

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE ORDEAL OF
RICHARD FEVEREL.
VOLUME 6

George Meredith

**The Ordeal of Richard
Feverel. Volume 6**

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CHAPTER XXXIX

At a season when the pleasant South-western Island has few attractions to other than invalids and hermits enamoured of wind and rain, the potent nobleman, Lord Mountfalcon, still lingered there to the disgust of his friends and special parasite. "Mount's in for it again," they said among themselves. "Hang the women!" was a natural sequence. For, don't you see, what a shame it was of the women to be always kindling such a very inflammable subject! All understood that Cupid had twanged his bow, and transfixed a peer of Britain for the fiftieth time: but none would perceive, though he vouched for it with his most eloquent oaths, that this was a totally different case from the antecedent ones. So it had been sworn to them too frequently before. He was as a man with mighty tidings, and no language: intensely communicative, but inarticulate. Good round oaths had formerly compassed and expounded his noble emotions. They were now quite beyond the comprehension of blasphemy, even when emphasized, and by this the poor lord divinely felt the case was different. There is something impressive in a great human hulk writhing under the unutterable torments of a mastery he cannot contend with, or account for, or explain by means of intelligible words. At first he took refuge in the depths of his contempt for women. Cupid gave him line. When he had come to vent his worst of them, the fair face now stamped on his brain beamed the more triumphantly: so the harpooned whale rose to the surface, and after a few convulsions, surrendered his huge length. My lord was in love with Richard's young wife. He gave proofs of it by burying himself beside her. To her, could she have seen it, he gave further proofs of a real devotion, in affecting, and in her presence feeling, nothing beyond a lively interest in her well-being. This wonder, that when near her he should be cool and composed, and when away from her wrapped in a tempest of desires, was matter for what powers of cogitation the heavy nobleman possessed.

The Hon. Peter, tired of his journeys to and fro, urged him to press the business. Lord Mountfalcon was wiser, or more scrupulous, than his parasite. Almost every evening he saw Lucy. The inexperienced little wife apprehended no harm in his visits. Moreover, Richard had commended her to the care of Lord Mountfalcon, and Lady Judith. Lady Judith had left the Island for London: Lord Mountfalcon remained. There could be no harm. If she had ever thought so, she no longer did. Secretly, perhaps, she was flattered. Lord Mountfalcon was as well educated as it is the fortune of the run of titled elder sons to be: he could talk and instruct: he was a lord: and he let her understand that he was wicked, very wicked, and that she improved him. The heroine, in common with the hero, has her ambition to be of use in the world—to do some good: and the task of reclaiming a bad man is extremely seductive to good women. Dear to their tender bosoms as old china is a bad man they are mending! Lord Mountfalcon had none of the arts of a libertine: his gold, his title, and his person had hitherto preserved him from having long to sigh in vain, or sigh at all, possibly: the Hon. Peter did his villanies for him. No alarm was given to Lucy's pure instinct, as might have been the case had my lord been over-adept. It was nice in her martyrdom to have a true friend to support her, and really to be able to do something for that friend. Too simple-minded to think much of his lordship's position, she was yet a woman. "He, a great nobleman, does not scorn to acknowledge me, and think something of me," may have been one of the half-thoughts passing through her now and then, as she reflected in self-defence on the proud family she had married into.

January was watering and freezing old earth by turns, when the Hon. Peter travelled down to the sun of his purse with great news. He had no sooner broached his lordship's immediate weakness, than Mountfalcon began to plunge like a heavy dragoon in difficulties. He swore by this and that he

had come across an angel for his sins, and would do her no hurt. The next moment he swore she must be his, though she cursed like a cat. His lordship's illustrations were not choice. "I haven't advanced an inch," he groaned. "Brayder! upon my soul, that little woman could do anything with me. By heaven! I'd marry her to-morrow. Here I am, seeing her every day in the week out or in, and what do you think she gets me to talk about?—history! Isn't it enough to make a fellow mad? and there am I lecturing like a prig, and by heaven! while I'm at it I feel a pleasure in it; and when I leave the house I should feel an immense gratification in shooting somebody. What do they say in town?"

"Not much," said Brayder, significantly.

"When's that fellow—her husband—coming down?"

"I rather hope we've settled him for life, Mount."

Nobleman and parasite exchanged looks.

"How d'ye mean?"

Brayder hummed an air, and broke it to say, "He's in for Don Juan at a gallop, that's all."

"The deuce! Has Bella got him?" Mountfalcon asked with eagerness.

Brayder handed my lord a letter. It was dated from the Sussex coast, signed "Richard," and was worded thus:

"My beautiful Devil!—

"Since we're both devils together, and have found each other out, come to me at once, or I shall be going somewhere in a hurry. Come, my bright hell-star! I ran away from you, and now I ask you to come to me! You have taught me how devils love, and I can't do without you. Come an hour after you receive this."

Mountfalcon turned over the letter to see if there was any more. "Complimentary love-epistle!" he remarked, and rising from his chair and striding about, muttered, "The dog! how infamously he treats his wife!"

"Very bad," said Brayder.

"How did you get hold of this?"

"Strolled into Belle's dressing-room, waiting for her turned over her pincushion hap-hazard. You know her trick."

"By Jove! I think that girl does it on purpose. Thank heaven, I haven't written her any letters for an age. Is she going to him?"

"Not she! But it's odd, Mount!—did you ever know her refuse money before? She tore up the cheque in style, and presented me the fragments with two or three of the delicacies of language she learnt at your Academy. I rather like to hear a woman swear. It embellishes her!"

Mountfalcon took counsel of his parasite as to the end the letter could be made to serve. Both conscientiously agreed that Richard's behaviour to his wife was infamous, and that he at least deserved no mercy. "But," said his lordship, "it won't do to show the letter. At first she'll be swearing it's false, and then she'll stick to him closer. I know the sluts."

"The rule of contrary," said Brayder, carelessly. "She must see the trahison with her eyes. "They believe their eyes. There's your chance, Mount. You step in: you give her revenge and consolation—two birds at one shot. That's what they like."

"You're an ass, Brayder," the nobleman exclaimed. "You're an infernal blackguard. You talk of this little woman as if she and other women were all of a piece. I don't see anything I gain by this confounded letter. Her husband's a brute—that's clear."

"Will you leave it to me, Mount?"

"Be damned before I do!" muttered my lord.

"Thank you. Now see how this will end: You're too soft, Mount. You'll be made a fool of."

"I tell you, Brayder, there's nothing to be done. If I carry her off—

I've been on the point of doing it every day—what'll come of that?

She'll look—I can't stand her eyes—I shall be a fool—worse off with

her than I am now."

Mountfalcon yawned despondently. "And what do you think?" he pursued. "Isn't it enough to make a fellow gnash his teeth? She's" . . . he mentioned something in an underbreath, and turned red as he said it.

"Hm!" Brayder put up his mouth and rapped the handle of his cane on his chin. "That's disagreeable, Mount. You don't exactly want to act in that character. You haven't got a diploma. Bother!"

"Do you think I love her a bit less?" broke out my lord in a frenzy. "By heaven! I'd read to her by her bedside, and talk that infernal history to her, if it pleased her, all day and all night."

"You're evidently graduating for a midwife, Mount."

The nobleman appeared silently to accept the imputation.

"What do they say in town?" he asked again.

Brayder said the sole question was, whether it was maid, wife, or widow.

"I'll go to her this evening," Mountfalcon resumed, after—to judge by the cast of his face—reflecting deeply. "I'll go to her this evening. She shall know what infernal torment she makes me suffer."

"Do you mean to say she don't know it?"

"Hasn't an idea—thinks me a friend. And so, by heaven! I'll be to her."

"A—hm!" went the Honourable Peter. "This way to the sign of the Green Man, ladies!"

"Do you want to be pitched out of the window, Brayder?"

"Once was enough, Mount. The Salvage Man is strong. I may have forgotten the trick of alighting on my feet. There—there! I'll be sworn she's excessively innocent, and thinks you a disinterested friend."

"I'll go to her this evening," Mountfalcon repeated. "She shall know what damned misery it is to see her in such a position. I can't hold out any longer. Deceit's horrible to such a girl as that. I'd rather have her cursing me than speaking and looking as she does. Dear little girl!—she's only a child. You haven't an idea how sensible that little woman is."

"Have you?" inquired the cunning one.

"My belief is, Brayder, that there are angels among women," said Mountfalcon, evading his parasite's eye as he spoke.

To the world, Lord Mountfalcon was the thoroughly wicked man; his parasite simply ingeniously dissipated. Full many a man of God had thought it the easier task to reclaim the Hon. Peter.

Lucy received her noble friend by firelight that evening, and sat much in the shade. She offered to have the candles brought in. He begged her to allow the room to remain as it was. "I have something to say to you," he observed with a certain solemnity.

"Yes—to me?" said Lucy, quickly.

Lord Mountfalcon knew he had a great deal to say, but how to say it, and what it exactly was, he did not know.'

"You conceal it admirably," he began, "but you must be very lonely here—I fear, unhappy."

"I should have been lonely, but for your kindness, my lord," said Lucy.

"I am not unhappy." Her face was in shade and could not belie her.

"Is there any help that one who would really be your friend might give you, Mrs. Feverel?"

"None indeed that I know of," Lucy replied. "Who can help us to pay for our sins?"

"At least you may permit me to endeavour to pay my debts, since you have helped me to wash out some of any sins."

"Ah, my lord!" said Lucy, not displeased. It is sweet for a woman to believe she has drawn the serpent's teeth.

"I tell you the truth," Lord Mountfalcon went on. "What object could I have in deceiving you? I know you quite above flattery—so different from other women!"

"Oh, pray, do not say that," interposed Lucy.

"According to my experience, then."

"But you say you have met such—such very bad women."

"I have. And now that I meet a good one, it is my misfortune."

"Your misfortune, Lord Mountfalcon?"

"Yes, and I might say more."

His lordship held impressively mute.

"How strange men are!" thought Lucy. "He had some unhappy secret."

Tom Bakewell, who had a habit of coming into the room on various pretences during the nobleman's visits, put a stop to the revelation, if his lordship intended to make any.

When they were alone again, Lucy said, smiling: "Do you know, I am always ashamed to ask you to begin to read."

Mountfalcon stared. "To read?—oh! ha! yes!" he remembered his evening duties. "Very happy, I'm sure. Let me see. Where were we?"

"The life of the Emperor Julian. But indeed I feel quite ashamed to ask you to read, my lord. It's new to me; like a new world—hearing about Emperors, and armies, and things that really have been on the earth we walk upon. It fills my mind. But it must have ceased to interest you, and I was thinking that I would not tease you any more."

"Your pleasure is mine, Mrs. Feverel. 'Pon my honour, I'd read till I was hoarse, to hear your remarks."

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Do I look so?"

Lord Mountfalcon had fine full eyes, and by merely dropping the lids he could appear to endow them with mental expression.

"No, you are not," said Lucy. "I must thank you for your forbearance."

The nobleman went on his honour loudly.

Now it was an object of Lucy's to have him reading; for his sake, for her sake, and for somebody else's sake; which somebody else was probably considered first in the matter. When he was reading to her, he seemed to be legitimizing his presence there; and though she had no doubts or suspicions whatever, she was easier in her heart while she had him employed in that office. So she rose to fetch the book, laid it open on the table at his lordship's elbow, and quietly waited to ring for candles when he should be willing to commence.

That evening Lord Mountfalcon could not get himself up to the farce, and he felt a pity for the strangely innocent unprotected child with anguish hanging over her, that withheld the words he wanted to speak, or insinuate. He sat silent and did nothing.

"What I do not like him for," said Lucy, meditatively, "is his changing his religion. He would have been such a hero, but for that. I could have loved him."

"Who is it you could have loved, Mrs. Feverel?" Lord Mountfalcon asked.

"The Emperor Julian."

"Oh! the Emperor Julian! Well, he was an apostate but then, you know, he meant what he was about. He didn't even do it for a woman."

"For a woman!" cried Lucy. "What man would for a woman?"

"I would."

"You, Lord Mountfalcon?"

"Yes. I'd turn Catholic to-morrow."

"You make me very unhappy if you say that, my lord."

"Then I'll unsay it."

Lucy slightly shuddered. She put her hand upon the bell to ring for lights.

"Do you reject a convert, Mrs. Feverel?" said the nobleman.

"Oh yes! yes! I do. One who does not give his conscience I would not have."

"If he gives his heart and body, can he give more?"

Lucy's hand pressed the bell. She did not like the doubtful light with one who was so unscrupulous. Lord Mountfalcon had never spoken in this way before. He spoke better, too. She missed the aristocratic twang in his voice, and the hesitation for words, and the fluid lordliness with which he rolled over difficulties in speech.

Simultaneously with the sounding of the bell the door opened, and presented Tom Bakewell. There was a double knock at the same instant at the street door. Lucy delayed to give orders.

"Can it be a letter, Tom!—so late?" she said, changing colour. "Pray run and see."

"That an't powst" Tom remarked, as he obeyed his mistress.

"Are you very anxious for a letter, Mrs. Feverel?" Lord Mountfalcon inquired.

"Oh, no!—yes, I am, very." said Lucy. Her quick ear caught the tones of a voice she remembered. "That dear old thing has come to see me," she cried, starting up.

Tom ushered a bunch of black satin into the room.

"Mrs. Berry!" said Lucy, running up to her and kissing her.

"Me, my darlin'!" Mrs. Berry, breathless and rosy with her journey, returned the salute. "Me truly it is, in fault of a better, for I ain't one to stand by and give the devil his licence—roamin'! and the salt sure enough have spilte my bride-gown at the beginnin', which ain't the best sign. Bless ye!—Oh, here he is." She beheld a male figure in a chair by the half light, and swung around to address him. "You bad man!" she held aloft one of her fat fingers, "I've come on ye like a bolt, I have, and goin' to make ye do your duty, naughty boy! But your my darlin' babe," she melted, as was her custom, "and I'll never meet you and not give to ye the kiss of a mother."

Before Lord Mountfalcon could find time to expostulate the soft woman had him by the neck, and was down among his luxurious whiskers.

"Ha!" She gave a smothered shriek, and fell back. "What hair's that?"

Tom Bakewell just then illumined the transaction.

"Oh, my gracious!" Mrs. Berry breathed with horror, "I been and kiss a strange man!"

Lucy, half-laughing, but in dreadful concern, begged the noble lord to excuse the woful mistake.

"Extremely flattered, highly favoured, I'm sure;" said his lordship, re-arranging his disconcerted moustache; "may I beg the pleasure of an introduction?"

"My husband's dear old nurse—Mrs. Berry," said Lucy, taking her hand to lend her countenance. "Lord Mountfalcon, Mrs. Berry."

Mrs. Berry sought grace while she performed a series of apologetic bobs, and wiped the perspiration from her forehead.

Lucy put her into a chair: Lord Mountfalcon asked for an account of her passage over to the Island; receiving distressingly full particulars, by which it was revealed that the softness of her heart was only equalled by the weakness of her stomach. The recital calmed Mrs. Berry down.

"Well, and where's my—where's Mr. Richard? yer husband, my dear?" Mrs.

Berry turned from her tale to question.

"Did you expect to see him here?" said Lucy, in a broken voice.

"And where else, my love? since he haven't been seen in London a whole fortnight."

Lucy did not speak.

"We will dismiss the Emperor Julian till to-morrow, I think," said Lord Mountfalcon, rising and bowing.

Lucy gave him her hand with mute thanks. He touched it distantly, embraced Mrs. Berry in a farewell bow, and was shown out of the house by Tom Bakewell.

The moment he was gone, Mrs. Berry threw up her arms. "Did ye ever know sich a horrid thing to go and happen to a virtuous woman!" she exclaimed. "I could cry at it, I could! To be goin' and kissin' a strange hairy man! Oh dear me! what's cornin' next, I wonder? Whiskers! thinks I—for I know the touch o' whiskers—'t ain't like other hair—what! have he growed a crop that sudden, I says to myself; and it flashed on me I been and made a awful mistake! and the lights come in, and I see that great hairy man—beggin' his pardon—nobleman, and if I could 'a dropped through the floor out o' sight o' men, drat 'em! they're al'ays in the way, that they are!"—

"Mrs. Berry," Lucy checked her, "did you expect to find him here?"

"Askin' that solemn?" retorted Berry. "What him? your husband? O' course I did! and you got him—somewheres hid."

"I have not heard from my husband for fifteen days," said Lucy, and her tears rolled heavily off her cheeks.

"Not heer from him!—fifteen days!" Berry echoed.

"O Mrs. Berry! dear kind Mrs. Berry! have you no news? nothing to tell me! I've borne it so long. They're cruel to me, Mrs. Berry. Oh, do you know if I have offended him—my husband? While he wrote I did not complain. I could live on his letters for years. But not to hear from him! To think I have ruined him, and that he repents! Do they want to take him from me? Do they want me dead? O Mrs. Berry! I've had no one to speak out my heart to all this time, and I cannot, cannot help crying, Mrs. Berry!"

Mrs. Berry was inclined to be miserable at what she heard from Lucy's lips, and she was herself full of dire apprehension; but it was never this excellent creature's system to be miserable in company. The sight of a sorrow that was not positive, and could not refer to proof, set her resolutely the other way.

"Fiddle-faddle," she said. "I'd like to see him repent! He won't find anywheres a beauty like his own dear little wife, and he know it. Now, look you here, my dear—you blessed weepin' pet—the man that could see ye with that hair of yours there in ruins, and he backed by the law, and not rush into your arms and hold ye squeezed for life, he ain't got much man in him, I say; and no one can say that of my babe! I was sayin', look here, to comfort ye—oh, why, to be sure he've got some surprise for ye. And so've I, my lamb! Hark, now! His father've come to town, like a good reasonable man at last, to u-nite ye both, and bring your bodies together, as your hearts is, for everlastin'. Now ain't that news?"

"Oh!" cried Lucy, "that takes my last hope away. I thought he had gone to his father." She burst into fresh tears.

Mrs. Berry paused, disturbed.

"Belike he's travellin' after him," she suggested.

"Fifteen days, Mrs. Berry!"

"Ah, fifteen weeks, my dear, after sieh a man as that. He's a regular meteor, is Sir Austin Feverel, Raynham Abbey. Well, so hark you here. I says to myself, that knows him—for I did think my babe was in his natural nest—I says, the bar'net'll never write for you both to come up and beg forgiveness, so down I'll go and fetch you up. For there was your mistake, my dear, ever to leave your husband to go away from ye one hour in a young marriage. It's dangerous, it's mad, it's wrong, and it's only to be righted by your obeyin' of me, as I commands it: for I has my fits, though I am a soft 'un. Obey me, and ye'll be happy tomorrow—or the next to it."

Lucy was willing to see comfort. She was weary of her self-inflicted martyrdom, and glad to give herself up to somebody else's guidance utterly.

"But why does he not write to me, Mrs. Berry?"

"'Cause, 'cause—who can tell the why of men, my dear? But that he love ye faithful, I'll swear. Haven't he groaned in my arms that he couldn't come to ye?—weak wretch! Hasn't he swore how he

loved ye to me, poor young man! But this is your fault, my sweet. Yes, it be. You should 'a followed my 'dvice at the fust—'stead o' going into your 'eroics about this and t'other." Here Mrs. Berry poured forth fresh sentences on matrimony, pointed especially at young couples. "I should 'a been a fool if I hadn't suffered myself," she confessed, "so I'll thank my Berry if I makes you wise in season."

Lucy smoothed her ruddy plump cheeks, and gazed up affectionately into the soft woman's kind brown eyes. Endearing phrases passed from mouth to mouth. And as she gazed Lucy blushed, as one who has something very secret to tell, very sweet, very strange, but cannot quite bring herself to speak it.

"Well! these's three men in my life I kissed," said Mrs. Berry, too much absorbed in her extraordinary adventure to notice the young wife's struggling bosom, "three men, and one a nobleman! He've got more whisker than my Berry, I wonder what the man thought. Ten to one he'll think, now, I was glad o' my chance—they're that vain, whether they's lords or commons. How was I to know? I nat'ral thinks none but her husband'd sit in that chair. Ha! and in the dark? and alone with ye?" Mrs. Berry hardened her eyes, "and your husband away? What do this mean? Tell to me, child, what it mean his bein' here alone without ere a candle?"

"Lord Mountfalcon is the only friend I have here," said Lucy. "He is very kind. He comes almost every evening."

"Lord Montfalcon—that his name!" Mrs. Berry exclaimed. "I been that flurried by the man, I didn't mind it at first. He come every evenin', and your husband out o' sight! My goodness me! it's gettin' worse and worse. And what do he come for, now, ma'am? Now tell me candid what ye do together here in the dark of an evenin'."

Mrs. Berry glanced severely.

"O Mrs. Berry! please not to speak in that way—I don't like it," said

Lucy, pouting.

"What do he come for, I ask?"

"Because he is kind, Mrs. Berry. He sees me very lonely, and wishes to amuse me. And he tells me of things I know nothing about and"—

"And wants to be a-teachin' some of his things, mayhap," Mrs. Berry interrupted with a ruffled breast.

"You are a very ungenerous, suspicious, naughty old woman," said Lucy, chiding her.

"And you're a silly, unsuspectin' little bird," Mrs. Berry retorted, as she returned her taps on the cheek. "You haven't told me what ye do together, and what's his excuse for comin'."

"Well, then, Mrs. Berry, almost every evening that he comes we read History, and he explains the battles, and talks to me about the great men. And he says I'm not silly, Mrs. Berry."

"That's one bit o' lime on your wings, my bird. History, indeed!

History to a young married lovely woman alone in the dark! a pretty History! Why, I know that man's name, my dear. He's a notorious living rake, that Lord Montfalcon. No woman's safe with him."

"Ah, but he hasn't deceived me, Mrs. Berry. He has not pretended he was good."

"More's his art," quoth the experienced dame. "So you read History together in the dark; my dear!"

"I was unwell to-night, Mrs. Berry. I wanted him not to see my face.

Look! there's the book open ready for him when the candles come in. And now, you dear kind darling old thing, let me kiss you for coming to me.

I do love you. Talk of other things."

"So we will," said Mrs. Berry softening to Lucy's caresses. "So let us. A nobleman, indeed, alone with a young wife in the dark, and she sich a beauty! I say this shall be put a stop to now and henceforth, on the spot it shall! He won't meneuvele Bessy Berry with his arts. There! I drop him. I'm dyin' for a cup o' tea, my dear."

Lucy got up to ring the bell, and as Mrs. Berry, incapable of quite dropping him, was continuing to say: "Let him go and boast I kiss him; he ain't nothin' to be 'shamed of in a chaste woman's kiss—unawares—which men don't get too often in their lives, I can assure 'em;"—her eye surveyed Lucy's figure.

Lo, when Lucy returned to her, Mrs. Berry surrounded her with her arms, and drew her into feminine depths. "Oh, you blessed!" she cried in most meaning tone, "you good, lovin', proper little wife, you!"

"What is it, Mrs. Berry!" lisps Lucy, opening the most innocent blue eyes.

"As if I couldn't see, you pet! It was my flurry blinded me, or I'd 'a marked ye the fast shock. Thinkin' to deceive me!"

Mrs. Berry's eyes spoke generations. Lucy's wavered; she coloured all over, and hid her face on the bounteous breast that mounted to her.

"You're a sweet one," murmured the soft woman, patting her back, and rocking her. "You're a rose, you are! and a bud on your stalk. Haven't told a word to your husband, my dear?" she asked quickly.

Lucy shook her head, looking sly and shy.

"That's right. We'll give him a surprise; let it come all at once on him, and thinks he—losin' breath 'I'm a father!' Nor a hint even you haven't give him?"

Lucy kissed her, to indicate it was quite a secret.

"Oh! you are a sweet one," said Bessy Berry, and rocked her more closely and lovingly.

Then these two had a whispered conversation, from which let all of male persuasion retire a space nothing under one mile.

Returning, after a due interval, we see Mrs. Berry counting on her fingers' ends. Concluding the sum, she cries prophetically: "Now this right everything—a baby in the balance! Now I say this angel-infant come from on high. It's God's messenger, my love! and it's not wrong to say so. He thinks you worthy, or you wouldn't 'a had one—not for all the tryin' in the world, you wouldn't, and some tries hard enough, poor creatures! Now let us rejice and make merry! I'm for cryin' and laughin', one and the same. This is the blessed seal of matrimony, which Berry never stamp on me. It's be hoped it's a boy. Make that man a grandfather, and his grandchild a son, and you got him safe. Oh! this is what I call happiness, and I'll have my tea a little stronger in consequence. I declare I could get tipsy to know this joyful news."

So Mrs. Berry carolled. She had her tea a little stronger. She ate and she drank; she rejoiced and made merry. The bliss of the chaste was hers.

Says Lucy demurely: "Now you know why I read History, and that sort of books."

"Do I?" replies Berry. "Belike I do. Since what you done's so good, my darlin', I'm agreeable to anything. A fig for all the lords! They can't come anigh a baby. You may read Voyages and Travels, my dear, and Romances, and Tales of Love and War. You cut the riddle in your own dear way, and that's all I cares for."

"No, but you don't understand," persists Lucy. "I only read sensible books, and talk of serious things, because I'm sure... because I have heard say...dear Mrs. Berry! don't you understand now?"

Mrs. Berry smacked her knees. "Only to think of her bein' that thoughtful! and she a Catholic, too! Never tell me that people of one religion ain't as good as another, after that. Why, you want to make him a historian, to be sure! And that rake of a lord who've been comin' here playin' at wolf, you been and made him—unbeknown to himself—sort o' tutor to the unborn blessed! Ha! ha! say that little women ain't got art ekal to the cunningest of 'em. Oh! I understand. Why, to be sure, didn't I know a lady, a widow of a clergyman: he was a postermost child, and afore his birth that women read nothin' but Blair's 'Grave' over and over again, from the end to the beginnin';—that's a serious book!—very hard readin'!—and at four years of age that child that come of it reelly was the piousest

infant!—he was like a little curate. His eyes was up; he talked so solemn." Mrs. Berry imitated the little curate's appearance and manner of speaking. "So she got her wish, for one!"

But at this lady Lucy laughed.

They chattered on happily till bedtime. Lucy arranged for Mrs. Berry to sleep with her. "If it's not dreadful to ye, my sweet, sleepin' beside a woman," said Mrs. Berry. "I know it were to me shortly after my Berry, and I felt it. It don't somehow seem nat'ral after matrimony—a woman in your bed! I was obliged to have somebody, for the cold sheets do give ye the creeps when you've been used to that that's different."

Upstairs they went together, Lucy not sharing these objections. Then Lucy opened certain drawers, and exhibited pretty caps, and laced linen, all adapted for a very small body, all the work of her own hands: and Mrs. Berry praised them and her. "You been guessing a boy—woman-like," she said. Then they cooed, and kissed, and undressed by the fire, and knelt at the bedside, with their arms about each other, praying; both praying for the unborn child; and Mrs. Berry pressed Lucy's waist the moment she was about to breathe the petition to heaven to shield and bless that coming life; and thereat Lucy closed to her, and felt a strong love for her. Then Lucy got into bed first, leaving Berry to put out the light, and before she did so, Berry leaned over her, and eyed her roguishly, saying, "I never see ye like this, but I'm half in love with ye myself, you blushin' beauty! Sweet's your eyes, and your hair do take one so—lyin' back. I'd never forgive my father if he kep me away from ye four-and-twenty hours just. Husband o' that!" Berry pointed at the young wife's loveliness. "Ye look so ripe with kisses, and there they are a-languishin'!—... You never look so but in your bed, ye beauty!—just as it ought to be." Lucy had to pretend to rise to put out the light before Berry would give up her amorous chaste soliloquy. Then they lay in bed, and Mrs. Berry fondled her, and arranged for their departure to-morrow, and reviewed Richard's emotions when he came to hear he was going to be made a father by her, and hinted at Lucy's delicious shivers when Richard was again in his rightful place, which she, Bessy Berry, now usurped; and all sorts of amorous sweet things; enough to make one fancy the adage subverted, that stolen fruits are sweetest; she drew such glowing pictures of bliss within the law and the limits of the conscience, till at last, worn out, Lucy murmured "Peepy, dear Berry," and the soft woman gradually ceased her chirp.

Bessy Berry did not sleep. She lay thinking of the sweet brave heart beside her, and listening to Lucy's breath as it came and went; squeezing the fair sleeper's hand now and then, to ease her love as her reflections warmed. A storm of wind came howling over the Hampshire hills, and sprang white foam on the water, and shook the bare trees. It passed, leaving a thin cloth of snow on the wintry land. The moon shone brilliantly. Berry heard the house-dog bark. His bark was savage and persistent. She was roused by the noise. By and by she fancied she heard a movement in the house; then it seemed to her that the house-door opened. She cocked her ears, and could almost make out voices in the midnight stillness. She slipped from the bed, locked and bolted the door of the room, assured herself of Lucy's unconsciousness, and went on tiptoe to the window. The trees all stood white to the north; the ground glittered; the cold was keen. Berry wrapped her fat arms across her bosom, and peeped as close over into the garden as the situation of the window permitted. Berry was a soft, not a timid, woman: and it happened this night that her thoughts were above the fears of the dark. She was sure of the voices; curiosity without a shade of alarm held her on the watch; and gathering bundles of her day-apparel round her neck and shoulders, she silenced the chattering of her teeth as well as she could, and remained stationary. The low hum of the voices came to a break; something was said in a louder tone; the house-door quietly shut; a man walked out of the garden into the road. He paused opposite her window, and Berry let the blind go back to its place, and peeped from behind an edge of it. He was in the shadow of the house, so that it was impossible to discern much of his figure. After some minutes he walked rapidly away, and Berry returned to the bed an icicle, from which Lucy's limbs sensitively shrank.

Next morning Mrs. Berry asked Tom Bakewell if he had been disturbed in the night. Tom, the mysterious, said he had slept like a top. Mrs. Berry went into the garden. The snow was partially melted; all save one spot, just under the portal, and there she saw the print of a man's foot. By some strange guidance it occurred to her to go and find one of Richard's boots. She did so, and, unperceived, she measured the sole of the boot in that solitary footmark. There could be no doubt that it fitted. She tried it from heel to toe a dozen times.

CHAPTER XL

Sir Austin Feverel had come to town with the serenity of a philosopher who says, 'Tis now time; and the satisfaction of a man who has not arrived thereat without a struggle. He had almost forgiven his son. His deep love for him had well-nigh shaken loose from wounded pride and more tenacious vanity. Stirrings of a remote sympathy for the creature who had robbed him of his son and hewed at his System, were in his heart of hearts. This he knew; and in his own mind he took credit for his softness. But the world must not suppose him soft; the world must think he was still acting on his System. Otherwise what would his long absence signify?—Something highly unphilosophical. So, though love was strong, and was moving him to a straightforward course, the last tug of vanity drew him still aslant.

The Aphorist read himself so well, that to juggle with himself was a necessity. As he wished the world to see him, he beheld himself: one who entirely put aside mere personal feelings: one in whom parental duty, based on the science of life, was paramount: a Scientific Humanist, in short.

He was, therefore, rather surprised at a coldness in Lady Blandish's manner when he did appear. "At last!" said the lady, in a sad way that sounded reproachfully. Now the Scientific Humanist had, of course, nothing to reproach himself with.

But where was Richard?

Adrian positively averred he was not with his wife.

"If he had gone," said the baronet, "he would have anticipated me by a few hours."

This, when repeated to Lady Blandish, should have propitiated her, and shown his great forgiveness. She, however, sighed, and looked at him wistfully.

Their converse was not happy and deeply intimate. Philosophy did not seem to catch her mind; and fine phrases encountered a rueful assent, more flattering to their grandeur than to their influence.

Days went by. Richard did not present himself. Sir Austin's pitch of self-command was to await the youth without signs of impatience.

Seeing this, the lady told him her fears for Richard, and mentioned the rumour of him that was about.

"If," said the baronet, "this person, his wife, is what you paint her, I do not share your fears for him. I think too well of him. If she is one to inspire the sacredness of that union, I think too well of him. It is impossible."

The lady saw one thing to be done.

"Call her to you," she said. "Have her with you at Raynham. Recognize her. It is the disunion and doubt that so confuses him and drives him wild. I confess to you I hoped he had gone to her. It seems not. If she is with you his way will be clear. Will you do that?"

Science is notoriously of slow movement. Lady Blandish's proposition was far too hasty for Sir Austin. Women, rapid by nature, have no idea of science.

"We shall see her there in time, Emmeline. At present let it be between me and my son."

He spoke loftily. In truth it offended him to be asked to do anything, when he had just brought himself to do so much.

A month elapsed, and Richard appeared on the scene.

The meeting between him and his father was not what his father had expected and had crooned over in the Welsh mountains. Richard shook his hand respectfully, and inquired after his health with the common social solicitude. He then said: "During your absence, sir, I have taken the liberty, without consulting you, to do something in which you are more deeply concerned than myself. I have taken upon myself to find out my mother and place her under my care. I trust you will not think I have done wrong. I acted as I thought best."

Sir Austin replied: "You are of an age, Richard, to judge for yourself in such a case. I would have you simply beware of deceiving yourself in imagining that you considered any one but yourself in acting as you did."

"I have not deceived myself, sir," said Richard, and the interview was over. Both hated an exposure of the feelings, and in that both were satisfied: but the baronet, as one who loves, hoped and looked for tones indicative of trouble and delight in the deep heart; and Richard gave him none of those. The young man did not even face him as he spoke: if their eyes met by chance, Richard's were defiantly cold. His whole bearing was changed.

"This rash marriage has altered him," said the very just man of science in life: and that meant: "it has debased him."

He pursued his reflections. "I see in him the desperate maturity of a suddenly-ripened nature: and but for my faith that good work is never lost, what should I think of the toil of my years? Lost, perhaps to me! lost to him! It may show itself in his children."

The Philosopher, we may conceive, has contentment in benefiting embryos: but it was a somewhat bitter prospect to Sir Austin. Bitterly he felt the injury to himself.

One little incident spoke well of Richard. A poor woman called at the hotel while he was missing. The baronet saw her, and she told him a tale that threw Christian light on one part of Richard's nature. But this might gratify the father in Sir Austin; it did not touch the man of science. A Feverel, his son, would not do less, he thought. He sat down deliberately to study his son.

No definite observations enlightened him. Richard ate and drank; joked and laughed. He was generally before Adrian in calling for a fresh bottle. He talked easily of current topics; his gaiety did not sound forced. In all he did, nevertheless, there was not the air of a youth who sees a future before him. Sir Austin put that down. It might be carelessness, and wanton blood, for no one could say he had much on his mind. The man of science was not reckoning that Richard also might have learned to act and wear a mask. Dead subjects—this is to say, people not on their guard—he could penetrate and dissect. It is by a rare chance, as scientific men well know, that one has an opportunity of examining the structure of the living.

However, that rare chance was granted to Sir Austin. They were engaged to dine with Mrs. Doria at the Foreys', and walked down to her in the afternoon, father and son arm-in-arm, Adrian beside them. Previously the offended father had condescended to inform his son that it would shortly be time for him to return to his wife, indicating that arrangements would ultimately be ordered to receive her at Raynham. Richard had replied nothing; which might mean excess of gratitude, or hypocrisy in concealing his pleasure, or any one of the thousand shifts by which gratified human nature expresses itself when all is made to run smooth with it. Now Mrs. Berry had her surprise ready charged for the young husband. She had Lucy in her own house waiting for him. Every day she expected him to call and be overcome by the rapturous surprise, and every day, knowing his habit of frequenting the park, she marched Lucy thither, under the plea that Master Richard, whom she had already christened, should have an airing.

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