

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

RHODA
FLEMING,
VOLUME 4

George Meredith
Rhoda Fleming. Volume 4

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George Meredith

Rhoda Fleming – Volume 4

CHAPTER XXX

Those two in the open carriage, one of whom had called out Sedgett's name, were Robert and Major Waring. When the cab had flown by, they fell back into their seats, and smoked; the original stipulation for the day having been that no harassing matter should be spoken of till nightfall.

True to this, Robert tried to think hard on the scene of his recent enjoyment. Horses were to him what music is to a poet, and the glory of the Races he had witnessed was still quick in heart, and partly counteracted his astonishment at the sight of his old village enemy in company with Algernon Blancove.

It was not astonishing at all to him that they should have quarrelled and come to blows; for he knew Sedgett well, and the imperative necessity for fighting him, if only to preserve a man's self-respect and the fair division of peace, when once he had been allowed to get upon terms sufficiently close to assert his black nature; but how had it come about? How was it that a gentleman could consent to appear publicly with such a fellow? He decided that it meant something, and something ominous—but what? Whom could it affect? Was Algernon Blancove such a poor creature that, feeling himself bound by certain dark dealings with Sedgett to keep him quiet, he permitted the bullying dog to hang to his coat-tail? It seemed improbable that any young gentleman should be so weak, but it might be the case; and "if so," thought Robert, "and I let him know I bear him no ill-will for setting Sedgett upon me, I may be doing him a service."

He remembered with pain Algernon's glance of savage humiliation upward, just before he turned to follow Sedgett into the cab; and considered that he ought in kindness to see him and make him comfortable by apologizing, as if he himself had no complaint to make.

He resolved to do it when the opportunity should come. Meantime, what on earth brought them together?

"How white the hedges are!" he said.

"There's a good deal of dust," Major Waring replied.

"I wasn't aware that cabs came to the races."

"They do, you see."

Robert perceived that Percy meant to fool him if he attempted a breach of the bond; but he longed so much for Percy's opinion of the strange alliance between Sedgett and Algernon Blancove, that at any cost he was compelled to say, "I can't get to the bottom of that."

"That squabble in the road?" said Percy. "We shall see two or three more before we reach home."

"No. What's the meaning of a gentleman consorting with a blackguard?"

Robert persisted.

"One or the other has discovered an assimilation, I suppose," Percy gave answer. "That's an odd remark on returning from Epsom. Those who jump into the same pond generally come out the same colour."

Robert spoke low.

"Has it anything to do with the poor girl, do you think?"

"I told you I declined to think till we were home again. Confound it, man, have you no idea of a holiday?"

Robert puffed his tobacco-smoke.

"Let's talk of Mrs. Lovell," he said.

"That's not a holiday for me," Percy murmured but Robert's mind was too preoccupied to observe the tone, and he asked,—

"Is she to be trusted to keep her word faithfully this time?"

"Come," said Percy, "we haven't betted to-day. I'll bet you she will, if you like. Will you bet against it?"

"I won't. I can't nibble at anything. Betting's like drinking."

"But you can take a glass of wine. This sort of bet is much the same.

However, don't; for you would lose."

"There," said Robert; "I've heard of being angry with women for fickleness, changeableness, and all sorts of other things. She's a lady I couldn't understand being downright angry with, and here's the reason— it ain't a matter of reason at all—she fascinates me. I do, I declare, clean forget Rhoda; I forget the girl, if only I see Mrs. Lovell at a distance. How's that? I'm not a fool, with nonsensical fancies of any kind. I know what loving a woman is; and a man in my position might be ass enough to—all sorts of things. It isn't that; it's fascination. I'm afraid of her. If she talks to me, I feel something like having gulped a bottle of wine. Some women you have a respect for; some you like or you love; some you despise: with her, I just feel I'm intoxicated."

Major Waring eyed him steadily. He said: "I'll unriddle it, if I can, to your comprehension. She admires you for what you are, and she lets you see it; I dare say she's not unwilling that you should see it. She has a worship for bravery: it's a deadly passion with her."

Robert put up a protesting blush of modesty, as became him. "Then why, if she does me the honour to think anything of me, does she turn against me?"

"Ah! now you go deeper. She is giving you what assistance she can; at present: be thankful, if you can be satisfied with her present doings. Perhaps I'll answer the other question by-and-by. Now we enter London, and our day is over. How did you like it?"

Robert's imagination rushed back to the downs.

"The race was glorious. I wish we could go at that pace in life; I should have a certainty of winning. How miserably dull the streets look; and the people creep along—they creep, and seem to like it. Horseback's my element."

They drove up to Robert's lodgings, where, since the Winter, he had been living austere and recklessly; exiled by his sensitiveness from his two homes, Warbeach and Wrexby; and seeking over London for Dahlia—a pensioner on his friend's bounty; and therein had lain the degrading misery to a man of his composition. Often had he thought of enlisting again, and getting drafted to a foreign station. Nothing but the consciousness that he was subsisting on money not his own would have kept him from his vice. As it was, he had lived through the months between Winter and Spring, like one threading his way through the tortuous lengths of a cavern; never coming to the light, but coming upon absurd mishaps in his effort to reach it. His adventures in London partook somewhat of the character of those in Warbeach, minus the victim; for whom two or three gentlemen in public thoroughfares had been taken. These misdemeanours, in the face of civil society, Robert made no mention of in his letters to Percy.

But there was light now, though at first it gave but a faint glimmer, in a lady's coloured envelope, lying on the sitting-room table. Robert opened it hurriedly, and read it; seized Dahlia's address, with a brain on fire, and said:

"It's signed 'Margaret Lovell.' This time she calls me 'Dear Sir.'"

"She could hardly do less," Percy remarked.

"I know: but there is a change in her. There's a summer in her writing now. She has kept her word, Percy. She's the dearest lady in the world. I don't ask why she didn't help me before."

"You acknowledge the policy of mild measures," said Major Waring.

"She's the dearest lady in the world," Robert repeated. He checked his enthusiasm. "Lord in heaven! what an evening I shall have."

The thought of his approaching interview with Dahlia kept him dumb.

As they were parting in the street, Major Waring said, "I will be here at twelve. Let me tell you this, Robert: she is going to be married; say nothing to dissuade her; it's the best she can do; take a manly view of it. Good-bye."

Robert was but slightly affected by the intelligence. His thoughts were on Dahlia as he had first seen her, when in her bloom, and the sister of his darling; now miserable; a thing trampled to earth! With him, pity for a victim soon became lost in rage at the author of the wrong, and as he walked along he reflected contemptuously on his feeble efforts to avenge her at Warbeach. She lived in a poor row of cottages, striking off from one of the main South-western suburb roads, not very distant from his own lodgings, at which he marvelled, as at a cruel irony. He could not discern the numbers, and had to turn up several of the dusky little strips of garden to read the numbers on the doors. A faint smell of lilac recalled the country and old days, and some church bells began ringing. The number of the house where he was to find Dahlia was seven. He was at the door of the house next to it, when he heard voices in the garden beside him.

A man said, "Then I have your answer?"

A woman said, "Yes; yes."

"You will not trust to my pledged honour?"

"Pardon me; not that. I will not live in disgrace."

"When I promise, on my soul, that the moment I am free I will set you right before the world?"

"Oh! pardon me."

"You will?"

"No; no! I cannot."

"You choose to give yourself to an obscure dog, who'll ill-treat you, and for whom you don't care a pin's-head; and why? that you may be fenced from gossip, and nothing more. I thought you were a woman above that kind of meanness. And this is a common countryman. How will you endure that kind of life? You were made for elegance and happiness: you shall have it. I met you before your illness, when you would not listen to me: I met you after. I knew you at once. Am I changed? I swear to you I have dreamed of you ever since, and love you. Be as faded as you like; be hideous, if you like; but come with me. You know my name, and what I am. Twice I have followed you, and found your name and address; twice I have written to you, and made the same proposal. And you won't trust to my honour? When I tell you I love you tenderly? When I give you my solemn assurance that you shall not regret it? You have been deceived by one man: why punish me? I know—I feel you are innocent and good. This is the third time that you have permitted me to speak to you: let it be final. Say you will trust yourself to me—trust in my honour. Say it shall be to-morrow. Yes; say the word. To-morrow. My sweet creature— do!"

The man spoke earnestly, but a third person and extraneous hearer could hardly avoid being struck by the bathetic conclusion. At least, in tone it bordered on a fall; but the woman did not feel it so.

She replied: "You mean kindly to me, sir. I thank you indeed, for I am very friendless. Oh! pardon me: I am quite—quite determined. Go—pray, forget me."

This was Dahlia's voice.

Robert was unconscious of having previously suspected it. Heartily ashamed of letting his ears be filled with secret talk, he went from the garden and crossed the street.

He knew this to be one of the temptations of young women in London.

Shortly after, the man came through the iron gateway of the garden. He passed under lamplight, and Robert perceived him to be a gentleman in garb.

A light appeared in the windows of the house. Now that he had heard her voice, the terrors of his interview were dispersed, and he had only plain sadness to encounter. He knocked at the door quietly. There was a long delay after he had sent in his name; but finally admission was given.

"If I had loved her!" groaned Robert, before he looked on her; but when he did look on her, affectionate pity washed the selfish man out of him. All these false sensations, peculiar to men, concerning the soiled purity of woman, the lost innocence; the brand of shame upon her, which are commonly the foul sentimentalism of such as can be too eager in the chase of corruption when occasion suits, and are another side of pruriency, not absolutely foreign to the best of us in our youth—all passed away from him in Dahlia's presence.

The young man who can look on them we call fallen women with a noble eye, is to my mind he that is most nobly begotten of the race, and likeliest to be the sire of a noble line. Robert was less than he; but Dahlia's aspect helped him to his rightful manliness. He saw that her worth survived.

The creature's soul had put no gloss upon her sin. She had sinned, and her suffering was manifest.

She had chosen to stand up and take the scourge of God; after which the stones cast by men are not painful.

By this I mean that she had voluntarily stripped her spirit bare of evasion, and seen herself for what she was; pleading no excuse. His scourge is the Truth, and she had faced it.

Innumerable fanciful thoughts, few of them definite, beset the mind at interviews such as these; but Robert was distinctly impressed by her look. It was as that of one upon the yonder shore. Though they stood close together, he had the thought of their being separate—a gulf between.

The colourlessness of her features helped to it, and the odd little close-fitting white linen cap which she wore to conceal the stubborn-twisting clipped curls of her shorn head, made her unlike women of our world. She was dressed in black up to the throat. Her eyes were still luminously blue, and she let them dwell on Robert one gentle instant, giving him her hand humbly.

"Dahlia!—my dear sister, I wish I could say; but the luck's against me,"

Robert began.

She sat, with her fingers locked together in her lap, gazing forward on the floor, her head a little sideways bent.

"I believe," he went on—"I haven't heard, but I believe Rhoda is well."

"She and father are well, I know," said Dahlia.

Robert started: "Are you in communication with them?"

She shook her head. "At the end of some days I shall see them."

"And then perhaps you'll plead my cause, and make me thankful to you for life, Dahlia?"

"Rhoda does not love you."

"That's the fact, if a young woman's to be trusted to know her own mind, in the first place, and to speak it, in the second."

Dahlia, closed her lips. The long-lined underlip was no more very red. Her heart knew that it was not to speak of himself that he had come; but she was poor-witted, through weakness of her blood, and out of her own immediate line of thought could think neither far nor deep. He entertained her with talk of his notions of Rhoda, finishing:

"But at the end of a week you will see her, and I dare say she'll give you her notions of me. Dahlia! how happy this'll make them. I do say thank God! from my soul, for this."

She pressed her hands in her lap, trembling. "If you will, please, not speak of it, Mr. Robert."

"Say only you do mean it, Dahlia. You mean to let them see you?"

She shivered out a "Yes."

"That's right. Because, a father and a sister—haven't they a claim? Think a while. They've had a terrible time. And it's true that you've consented to a husband, Dahlia? I'm glad, if it is; and he's good and kind. Right soul-glad I am."

While he was speaking, her eyelids lifted and her eyes became fixed on him in a stony light of terror, like a creature in anguish before her executioner. Then again her eyelids dropped. She had not moved from her still posture.

"You love him?" he asked, in some wonderment.

She gave no answer.

"Don't you care for him?"

There was no reply.

"Because, Dahlia, if you do not I know I have no right to fancy you do not. How is it? Tell me. Marriage is an awful thing, where there's no love. And this man, whoever he is—is he in good circumstances? I wouldn't speak of him; but, you see, I must, as your friend—and I'm that. Come: he loves you? Of course he does. He has said so. I believe it. And he's a man you can honour and esteem? You wouldn't consent without, I'm sure. What makes me anxious—I look on you as my sister, whether Rhoda will have it so or not; I'm anxious because—I'm anxious it should be over, for then Rhoda will be proud of the faith she had in you, and it will lighten the old man's heart."

Once more the inexplicable frozen look struck over him from her opened eyes, as if one of the minutes of Time had yawned to show him its deep, mute, tragic abyss, and was extinguished.

"When does it take place, Dahlia?"

Her long underlip, white almost as the row of teeth it revealed, hung loose.

"When?" he asked, leaning forward to hear, and the word was "Saturday," uttered with a feeble harshness, not like the gentle voice of Dahlia.

"This coming Saturday?"

"No."

"Saturday week?"

She fell into a visible trembling.

"You named the day?"

He pushed for an indication of cheerful consent to the act she was about to commit, or of reluctance.

Possibly she saw this, for now she answered, "I did." The sound was deep in her throat.

"Saturday week," said Robert. "I feel to the man as a brother, already.

Do you live—you'll live in the country?"

"Abroad."

"Not in Old England? I'm sorry for that. But—well! Things must be as they're ordered. Heigho! I've got to learn it."

Dahlia smiled kindly.

"Rhoda will love you. She is firm when she loves."

"When she loves. Where's the consolation to me?"

"Do you think she loves me as much—as much"

"As much as ever? She loves her sister with all her heart—all, for I haven't a bit of it."

"It is because," said Dahlia slowly, "it is because she thinks I am—"

Here the poor creature's bosom heaved piteously.

"What has she said of me? I wish her to have blamed me—it is less pain."

"Listen," said Robert. "She does not, and couldn't blame you, for it's a sort of religion with her to believe no wrong of you. And the reason why she hates me is, that I, knowing something more of the world, suspected, and chose to let her know it—I said it, in fact—that you had been deceived by a—But this isn't the time to abuse others. She would have had me, if I had thought proper to think as she thinks, or play hypocrite, and pretend to. I'll tell you openly, Dahlia; your father thinks the worst. Ah! you look the ghost again. It's hard for you to hear, but you give me a notion of having got strength to hear it. It's your father's way to think the worst. Now, when you can show him your husband, my dear, he'll lift his head. He's old English. He won't dream of asking questions. He'll see a brave and honest young man who must love you, or—he does love you, that's settled. Your father'll shake his hand, and as for Rhoda, she'll triumph. The only person to speak out to, is the man who marries you, and that you've done."

Robert looked the interrogation he did not utter.

"I have," said Dahlia.

"Good: if I may call him brother, some day, all the better for me. Now, you won't leave England the day you're married."

"Soon. I pray that it may be soon."

"Yes; well, on that morning, I'll have your father and Rhoda at my lodgings, not wide from here: if I'd only known it earlier!—and you and your husband shall come there and join us. It'll be a happy meeting at last."

Dahlia stopped her breathing.

"Will you see Rhoda?"

"I'll go to her to-morrow, if you like."

"If I might see her, just as I am leaving England! not before."

"That's not generous," said Robert.

"Isn't it?" she asked like a child.

"Fancy!—to see you she's been longing for, and the ship that takes you off, perhaps everlastingly, as far as this world's concerned!"

"Mr. Robert, I do not wish to deceive my sister. Father need not be distressed. Rhoda shall know. I will not be guilty of falsehoods any more—no more! Will you go to her? Tell her—tell Rhoda what I am. Say I have been ill. It will save her from a great shock."

She covered her eyes.

"I said in all my letters that my husband was a gentleman."

It was her first openly penitential utterance in his presence, and her cheeks were faintly reddened. It may have been this motion of her blood which aroused the sunken humanity within her; her heart leaped, and she cried "I can see her as I am, I can. I thought it impossible. Oh! I can. Will she come to me? My sister is a Christian and forgives. Oh! let me see her. And go to her, dear Mr. Robert, and ask her—tell her all, and ask her if I may be spared, and may work at something—anything, for my livelihood near my sister. It is difficult for women to earn money, but I think I can. I have done so since my illness. I have been in the hospital with brain fever. He was lodging in the house with me before. He found me at the hospital. When I came out, he walked with me to support me: I was very weak. He read to me, and then asked me to marry him. He asked again. I lay in bed one night, and with my eyes open, I saw the dangers of women, and the trouble of my father and sister; and pits of wickedness. I saw like places full of snakes. I had such a yearning for protection. I gave him my word I would be his wife, if he was not ashamed of a wife like me. I wished to look once in father's face. I had fancied that Rhoda would spurn me, when she discovered my falsehood. She—sweet dear! would she ever? Go to her. Say, I do not love any man. I am heart-dead. I have no heart except for her. I cannot love a husband. He is good, and it is kind: but, oh! let me be spared. His face!—"

She pressed her hands tight into the hollow of her eyes.

"No; it can't be meant. Am I very ungrateful? This does not seem to be what God orders. Only if this must be! only if it must be! If my sister cannot look on me without! He is good, and it is unselfish to take a moneyless, disgraced creature: but, my misery!—If my sister will see me, without my doing this!—Go to her, Mr. Robert. Say, Dahlia was false, and repents, and has worked with her needle to subsist, and can, and will, for her soul strives to be clean. Try to make her understand. If Rhoda could love you, she would know. She is locked up—she is only ideas. My sweet is so proud. I love her for her pride, if she will only let me creep to her feet, kiss her feet. Dear Mr. Robert, help me! help me! I will do anything she says. If she says I am to marry him, I will. Don't mind my tears—they mean nothing now. Tell my dear, I will obey her. I will not be false any more to her. I wish to be quite stripped. And Rhoda may know me, and forgive me, if she can. And—Oh! if she thinks, for father's sake, I ought, I will submit and speak the words; I will; I am ready. I pray for mercy."

Robert sat with his fist at his temples, in a frowning meditation.

Had she declared her reluctance to take the step, in the first moments of their interview, he might have been ready to support her: but a project fairly launched becomes a reality in the brain—a thing once spoken of attracts like a living creature, and does not die voluntarily. Robert now beheld all that was in its favour, and saw nothing but flighty flimsy objections to it. He was hardly moved by her unexpected outburst.

Besides, there was his own position in the case. Rhoda would smile on him, if he brought Dahlia to her, and brought her happy in the world's eye. It will act as a sort of signal for general happiness. But if he had to go and explain matters base and mournful to her, there would be no smile on her face, and not much gratitude in her breast. There would be none for a time, certainly. Proximity to her faded sister made him conceive her attainable, and thrice precious by contrast.

He fixed his gaze on Dahlia, and the perfect refinement of her simplicity caused him to think that she might be aware of an inappropriateness in the contemplated union.

"Is he a clumsy fellow? I mean, do you read straight off that he has no pretension to any manners of a gentleman—nothing near it?"

To this question, put with hesitation by Robert, Dahlia made answer, "I respect him."

She would not strengthen her prayer by drawing the man's portrait. Speedily she forgot how the doing so would in any way have strengthened her prayer. The excitement had left her brain dull. She did little more than stare mildly, and absently bend her head, while Robert said that he would go to Rhoda on the morrow, and speak seriously with her.

"But I think I can reckon her ideas will side with mine, that it is to your interest, my dear, to make your feelings come round warm to a man you can respect, and who offers you a clear path," he said.

Whereat Dahlia quietly blinked her eyes.

When he stood up, she rose likewise.

"Am I to take a kiss to Rhoda?" he said, and seeing her answer, bent his forehead, to which she put her lips.

"And now I must think all night long about the method of transferring it. Good-bye, Dahlia. You shall hear from your sister the morning after to-morrow. Good-bye!"

He pressed her hand, and went to the door.

"There's nothing I can do for you, Dahlia?"

"Not anything."

"God bless you, my dear!"

Robert breathed with the pleasant sense of breathing, when he was again in the street. Amazement, that what he had dreaded so much should be so easily over, set him thinking, in his fashion, on the marvels of life, and the naturalness in the aspect of all earthly things when you look at them with your eyes.

But in the depths of his heart there was disquiet.

"It's the best she can do; she can do no better," he said; and said it more frequently than it needed by a mind established in the conviction. Gradually he began to feel that certain things seen with the eyes, natural as they may then appear and little terrible, leave distinct, solid, and grave impressions. Something of what our human tragedy may show before high heaven possessed him. He saw it bare of any sentiment, in the person of the girl Dahlia. He could neither put a halo of imagination about her, nor could he conceive one degraded thought of the creature. She stood a naked sorrow, haunting his brain.

And still he continued saying, "It's the best she can do: it's best for all. She can do nothing better."

He said it, unaware that he said it in self-defence.

The pale nun-like ghostly face hung before him, stronger in outline the farther time widened between him and that suffering flesh.

CHAPTER XXXI

The thousand pounds were in Algernon's hands at last. He had made his escape from Boyne's Bank early in the afternoon, that he might obtain the cheque and feel the money in his pocket before that day's sun was extinguished. There was a note for five hundred; four notes for a hundred severally; and two fifties. And all had come to him through the mere writing down of his name as a recipient of the sum!

It was enough to make one in love with civilization. Money, when it is once in your pocket, seems to have come there easily, even if you have worked for it; but if you have done no labour whatever, and still find it there, your sensations (supposing you to be a butterfly youth—the typical child of a wealthy country) exult marvellously, and soar above the conditions of earth.

He knew the very features of the notes. That gallant old Five Hundred, who might have been a Thousand, but that he had nobly split himself into centurions and skirmishers, stood in his imaginative contemplation like a grand white-headed warrior, clean from the slaughter and in court-ruffles—say, Blucher at the court of the Waterloo Regent. The Hundreds were his Generals; the Fifties his captains; and each one was possessed of unlimited power of splitting himself into serviceable regiments, at the call of his lord, Algernon.

He scarcely liked to make the secret confession that it was the largest sum he had ever as yet carried about; but, as it heightened his pleasure, he did confess it for half an instant. Five Hundred in the bulk he had never attained to. He felt it as a fortification against every mishap in life.

To a young man commonly in difficulties with regard to the paying of his cabman, and latterly the getting of his dinner, the sense of elevation imparted by the sum was intoxicating. But, thinking too much of the Five Hundred waxed dangerous for the fifties; it dwarfed them to such insignificance that it made them lose their self-respect. So, Algernon, pursuing excellent tactics, set his mind upon some stray shillings that he had a remainder of five pounds borrowed from old Anthony, when he endeavoured to obtain repayment of the one pound and interest dating from the night at the theatre. Algernon had stopped his mouth on that point, as well as concerning his acquaintance with Dahlia, by immediately attempting to borrow further, whenever Anthony led the way for a word in private. A one-pound creditor had no particular terrors for him, and he manoeuvred the old man neatly, saying, as previously, "Really, I don't know the young person you allude to: I happened to meet her, or some one like her, casually," and dropping his voice, "I'm rather short—what do you think? Could you?—a trifling accommodation?" from which Anthony fled.

But on the day closing the Epsom week he beckoned Anthony secretly to follow him out of the office, and volunteered to give news that he had just heard of Dahlia.

"Oh," said Anthony, "I've seen her."

"I haven't," said Algernon, "upon my honour."

"Yes, I've seen her, sir, and sorry to hear her husband's fallen a bit low." Anthony touched his pocket. "What they calls 'nip' tides, ain't it?"

Algernon sprang a compliment under him, which sent the vain old fellow up, whether he would or not, to the effect that Anthony's tides were not subject to lunar influence.

"Now, Mr. Blancove, you must change them notions o' me. I don't say I shouldn't be richer if I'd got what's owing to me."

"You'd have to be protected; you'd be Bullion on two legs," said Algernon, always shrewd in detecting a weakness. "You'd have to go about with sentries on each side, and sleep in an iron safe!"

The end of the interview was a visit to the public-house, and the transferring of another legal instrument from Algernon to Anthony. The latter departed moaning over his five pounds ten shillings in paper; the former rejoicing at his five pounds in gold. That day was Saturday. On Monday, only a

few shillings of the five pounds remained; but they were sufficient to command a cab, and, if modesty in dining was among the prescriptions for the day, a dinner. Algernon was driven to the West.

He remembered when he had plunged in the midst of the fashionable whirlpool, having felt reckless there formerly, but he had become remarkably sedate when he stepped along the walks. A certain equipage, or horse, was to his taste, and once he would have said: "That's the thing for me;" being penniless. Now, on the contrary, he reckoned the possible cost, grudgingly, saying "Eh?" to himself, and responding "No," faintly, and then more positively, "Won't do."

He was by no means acting as one on a footing of equality with the people he beholds. A man who is ready to wager a thousand pounds that no other man present has that amount in his pocket, can hardly feel unequal to his company.

Charming ladies on horseback cantered past. "Let them go," he thought. Yesterday, the sight of one would have set him dreaming on grand alliances. When you can afford to be a bachelor, the case is otherwise. Presently, who should ride by but Mrs. Lovell! She was talking more earnestly than was becoming, to that easy-mannered dark-eyed fellow; the man who had made him savage by entering the opera-box.

"Poor old Ned!" said Algernon; "I must put him on his guard." But, even the lifting of a finger—a hint on paper—would bring Edward over from Paris, as he knew; and that was not in his scheme; so he only determined to write to his cousin.

A flood of evening gold lay over the Western park.

"The glory of this place," Algernon said to himself, "is, that you're sure of meeting none but gentlemen here;" and he contrasted it with Epsom Downs.

A superstitious horror seized him when, casting his eyes ahead, he perceived Sedgett among the tasteful groups—as discordant a figure as could well be seen, and clumsily aware of it, for he could neither step nor look like a man at ease. Algernon swung round and retraced his way; but Sedgett had long sight.

"I'd heard of London"—Algernon soon had the hated voice in his ears,— "and I've bin up to London b'fore; I came here to have a wink at the fash'nables—hang me, if ever I see such a scrumptious lot. It's worth a walk up and down for a hour or more. D' you come heer often, sir?"

"Eh? Who are you? Oh!" said Algernon, half mad with rage. "Excuse me;" and he walked faster.

"Fifty times over," Sedgett responded cheerfully. "I'd pace you for a match up and down this place if you liked. Ain't the horses a spectacle? I'd rather be heer than there at they Races. As for the ladies, I'll tell you what: ladies or no ladies, give my young woman time for her hair to grow; and her colour to come, by George! if she wouldn't shine against e'er a one—smite me stone blind, if she wouldn't! So she shall! Australia'll see. I owe you my thanks for interdoocin' me, and never fear my not remembering."

Where there was a crowd, Algernon could elude his persecutor by threading his way rapidly; but the open spaces condemned him to merciless exposure, and he flew before eyes that his imagination exaggerated to a stretch of supernatural astonishment. The tips of his fingers, the roots of his hair, pricked with vexation, and still, manoeuvre as he might, Sedgett followed him.

"Call at my chambers," he said sternly.

"You're never at home, sir."

"Call to-morrow morning, at ten."

"And see a great big black door, and kick at it till my toe comes through my boot. Thank ye."

"I tell you, I won't have you annoying me in public; once for all."

"Why, sir; I thought we parted friends, last time. Didn't you shake my hand, now, didn't you shake my hand, sir? I ask you, whether you shook my hand, or whether you didn't? A plain answer. We had a bit of a scrimmage, coming home. I admit we had; but shaking hands, means 'friends again we are.' I know you're a gentleman, and a man like me shouldn't be so bold as fur to strike his betters. Only, don't you see, sir, Full-o'-Beer's a hasty chap, and up in a minute; and he's sorry for it after."

Algernon conceived a brilliant notion. Drawing five shillings from his pocket, he held them over to Sedgett, and told him to drive down to his chambers, and await his coming. Sedgett took the money; but it was five shillings lost. He made no exhibition of receiving orders, and it was impossible to address him imperiously without provoking observations of an animated kind from the elegant groups parading and sitting.

Young Harry Latters caught Algernon's eye; never was youth more joyfully greeted. Harry spoke of the Friday's race, and the defection of the horse Tenpenny Nail. A man passed with a nod and "How d' ye do?" for which he received in reply a cool stare.

"Who's that?" Algernon asked.

"The son of a high dignitary," said Harry.

"You cut him."

"I can do the thing, you see, when it's a public duty."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Merely a black-leg, a grec, a cheat, swindler, or whatever name you like," said Harry. "We none of us nod to the professionals in this line; and I won't exchange salutes with an amateur. I'm peculiar. He chose to be absent on the right day last year; so from that date; I consider him absent in toto; "none of your rrrrr—m reckonings, let's have the rrrrr— m toto;"—you remember Suckling's story of the Yankee fellow? Bye-bye; shall see you the day after to-morrow. You dine with me and Suckling at the club."

Latters was hailed by other friends. Algernon was forced to let him go. He dipped under the iron rail, and crossed the row at a run; an indecorous proceeding; he could not help it. The hope was that Sedgett would not have the like audacity, or might be stopped, and Algernon's reward for so just a calculation was, that on looking round, he found himself free. He slipped with all haste out of the Park. Sedgett's presence had the deadening power of the torpedo on the thousand pounds.

For the last quarter of an hour, Algernon had not felt a motion of it. A cab, to make his escape certain, was suggested to his mind; and he would have called a cab, had not the novel apparition of economy, which now haunted him, suggested that he had recently tossed five shillings into the gutter. A man might dine on four shillings and sixpence, enjoying a modest half-pint of wine, and he possessed that sum. To pinch himself and deserve well of Providence, he resolved not to drink wine, but beer, that day. He named the beverage; a pint-bottle of ale; and laughed, as a royal economist may, who punishes himself to please himself.

"Mighty jolly, ain't it, sir?" said Sedgett, at his elbow.

Algernon faced about, and swore an oath from his boots upward; so vehement was his disgust, and all-pervading his amazement.

"I'll wallop you at that game," said Sedgett.

"You infernal scoundrel!"

"If you begin swearing," Sedgett warned him.

"What do you want with me?"

"I'll tell you, sir. I don't want to go to ne'er a cock-fight, nor betting hole."

"Here, come up this street," said Algernon, leading the way into a dusky defile from a main parade of fashion. "Now, what's your business, confound you!"

"Well, sir, I ain't goin' to be confounded: that, I'll—I'll swear to.

The long and the short is, I must have some money 'fore the week's out."

"You won't have a penny from me."

"That's blunt, though it ain't in my pocket," said Sedgett, grinning. "I say, sir, respectful as you like, I must. I've got to pay for passengerin' over the sea, self and wife; and quick it must be. There's things to buy on both sides. A small advance and you won't be bothered. Say, fifty. Fifty, and you don't see me till Saturday, when, accordin' to agreement, you hand to me the cash, outside the church door; and then we parts to meet no more. Oh! let us be joyful—I'll sing."

Algernon's loathing of the coarseness and profanity of villainy increased almost to the depth of a sentiment as he listened to Sedgett.

"I do nothing of the sort," he said. "You shall not have a farthing. Be off. If you follow me, I give you into custody of a policeman."

"You durst n't." Sedgett eyed him warily.

He could spy a physical weakness, by affinity of cowardice, as quickly as

Algernon a moral weakness, by the same sort of relationship to it.

"You don't dare," Sedgett pursued. "And why should you, sir? there's ne'er a reason why. I'm civil. I asks for my own: no more 'n my own, it ain't. I call the bargain good: why sh'd I want fur to break it? I want the money bad. I'm sick o' this country. I'd like to be off in the first ship that sails. Can't you let me have ten till to-morrow? then t' other forty. I've got a mortal need for it, that I have. Come, it's no use your walking at that rate; my legs are's good as yours."

Algernon had turned back to the great thoroughfare. He was afraid that ten pounds must be forfeited to this worrying demon in the flesh, and sought the countenance of his well-dressed fellows to encourage him in resisting. He could think of no subterfuge; menace was clearly useless: and yet the idea of changeing one of the notes and for so infamous a creature, caused pangs that helped him further to endure his dogging feet and filthy tongue. This continued until he saw a woman's hand waving from a cab. Presuming that such a signal, objectionable as it was, must be addressed to himself, he considered whether he should lift his hat, or simply smile as a favoured, but not too deeply flattered, man. The cab drew up, and the woman said, "Sedgett." She was a well-looking woman, strongly coloured, brown-eyed, and hearty in appearance.

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