GEORGE MEREDITH

SANDRA BELLONI. VOLUME 4

George Meredith

Sandra Belloni. Volume 4

Meredith G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER XXVI

It was midnight. Mr. Pole had appeased his imagination with a chop, and was trying to revive the memory of his old after-theatre night carouses by listening to a song which Emilia sang to him, while he sipped at a smoking mixture, and beat time on the table, rejoiced that he was warm from head to foot at last.

"That's a pretty song, my dear," he said. "A very pretty song. It does for an old fellow; and so did my supper: light and wholesome. I'm an old fellow; I ought to know I've got a grown-up son and grown-up daughters. I shall be a grandpa, soon, I dare say. It's not the thing for me to go about hearing glees. I had an idea of it. I'm better here. All I want is to see my children happy, married and settled, and comfortable!"

Emilia stole up to him, and dropped on one knee: "You love them?"

"I do. I love my girls and my boy. And my brandy-and-water, do you mean to say, you rogue?"

"And me?" Emilia looked up at him beseechingly.

"Yes, and you. I do. I haven't known you long, my dear, but I shall be glad to do what I can for you. You shall make my house your home as long as you live; and if I say, make haste and get married, it's only just this: girls ought to marry young, and not be in an uncertain position."

"Am I worth having?"

"To be sure you are! I should think so. You haven't got a penny; but, then, you're not for spending one. And"—Mr. Pole nodded to right and left like a man who silenced a host of invisible logicians, urging this and that—"you're a pleasant companion, thrifty, pretty, musical: by Jingo! what more do they want? They'll have their song and chop at home."

"Yes; but suppose it depends upon their fathers?"

"Well, if their fathers will be fools, my dear, I can't help 'em. We needn't take 'em in a lump: how about the doctor? I'll see him to-morrow morning, and hear what he has to say. Shall I?"

Mr. Pole winked shrewdly.

"You will not make my heart break?" Emilia's voice sounded one low chord as she neared the thing she had to say.

"Bless her soul!" the old merchant patted her; "I'm not the sort of man for that."

"Nor his?"

"His?" Mr. Pole's nerves became uneasy in a minute, at the scent of a mystification. He dashed his handkerchief over his forehead, repeating: "His? Break a man's heart! I? What's the meaning of that? For God's sake, don't bother me!"

Emilia was still kneeling before him, eyeing him with a shadowed steadfast air.

"I say his, because his heart is in mine. He has any pain that hurts me."

"He may be tremendously in love," observed Mr. Pole; "but he seems a deuced soft sort of a doctor! What's his name?"

"I love Wilfrid."

The merchant appeared to be giving ear to her, long after the words had been uttered, while there was silence in the room.

"Wilfrid? my son?" he cried with a start.

"He is my lover."

"Damned rascal!" Mr. Pole jumped from his chair. "Going and playing with an unprotected girl. I can pardon a young man's folly, but this is infamous. My dear child," he turned to Emilia, "if

you've got any notion about my son Wilfrid, you must root it up as quick as you can. If he's been behaving like a villain, leave him to me. I detest, I hate, I loathe, I would kick, a young man who deceives a girl. Even if he's my son!—more's the reason!"

Mr. Pole was walking up and down the room, fuming as he spoke. Emilia tried to hold his hand, as he was passing, but he said: "There, my child! I'm very sorry for you, and I'm damned angry with him. Let me go."

"Can you, can you be angry with him for loving me?"

"Deceiving you," returned Mr. Pole; "that's what it is. And I tell you, I'd rather fifty times the fellow had deceived me. Anything rather than that he should take advantage of a girl."

"Wilfrid loves me and would die for me," said Emilia.

"Now, let me tell you the fact," Mr. Pole came to a halt, fronting her. "My son Wilfrid Pole may be in love, as he says, here and there, but he is engaged to be married to a lady of title. I have his word—his oath. He got near a thousand pounds out of my pocket the other day on that understanding. I don't speak about the money, but—now—it's a lump— others would have made a nice row about it—but is he a liar? Is he a seducing, idling, vagabond dog? Is he a contemptible scoundrel?"

"He is my lover," said Emilia.

She stood without changing a feature; as in a darkness, holding to the one thing she was sure of. Then, with a sudden track of light in her brain: "I know the mistake," she said. "Pardon him. He feared to offend you, because you are his father, and he thought I might not quite please you. For, he loves me. He has loved me from the first moment he saw me. He cannot be engaged to another. I could bring him from any woman's side. I have only to say to myself—he must come to me. For he loves me! It is not a thing to doubt."

Mr. Pole turned and recommenced his pacing with hasty steps. All the indications of a nervous tempest were on him. Interjecting half-formed phrases, and now and then staring at Emilia, as at an incomprehensible object, he worked at his hair till it lent him the look of one in horror at an apparition.

"The fellow's going to marry Lady Charlotte Chillingworth, I tell you.

He has asked my permission. The infernal scamp! he knew it pleased me.

He bled me of a thousand pounds only the other day. I tell you, he's

going to marry Lady Charlotte Chillingworth."

Emilia received this statement with a most perplexing smile. She shook her head. "He cannot."

"Cannot? I say he shall, and must, and in a couple of months, too!"

The gravely sceptical smile on Emilia's face changed to a blank pallor.

"Then, you make him, sir—you?"

"He'll be a beggar, if he don't."

"You will keep him without money?"

Mr. Pole felt that he gazed on strange deeps in that girl's face. Her voice had the wire-like hum of a rising wind. There was no menace in her eyes: the lashes of them drooped almost tenderly, and the lips were but softly closed. The heaving of the bosom, though weighty, was regular: the hands hung straight down, and were open. She looked harmless; but his physical apprehensiveness was sharpened by his nervous condition, and he read power in her: the capacity to concentrate all animal and mental vigour into one feeling—this being the power of the soul.

So she stood, breathing quietly, steadily eyeing him.

"No, no;" went on Mr. Pole. "Come, come. We'll sit down, and see, and talk—see what can be done. You know I always meant kindly by you."

"Oh, yes!" Emilia musically murmured, and it cost her nothing to smile again.

"Now, tell me how this began." Mr. Pole settled himself comfortably to listen, all irritation having apparently left him, under the influence of the dominant nature. "You need not be ashamed to talk it over to me."

"I am not ashamed," Emilia led off, and told her tale simply, with here and there one of her peculiar illustrations. She had not thought of love till it came to life suddenly, she said; and then all the world looked different. The relation of Wilfrid's bravery in fighting for her, varied for a single instant the low monotony of her voice. At the close of the confession, Mr. Pole wore an aspect of distress. This creature's utter unlikeness to the girls he was accustomed to, corroborated his personal view of the case, that Wilfrid certainly could not have been serious, and that she was deluded. But he pitied her, for he had sufficient imagination to prevent him from despising what he did not altogether comprehend. So, to fortify the damsel, he gave her a lecture: first, on young men—their selfish inconsiderateness, their weakness, the wanton lives they led, their trick of lying for any sugar-plum, and how they laughed at their dupes. Secondly, as to the conduct consequently to be prescribed to girls, who were weaker, frailer, by disposition more confiding, and who must believe nothing but what they heard their elders say.

Emilia gave patient heed to the lecture.

"But I am safe," she remarked, when he had finished; "for my lover is not as those young men are."

To speak at all, and arrange his ideas, was a vexation to the poor merchant. He was here like an irritable traveller, who knocks at a gate, which makes as if it opens, without letting him in. Emilia's naive confidence he read as stupidity. It brought on a fresh access of the nervous fever lurking in him, and he cried, jumping from his seat: "Well, you can't have him, and there's an end. You must give up—confound! why! do you expect to have everything you want at starting? There, my child— but, upon my honour! a man loses his temper at having to talk for an hour or so, and no result. You must go to bed; and—do you say your prayers? Well! that's one way of getting out of it—pray that you may forget all about what's not good for you. Why, you're almost like a young man, when you set your mind on a thing. Bad! won't do! Say your prayers regularly. And, please, pour me out a mouthful of brandy. My hand trembles—I don't know what's the matter with it;—just like those rushes on the Thames I used to see when out fishing. No wind, and yet there they shake away. I wish it was daylight on the old river now! It's night, and no mistake. I feel as if I had a fellow twirling a stick over my head. The rascal's been at it for the last month. There, stop where you are, my dear. Don't begin to dance!"

He pressed at his misty eyes, half under the impression that she was taking a succession of dazzling leaps in air. Terror of an impending blow, which he associated with Emilia's voice, made him entreat her to be silent. After a space, he breathed a long breath of relief, saying: "No, no; you're firm enough on your feet. I don't think I ever saw you dance. My girls have given it up. What led me to think…but, let's to bed, and say our prayers. I want a kiss."

Emilia kissed him on the forehead. The symptoms of illness were strange to her, and passed unheeded. She was too full of her own burning passion to take evidence from her sight. The sun of her world was threatened with extinction. She felt herself already a wanderer in a land of tombs, where none could say whether morning had come or gone. Intensely she looked her misery in the face; and it was as a voice that said, "No sun: never sun any more," to her. But a blue-hued moon slipped from among the clouds, and hung in the black outstretched fingers of the tree of darkness, fronting troubled waters. "This is thy light for ever! thou shalt live in thy dream." So, as in a prison-house, did her soul now recall the blissful hours by Wilming Weir. She sickened but an instant. The blood in her veins was too strong a tide for her to crouch in that imagined corpse-like universe which alternates with an irradiated Eden in the brain of the passionate young.

"Why should I lose him!" The dry sob choked her.

She struggled with the emotion in her throat, and Mr. Pole, who had previously dreaded supplication and appeals for pity, caressed her. Instantly the flood poured out.

"You are not cruel. I knew it. I should have died, if you had come between us. Oh, Wilfrid's father, I love you!—I have never had a very angry word on my mouth. Think! think! if you had made me curse you. For, I could! You would have stopped my life, and Wilfrid's. What would our last

thoughts have been? We could not have forgiven you. Take up dead birds killed by frost. You cry: Cruel winter! murdering cold! But I knew better. You are Wilfrid's father, whom I can kneel to. My lover's father! my own father! my friend next to heaven! Oh! bless my love, for him. You have only to know what my love for him is! The thought of losing him goes like perishing cold through my bones; —my heart jerks, as if it had to pull up my body from the grave every time it beats…."

"God in heaven!" cried the horrified merchant, on whose susceptible nerves these images wrought with such a force that he absolutely had dread of her. He gasped, and felt at his heart, and then at his pulse; rubbed the moisture from his forehead, and throwing a fixedly wild look on her eyes, he jumped up and left her kneeling.

His caress had implied mercy to Emilia: for she could not reconcile it with the rejection of the petition of her soul. She was now a little bewildered to see him trotting the room, frowning and blinking, and feeling at one wrist, at momentary pauses, all his words being: "Let's be quiet. Let's be good. Let's go to bed, and say our prayers;" mingled with short ejaculations.

"I may say," she intercepted him, "I may tell my dear lover that you bless us both, and that we are to live. Oh, speak! sir! let me hear you!"

"Let's go to bed," iterated Mr. Pole. "Come, candles! do light them. In

God's name! light candles. And let's be off and say our prayers."

"You consent, sir?"

"What's that your heart does?" Mr. Pole stopped to enquire; adding: "There, don't tell me. You've played the devil with mine. Who'd ever have made me believe that I should feel more at ease running up and down the room, than seated in my arm-chair! Among the wonders of the world, that!"

Emilia put up her lips to kiss him, as he passed her. There was something deliciously soothing and haven-like to him in the aspect of her calmness.

"Now, you'll be a good girl," said he, when he had taken her salute.

"And you," she rejoined, "will be happier!"

His voice dropped. "If you go on like this, you've done for me!"

But she could make no guess at any tragic meaning in his words. "My father—let me call you so!"

"Will you see that you can't have him?" he stamped the syllables into her ears: and, with a notion of there being a foreign element about her, repeated:—"No!—not have him!—not yours!—somebody else's!"

This was clear enough.

"Only you can separate us," said Emilia, with a brow levelled intently.

"Well, and I"—Mr. Pole was pursuing in the gusty energy of his previous explanation. His eyes met Emilia's, gravely widening. "I—I'm very sorry," he broke down: "upon my soul, I am!"

The old man went to the mantel-piece and leaned his elbow before the glass.

Emilia's bosom began to rise again.

She was startled to hear him laugh. A slight melancholy little burst; and then a louder one, followed by a full-toned laughter that fell short and showed the heart was not in it.

"That boy Braintop! What fun it was!" he said, looking all the while into the glass. "Why can't we live in peace, and without bother! Is your candle alight, my dear?"

Emilia now thought that he was practising evasion.

"I will light it," she said.

Mr. Pole gave a wearied sigh. His head being still turned to the glass, he listened with a shrouded face for her movements: saying, "Good night; good night; I'll light my own. There's a dear!"

A shouting was in his ears, which seemed to syllable distinctly: "If she goes at once, I'm safe."

The sight of pain at all was intolerable to him; but he had a prophetic physical warning now that to witness pain inflicted by himself would be more than he could endure.

Emilia breathed a low, "Good night."

"Good night, my love—all right to-morrow!" he replied briskly; and remorse touching his kind heart as the music of her 'good night' penetrated to it by thrilling avenues, he added injudiciously: "Don't fret. We'll see what we can do. Soon make matters comfortable."

"I love you, and I know you will not stab me," she answered.

"No; certainly not," said Mr. Pole, still keeping his back to her.

Struck with a sudden anticipating fear of having to go through this scene on the morrow, he continued: "No misunderstands, mind! Wilfrid's done with."

There was a silence. He trusted she might be gone. Turning round, he faced her; the light of the candle throwing her pale visage into ghostly relief.

"Where is sleep for you if you part us?"

Mr. Pole flung up his arms. "I insist upon your going to bed. Why shouldn't I sleep? Child's folly!"

Though he spoke so, his brain was in strings to his timorous ticking nerves; and he thought that it would be well to propitiate her and get her to utter some words that would not haunt his pillow.

"My dear girl! it's not my doing. I like you. I wish you well and happy. Very fond of you;—blame circumstances, not me." Then he murmured: "Are black spots on the eyelids a bad sign? I see big flakes of soot falling in a dark room."

Emilia's mated look fleeted. "You come between us, sir, because I have no money?"

"I tell you it's the boy's only chance to make his hit now." Mr. Pole stamped his foot angrily.

"And you make my Cornelia marry, though she loves another, as Wilfrid loves me, and if they do not obey you they are to be beggars! Is it you who can pray? Can you ever have good dreams? I saved my father from the sin, by leaving him. He wished to sell me. But my poor father had no money at all, and I can pardon him. Money was a bright thing to him: like other things to us. Mr. Pole! What will any one say for you!"

The unhappy merchant had made vehement efforts to perplex his hearing, that her words might be empty and not future dragons round his couch. He was looking forward to a night of sleep as a cure for the evil sensations besetting him—his only chance. The chance was going; and with the knowledge that it was unjustly torn from him—this one gleam of clear reason in his brain undimmed by the irritable storm which plucked him down—he cried out, to clear himself:—

"They are beggars, both, and all, if they don't marry before two months are out. I'm a beggar then. I'm ruined. I shan't have a penny. I'm in a workhouse. They are in good homes. They are safe, and thank their old father. Now, then; now. Shall I sleep?"

Emilia caught his staggering arm. The glazed light of his eyes went out. He sank into a chair; white as if life had issued with the secret of his life. Wonderful varying expressions had marked his features and the tones of his voice, while he was uttering that sharp, succinct confession; so that, strange as it sounded, every sentence fixed itself on her with incontrovertible force, and the meaning of the whole flashed through her mind. It struck her too awfully for speech. She held fast to his nerveless hand, and kneeling before him, listened for his long reluctant breathing.

The 'Shall I sleep?' seemed answered.

CHAPTER XXVII

For days after the foregoing scene, Brookfield was unconscious of what had befallen it. Wilfrid was trying his yacht, the ladies were preparing for the great pleasure-gathering on Besworth lawn, and shaping astute designs to exclude the presence of Mrs. Chump, for which they partly condemned themselves; but, as they said, "Only hear her!" The excitable woman was swelling from conjecture to certainty on a continuous public cry of, "'Pon my hon'r!—d'ye think little Belloni's gone and marrud Pole?"

Emilia's supposed flight had deeply grieved the ladies, when alarm and suspicion had subsided. Fear of some wretched male baseness on the part of their brother was happily diverted by a letter, wherein he desired them to come to him speedily. They attributed her conduct to dread of Mr. Pericles. That fervid devotee of Euterpe received the tidings with an obnoxious outburst, which made them seriously ask themselves (individually and in secret) whether he was not a moneyed brute, and nothing more. Nor could they satisfactorily answer the question. He raved: "You let her go. Ha! what creatures you are—hein? But you find not anozer in fifty years, I say; and here you stop, and forty hours pass by, and not a sing in motion. What blood you have! It is water—not blood. Such a voice, a verve, a style, an eye, a devil, zat girl! and all drawn up and out before ze time by a man: she is spoilt!"

He exhibited an anguish that they were not able to commiserate. Certain expressions falling from him led them to guess that he had set some plot in motion, which Emilia's flight had arrested; but his tragic outcries were all on the higher ground of the loss to Art. They were glad to see him go from the house. Soon he returned to demand Wilfrid's address. Arabella wrote it out for him with rebuking composure. Then he insisted upon having Captain Gambier's, whom he described as "ce nonchalant dandy."

"Him you will have a better opportunity of seeing by waiting here," said Adela; and the captain came before Mr. Pericles had retreated. "Ce nonchalant" was not quite true to his title, when he heard that Emilia had flown. He did not say much, but iterated "Gone!" with an elegant frown, adding, "She must come back, you know!" and was evidently more than commonly puzzled and vexed, pursuing the strain in a way that satisfied Mr. Pericles more thoroughly than Adela.

"She shall come back as soon as she has a collar," growled Mr. Pericles, meaning captivity.

"If she'd only come back with her own maiden name," interjected Mrs. Chump, "I'll give her a character; but, upon my hon'r—d'ye think ut possible, now…?"

Arabella talked over her, and rescued her father's name.

The noisy sympathy and wild speculations of the Tinleys and Copleys had to be endured. On the whole, the feeling toward Emilia was kind, and the hope that she would come to no harm was fervently expressed by all the ladies; frequently enough, also, to show the opinion that it might easily happen. On such points Mrs. Chump never failed to bring the conversation to a block. Supported as they were by Captain Gambier, Edward Buxley, Freshfield Sumner, and more than once by Sir Twickenham (whom Freshfield, launching angry shafts, now called the semi-betrothed, the statistical cripple, and other strong things that show a developing genius for street-cries and hustings—epithets in every member of the lists of the great Rejected, or of the jilted who can affect to be philosophical), notwithstanding these aids, the ladies of Brookfield were crushed by Mrs. Chump. Her main offence was, that she revived for them so much of themselves that they had buried. "Oh! the unutterably sordid City life!" It hung about her like a smell of London smoke. As a mere animal, they passed her by, and had almost come to a state of mind to pass her off. It was the phantom, or rather the embodiment of their First Circle, that they hated in the woman. She took heroes from the journals read by servant-maids; she thought highly of the Court of Aldermen; she went on public knees to the aristocracy; she was proud, in fact, of all City appetites. What, though none saw the peculiar sting? They felt it; and one virtue in possessing an 'ideal' is that, lodging in you as it does, it insists upon the interior being

furnished by your personal satisfaction, and not by the blindness or stupidity of the outer world. Thus, in one direction, an ideal precludes humbug. The ladies might desire to cloak facts, but they had no pleasure in deception. They had the feminine power of extinguishing things disagreeable, so long as nature or the fates did them no violence. When these forces sent an emissary to confound them, as was clearly the case with Mrs. Chump, they fought. The dreadful creature insisted upon shows of maudlin affection that could not be accorded to her, so that she existed in a condition of preternatural sensitiveness. Among ladies pretending to dignity of life, the horror of acrid complaints alternating with public offers of love from a gross woman, may be pictured in the mind's eye. The absence of Mr. Pole and Wilfrid, which caused Mrs. Chump to chafe at the restraint imposed by the presence of males to whom she might not speak endearingly, and deprived the ladies of proper counsel, and what good may be at times in masculine authority, led to one fierce battle, wherein the great shot was fired on both sides. Mrs. Chump was requested to leave the house: she declined. Interrogated as to whether she remained as an enemy, knowing herself to be so looked upon, she said that she remained to save them from the dangers they invited. Those dangers she named, observing that Mrs. Lupin, their aunt, might know them, but was as liable to be sent to sleep by a fellow with a bag of jokes as a watchdog to be quieted by a bone. The allusion here was to Mrs. Lupin's painful, partially inexcusable, incurable sense of humour, especially when a gleam of it led to the prohibited passages of life. The poor lady was afflicted so keenly that, in instances where one of her sex and position in the social scale is bound to perish rather than let even the shadow of a laugh appear, or any sign of fleshly perception or sympathy peep out, she was seen to be mutely, shockingly, penitentially convulsed: a degrading sight. And albeit repeatedly remonstrated with, she, upon such occasions, invariably turned imploring glances—a sort of frowning entreaty—to the ladies, or to any of her sex present. "Did you not see that? Oh! can you resist it?" she seemed to gasp, as she made those fruitless efforts to drag them to her conscious level. "Sink thou, if thou wilt," was the phrase indicated to her. She had once thought her propensity innocent enough, and enjoyable. Her nieces had almost cured her, by sitting on her, until Mrs. Chump came to make her worst than ever. It is to be feared that Mrs. Chump was beginning to abuse her power over the little colourless lady. We cannot, when we find ourselves possessed of the gift of sending a creature into convulsions, avoid exercising it. Mrs. Lupin was one of the victims of the modern feminine 'ideal.' She was in mind merely a woman; devout and charitable, as her nieces admitted; but radically—what? They did not like to think, or to say, what;—repugnant, seemed to be the word. A woman who consented to perceive the double-meaning, who acknowledged its suggestions of a violation of decency laughable, and who could not restrain laughter, was, in their judgement, righteously a victim. After signal efforts to lift her up, the verdict was that their Aunt Lupin did no credit to her sex. If we conceive a timorous little body of finely-strung nerves, inclined to be gay, and shrewdly apprehensive, but depending for her opinion of herself upon those about her, we shall see that Mrs. Lupin's life was one of sorrow and scourges in the atmosphere of the 'ideal.' Never did nun of the cloister fight such a fight with the flesh, as this poor little woman, that she might not give offence to the Tribunal of the Nice Feelings which leads us to ask, "Is sentimentalism in our modern days taking the place of monasticism to mortify our poor humanity?" The sufferings of the Three of Brookfield under Mrs. Chump was not comparable to Mrs. Lupin's. The good little woman's soul withered at the self- contempt to which her nieces helped her daily. Laughter, far from expanding her heart and invigorating her frame, was a thing that she felt herself to be nourishing as a traitor in her bosom: and the worst was, that it came upon her like a reckless intoxication at times, possessing her as a devil might; and justifying itself, too, and daring to say, "Am I not Nature?" Mrs. Lupin shrank from the remembrance of those moments.

In another age, the scenes between Mrs. Lupin and Mrs. Chump, greatly significant for humanity as they are, will be given without offence on one side or martyrdom on the other. At present, and before our sentimentalists are a concrete, it would be profitless rashness to depict them. When the great shots were fired off (Mrs. Chump being requested to depart, and refusing) Mrs. Lupin fluttered

between the belligerents, doing her best to be a medium for the restoration of peace. In repeating Mrs. Chump's remarks, which were rendered purposely strong with Irish spice by that woman, she choked; and when she conveyed to Mrs. Chump the counter-remarks of the ladies, she provoked utterances that almost killed her. A sadder life is not to be imagined. The perpetual irritation of a desire to indulge in her mortal weakness, and listening to the sleepless conscience that kept watch over it; her certainty that it would be better for her to laugh right out, and yet her incapacity to contest the justice of her nieces' rebuke; her struggle to resist Mrs. Chump, which ended in a sensation of secret shameful liking for her—all these warring influences within were seen in her behaviour.

"I have always said," observed Cornelia, "that she labours under a disease." What is more, she had always told Mrs. Lupin as much, and her sisters had echoed her. Three to one in such a case is a severe trial to the reason of solitary one. And Mrs. Lupin's case was peculiar, inasmuch as the more she yielded to Chump-temptation and eased her heart of its load of laughter, the more her heart cried out against her and subscribed to the scorn of her nieces. Mrs. Chump acted a demon's part; she thirsted for Mrs. Lupin that she might worry her. Hitherto she had not known that anything peculiar lodged in her tongue, and with no other person did she think of using it to produce a desired effect; but now the scenes in Brookfield became hideous to the ladies, and not wanting in their trials to the facial muscles of the gentlemen. A significant sign of what the ladies were enduring was, that they ceased to speak of it in their consultations. It is a blank period in the career of young creatures when a fretting wretchedness forces them out of their dreams to action; and it is then that they will do things that, seen from the outside (i.e. in the conduct of others), they would hold to be monstrous, all but impossible. Or how could Cornelia persuade herself, as she certainly persuaded Sir Twickenham and the world about her, that she had a contemplative pleasure in his society? Arabella drew nearer to Edward Buxley, whom she had not treated well, and who, as she might have guessed, had turned his thoughts toward Adela; though clearly without encouragement. Adela indeed said openly to her sisters, with a Gallic ejaculation, "Edward follows me, do you know; and he has adopted a sort of Sicilian-vespers look whenever he meets me with Captain Gambier. I could forgive him if he would draw out a dagger and be quite theatrical; but, behold, we meet, and my bourgeois grunts and stammers, and seems to beg us to believe that he means nothing whatever by his behaviour. Can you convey to his City-intelligence that he is just a trifle ill-bred?"

Now, Arabella had always seen Edward as a thing that was her own, which accounts for the treatment to which, he had been subjected. A quick spur of jealousy—a new sensation—was the origin of her leaning toward Edward; and the plea of saving Adela from annoyance excused and covered it. He, for his part, scarcely concealed his irritation, until a little scented twisted note was put in his hand, which said, "You are as anxious as I can be about our sweet lost Emilia! We believe ourselves to be on her traces." This gave him wonderful comfort. It put Adela in a beautiful fresh light as a devoted benefactress and delicious intriguante. He threw off some of his most telling caricatures at this period. Adela had divined that Captain Gambier suspected his cousin Merthyr Powys of abstracting Emilia, that he might shield her from Mr. Pericles. The Captain confessed it, calmly blushing, and that he was in communication with Miss Georgiana Ford, Mr. Powys's half-sister; about whom Adela was curious, until the Captain ejaculated, "A saint!"—whereat she was satisfied, knowing by instinct that the preference is for sinners. Their meetings usually referred to Emilia; and it was astonishing how willingly the Captain would talk of her. Adela repeated to herself, "This is our mask," and thus she made it the Captain's; for it must be said that the conquering Captain had never felt so full of pity to any girl or woman to whom he fancied he had done damage, as to Emilia. He enjoyed a most thorough belief that she was growing up to perplex him with her love, and he had not consequently attempted to precipitate the measure; but her flight had prematurely perplexed him. In grave debate with the ends of his moustache for a term, he concluded by accusing Merthyr Powys; and with a little feeling of spite not unknown to masculine dignity, he wrote to Merthyr's half-sister—"merely

to inquire, being aware that whatever he does you have been consulted on, and the friends of this Miss Belloni are distressed by her absence."

The ladies of Brookfield were accustomed to their father's occasional unpremeditated absences, and neither of them had felt an apprehension which she could not dismiss, until one morning Mr. Powys sent up his card to Arabella, requesting permission to speak with her alone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Georgiana Ford would have had little claim among the fair saints to be accepted by them as one of their order. Her reputation for coldness was derived from the fact of her having stood a siege from Captain Gambier. But she loved a creature of earth too well to put up a hand for saintly honours. The passion of her life centred in devotion to her half- brother. Those who had studied her said, perhaps with a touch of malignity, that her religious instinct had its source in a desire to gain some place of intercession for him. Merthyr had leaned upon it too often to doubt the strength of it, whatever its purity might be. She, when barely more than a child (a girl of sixteen), had followed him over the then luckless Italian fields—sacrificing as much for a cause that she held to be trivial, as he in the ardour of his half-fanatical worship. Her theory was: "These Italians are in bondage, and since heaven permits it, there has been guilt. By endurance they are strengthened, by suffering chastened; so let them endure and suffer." She would cleave to this view with many variations of pity. Merthyr's experience was tolerant to the weaker vessel's young delight in power, which makes her sometimes, though sweet and merciful by nature, enunciate Hebraic severities oracularly. He smiled, and was never weary of pointing out practical refutations. Whereat she said, "Will a thousand instances change the principle?" When the brain, and especially the fine brain of a woman, first begins to act for itself, the work is of heavy labour; she finds herself plunging abroad on infinite seas, and runs speedily into the anchorage of dogmas, obfuscatory saws, and what she calls principles. Here she is safe; but if her thinking was not originally the mere action of lively blood upon that battery of intelligence, she will by-and-by reflect that it is not well for a live thing to be tied to a dead, and that long clinging to safety confesses too much. Merthyr waited for Georgians patiently. On all other points they were heart-in-heart. It was her pride to say that she loved him with no sense of jealousy, and prayed that he might find a woman, in plain words, worthy of him. This woman had not been found; she confessed that she had never seen her.

Georgians received Captain Gambier's communication in Monmouth. Merthyr had now and then written of a Miss Belloni; but he had seemed to refer to a sort of child, and Georgians had looked on her as another Italian pensioner. She was decisive. The moment she awoke to feel herself brooding over the thought of this girl, she started to join Merthyr. Solitude is pasturage for a suspicion. On her way she grew persuaded that her object was bad, and stopped; until the thought came, 'If he is in a dilemma, who shall help him save his sister?' And, with spiritually streaming eyes at a vision of companionship broken (but whether by his taking another adviser, or by Miss Belloni, she did not ask), Georgiana continued her journey.

At the door of Lady Gosstre's town-house she hesitated, and said in her mind, "What am I doing? and what earthliness has come into my love for him?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.