

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

SANDRA

BELLONI,

VOLUME 7

George Meredith
Sandra Belloni. Volume 7

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George Meredith

Sandra Belloni – Volume 7

CHAPTER L

Emilia remained locked up with her mother all that evening. The good little shrill woman, tender-eyed and slatternly, had to help try on dresses, and run about for pins, and express her critical taste in undertones, believing all the while that her daughter had given up music to go mad with vanity. The reflection struck her, notwithstanding, that it was a wiser thing for one of her sex to make friends among rich people than to marry a foreign husband.

The girl looked a brilliant woman in a superb Venetian dress of purple velvet, which she called 'the Branciani dress,' and once attired in it, and the rich purges and swelling creases over the shoulders puffed out to her satisfaction, and the run of yellow braid about it properly inspected and flattened, she would not return to her more homely wear, though very soon her mother began to whimper and say that she had lost her so long, and now that she had found her it hardly seemed the same child. Emilia would listen to no entreaties to put away her sumptuous robe. She silenced her mother with a stamp of her foot, and then sighed: "Ah! Why do I always feel such a tyrant with you?" kissing her.

"This dress," she said, and held up her mother's chin fondlingly between her two hands, "this dress was designed by my friend Merthyr—that is, Mr. Powys—from what he remembered of a dress worn by Countess Branciani, of Venice. He had it made to give to me. It came from Paris. Countess Branciani was one of his dearest friends. I feel that I am twice as much his friend with this on me. Mother, it seems like a deep blush all over me. I feel as if I looked out of a rose."

She spread her hands to express the flower magnified.

"Oh! what silly talk," said her mother: "it does turn your head, this dress does!"

"I wish it would give me my voice, mother. My father has no hope. I wish he would send me news to make me happy about him; or come and run his finger up the strings for hours, as he used to. I have fancied I heard him at times, and I had a longing to follow the notes, and felt sure of my semi-tones. He won't see me! Mother! he would think something of me if he saw me now!"

Her mother's lamentations reached that vocal pitch at last which Emilia could not endure, and the little lady was despatched to her home under charge of a servant.

Emilia feasted on the looking-glass when alone. Had Merthyr, in restoring her to health, given her an overdose of the poison?

"Countess Branciani made the Austrian Governor her slave," she uttered, planting one foot upon a stool to lend herself height. "He told her who were suspected, and who would be imprisoned, and gave her all the State secrets. Beauty can do more than music. I wonder whether Merthyr loved her? He loves me!"

Emilia was smitten with a fear that he would speak of it when she next saw him. "Oh! I hope he will be just the same as he has been," she sighed; and with much melancholy shook her head at her fair reflection, and began to undress. It had not struck her with surprise that two men should be loving her, until, standing away from the purple folds, she seemed to grow smaller and smaller, as a fire-log robbed of its flame, and felt insufficient and weak. This was a new sensation. She depended no more on her own vital sincerity. It was in her nature, doubtless, to crave constantly for approval, but in the service of personal beauty instead of divine Art, she found herself utterly unwound without it: victim of a sense of most uncomfortable hollowness. She was glad to extinguish the candle and be covered up dark in the circle of her warmth. Then her young blood sang to her again.

An hour before breakfast every morning she read with Merthyr. Now, this morning how was she to appear to him? There would be no reading, of course. How could he think of teaching one to

whom he trembled. Emilia trusted that she might see no change in him, and, above all, that he would not speak of his love for her. Nevertheless, she put on her robe of conquest, having first rejected with distaste a plainer garb. She went down the stairs slowly. Merthyr was in the library awaiting her. "You are late," he said, eyeing the dress as a thing apart from her, and remarking that it was hardly suited for morning wear. "Yellow, if you must have a strong colour, and you wouldn't exhibit the schwartz-gelb of the Tedeschi willingly. But now!"

This was the signal for the reading to commence.

"Wilfrid would not have been so cold to me," thought Emilia, turning the leaves of Ariosto as a book of ashes. Not a word of love appeared to be in his mind. This she did not regret; but she thirsted for the assuring look. His eyes were quietly friendly. So friendly was he, that he blamed her for inattention, and took her once to task about a melodious accent in which she vulgarized the vowels. All the flattery of the Branciani dress could not keep Emilia from her feeling of smallness. Was it possible that he loved her? She watched him as eagerly as her shyness would permit. Any shadow of a change was spied for. Getting no softness from him, or superadded kindness, no shadow of a change in that direction, she stumbled in her reading purposely, to draw down rebuke; her construing was villanously bad. He told her so, and she replied: "I don't like poetry." But seeing him exchange Ariosto for Roman History, she murmured, "I like Dante." Merthyr plunged her remorselessly into the second Punic war.

But there was worse to follow. She was informed that after breakfast she would be called upon to repeat the principal facts she had been reading of. Emilia groaned audibly.

"Take the book," said Merthyr.

"It's so heavy," she complained.

"Heavy?"

"I mean, to carry about."

"If you want to 'carry it about,' the boy shall follow you with it."

She understood that she was being laughed at. Languor, coupled with the consciousness of ridicule, overwhelmed her.

"I feel I can't learn," she said.

"Feel, that you must," was replied to her.

"No; don't take any more trouble with me!"

"Yes; I expect you to distinguish Scipio from Cicero, and not make the mistake of the other evening, when you were talking to Mrs. Cameron."

Emilia left him, abashed, to dread shrewdly their meeting within five minutes at the breakfast-table; to dread eating under his eyes, with doubts of the character of her acts generally. She was, indeed, his humble scholar, though she seemed so full of weariness and revolt. He, however, when alone, looked fixedly at the door through which she had passed, and said, "She loves that man still. Similar ages, similar tastes, I suppose! She is dressed to be ready for him. She can't learn: she can do nothing. My work mayn't be lost, but it's lost for me."

Merthyr did not know that Georgiana had betrayed him, but in no case would he have given Emilia the signs she expected: in the first place, because he had self-command; and, secondly, because of those years he counted in advance of her. So she had the full mystery of his loving her to think over, without a spot of the weakness to fasten on.

Georgiana's first sight of Emilia in her Branciani dress shut her heart against the girl with iron clasps. She took occasion to remark, "We need not expect visitors so very early;" but the offender was impervious. Breakfast finished, the reading with Merthyr recommenced, when Emilia, having got over her surprise at the sameness of things this day, acquitted herself better, and even declaimed the verses musically. Seeing him look pleased, she spoke them out sonorously. Merthyr applauded. Upon which Emilia said, with odd abruptness and solemnity, "Will he come to-day?" It was beyond

Merthyr's power of self-control to consent to be taken into a consultation on this matter, and he attempted to put it aside. "He may or he may not—probably to-morrow."

"No; to-day, in the afternoon," said Emilia, "be near me."

"I have engagements."

"Some word, say, that will seem to be you with me."

"Some flattery, or you won't remember it."

"Yes, I like flattery."

"Well, you look like Countess Branciani when, after thinking her husband the basest of men, she discovered him to be the noblest."

Emilia blushed. "That's not easily forgotten! But she must have looked braver, bolder, not so under a burden as I feel."

"The comparison was meant to suit the moment of your reciting."

"Yes," said Emilia, half-mournfully, "then 'myself' doesn't sit on my shoulders: I don't even care what I am."

"That is what Art does for you."

"Only by fits and starts now. Once I never thought of myself."

There was a knock at the street-door, and she changed countenance.

Presently there came a gentle tap at their own door.

"It is that woman," said Emilia.

"I fancy it must be Lady Charlotte. You will not see her?"

Merthyr was anticipating a negative, but Emilia said, "Let her come in."

She gave her hand to the lady, and was the less concerned of the two.

Lady Charlotte turned away from her briskly.

"Georgey didn't say anything of you in her letter, Merthyr; I am going up to her, but I wished to satisfy myself that you were in town, first:—to save half-a-minute, you see I anticipate the philosophic manly sneer. Is it really true that you are going to mix yourself up in this mad Italian business again? Now that you're a man, my dear Merthyr, it seems almost inexcuseable—for a sensible Englishman!"

Lady Charlotte laughed, giving him her hand at the same time.

"Don't you know I swore an oath?" Merthyr caught up her tone.

"Yes, but you never succeed. I complain that you never succeed. Of what use on earth are all your efforts if you never succeed?"

Emilia's voice burst out:—

""Piacemi almen che i miei sospir sien quali
Spera 'l Tevere e 'l Arno,
E 'l Po,—""

Merthyr continued the ode, acting a similar fervour:—

""Ben provvide Natura al nostro stato
Quando dell' Alpi schermo
Pose fra noi e la tedesca rabbis.""

"We are merely bondsmen to the re-establishment of the provisions of nature."

"And we know we shall succeed!" said Emilia, permitting her antagonism to pass forth in irritable emphasis.

Lady Charlotte quickly left them, to run up to Georgiana. She was not long in the house. Emilia hung near Merthyr all day, and she was near him when the knock was heard which she could suppose to be Wilfrid's, as it proved. Wilfrid was ushered in to Georgiana. Delicacy had prevented Merthyr

from taking special notice to Emilia of Lady Charlotte's visit, and he treated Wilfrid's similarly, saying, "Georgey will send down word."

"Only, don't leave me till she does," Emilia rejoined.

Her agitation laid her open to be misinterpreted. It was increased when she saw him take a book and sit in the armchair between two lighted candles, calmly careless of her. She did not actually define to herself that he should feel jealousy, but his indifference was one extreme which provoked her instinct to imagine a necessity for the other. Word came from Georgiana, and Emilia moved to the door. "Remember, we dine half- an-hour earlier to-day, on account of the Cameron party," was all that he uttered. Emilia made an effort to go. She felt herself as a ship sailing into perilous waters, without compass. Why did he not speak tenderly? Before Georgiana had revealed his love for her, she had been strong to see Wilfrid. Now, the idea smote her softened heart that Wilfrid's passion might engulf her if she had no word of sustainment from Merthyr. She turned and flung herself at his feet, murmuring, "Say something to me." Merthyr divined this emotion to be a sort of foresight of remorse on her part: he clasped the interwoven fingers of her hands, letting his eyes dwell upon hers. The marvel of their not wavering or softening meaningly kept her speechless. She rose with a strength not her own: not comforted, and no longer speculating. It was as if she had been eyeing a golden door shut fast, that might some day open, but was in itself precious to behold. She arose with deep humbleness, which awakened new ideas of the nature of worth in her bosom. She felt herself so low before this man who would not be played upon as an obsequious instrument—who would not leap into ardour for her beauty! Before that man upstairs how would she feel? The question did not come to her. She entered the room where he was, without a blush. Her step was firm, and her face expressed a quiet gladness. Georgiana stayed through the first commonplaces: then they were alone.

CHAPTER LI

Commonplaces continued to be Wilfrid's refuge, for sentiment was surging mightily within him. The commonplaces concerning father, sisters, health, weather, sickened him when uttered, so much that for a time he was unobservant of Emilia's ready exchange of them. To a compliment on her appearance, she said: "You like this dress? I will tell you the history of it. I call it the Branciani dress. Mr. Powys designed it for me. The Countess Branciani was his friend. She used always to dress in this colour; just in this style. She also was dark. And she imagined that her husband favoured the Austrians. She believed he was an Austrian spy. It was impossible for her not to hate him—"

"Her husband!" quoth Wilfrid. The unexpected richness that had come upon her beauty and the coolness of her prattle at such an interview amazed and mortified him.

"She supposed him to be an Austrian spy!"

"Still he was her husband!"

Emilia gave her features a moment's play, but she had not full command of them, and the spark of scorn they emitted was very slight.

"Ah!" his tone had fallen into a depth, "how I thank you for the honour you have done me in desiring to see me once before you leave England! I know that I have not merited it."

More he said on this theme, blaming himself emphatically, until, startled by the commonplaces he was uttering, he stopped short; and the stopping was effective, if the speech was not. Where was the tongue of his passion? He almost asked it of himself. Where was Hippogriff? He who had burned to see her, he saw her now, fair as a vision, and yet in the flesh! Why was he as good as tongue-tied in her presence when he had such fires to pour forth?

(Presuming that he has not previously explained it, the philosopher here observes that Hippogriff, the foal of Fiery Circumstance out of Sentiment, must be subject to strong sentimental friction before he is capable of a flight: his appetites must fast long in the very eye of provocation ere he shall be eloquent. Let him, the Philosopher, repeat at the same time that souls harmonious to Nature, of whom there are few, do not mount this animal. Those who have true passion are not at the mercy of Hippogriff—otherwise Sur-excited Sentiment. You will mark in them constantly a reverence for the laws of their being, and a natural obedience to common sense. They are subject to storm, as in everything earthly, and they need no lesson of devotion; but they never move to an object in a madness.)

Now this is good teaching: it is indeed my Philosopher's object—his purpose—to work out this distinction; and all I wish is that it were good for my market. What the Philosopher means, is to plant in the reader's path a staring contrast between my pet Emilia and his puppet Wilfrid. It would be very commendable and serviceable if a novel were what he thinks it: but all attestation favours the critical dictum, that a novel is to give us copious sugar and no cane. I, myself, as a reader, consider concomitant cane an adulteration of the qualities of sugar. My Philosopher's error is to deem the sugar, born of the cane, inseparable from it. The which is naturally resented, and away flies my book back at the heads of the librarians, hitting me behind them a far more grievous blow.

Such is the construction of my story, however, that to entirely deny the Philosopher the privilege he stipulated for when with his assistance I conceived it, would render our performance unintelligible to that acute and honourable minority which consents to be thwacked with aphorisms and sentences and a fantastic delivery of the verities. While my Play goes on, I must permit him to come forward occasionally. We are indeed in a sort of partnership, and it is useless for me to tell him that he is not popular and destroys my chance.

CHAPTER LII

"Don't blame yourself, my Wilfrid."

Emilia spoke thus, full of pity for him, and in her adorable, deep-fluted tones, after the effective stop he had come to.

The 'my Wilfrid' made the owner of the name quiver with satisfaction. He breathed: "You have forgiven me?"

"That I have. And there was indeed no blame. My voice has gone. Yes, but I do not think it your fault."

"It was! it is!" groaned Wilfrid. "But, has your voice gone?" He leaned nearer to her, drawing largely on the claim his incredulity had to inspect her sweet features accurately. "You speak just as—more deliciously than ever! I can't think you have lost it. Ah! forgive me! forgive me!"

Emilia was about to put her hand over to him, but the prompt impulse was checked by a simultaneous feminine warning within. She smiled, saying: "'I forgive' seems such a strange thing for me to say;" and to convey any further meaning that might comfort him, better than words could do, she held on her smile. The smile was of the acceptedly feigned, conventional character; a polished Surface: belonging to the passage of the discourse, and not to the emotions. Wilfrid's swelling passion slipped on it. Sensitively he discerned an ease in its formation and disappearance that shot a first doubt through him, whether he really maintained his empire in her heart. If he did not reign there, why had she sent for him? He attributed the unheated smile to a defect in her manner, that was always chargeable with something, as he remembered. He began systematically to account for his acts: but the man was so constituted that as he laid them out for pardon, he himself condemned them most; and looking back at his weakness and double play, he broke through his phrases to cry without premeditation: "Can you have loved me then?"

Emilia's cheeks tingled: "Don't speak of that night in Devon," she replied.

"Ah!" sighed he. "I did not mean then. Then you must have hated me."

"No; for, what did I say? I said that you would come to me—nothing more. I hated that woman. You? Oh, no!"

"You loved me, then?"

"Did I not offer to work for you, if you were poor? And—I can't remember what I said. Please, do not speak of that night."

"Emilia! as a man of honour, I was bound—"

She lifted her hands: "Oh! be silent, and let that night die."

"I may speak of that night when you drove home from Penarvon Castle, and a robber? You have forgotten him, perhaps! What did he steal? not what he came for, but something dearer to him than anything he possesses. How can I say—? Dear to me? If it were dipped in my heart's blood!—"

Emilia was far from being carried away by the recollection of the scene; but remembering what her emotion had then been, she wondered at her coolness now.

"I may speak of Wilming Weir?" he insinuated.

Her bosom rose softly and heavily. As if throwing off some cloak of enchantment that clogged her spirit! "I was telling you of this dress," she said: "I mean, of Countess Branciani. She thought her husband was the Austrian spy who had betrayed them, and she said, "He is not worthy to live. Everybody knew that she had loved him. I have seen his portrait and hers. I never saw faces that looked so fond of life. She had that Italian beauty which is to any other like the difference between velvet and silk."

"Oh! do I require to be told the difference?" Wilfrid's heart throbbed.

"She," pursued Emilia, "she loved him still, I believe, but her country was her religion. There was known to be a great conspiracy, and no one knew the leader of it. All true Italians trusted Countess

Branciani, though she visited the Austrian Governor's house—a General with some name on the teeth. One night she said to him, 'You have a spy who betrays you.' The General never suspected Countess Branciani. Women are devils of cleverness sometimes.

"But he did suspect it must be her husband—thinking, I suppose, 'How otherwise would she have known he was my spy?' He gave Count Branciani secret work and high pay. Then he set a watch on him. Count Branciani was to find out who was this unknown leader. He said to the Austrian Governor, 'You shall know him in ten days.' This was repeated to Countess Branciani, and she said to herself, 'My husband! you shall perish, though I should have to stab you myself.'"

Emilia's sympathetic hand twitched. Wilfrid's seized it, but it proved no soft melting prize. She begged to be allowed to continue. He entreated her to. Thereat she pulled gently for her hand, and persisting, it was grudgingly let go.

"One night Countess Branciani put the Austrians on her husband's track. He knew that she was true to her country, and had no fear of her, whether she touched the Black-yellow gold or not. But he did not confide any, of his projects to her. And his reason was, that as she went to the Governor's, she might accidentally, by a word or a sign, show that she was an accomplice in the conspiracy. He wished to save her from a suspicion. Brave Branciani!"

Emilia had a little shudder of excitement.

"Only," she added, "why will men always think women are so weak? The Count worked with conspirators who were not dreaming they would do anything, but were plotting to do it. The Countess belonged to the other party—men who never thought they were strong enough to see their ideas acting—I mean, not bold enough to take their chance. As if we die more than one death, and the blood we spill for Italy is ever wasted! That night the Austrian spy followed the Count to the meeting-house of the conspirators. It was thought quite natural that the Count should go there. But the spy, not having the password, crouched outside, and heard from two that came out muttering, the next appointment for a meeting. This was told to Countess Branciani, and in the meantime she heard from the Austrian Governor that her husband had given in names of the conspirators. She determined at once. 'Now may Christ and the Virgin help me!'"

Emilia struck her knees, while tears started through her shut eyelids. The exclamation must have been caught from her father, who liked not the priests of his native land well enough to interfere between his English wife and their child in such a matter as religious training.

"What happened?" said Wilfrid, vainly seeking for personal application in this narrative.

"Listen!—Ah!" she fought with her tears, and said, as they rolled down her face: "For a miserable thing one can not help, I find I must cry. This is what she did. She told him she knew of the conspiracy, and asked permission to join it, swearing that she was true to Italy. He said he believed her.—Oh, heaven!—And for some time she had to beg and beg; but to spare her he would not let her join. I cannot tell why—he gave her the password for the neat meeting, and said that an old gold coin must be shown. She must have coaxed it, though he was a strong man, who could resist women. I suppose he felt that he had been unkind.—Were I Queen of Italy he should stand for ever in a statue of gold!—The next appointed night a spy entered among the conspirators, with the password and the coin. Did I tell you the Countess had one child—a girl! She lives now, and I am to know her. She is like her mother. That little girl was playing down the stairs with her nurse when a band of Austrian soldiers entered the hall underneath, and an officer, with his sword drawn, and some men, came marching up in their stiff way—the machines! This officer stooped to her, and before the nurse could stop her, made her say where her father was. Those Austrians make children betray their parents! They don't think how we grow up to detest them. Do I? Hate is not the word: it burns so hot and steady with me. The Countess came out on the first landing; she saw what was happening. When her husband was led out, she asked permission to embrace him. The officer consented, but she had to say to him, 'Move back,' and then, with her lips to her husband's cheek, 'Betray no more of them!' she whispered. Count Branciani started. Now he understood what she had done, and why she had done

it. 'Ask for the charge that makes me a prisoner,' he said. Her husband's noble face gave her a chill of alarm. The Austrian spoke. 'He is accused of being the chief of the Sequin Club.' And then the Countess looked at her husband; she sank at his feet. My heart breaks. Wilfrid! Wilfrid! You will not wear that uniform? Say 'Never, never!' You will not go to the Austrian army—Wilfrid? Would you be my enemy? Brutes, knee-deep in blood! with bloody fingers! Ogres! Would you be one of them? To see me turn my head shivering with loathing as you pass? This is why I sent for you, because I loved you, to entreat you, Wilfrid, from my soul, not to blacken the dear happy days when I knew you! Will you hear me? That woman is changing you—doing all this. Resist her! Think of me in this one thing! Promise it, and I will go at once, and want no more. I will swear never to trouble you. Oh, Wilfrid it's not so much our being enemies, but what you become, I think of. If I say to myself, 'He also, who was once my lover—Oh! paid murderer of my dear people!'"

Emilia threw up both hands to her eyes: but Wilfrid, all on fire with a word, made one of her hands his own, repeating eagerly: "Once? once?"

"Once?" she echoed him.

"Once my love?" said he. "Not now?—does it mean, 'not now?' My darling!—pardon me, I must say it. My beloved! you said: 'He who was once my lover:'—you said that. What does it mean? Not that—not—? does it mean, all's over? Why did you bring me here? You know I must love you forever. Speak! 'Once?'"

"Once?" Emilia was breathing quick, but her voice was well contained:

"Yes, I said 'once.' You were then."

"Till that night in Devon?"

"Let it be."

"But you love me still?"

"We won't speak of it."

"I see! You cannot forgive. Good heavens! I think I remember your saying so once—Once! Yes, then: you said it then, during our 'Once;' when I little thought you would be merciless to me—who loved you from the first! the very first! I love you now! I wake up in the night, thinking I hear your voice. You haunt me. Cruel! cold!—who guards you and watches over you but the man you now hate? You sit there as if you could make yourself stone when you pleased. Did I not chastise that man Pericles publicly because he spoke a single lie of you? And by that act I have made an enemy to our house who may crush us in ruin. Do I regret it? No. I would do any madness, waste all my blood for you, die for you!"

Emilia's fingers received a final twist, and were dropped loose. She let them hang, looking sadly downward. Melancholy is the most irritating reply to passion, and Wilfrid's heart waged fierce at the sight of her, grown beautiful!—grown elegant!—and to reject him! When, after a silence which his pride would not suffer him to break, she spoke to ask what Mr. Pericles had said of her, he was enraged, forgot himself, and answered: "Something disgraceful."

Deep colour came on Emilia. "You struck him, Wilfrid?"

"It was a small punishment for his infamous lie, and, whatever might be the consequences, I would do it again."

"Wilfrid, I have heard what he has said. Madame Marini has told me. I wish you had not struck him. I cannot think of him apart from the days when I had my voice. I cannot bear to think of your having hurt him. He was not to blame. That is, he did not say: it was not untrue."

She took a breath to make this last statement, and continued with the same peculiar implicity of distinctness, which a terrific thunder of "What?" from Wilfrid did not overbear: "I was quite mad that day I went to him. I think, in my despair I spoke things that may have led him to fancy the truth of what he has said. On my honour, I do not know. And I cannot remember what happened after for the week I wandered alone about London. Mr. Powys found me on a wharf by the river at night."

A groan burst from Wilfrid. Emilia's instinct had divined the antidote that this would be to the poison of revived love in him, and she felt secure, though he had again taken her hand; but it was she who nursed a mere sentiment now, while passion sprang in him, and she was not prepared for the delirium with which he enveloped her. She listened to his raving senselessly, beginning to think herself lost. Her tortured hands were kissed; her eyes gazed into. He interpreted her stupefaction as contrition, her silence as delicacy, her changeing of colour as flying hues of shame: the partial coldness at their meeting he attributed to the burden on her mind, and muttering in a magnanimous sublimity that he forgave her, he claimed her mouth with force.

"Don't touch me!" cried Emilia, showing terror.

"Are you not mine?"

"You must not kiss me."

Wilfrid loosened her waist, and became in a minute outwardly most cool and courteous.

"My successor may object. I am bound to consider him. Pardon me.

Once!—"

The wretched insult and silly emphasis passed harmlessly from her: but a word had led her thoughts to Merthyr's face, and what is meant by the phrase 'keeping oneself pure,' stood clearly in Emilia's mind. She had not winced; and therefore Wilfrid judged that his shot had missed because there was no mark. With his eye upon her sideways, showing its circle wide as a parrot's, he asked her one of those questions that lovers sometimes permit between themselves. "Has another—?" It is here as it was uttered. Eye-speech finished the sentence.

Rapidly a train of thought was started in Emilia, and she came to this conclusion, aloud: "Then I love nobody!" For she had never kissed Merthyr, or wished for his kiss.

"You do not?" said Wilfrid, after a silence. "You are generous in being candid."

A pressure of intensest sorrow bowed his head. The real feeling in him stole to Emilia like a subtle flame.

"Oh! what can I do for you?" she cried.

"Nothing, if you do not love me," he was replying mournfully, when, "Yes! yes!" rushed to his lips; "marry me: marry me to-morrow. You have loved me. 'I am never to leave you!' Can you forget the night when you said it? Emilia! Marry me and you will love me again. You must. This man, whoever he is—Ah! why am I such a brute! Come! be mine! Let me call you my own darling! Emilia!—or say quietly 'you have nothing to hope for:' I shall not reproach you, believe me."

He looked resigned. The abrupt transition had drawn her eyes to his. She faltered: "I cannot be married." And then: "How could I guess that you felt in this way?"

"Who told me that I should?" said he. "Your words have come true. You predicted that I should fly from 'that woman,' as you called her, and come to you. See! here it is exactly as you willed it. You—you are changed. You throw your magic on me, and then you are satisfied, and turn elsewhere."

Emilia's conscience smote her with a verification of this charge, and she trembled, half-intoxicated for the moment, by the aspect of her power. This filled her likewise with a dangerous pity for its victim; and now, putting out both hands to him, her chin and shoulders raised entreatingly, she begged the victim to spare her any word of marriage.

"But you go, you run away from me—I don't know where you are or what you are doing," said Wilfrid. "And you leave me to that woman. She loves the Austrians, as you know. There! I will ask nothing—only this: I will promise, if I quit the Queen's service for good, not to wear the white uniform—"

"Oh!" Emilia breathed inward deeply, scarce noticing the 'if' that followed; nodding quick assent to the stipulation before she heard the nature of it. It was, that she should continue in England.

"Your word," said Wilfrid; and she pledged it, and did not think she was granting much in the prospect of what she gained.

"You will, then?" said he.

"Yes, I will."

"On your honour?"

These reiterated questions were simply pretexts for steps nearer to the answering lips.

"And I may see you?" he went on.

"Yes."

"Wherever you are staying? And sometimes alone? Alone!—"

"Not if you do not know that I am to be respected," said Emilia, huddled in the passionate fold of his arms. He released her instantly, and was departing, wounded; but his heart counselled wiser proceedings.

"To know that you are in England, breathing the same air with me, near me! is enough. Since we are to meet on those terms, let it be so. Let me only see you till some lucky shot puts me out of your way."

This 'some lucky shot,' which is commonly pointed at themselves by the sentimental lovers, with the object of hitting the very centre of the hearts of obdurate damsels, glanced off Emilia's, which was beginning to throb with a comprehension of all that was involved in the word she had given.

"I have your promise?" he repeated: and she bent her head.

"Not," he resumed, taking jealousy to counsel, now that he had advanced a step: "Not that I would detain you against your will! I can't expect to make such a figure at the end of the piece as your Count Branciani—who, by the way, served his friends oddly, however well he may have served his country."

"His friends?" She frowned.

"Did he not betray the conspirators? He handed in names, now and then."

"Oh!" she cried, "you understand us no better than an Austrian. He handed in names—yes he was obliged to lull suspicion. Two or three of the least implicated volunteered to be betrayed by him; they went and confessed, and put the Government on a wrong track. Count Branciani made a dish of traitors—not true men—to satisfy the Austrian ogre. No one knew the head of the plot till that night of the spy. Do you not see?—he weeded the conspiracy!"

"Poor fellow!" Wilfrid answered, with a contracted mouth: "I pity him for being cut off from his handsome wife."

"I pity her for having to live," said Emilia.

And so their duett dropped to a finish. He liked her phrase better than his own, and being denied any privileges, and feeling stupefied by a position which both enticed and stung him, he remarked that he presumed he must not detain her any longer; whereupon she gave him her hand. He clutched the ready hand reproachfully.

"Good-bye," said she.

"You are the first to say it," he complained.

"Will you write to that Austrian colonel, your cousin, to say "Never! never!" to-morrow, Wilfrid?"

"While you are in England, I shall stay, be sure of that."

She bade him give her love to all Brookfield.

"Once you had none to give but what I let you take back for the purpose!" he said. "Farewell! I shall see the harp to-night. It stands in the old place. I will not have it moved or touched till you—"

"Ah! how kind you were, Wilfrid!"

"And how lovely you are!"

There was no struggle to preserve the backs of her fingers from his lips, and, as this time his phrase was not palpably obscured by the one it countered, artistic sentiment permitted him to go.

CHAPTER LIII

A minute after his parting with Emilia, Wilfrid swung round in the street and walked back at great strides. "What a fool I was not to see that she was acting indifference!" he cried. "Let me have two seconds with her!" But how that was to be contrived his diplomatic brain refused to say. "And what a stiff, formal fellow I was all the time!" He considered that he had not uttered a sentence in any way pointed to touch her heart. "She must think I am still determined to marry that woman."

Wilfrid had taken his stand on the opposite side of the street, and beheld a male figure in the dusk, that went up to the house and then stood back scanning the windows. Wounded by his audacious irreverence toward the walls behind which his beloved was sheltered, Wilfrid crossed and stared at the intruder. It proved to be Braintop.

"How do you do, sir!—no! that can't be the house," stammered Braintop, with a very earnest scrutiny.

"What house? what do you want?" enquired Wilfrid.

"Jenkinson," was the name that won the honour of rescuing Braintop from this dilemma.

"No; it is Lady Gosstre's house: Miss Belloni is living there; and stop: you know her. Just wait, and take in two or three words from me, and notice particularly how she is looking, and the dress she wears. You can say—say that Mrs. Chump sent you to enquire after Miss Belloni's health."

Wilfrid tore a leaf from his pocket-book, and wrote:

"I can be free to-morrow. One word! I shall expect it, with your name in full."

But even in the red heat of passion his born diplomacy withheld his own signature. It was not difficult to override Braintop's scruples about presenting himself, and Wilfrid paced a sentinel measure awaiting the reply. "Free to-morrow," he repeated, with a glance at his watch under a lamp: and thus he soliloquized: "What a time that fellow is! Yes, I can be free to-morrow if I will. I wonder what the deuce Gambier had to do in Monmouthshire. If he has been playing with my sister's reputation, he shall have short shrift. That fellow Braintop sees her now—my little Emilia! my bird! She won't have changed her dress till she has dined. If she changes it before she goes out—by Jove, if she wears it to-night before all those people, that'll mean 'Good-bye' to me: 'Addio, caro,' as those olive women say, with their damned cold languor, when they have given you up. She's not one of them! Good God! she came into the room looking like a little Empress. I'll swear her hand trembled when I went, though! My sisters shall see her in that dress. She must have a clever lady's maid to have done that knot to her back hair. She's getting as full of art as any of them—Oh! lovely little darling! And when she smiles and holds out her hand! What is it—what is it about her? Her upper lip isn't perfectly cut, there's some fault with her nose, but I never saw such a mouth, or such a face. "Free to-morrow?" Good God! she'll think I mean I'm free to take a walk!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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