous! She is very little so, believe me!

"Emilia is (am I chronicling a princess?)—she is in London with Signor Marini; and Wilfrid has not seen her. Lady Charlotte managed to get the first boat full, and pushed off as he was about to descend. I pitied his poor trembling hand I went on shore in the second boat with him. We did not find the others for an hour, when we heard that Emilia had gone with Signor M. The next day, whom should we sea but Mr. Pericles. "He (I have never seen him so civil)—he shook Wilfrid by the hand almost like an Englishman; and Wilfrid too, though he detests him, was civil to him, and even laughed when he said: 'Here it is dull; ze Continent for a week. I follow Philomela—ze nightingales." I was just going to say, 'Well then, you are running away from one.' Wilfrid pressed my fingers, and taught me to be still; and I did not know why till I reflected. Poor Mr. Pericles, seeing him friendly for the first time, rubbed his hands and it was most painful to me to see him shake hands with Wilfrid again and again, till he was on board the vessel chuckling. Wilfrid suddenly laughed with all his might —a cruel laugh; and Mr. Pericles tried to be as loud, but commenced coughing and tapping his chest, to explain that his intention was good. Bella! the passion of love must be judged by the person who inspires it; and I cannot even go so far as to feel pity for Wilfrid if he has stooped to the humiliation of—there is another way of regarding it, know. Let him be sincere and noble; but not his own victim. He scarcely holds up his head. We are now for Devon. Tracy is with us; and we never did a wiser thing than when we decided to patronize poets. If kept in order—under—they are the aristocracy of light conversationalists. Adieu! We speed for beautiful Devon. 'Me love to Pole, and I'm just,' etc. That will do this time; next, she will speak herself. That I should wish it! But the world is full of change, as I begin to learn. What will ensue?"

# CHAPTER XXXV

When Mrs. Chump had turned her back on Brookfield, the feelings of the outcast woman were too deep for much distinctly acrimonious sensation toward the ladies; but their letters soon lifted and revived her, until, being in a proper condition of prickly wrath, she sat down to compose a reply that should bury them under a mountain of shame. The point, however, was to transfer this mountain from her bosom, which laboured heavily beneath it, to their heads. Nothing could appear simpler. Here is the mountain; the heads are yonder. Accordingly, she prepared to commence. In a moment the difficulty yawned monstrous. For the mountain she felt was not a mountain of shame; yet that was the character of mountain she wished to cast. If she crushed them, her reputation as a forgiving soul might suffer: she could not pardon without seeing them abased. Thus shaken at starting, she found herself writing: "I know that your father has been hearing tales told of me, or he would have written, and he has not; so you shall never see me, not if you cried to me from the next world—the hot part."

Perusing this, it was too tremendous. "Oh, that's awful!" she said, getting her body a little away from the manuscript. "Ye couldn't curse much louder."

A fresh trial found her again rounding the fact that Mr. Pole had not written to her, and again flying into consequent angers. She had some dim conception of the sculpture of an offended Goddess. "I look so," she said before the glass "I'm above ye, and ye can't hurt me, and don't come anigh me: but here's a cheque—and may ye be haunted in your dreams!—but here's a cheque."

There was pain in her heart, for she had felt faith in Mr. Pole's affection for her. "And he said," she cried out in her lonely room—"he said, 'Martha, ye've onnly to come and be known to 'm, and then they'll take to the ideea.' And wasn't I a patient creature! And it's Pole that's turned—Pole!"

Varied with the frequent 'Oh!' and 'Augh!' these dramatic monologues occupied her time while the yacht was sailing for her Devon bay.

At last the thought struck her that she would send for Braintop— telegraphing that expenses would be paid, and that he must come with a good quill. "It goes faster," she whispered, suggesting the pent-up torrent, as it were, of blackest ink in her breast that there was to pour forth. A very cunning postscript to the telegram brought Braintop almost as quick to her as a return message. It was merely 'Little Belloni.'

She had forgotten this piece of artifice: but when she saw him start at the opening of the door, keeping a sheepish watch in that direction, "By'n-by," she said, with a nod; and shortly afterward unfolded her object in summoning him from his London labours: "A widde-woman ought to get marrud, Mr. Braintop, if onnly to have a husband to write letters for 'rr. Now, that's a task! But sup to-night, and mind ye say yer prayers before gettin' into bed; and no tryin' to flatter your Maker with your knees cuddled up to your chin under the counterpane. I do 't myself sometimes, and I know one prayer out of bed's worrth ten of 'm in. Then I'll pray too; and mayhap we'll get permission and help to write our letter to-morrow, though Sunday, as ye say."

On the morrow Braintop's spirits were low, he having perceived that the 'Little Belloni' postscript had been but an Irish chuckle and nudge in his ribs, by way of sly insinuation or reminder. He looked out on the sea, and sighed to be under certain white sails visible in the offing. Mrs. Chump had received by the morning's post another letter from Arabella, enclosing one for Wilfrid. A dim sense of approaching mastery, and that she might soon be melted, combined with the continued silence of Mr. Pole to make her feel yet more spiteful. She displayed no commendable cunning when, to sharpen and fortify Braintop's wits, she plumped him at breakfast with all things tempting to the appetite of man. "I'll help ye to 'rr," she said from time to time, finding that no encouragement made him potent in speech.

Fronting the sea a desk was laid open. On it were the quills faithfully brought down by Braintop.

"Pole's own quills," she said, having fixed Braintop in this official seat, while she took hers at a station half-commanding the young clerk's face. The mighty breakfast had given Braintop intolerable desire to stretch his limbs by the sounding shore, and enjoy life in semi-oblivion. He cheered himself with the reflection that there was only one letter to write, so he remarked politely that he was at his hostess's disposal. Thereat Mrs. Chump questioned him closely whether Mr. Pole had spoken her name aloud; and whether he did it somehow, now and then by accident, and whether he had looked worse of late. Braintop answered the latter question first, assuring her that Mr. Pole was improving.

"Then there's no marcy from me," said Mrs. Chump; and immediately discharged an exclamatory narrative of her recent troubles, and the breach between herself and Brookfield, at Braintop's ears. This done, she told him that he was there to write the reply to the letters of the ladies, in her name. "Begin," she said. "Ye've got head enough to guess my feelin's. I'm invited, and I won't go—till I'm fetched. But don't say that. That's their guess ye know. 'And I don't care for ye enough to be angry at all, but it's pity I feel at a parcel of fine garls'—so on, Mr. Braintop."

The perplexities of epistolary correspondence were assuming the like proportions to the recruited secretary that they had worn to Mrs. Chump. Steadily watching his countenance; she jogged him thus: "As if ye couldn't help ut, ye know, ye begin. Jest like wakin' in the mornin' after dancin' all night. Ye make the garls seem to hear me seemin' to say—Oooo! I was so comfortable before your disturbin' me with your horrud voices. Ye understand, Mr. Braintop? 'I'm in bed, and you're a cold bath.' Begin like that, ye know. 'Here's clover, and you're nettles.' D'ye see? Here from my glass o' good Porrt to your tumbler of horrud acud vin'gar.' Bless the boy! he don't begin."

She stamped her foot. Braintop, in desperation, made a plunge at the paper. Looking over his shoulder in a delighted eagerness, she suddenly gave it a scornful push. "'Dear!'" she exclaimed. "You're dearin' them, absurd young man I'm not the woman to I dear 'em—not at the starrt! I'm indignant—I'm hurrt. I come round to the 'dear' by-and-by, after I have whipped each of the proud sluts, and their brother Mr. Wilfrid, just as if by accident. Ye'll promus to forget avery secret I tell ye; but our way is always to pretend to believe the men can't help themselves. So the men look like fools, ye sly laughin' fella! and the women horrud scheming spiders. Now, away, with ye, and no dearin'."

The Sunday-bells sounded mockingly in Braintop's ears, appearing to ask him how he liked his holiday; and the white sails on the horizon line have seldom taunted prisoner more. He spread out another sheet of notepaper and wrote "My," and there he stopped.

Mrs. Chump was again at his elbow. "But, they aren't 'my,' she remonstrated, "when I've nothin' to do with 'm. And a 'my' has a 'dear' to 't always. Ye're not awake, Mr. Braintop; try again."

"Shall I begin formally, "Mrs. Chump presents her compliments,' ma'am?" said Braintop stiffly.

"And I stick myself up on a post, and talk like a parrot, sir! Don't you see, I'm familiar, and I'm woundud? Go along; try again."

Braintop's next effort was, "Ladies."

"But they don't behave to me like ladus; and it's against my conscience to call 'em!" said Mrs. Chump, with resolution.

Braintop wrote down "Women," in the very irony of disgust.

"And avery one of 'em unmarred garls!" exclaimed Mrs. Chump, throwing up her hands. "Mr. Braintop! Mr. Braintop! ye're next to an ejut!"

Braintop threw dawn the pen. "I really do not know what to say," he remarked, rising in distress.

"I naver had such a desire to shake anny man in all my life," said Mrs.

Chump, dropping to her chair.

The posture of affairs was chimed to by the monotonous bell. After listening to it for some minutes, Mrs. Chump was struck with a notion that Braintop's sinfulness in working on a Sunday, or else the shortness of the prayer he had put up to gain absolution, was the cause of his lack of ready wit. Hearing that he had gloves, she told him to go to church, listen devoutly, and return to luncheon. Braintop departed, with a sensation of relief in the anticipation of a sermon, quite new to him. When

he next made his bow to his hostess, he was greeted by a pleasant sparkle of refreshments. Mrs. Chump herself primed him with Sherry, thinking in the cunning of her heart that it might haply help the inspiration derived from his devotional exercise. After this, pen and paper were again produced.

"Well, now, Mr. Braintop, and what have ye thought of?" said Mrs. Chump, encouragingly.

Braintop thought rapidly over what he might possibly have been thinking of; and having put a file of ideas into the past, said, with the air of a man who delicately suggests a subtlety: "It has struck me, ma'am, that perhaps 'Girls' might begin very well. To be sure 'Dear girls' is the best, if you would consent to it."

"Take another glass of wine, Mr. Braintop," Mrs. Chump nodded. "Ye're nearer to ut now. 'Garls' is what they are, at all events. But don't you see, my dear your man, it isn't the real thing we want so much as a sort of a proud beginnin', shorrt of slappin' their faces. Think of dinner. Furrst soup; that prepares ye for what's comin'. Then fish, which is on the road to meat, dye see?—we pepper 'em. Then joint, Mr. Braintop—out we burrst: (Oh, and what ins'lent hussies ye've been to me, and yell naver see annything of me but my back!) Then the sweets,—But I'm a forgivin' woman, and a Christian in the bargain, ye ungrateful minxes; and if ye really are sorrowful! And there, Mr. Braintop, ye've got it all laid out as flat as a pancake."

Mrs. Chump gave the motion of a lightning scrawl of the pen. Braintop looked at the paper, which now appeared to recede from his eyes, and flourish like a descending kite. The nature of the task he had undertaken became mountainous in his imagination, till at last he fixed his forehead in his thumbs and fingers, and resolutely counted a number of meaningless words one hundred times. As this was the attitude of a severe student, Mrs. Chump remained in expectation. Aware of the fearful confidence he had excited in her, Braintop fell upon a fresh hundred, with variations.

"The truth is, I think better in church," he said, disclosing at last as ingenuous a face as he could assume. He scarcely ventured to hope for a second dismissal.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.