GEORGE MEREDITH

RHODA FLEMING, VOLUME 3

George Meredith

Rhoda Fleming. Volume 3

«Public Domain»

Meredith G.

Rhoda Fleming. Volume 3 / G. Meredith — «Public Domain»,

© Meredith G.
© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER XXI 5
CHAPTER XXII 12
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 17

George Meredith
Rhoda Fleming – Volume 3

CHAPTER XXI

Mrs. Boulby's ears had not deceived her; it had been a bet: and the day would have gone disastrously with Robert, if Mrs. Lovell had not won her bet. What was heroism to Warbeach, appeared very outrageous blackguardism up at Fairly. It was there believed by the gentlemen, though rather against evidence, that the man was a sturdy ruffian, and an infuriated sot. The first suggestion was to drag him before the magistrates; but against this Algernon protested, declaring his readiness to defend himself, with so vehement a magnanimity, that it was clearly seen the man had a claim on him. Lord Elling, however, when he was told of these systematic assaults upon one of his guests, announced his resolve to bring the law into operation. Algernon heard it as the knell to his visit.

He was too happy, to go away willingly; and the great Jew City of London was exceedingly hot for him at that period; but to stay and risk an exposure of his extinct military career, was not possible. In his despair, he took Mrs. Lovell entirely into his confidence; in doing which, he only filled up the outlines of what she already knew concerning Edward. He was too useful to the lady for her to afford to let him go. No other youth called her "angel" for listening complacently to strange stories of men and their dilemmas; no one fetched and carried for her like Algernon; and she was a woman who cherished dog-like adoration, and could not part with it. She had also the will to reward it.

At her intercession, Robert was spared an introduction to the magistrates. She made light of his misdemeanours, assuring everybody that so splendid a horseman deserved to be dealt with differently from other offenders. The gentlemen who waited upon Farmer Eccles went in obedience to her orders.

Then came the scene on Ditley Marsh, described to that assembly at the Pilot, by Stephen Bilton, when she perceived that Robert was manageable in silken trammels, and made a bet that she would show him tamed. She won her bet, and saved the gentlemen from soiling their hands, for which they had conceived a pressing necessity, and they thanked her, and paid their money over to Algernon, whom she constituted her treasurer. She was called "the man-tamer," gracefully acknowledging the compliment. Colonel Barclay, the moustachioed horseman, who had spoken the few words to Robert in passing, now remarked that there was an end of the military profession.

"I surrender my sword," he said gallantly.

Another declared that ladies would now act in lieu of causing an appeal to arms.

"Similia similibus, &c.," said Edward. "They can, apparently, cure what they originate."

"Ah, the poor sex!" Mrs. Lovell sighed. "When we bring the millennium to you, I believe you will still have a word against Eve."

The whole parade back to the stables was marked by pretty speeches.

"By Jove! but he ought to have gone down on his knees, like a horse when you've tamed him," said Lord Suckling, the young guardsman.

"I would mark a distinction between a horse and a brave man, Lord Suckling," said the lady; and such was Mrs. Lovell's dignity when an allusion to Robert was forced on her, and her wit and ease were so admirable, that none of those who rode with her thought of sitting in judgement on her conduct. Women can make for themselves new spheres, new laws, if they will assume their right to be eccentric as an unquestionable thing, and always reserve a season for showing forth like the conventional women of society.

The evening was Mrs. Lovell's time for this important re-establishment of her position; and many a silly youth who had sailed pleasantly with her all the day, was wrecked when he tried to carry on the topics where she reigned the lady of the drawing-room. Moreover, not being eccentric from

vanity, but simply to accommodate what had once been her tastes, and were now her necessities, she avoided slang, and all the insignia of eccentricity.

Thus she mastered the secret of keeping the young men respectfully enthusiastic; so that their irrepressible praises did not (as is usual when these are in acclamation) drag her to their level; and the female world, with which she was perfectly feminine, and as silkenly insipid every evening of her life as was needed to restore her reputation, admitted that she belonged to it, which is everything to an adventurous spirit of that sex: indeed, the sole secure basis of operations.

You are aware that men's faith in a woman whom her sisters discountenance, and partially repudiate, is uneasy, however deeply they may be charmed. On the other hand, she maybe guilty of prodigious oddities without much disturbing their reverence, while she is in the feminine circle.

But what fatal breath was it coming from Mrs. Lovell that was always inflaming men to mutual animosity? What encouragement had she given to Algernon, that Lord Suckling should be jealous of him? And what to Lord Suckling, that Algernon should loathe the sight of the young lord? And why was each desirous of showing his manhood in combat before an eminent peacemaker?

Edward laughed—"Ah-ha!" and rubbed his hands as at a special confirmation of his prophecy, when Algernon came into his room and said, "I shall fight that fellow Suckling. Hang me if I can stand his impudence! I want to have a shot at a man of my own set, just to let Peggy Lovell see! I know what she thinks."

"Just to let Mrs. Lovell see!" Edward echoed. "She has seen it lots of times, my dear Algy. Come; this looks lively. I was sure she would soon be sick of the water-gruel of peace."

"I tell you she's got nothing to do with it, Ned. Don't be confoundedly unjust. She didn't tell me to go and seek him. How can she help his whispering to her? And then she looks over at me, and I swear I'm not going to be defended by a woman. She must fancy I haven't got the pluck of a flea. I know what her idea of young fellows is. Why, she said to me, when Suckling went off from her, the other day, "These are our Guards." I shall fight him."

"Do," said Edward.

"Will you take a challenge?"

"I'm a lawyer, Mr. Mars."

"You won't take a challenge for a friend, when he's insulted?"

"I reply again, I am a lawyer. But this is what I'll do, if you like. I'll go to Mrs. Lovely and inform her that it is your desire to gain her esteem by fighting with pistols. That will accomplish the purpose you seek. It will possibly disappoint her, for she will have to stop the affair; but women are born to be disappointed—they want so much."

"I'll fight him some way or other," said Algernon, glowering; and then his face became bright: "I say, didn't she manage that business beautifully this morning? Not another woman in the world could have done it."

"Oh, Una and the Lion! Mrs. Valentine and Orson! Did you bet with the rest?" his cousin asked.

"I lost my tenner; but what's that!"

"There will be an additional five to hand over to the man Sedgett.

What's that!"

"No, hang it!" Algernon shouted.

"You've paid your ten for the shadow cheerfully. Pay your five for the substance."

"Do you mean to say that Sedgett—" Algernon stared.

"Miracles, if you come to examine them, Algy, have generally had a pathway prepared for them; and the miracle of the power of female persuasion exhibited this morning was not quite independent of the preliminary agency of a scoundrel."

"So that's why you didn't bet." Algernon signified the opening of his intelligence with his eyelids, pronouncing "by jingos" and "by Joves," to ease the sudden rush of ideas within him. "You

might have let me into the secret, Ned. I'd lose any number of tens to Peggy Lovell, but a fellow don't like to be in the dark."

"Except, Algy, that when you carry light, you're a general illuminator. Let the matter drop. Sedgett has saved you from annoyance. Take him his five pounds."

"Annoyance be hanged, my good Ned!" Algernon was aroused to reply. "I don't complain, and I've done my best to stand in front of you; and as you've settled the fellow, I say nothing; but, between us two, who's the guilty party, and who's the victim?"

"Didn't he tell you he had you in his power?"

"I don't remember that he did."

"Well, I heard him. The sturdy cur refused to be bribed, so there was only one way of quieting him; and you see what a thrashing does for that sort of beast. I, Algy, never abandon a friend; mark that. Take the five pounds to Sedgett."

Algernon strode about the room. "First of all, you stick me up in a theatre, so that I'm seen with a girl; and then you get behind me, and let me be pelted," he began grumbling. "And ask a fellow for money, who hasn't a farthing! I shan't literally have a farthing till that horse 'Templemore' runs; and then, by George! I'll pay my debts. Jews are awful things!"

"How much do you require at present?" said Edward, provoking his appetite for a loan.

"Oh, fifty—that is, just now. More like a thousand when I get to town. And where it's to come from! but never mind. 'Pon my soul, I pity the fox I run down here. I feel I'm exactly in his case in London. However, if I can do you any service, Ned—"

Edward laughed. "You might have done me the service of not excusing yourself to the squire when he came here, in such a way as to implicate me."

"But I was so tremendously badgered, Ned."

"You had a sort of gratification in letting the squire crow over his brother. And he did crow for a time."

"On my honour, Ned, as to crowing! he went away cursing at me. Peggy

Lovell managed it somehow for you. I was really awfully badgered."

"Yes; but you know what a man my father is. He hasn't the squire's philosophy in those affairs."

"'Pon my soul, Mr. Ned, I never guessed it before; but I rather fancy you got clear with Sir Billy the banker by washing in my basin—eh, did you?"

Edward looked straight at his cousin, saying, "You deserved worse than that. You were treacherous. You proved you were not to be trusted; and yet, you see, I trust you. Call it my folly. Of course (and I don't mind telling you) I used my wits to turn the point of the attack. I may be what they call unscrupulous when I'm surprised. I have to look to money as well as you; and if my father thought it went in a—what he considers—wrong direction, the source would be choked by paternal morality. You betrayed me. Listen."

"I tell you, Ned, I merely said to my governor—"

"Listen to me. You betrayed me. I defended myself; that is, I've managed so that I may still be of service to you. It was a near shave; but you now see the value of having a character with one's father. Just open my writing-desk there, and toss out the cheque-book. I confess I can't see why you should have objected—but let that pass. How much do you want? Fifty? Say forty-five, and five I'll give you to pay to Sedgett—making fifty. Eighty before, and fifty—one hundred and thirty. Write that you owe me that sum, on a piece of paper. I can't see why you should wish to appear so uncommonly virtuous."

Algernon scribbled the written acknowledgment, which he despised himself for giving, and the receiver for taking, but was always ready to give for the money, and said, as he put the cheque in his purse: "It was this infernal fellow completely upset me. If you were worried by a bull-dog, by Jove, Ned, you'd lose your coolness. He bothered my head off. Ask me now, and I'll do anything on earth for you. My back's broad. Sir Billy can't think worse of me than he does. Do you want to break

positively with that pretty rival to Peggy L.? I've got a scheme to relieve you, my poor old Ned, and make everybody happy. I'll lay the foundations of a fresh and brilliant reputation for myself."

Algernon took a chair. Edward was fathoms deep in his book.

The former continued: "I'd touch on the money-question last, with any other fellow than you; but you always know that money's the hinge, and nothing else lifts a man out of a scrape. It costs a stiff pull on your banker, and that reminds me, you couldn't go to Sir Billy for it; you'd have to draw in advance, by degrees anyhow, look here:—There are lots of young farmers who want to emigrate and want wives and money. I know one. It's no use going into particulars, but it's worth thinking over. Life is made up of mutual help, Ned. You can help another fellow better than yourself. As for me, when I'm in a hobble, I give you my word of honour, I'm just like a baby, and haven't an idea at my own disposal. The same with others. You can't manage without somebody's assistance. What do you say, old boy?"

Edward raised his head from his book. "Some views of life deduced from your private experience?" he observed; and Algernon cursed at book-worms, who would never take hints, and left him.

But when he was by himself, Edward pitched his book upon the floor and sat reflecting. The sweat started on his forehead. He was compelled to look into his black volume and study it. His desire was to act humanely and generously; but the question inevitably recurred: "How can I utterly dash my prospects in the world?" It would be impossible to bring Dahlia to great houses; and he liked great houses and the charm of mixing among delicately-bred women. On the other hand, lawyers have married beneath them—married cooks, housemaids, governesses, and so forth. And what has a lawyer to do with a dainty lady, who will constantly distract him with finicking civilities and speculations in unprofitable regions? What he does want is a woman amiable as a surface of parchment, serviceable as his inkstand; one who will be like the wig in which he closes his forensic term, disreputable from overwear, but suited to the purpose.

"Ah! if I meant to be nothing but a lawyer!" Edward stopped the flow of this current in Dahlia's favour. His passion for her was silent. Was it dead? It was certainly silent. Since Robert had come down to play his wild game of persecution at Fairly, the simple idea of Dahlia had been Edward's fever. He detested brute force, with a finely-witted man's full loathing; and Dahlia's obnoxious champion had grown to be associated in his mind with Dahlia. He swept them both from his recollection abhorrently, for in his recollection he could not divorce them. He pretended to suppose that Dahlia, whose only reproach to him was her suffering, participated in the scheme to worry him. He could even forget her beauty—forget all, save the unholy fetters binding him. She seemed to imprison him in bare walls. He meditated on her character. She had no strength. She was timid, comfort-loving, fond of luxury, credulous, preposterously conventional; that is, desirous more than the ordinary run of women of being hedged about and guarded by ceremonies—"mere ceremonies," said Edward, forgetting the notion he entertained of women not so protected. But it may be, that in playing the part of fool and coward, we cease to be mindful of the absolute necessity for sheltering the weak from that monstrous allied army, the cowards and the fools. He admitted even to himself that he had deceived her, at the same time denouncing her unheard-of capacity of belief, which had placed him in a miserable hobble, and that was the truth.

Now, men confessing themselves in a miserable hobble, and knowing they are guilty of the state of things lamented by them, intend to drown that part of their nature which disturbs them by its outcry. The submission to a tangle that could be cut through instantaneously by any exertion of a noble will, convicts them. They had better not confide, even to their secret hearts, that they are afflicted by their conscience and the generosity of their sentiments, for it will be only to say that these high qualities are on the failing side. Their inclination, under the circumstances, is generally base, and no less a counsellor than uncorrupted common sense, when they are in such a hobble, will sometimes advise them to be base. But, in admitting the plea which common sense puts forward

on their behalf, we may fairly ask them to be masculine in their baseness. Or, in other words, since they must be selfish, let them be so without the poltroonery of selfishness. Edward's wish was to be perfectly just, as far as he could be now—just to himself as well; for how was he to prove of worth and aid to any one depending on him, if he stood crippled? Just, also, to his family; to his possible posterity; and just to Dahlia. His task was to reconcile the variety of justness due upon all sides. The struggle, we will assume, was severe, for he thought so; he thought of going to Dahlia and speaking the word of separation; of going to her family and stating his offence, without personal exculpation; thus masculine in baseness, he was in idea; but poltroonery triumphed, the picture of himself facing his sin and its victims dismayed him, and his struggle ended in his considering as to the fit employment of one thousand pounds in his possession, the remainder of a small legacy, hitherto much cherished.

A day later, Mrs. Lovell said to him: "Have you heard of that unfortunate young man? I am told that he lies in great danger from a blow on the back of his head. He looked ill when I saw him, and however mad he may be, I'm sorry harm should have come to one who is really brave. Gentle means are surely best. It is so with horses, it must be so with men. As to women, I don't pretend to unriddle them."

"Gentle means are decidedly best," said Edward, perceiving that her little dog Algy had carried news to her, and that she was setting herself to fathom him. "You gave an eminent example of it yesterday. I was so sure of the result that I didn't bet against you."

"Why not have backed me?"

The hard young legal face withstood the attack of her soft blue eyes, out of which a thousand needles flew, seeking a weak point in the mask.

"The compliment was, to incite you to a superhuman effort."

"Then why not pay the compliment?"

"I never pay compliments to transparent merit; I do not hold candles to lamps."

"True," said she.

"And as gentle means are so admirable, it would be as well to stop incision and imbruing between those two boys."

"Which?" she asked innocently.

"Suckling and Algy."

"Is it possible? They are such boys."

"Exactly of the kind to do it. Don't you know?" and Edward explained elaborately and cruelly the character of the boys who rushed into conflicts. Colour deep as evening red confused her cheeks, and she said, "We must stop them."

"Alas!" he shook his head; "if it's not too late."

"It never is too late."

"Perhaps not, when the embodiment of gentle means is so determined."

"Come; I believe they are in the billiard room now, and you shall see," she said.

The pair were found in the billiard room, even as a pair of terriers that remember a bone. Mrs. Lovell proposed a game, and offered herself for partner to Lord Suckling.

"Till total defeat do us part," the young nobleman acquiesced; and total defeat befell them. During the play of the balls, Mrs. Lovell threw a jealous intentness of observation upon all the strokes made by Algernon; saying nothing, but just looking at him when he did a successful thing. She winked at some quiet stately betting that went on between him and Lord Suckling.

They were at first preternaturally polite and formal toward one another; by degrees, the influence at work upon them was manifested in a thaw of their stiff demeanour, and they fell into curt dialogues, which Mrs. Lovell gave herself no concern to encourage too early.

Edward saw, and was astonished himself to feel that she had ceased to breathe that fatal inciting breath, which made men vindictively emulous of her favour, and mad to match themselves for a claim to the chief smile. No perceptible change was displayed. She was Mrs. Lovell still; vivacious and

soft; flame-coloured, with the arrowy eyelashes; a pleasant companion, who did not play the woman obtrusively among men, and show a thirst for homage. All the difference appeared to be, that there was an absence as of some evil spiritual emanation.

And here a thought crossed him—one of the memorable little evanescent thoughts which sway us by our chance weakness; "Does she think me wanting in physical courage?"

Now, though the difference between them had been owing to a scornful remark that she had permitted herself to utter, on his refusal to accept a quarrel with one of her numerous satellites, his knowledge of her worship of brains, and his pride in his possession of the burdensome weight, had quite precluded his guessing that she might haply suppose him to be deficient in personal bravery. He was astounded by the reflection that she had thus misjudged him. It was distracting; sober-thoughted as he was by nature. He watched the fair simplicity of her new manner with a jealous eye. Her management of the two youths was exquisite; but to him, Edward, she had never condescended to show herself thus mediating and amiable. Why? Clearly, because she conceived that he had no virile fire in his composition. Did the detestable little devil think silly duelling a display of valour? Did the fair seraph think him anything less than a man?

How beautifully hung the yellow loop of her hair as she leaned over the board! How gracious she was and like a Goddess with these boys, as he called them! She rallied her partner, not letting him forget that he had the honour of being her partner; while she appeared envious of Algernon's skill, and talked to both and got them upon common topics, and laughed, and was like a fair English flower of womanhood; nothing deadly.

"There, Algy; you have beaten us. I don't think I'll have Lord Suckling for my partner any more," she said, putting up her wand, and pouting.

"You don't bear malice?" said Algernon, revived.

"There is my hand. Now you must play a game alone with Lord Suckling, and beat him; mind you beat him, or it will redound to my discredit."

With which, she and Edward left them.

"Algy was a little crestfallen, and no wonder," she said. "He is soon set up again. They will be good friends now."

"Isn't it odd, that they should be ready to risk their lives for trifles?"

Thus Edward tempted her to discuss the subject which he had in his mind.

She felt intuitively the trap in his voice.

"Ah, yes," she replied; "it must be because they know their lives are not precious."

So utterly at her mercy had he fallen, that her pronunciation of that word "precious" carried a severe sting to him, and it was not spoken with peculiar emphasis; on the contrary, she wished to indicate that she was of his way of thinking, as regarded this decayed method of settling disputes. He turned to leave her.

"You go to your Adeline, I presume," she said.

"Ah! that reminds me. I have never thanked you."

"For my good services? such as they are. Sir William will be very happy, and it was for him, a little more than for you, that I went out of my way to be a matchmaker."

"It was her character, of course, that struck you as being so eminently suited to mine."

"Can I tell what is the character of a girl? She is mild and shy, and extremely gentle. In all probability she has a passion for battles and bloodshed. I judged from your father's point of view. She has money, and you are to have money; and the union of money and money is supposed to be a good thing. And besides, you are variable, and off to-morrow what you are on to-day; is it not so? and heiresses are never jilted. Colonel Barclay is only awaiting your retirement. Le roi est mort; vive le roi! Heiresses may cry it like kingdoms."

"I thought," said Edward, meaningly, "the colonel had better taste."

"Do you not know that my friends are my friends because they are not allowed to dream they will do anything else? If they are taken poorly, I commend them to a sea-voyage—Africa, the North-West Passage, the source of the Nile. Men with their vanity wounded may discover wonders! They return friendly as before, whether they have done the Geographical Society a service or not. That is, they generally do."

"Then I begin to fancy I must try those latitudes."

"Oh! you are my relative."

He scarcely knew that he had uttered "Margaret."

She replied to it frankly, "Yes, Cousin Ned. You have made the voyage, you see, and have come back friends with me. The variability of opals! Ah! Sir John, you join us in season. We were talking of opals. Is the opal a gem that stands to represent women?"

Sir John Capes smoothed his knuckles with silken palms, and with courteous antique grin, responded, "It is a gem I would never dare to offer to a lady's acceptance."

"It is by repute unlucky; so you never can have done so.

"Exquisite!" exclaimed the veteran in smiles, "if what you deign to imply were only true!"

They entered the drawing-room among the ladies.

Edward whispered in Mrs. Lovell's ear, "He is in need of the voyage."

"He is very near it," she answered in the same key, and swam into general conversation.

Her cold wit, Satanic as the gleam of it struck through his mind, gave him a throb of desire to gain possession of her, and crush her.

CHAPTER XXII

The writing of a letter to Dahlia had previously been attempted and abandoned as a sickening task. Like an idle boy with his holiday imposition, Edward shelved it among the nightmares, saying, "How can I sit down and lie to her!" and thinking that silence would prepare her bosom for the coming truth.

Silence is commonly the slow poison used by those who mean to murder love. There is nothing violent about it; no shock is given; Hope is not abruptly strangled, but merely dreams of evil, and fights with gradually stifling shadows. When the last convulsions come they are not terrific; the frame has been weakened for dissolution; love dies like natural decay. It seems the kindest way of doing a cruel thing. But Dahlia wrote, crying out her agony at the torture. Possibly your nervously organized natures require a modification of the method.

Edward now found himself able to conduct a correspondence. He despatched the following:—

> "My Dear Dahlia,—Of course I cannot expect you to be aware of the bewildering occupations of a country house, where a man has literally not five minutes' time to call his own; so I pass by your reproaches. My father has gone at last. He has manifested an extraordinary liking for my society, and I am to join him elsewhere —perhaps run over to Paris (your city)—but at present for a few days I am my own master, and the first thing I do is to attend to your demands: not to write 'two lines,' but to give you a good long letter.
>
> "What on earth makes you fancy me unwell? You know I am never unwell. And as to your nursing me—when has there ever been any need for it?
>
> "You must positively learn patience. I have been absent a week or so, and you talk of coming down here and haunting the house! Such ghosts as you meet with strange treatment when they go about unprotected, let me give you warning. You have my full permission to walk out in the Parks for exercise. I think you are bound to do it, for your health's sake.
>
> "Pray discontinue that talk about the alteration in your looks. You must learn that you are no longer a child. Cease to write like a child. If people stare at you, as you say, you are very well aware it is not because you are becoming plain. You do not mean it, I know; but there is a disingenuousness in remarks of this sort that is to me exceedingly distasteful. Avoid the shadow of hypocrisy. Women are subject to it—and it is quite innocent, no doubt. I won't lecture you.
>
> "My cousin Algernon is here with me. He has not spoken of your sister. Your fears in that direction are quite unnecessary. He is attached to a female cousin of ours, a very handsome person, witty, and highly sensible, who dresses as well as the lady you talk about having seen one day in Wrexby Church. Her lady's-maid is a Frenchwoman, which accounts for it. You have not forgotten the boulevards?
>
> "I wish you to go on with your lessons in French. Educate yourself, and you will rise superior to these distressing complaints. I recommend you to read the newspapers daily. Buy nice picture-books, if the papers are too matter-of-fact for you. By looking eternally inward, you teach yourself to fret, and the consequence is, or will be, that you wither. No constitution can stand it. All the ladies here take an interest in Parliamentary affairs. They can talk to men upon men's themes. It is impossible to explain to you how wearisome an everlasting nursery prattle becomes. The idea that men ought never to tire of it is founded on some queer belief that they are not mortal.

"Parliament opens in February. My father wishes me to stand for Selborough. If he or some one will do the talking to the tradesmen, and provide the beer and the bribes, I have no objection. In that case my Law goes to the winds. I'm bound to make a show of obedience, for he has scarcely got over my summer's trip. He holds me a prisoner to him for heaven knows how long—it may be months.

"As for the heiress whom he has here to make a match for me, he and I must have a pitched battle about her by and by. At present my purse insists upon my not offending him. When will old men understand young ones? I burn your letters, and beg you to follow the example. Old letters are the dreariest ghosts in the world, and you cannot keep more treacherous rubbish in your possession. A discovery would exactly ruin me.

"Your purchase of a black-velvet bonnet with pink ribands, was very suitable. Or did you write 'blue' ribands? But your complexion can bear anything.

"You talk of being annoyed when you walk out. Remember, that no woman who knows at all how to conduct herself need for one moment suffer annoyance.

"What is the 'feeling' you speak of? I cannot conceive any 'feeling' that should make you helpless when you consider that you are insulted. There are women who have natural dignity, and women who have none.

"You ask the names of the gentlemen here:—Lord Carey, Lord Wippern (both leave to-morrow), Sir John Capes, Colonel Barclay, Lord Suckling. The ladies:—Mrs. Gosling, Miss Gosling, Lady Carey.

Mrs. Anybody—to any extent.

"They pluck hen's feathers all day and half the night. I see them out, and make my bow to the next batch of visitors, and then I don't know where I am.

"Read poetry, if it makes up for my absence, as you say. Repeat it aloud, minding the pulsation of feet. Go to the theatre now and then, and take your landlady with you. If she's a cat, fit one of your dresses on the servant-girl, and take her. You only want a companion—a dummy will do. Take a box and sit behind the curtain, back to the audience.

"I wrote to my wine-merchant to send Champagne and Sherry. I hope he did: the Champagne in pints and half-pints; if not, return them instantly. I know how Economy, sitting solitary, poor thing, would not dare to let the froth of a whole pint bottle fly out.

"Be an obedient girl and please me.

"Your stern tutor,

"Edward the First."

He read this epistle twice over to satisfy himself that it was a warm effusion, and not too tender; and it satisfied him. By a stretch of imagination, he could feel that it represented him to her as in a higher atmosphere, considerate for her, and not so intimate that she could deem her spirit to be sharing it. Another dose of silence succeeded this discreet administration of speech.

Dahlia replied with letter upon letter; blindly impassioned, and again singularly cold; but with no reproaches. She was studying, she said. Her head ached a little; only a little. She walked; she read poetry; she begged him to pardon her for not drinking wine. She was glad that he burnt her letters, which were so foolish that if she could have the courage to look at them after they were written, they would never be sent. He was slightly revolted by one exclamation: "How ambitious you are!"

"Because I cannot sit down for life in a London lodging-house!" he thought, and eyed her distantly as a poor good creature who had already accepted her distinctive residence in another sphere than his. From such a perception of her humanity, it was natural that his livelier sense of it should diminish. He felt that he had awakened; and he shook her off.

And now he set to work to subdue Mrs. Lovell. His own subjugation was the first fruit of his effort. It was quite unacknowledged by him: but when two are at this game, the question arises —"Which can live without the other?" and horrid pangs smote him to hear her telling musically of the places she was journeying to, the men she would see, and the chances of their meeting again before he was married to the heiress Adeline.

"I have yet to learn that I am engaged to her," he said. Mrs. Lovell gave him a fixed look,—

"She has a half-brother."

He stepped away in a fury.

"Devil!" he muttered, absolutely muttered it, knowing that he fooled and frowned like a stage-hero in stagey heroics. "You think to hound me into this brutal stupidity of fighting, do you? Upon my honour," he added in his natural manner, "I believe she does, though!"

But the look became his companion. It touched and called up great vanity in his breast, and not till then could he placably confront the look. He tried a course of reading. Every morning he was down in the library, looking old in an arm-chair over his book; an intent abstracted figure.

Mrs. Lovell would enter and eye him carelessly; utter little commonplaces and go forth. The silly words struck on his brain. The book seemed hollow; sounded hollow as he shut it. This woman breathed of active striving life. She was a spur to black energies; a plumed glory; impulsive to chivalry. Everything she said and did held men in scales, and approved or rejected them.

Intoxication followed this new conception of her. He lost altogether his right judgement; even the cooler after-thoughts were lost. What sort of man had Harry been, her first husband? A dashing soldier, a quarrelsome duellist, a dull dog. But, dull to her? She, at least, was reverential to the memory of him.

She lisped now and then of "my husband," very prettily, and with intense provocation; and yet she worshipped brains. Evidently she thirsted for that rare union of brains and bravery in a man, and would never surrender till she had discovered it. Perhaps she fancied it did not exist. It might be that she took Edward as the type of brains, and Harry of bravery, and supposed that the two qualities were not to be had actually in conjunction.

Her admiration of his (Edward's) wit, therefore, only strengthened the idea she entertained of his deficiency in that other companion manly virtue.

Edward must have been possessed, for he ground his teeth villanously in supposing himself the victim of this outrageous suspicion. And how to prove it false? How to prove it false in a civilized age, among sober- living men and women, with whom the violent assertion of bravery would certainly imperil his claim to brains? His head was like a stew-pan over the fire, bubbling endlessly.

He railed at her to Algernon, and astonished the youth, who thought them in a fair way to make an alliance. "Milk and capsicums," he called her, and compared her to bloody mustard-haired Saxon Queens of history, and was childishly spiteful. And Mrs. Lovell had it all reported to her, as he was-quite aware.

"The woman seeking for an anomaly wants a master."

With this pompous aphorism, he finished his reading of the fair Enigma.

Words big in the mouth serve their turn when there is no way of satisfying the intelligence.

To be her master, however, one must not begin by writhing as her slave.

The attempt to read an inscrutable woman allows her to dominate us too commandingly. So the lordly mind takes her in a hard grasp, cracks the shell, and drawing forth the kernel, says, "This was all the puzzle."

Doubtless it is the fate which women like Mrs. Lovell provoke. The truth was, that she could read a character when it was under her eyes; but its yesterday and to-morrow were a blank. She had no imaginative hold on anything. For which reason she was always requiring tangible signs of virtues that she esteemed.

The thirst for the shows of valour and wit was insane with her; but she asked for nothing that she herself did not give in abundance, and with beauty super-added. Her propensity to bet sprang of her passion for combat; she was not greedy of money, or reckless in using it; but a difference of opinion arising, her instinct forcibly prompted her to back her own. If the stake was the risk of a lover's life, she was ready to put down the stake, and would have marvelled contemptuously at the lover complaining. "Sheep! sheep!" she thought of those who dared not fight, and had a wavering tendency to affix the epithet to those who simply did not fight.

Withal, Mrs. Lovell was a sensible person; clearheaded and shrewd; logical, too, more than the run of her sex: I may say, profoundly practical. So much so, that she systematically reserved the after-years for enlightenment upon two or three doubts of herself, which struck her in the calm of her spirit, from time to time.

"France," Edward called her, in one of their colloquies.

It was an illuminating title. She liked the French (though no one was keener for the honour of her own country in opposition to them), she liked their splendid boyishness, their unequalled devotion, their merciless intellects; the oneness of the nation when the sword is bare and pointing to chivalrous enterprise.

She liked their fine varnish of sentiment, which appears so much on the surface that Englishmen suppose it to have nowhere any depth; as if the outer coating must necessarily exhaust the stock, or as if what is at the source of our being can never be made visible.

She had her imagination of them as of a streaming banner in the jaws of storm, with snows among the cloud-rents and lightning in the chasms:– which image may be accounted for by the fact that when a girl she had in adoration kissed the feet of Napoleon, the giant of the later ghosts of history.

It was a princely compliment. She received it curtseying, and disarmed the intended irony. In reply, she called him "Great Britain." I regret to say that he stood less proudly for his nation. Indeed, he flushed. He remembered articles girding at the policy of peace at any price, and half felt that Mrs. Lovell had meant to crown him with a Quaker's hat. His title fell speedily into disuse; but, "Yes, France," and "No, France," continued, his effort being to fix the epithet to frivolous allusions, from which her ingenuity rescued it honourably.

Had she ever been in love? He asked her the question. She stabbed him with so straightforward an affirmative that he could not conceal the wound.

"Have I not been married?" she said.

He began to experience the fretful craving to see the antecedents of the torturing woman spread out before him. He conceived a passion for her girlhood. He begged for portraits of her as a girl. She showed him the portrait of Harry Lovell in a locket. He held the locket between his fingers. Dead Harry was kept very warm. Could brains ever touch her emotions as bravery had done?

"Where are the brains I boast of?" he groaned, in the midst of these sensational extravagances.

The lull of action was soon to be disturbed. A letter was brought to him.

He opened it and read—

> "Mr. Edward Blancove,—When you rode by me under Fairly Park, I did not know you. I can give you a medical certificate that since then I have been in the doctor's hands. I know you now. I call upon you to meet me, with what weapons you like best, to prove that you are not a midnight assassin. The place shall be where you choose to appoint. If you decline I will make you publicly acknowledge what you have done. If you answer, that I am not a gentleman and you are one, I say that you have attacked me in the dark, when I was on horseback, and you are now my equal, if I like to think so. You will not talk about the law after that night. The man you employed I may punish or I may leave, though he struck the blow. But I will meet you. To-morrow, a friend of mine, who is a major in the army, will be down here,

and will call on you from me; or on any friend of yours you are pleased to name. I will not let you escape. Whether I shall face a guilty man in you, God knows; but I know I have a right to call upon you to face me.

"I am, Sir,

"Yours truly,

"Robert Eccles."

Edward's face grew signally white over the contents of this unprecedented challenge. The letter had been brought in to him at the breakfast table. "Read it, read it," said Mrs. Lovell, seeing him put it by; and he had read it with her eyes on him.

The man seemed to him a man of claws, who clutched like a demon. Would nothing quiet him? Edward thought of bribes for the sake of peace; but a second glance at the letter assured his sagacious mind that bribes were powerless in this man's case; neither bribes nor sticks were of service. Departure from Fairly would avail as little: the tenacious devil would follow him to London; and what was worse, as a hound from Dahlia's family he was now on the right scent, and appeared to know that he was. How was a scandal to be avoided? By leaving Fairly instantly for any place on earth, he could not avoid leaving the man behind; and if the man saw Mrs. Lovell again, her instincts as a woman of her class were not to be trusted. As likely as not she would side with the ruffian; that is, she would think he had been wronged—perhaps think that he ought to have been met. There is the democratic virus secret in every woman; it was predominant in Mrs. Lovell, according to Edward's observation of the lady. The rights of individual manhood were, as he angrily perceived, likely to be recognized by her spirit, if only they were stoutly asserted; and that in defiance of station, of reason, of all the ideas inculcated by education and society.

"I believe she'll expect me to fight him," he exclaimed. At least, he knew she would despise him if he avoided the brutal challenge without some show of dignity.

On rising from the table, he drew Algernon aside. It was an insufferable thought that he was compelled to take his brainless cousin into his confidence, even to the extent of soliciting his counsel, but there was no help for it. In vain Edward asked himself why he had been such an idiot as to stain his hands with the affair at all. He attributed it to his regard for Algernon. Having commonly the sway of his passions, he was in the habit of forgetting that he ever lost control of them; and the fierce black mood, engendered by Robert's audacious persecution, had passed from his memory, though it was now recalled in full force.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.