

GEORGE MEREDITH

LORD ORMONT AND HIS
AMINTA. VOLUME 2

George Meredith

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Содержание

CHAPTER VI	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

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CHAPTER VI IN A MOOD OF LANGUOR

Up in Aminta's amber dressing-room; Mrs. Nargett Pagnell alluded sadly to the long month of separation, and begged her niece to let her have in plain words an exact statement of the present situation; adding, "Items will do." Thereupon she slipped into prattle and held the field.

She was the known, worthy, good, intolerable woman whom the burgess turns out for his world in regiments, that do and look and all but step alike; and they mean well, and have conventional worships and material aspirations, and very peculiar occult refinements, with a blind head and a haphazard gleam of acuteness, impressive to acquaintances, convincing themselves that they impersonate sagacity. She had said this, done that; and it was, by proof, Providence consenting, the right thing. A niece, written down in her girlhood, because of her eyes and her striking air and excellent deportment, as mate for a nobleman, marries, him before she is out of her teens. "I said, She shall be a countess." A countess she is. Providence does not comply with our predictions in order to stultify us. Admitting the position of affairs for the moment as extraordinary, we are bound by what has happened to expect they will be conformable in the end. Temporarily warped, we should say of them.

She could point to the reason: it was Lord Ormont's blunt misunderstanding of her character. The burgess's daughter was refining to an appreciation of the exquisite so rapidly that she could criticize patricians. My lord had never forgiven her for correcting him in his pronunciation of her name by marriage. Singular indeed; but men, even great men, men of title, are so, some of them, whom you could least suspect of their being so. He would speak the "g" in Nargett, and he, declined—after a remonstrance he declined—to pass Pagnell under the cedilla. Lord Ormont spoke the name like a man hating it, or an English rustic: "Nargett Pagnell," instead, of the soft and elegant "Naryett Pagnell," the only true way of speaking it; and she had always taken that pronunciation of her name for a test of people's breeding. The expression of his lordship's countenance under correction was memorable. Naturally, in those honeymoon days, the young Countess of Ormont sided with her husband the earl; she declared that her aunt had never dreamed of the cedilla before the expedition to Spain. When, for example, Alfred Nargett Pagnell had a laughing remark, which Aminta in her childhood must have heard: "We rhyme with spaniel!"

That was the secret of Lord Ormont's prepossession against Aminta's aunt; and who can tell? perhaps of much of his behaviour to the beautiful young wife he at least admired, sincerely admired, though he caused her to hang her head—cast a cloud on the head so dear to him!

Otherwise there was no interpreting his lordship. To think of herself as personally disliked by a nobleman stupefied Mrs. Pagnell, from her just expectation of reciprocal dealings in high society; for she confessed herself a fly to a title. Where is the shame, if titles are created to attract? Elsewhere than in that upper circle, we may anticipate hard bargains; the widow of a solicitor had not to learn it. But when a distinguished member and ornament of the chosen seats above blew cold upon their gesticulatory devotee, and was besides ungrateful; she was more than commonly assured of his being, as she called him, "a sphinx." His behaviour to his legally wedded wife confirmed the charge.

She checked her flow to resume the question. "So, then, where are we now? He allows you liberally for pin-money in addition to your own small independent income. Satisfaction with that would warrant him to suppose his whole duty done by you."

"We are where we were, aunty; the month has made no change," said Aminta in languor.

"And you as patient as ever?"

"I am supposed to have everything a woman can require."

"Can he possibly think it? And I have to warn you, child, that lawyers are not so absolving as the world is with some of the ladies Lord Ormont allows you to call your friends. I have been hearing—it is not mere airy tales one hears from lawyers about cases in Courts of Law. Tighten your lips as you like; I say nothing to condemn or reflect on Mrs. Lawrence Finchley. I have had my eyes a little opened, that is all. Oh, I know my niece Aminta, when it's a friend to stand by; but our position—thanks to your inscrutable lord and master—demands of us the utmost scrupulousness, or it soon becomes a whirl and scandal flying about, and those lawyers picking up and putting together. I have had a difficulty to persuade them!... and my own niece! whom I saw married at the British Embassy in Madrid, as I take good care to tell everybody; for it was my doing; I am the responsible person! and by an English Protestant clergyman, to all appearance able to walk erect in and out of any of these excellent new Life Assurance offices they are starting for the benefit of widows and orphans, and deceased within six days of the ceremony—if ceremony one may call the hasty affair in those foreign places. My dear, the instant I heard it I had a presentiment, 'All has gone well up to now.' I remember murmuring the words. Then your letter, received in that smelly Barcelona: Lord Ormont was carrying you off to Granada—a dream of my infancy! It may not have been his manoeuvre, but it was the beginning of his manoeuvres."

Aminta shuddered. "And tra-la-la, and castanets, and my Cid! my Cid! and the Alhambra, the Sierra Nevada, and ay di me, Alhama; and Boabdil el Chico and el Zagal and Fray Antonio Agapida!" She flung out the rattle, yawning, with her arms up and her head back, in the posture of a woman wounded. One of her aunt's chance shots had traversed her breast, flashing at her the time, the scene, the husband, intensest sunniness on sword-edges of shade,—and now the wedded riddle; illusion dropping mask, romance in its anatomy, cold English mist. Ah, what a background is the present when we have the past to the fore! That filmy past is diaphanous on heaving ribs.

She smiled at the wide-eyed little gossip. "Don't speak of manaoeuvres, dear aunt. And we'll leave Granada to the poets. I'm tired. Talk of our own people, on your side and my father's, and as much as you please of the Pagnell-Pagnells, they refresh me. Do they go on marrying?"

"Why, my child, how could they go on without it?"

Aminta pressed her hands at her eyelids. "Oh, me!" she sighed, feeling the tear come with a sting from checked laughter. "But there are marriages, aunty, that don't go on, though Protestant clergymen officiated. Leave them unnoticed, I have really nothing to tell."

"You have not heard anything of Lady Eglett?"

"Lady Charlotte Eglett? No syllable. Or wait—my lord's secretary was with her at Olmer; approved by her, I have to suppose."

"There, my dear, I say again I do dread that woman, if she can make a man like Lord Ormont afraid of her. And no doubt she is of our old aristocracy. And they tell me she is coarse in her conversation—like a man. Lawyers tell me she is never happy but in litigation. Years back, I am given to understand, she did not set so particularly good an example. Lawyers hear next to everything. I am told she lifted her horsewhip on a gentleman once, and then put her horse at him and rode him down. You will say, the sister of your husband. No; not to make my niece a countess, would I, if I had known the kind of family! Then one asks, Is she half as much afraid of him? In that case, no wonder they have given up meeting. Was formerly one of the Keepsake Beauties. Well, Lady Eglett, and Aminta, Countess of Ormont, will be in that Peerage, as they call it, let her only have her dues. My dear, I would—if I ever did—swear the woman is jealous."

"Of me, aunty!"

"I say more; I say again, it would be a good thing for somebody if somebody had his twitch of jealousy. Wives may be too meek. Cases and cases my poor Alfred read to me, where an ill-behaving

man was brought to his senses by a clever little shuffle of the cards, and by the most innocent of wives. A kind of poison to him, of course; but there are poisons that cure. It might come into the courts; and the nearer the proofs the happier he in withdrawing from his charge and effecting a reconciliation. Short of guilt, of course. Men are so strange. Imagine now, if a handsome young woman were known to be admired rather more than enough by a good-looking gentleman near about her own age. Oh, I've no patience with, the man for causing us to think and scheme! Only there are men who won't be set right unless we do. My husband used to say, change is such a capital thing in life's jogtrot; that men find it refreshing if we now and then, reverse the order of our pillion-riding for them. A spiritless woman in a wife is what they bear least of all. Anything rather. Is Mr. Morsfield haunting Mrs. Lawrence Finchley's house as usual?"

Aminta's cheeks unrolled their deep damask rose at the abrupt intrusion of the name. "I meet him there."

"Lord Adderwood, Sir John Randeller; and the rest?"

"Two or three times a week."

"And the lady, wife of the captain, really a Lady Fair—Mrs. . . . month of May: so I have to get at it."

"She may be seen there."

"Really a contrast, when you two are together! As to reputation, there is an exchange of colours. Those lawyers hold the keys of the great world, and a naughty world it is, I fear—with exceptions, who are the salt, but don't taste so much. I can't help enjoying the people at Mrs. Lawrence Finchley's. I like to feel I can amuse them, as they do me. One puzzles for what they say—in somebody's absence, I mean. They must take Lord Ormont for a perfect sphinx; unless they are so silly as to think they may despise him, or suppose him indifferent. Oh, that upper class! It's a garden, and we can't help pushing to enter it; and fair flowers, indeed, but serpents too, like the tropics. It tries us more than anything else in the world—well, just as good eating tries the constitution. He ought to know it and feel it, and give his wife all the protection of his name, instead of—not that he denies: I have brought him to that point; he cannot deny it with me. But not to present her—to shun the Court; not to introduce her to his family, to appear ashamed of her! My darling Aminta, a month of absence for reflection on your legally-wedded husband's conduct increases my astonishment. For usually men old enough to be the grandfathers of their wives—"

"Oh, pray, aunty, pray, pray!" Aminta cried, and her body writhed. "No more to-night. You mean well, I am sure. Let us wait. I shall sleep, perhaps, if I go to bed early. I dare say I am spiritless—not worth more than I get. I gave him the lead altogether; he keeps it. In everything else he is kind; I have all the luxuries—enough to loathe them. Kiss me and say good night."

Aminta made it imperative by rising. Her aunt stood up, kissed, and exclaimed, "I tell you you are a queenly creature, not to be treated as any puny trollop of a handmaid. And although he is a great nobleman, he is not to presume to behave any longer, my dear, as if your family had no claim on his consideration. My husband, Alfred Pagnell, would have laid that before him pretty quick. You are the child of the Farrells and the Solers, both old families; on your father's side you are linked with the oldest nobility in Europe. It flushes one to think of it! Your grandmother, marrying Captain Algernon Farrell, was the legitimate daughter of a Grandee of Spain; as I have told Lord Ormont often, and I defy him to equal that for a romantic marriage in the annals of his house, or boast of bluer blood. Again, the Solers—"

"We take the Solers for granted, aunty, good night."

"Commoners, if you like; but established since the Conquest. That is, we trace the pedigree. And to be treated, even by a great nobleman, as if we were stuff picked up out of the ditch! I declare, there are times when I sit and think and boil. Is it chivalrous, is it generous—is it, I say, decent—is it what Alfred would have called a fair fulfilment of a pact, for your wedded husband—? You may close my mouth! But he pretends to be chivalrous and generous, and he has won a queen any wealthy

gentleman in England—I know of one, if not two—would be proud to have beside him in equal state; and what is he to her? He is an extinguisher. Or is it the very meanest miserliness, that he may keep you all to himself? There we are again! I say he is an unreadable sphinx."

Aminta had rung the bell for her maid. Mrs. Pagnell could be counted on for drawing in her tongue when the domestics were near.

A languor past delivery in sighs was on the young woman's breast. She could have heard without a regret that the heart was to cease beating. Had it been downright misery she would have looked about her with less of her exanimate glassiness. The unhappy have a form of life: until they are worn out, they feel keenly. She felt nothing. The blow to her pride of station and womanhood struck on numbed sensations. She could complain that the blow was not heavier.

A letter lying in her jewel-box called her to read it, for the chance of some slight stir. The contents were known. The signature of Adolphus Morsfield had a new meaning for her eyes, and dashed her at her husband in a spasm of revolt and wrath against the man exposing her to these letters, which a motion of her hand could turn to blood, and abstention from any sign maintained in a Satanic whisper, saying, "Here lies one way of solving the riddle." It was her husband who drove her to look that way.

The look was transient, and the wrath: she could not burn. A small portion of contempt lodged in her mind to shadow husbands precipitating women on their armoury for a taste of vengeance. Women can always be revenged—so speedily, so completely: they have but to dip. Husbands driving wives to taste their power execrate the creature for her fall deep downward. They are forgetful of causes.

Does it matter? Aminta's languor asked. The letter had not won a reply. Thought of the briefest of replies was a mountain of effort, and she moaned at her nervelessness in body and mind. To reply, to reproach the man, to be flame—an image of herself under the form she desired—gave her a momentary false energy, wherein the daring of the man, whose life was at a loss for the writing of this letter, hung lighted. She had therewith a sharp vision of his features, repellent in correctness, Greek in lines, with close eyes, hollow temples, pressed lips—a face indicating the man who can fling himself on a die. She had heard tales of women and the man. Some had loved him, report said. Here were words to say that he loved her. They might, poor man, be true. Otherwise she had never been loved.

Memory had of late been paying visits to a droopy plant in the golden summer drought on a gorgeous mid-sea island, and had taken her on board to refresh her with voyages, always bearing down full sail on a couple of blissful schools, abodes of bloom and briny vigour, sweet merriment, innocent longings, dreams the shyest, dreams the mightiest. At night before sleep, at morn before rising, often during day, and when vexed or when dispirited, she had issued her command for the voyage. Sheer refreshment followed, as is ever the case if our vessel carries no freight of hopes. There could be no hopes. It was forgotten that they had ever been seriously alive. But it carried an admiration. Now, an admiration may endure, and this one had been justified all round. The figure heroic, the splendid, active youth, hallowed Aminta's past. The past of a bitterly humiliated Aminta was a garden in the coming kiss of sunset, with that godlike figure of young manhood to hallow it. There he stayed, perpetually assuring her of his triumphs to come.

She could have no further voyages. Ridicule convulsed her home of refuge. For the young soldier-hero, to be unhorsed by misfortune, was one thing; but the meanness of the ambition he had taken in exchange for the thirst of glory, accused his nature. He so certainly involved her in the burlesque of the transformation that she had to quench memory.

She was, therefore, having smothered a good part of herself, accountably languid—a condition alternating with fire in Aminta; and as Mr. Morsfield's letter supplied the absent element, her needy instinct pushed her to read his letter through. She had not yet done that with attention.

Whether a woman loves a man or not, he is her lover if he dare tell her he loves her, and is heard with attention. Aware that the sentences were poison, she summoned her constitutional antagonism to the mad step proposed, so far nullifying the virus as to make her shrink from the madness. Even then

her soul cried out to her husband, Who drives me to read? or rather, to brood upon what she read. The brooding ensued, was the thirst of her malady. The best antidote she could hit on was the writer's face. Yet it expressed him, his fire and his courage—gifts she respected in him, found wanting in herself. Read by Lord Ormont, this letter would mean a deadly thing.

Aminta did her lord the justice to feel sure of him, that with her name bearing the superscription, it might be left on her table, and would not have him to peruse it. If he manoeuvred, it was never basely. Despite resentment, her deepest heart denied his being indifferent either to her honour or his own in relation to it. He would vindicate both at a stroke, for a sign. Nevertheless, he had been behaving cruelly. She charged on him the guilt of the small preludes, archeries, anglings, veilings, evasions, all done with the eyelids and the mute of the lips, or a skirmisher word or a fan's flourish, and which, intended to pique the husband rather than incite the lover, had led Mrs. Lawrence Finchley to murmur at her ear, in close assembly, without a distinct designation of Mr. Morsfield, "Dangerous man to play little games with!" It had brought upon her this letter of declaration, proposal, entreaty.

This letter was the man's life in her hands, and safe, of course. But surely it was a proof that the man loved her?

Aminta was in her five-and-twentieth year; when the woman who is uncertain of the having been loved, and she reputed beautiful, desirable, is impelled by a sombre necessity to muse on a declaration, and nibble at an idea of a test. If "a dangerous man to play little games with," he could scarcely be dangerous to a woman having no love for him at all. It meant merely that he would soon fall to writing letters like this, and he could not expect an answer to it. But her heart really thanked him, and wished the poor gentleman to take its dumb response as his reward, for being the one sole one who had loved her.

Aminta dwelt on "the one sole one." Lord Ormont's treatment had detached her from any belief in love on his part; and the schoolboy, now ambitious to become a schoolmaster, was behind the screen unlikely to be lifted again by a woman valuing her pride of youth, though he had—behold our deceptions!—the sympathetic face entirely absent from that of Mr. Adolphus Morsfield, whom the world would count quite as handsome—nay, it boasted him. He enjoyed the reputation of a killer of ladies. Women have odd tastes, Aminta thought, and examined the gentleman's handwriting. It pleased her better. She studied it till the conventional phrases took a fiery hue, and came at her with an invasive rush.

The letter was cast back into the box, locked up; there an end to it, or no interdiction of sleep.

Sleep was a triumph. Aminta's healthy frame rode her over petty agitations of a blood uninflamed, as lightly as she swam the troubled sea-waters her body gloried to cleave. She woke in the morning peaceful and mildly reflective, like one who walks across green meadows. Only by degrees, by glimpses, was she drawn to remember the trotting, cantering, galloping, leaping of an active heart during night. We cannot, men or woman, control the heart in sleep at night. There had been wild leapings. Night will lead an unsatisfied heart of a woman, by way of sleep, to scale black mountains, jump jagged chasms. Sleep is a horse that laughs at precipices and abysses. We bid women, moreover, be all heart. They are to cultivate their hearts, pay much heed to their hearts. The vast realm of feeling is open to these appointed keepers of the sanctuary household, who may be withering virgins, may be childless matrons, may be unhusbanded wives. Wandering in the vast realm which they are exhorted to call their own, for the additional attractiveness it gives them, an unsatisfied heart of woman will somewhat audaciously cross the borderland a single step into the public road of the vast realm of thinking. Once there, and but a single step on the road, she is a rebel against man's law for her sex. Nor is it urgent on her that she should think defiantly in order to feel herself the rebel. She may think submissively; with a heart (the enlarged, the scientifically plumped, the pasture of epicurean man), with her coveted heart in revolt, and from the mere act of thinking at all.

Aminta reviewed perforce, dead against her will, certain of the near-to- happiness ratings overnight. She thinned her lips, and her cheeks glowed. An arm, on the plea of rescuing, had been round her. The choice now offered her was, to yield to softness or to think. She took the latter step, the single step of an unaccustomed foot, which women educated simply to feet, will, upon extreme impulsion, take; and it held a candle in a windy darkness. She saw no Justice there. The sensational immensity touched sublime, short of that spirit of Justice required for the true sublime. And void of Justice; what a sunless place is any realm! Infants, the male and the female alike, first begin to know they feel when it is refused them. When they know they feel, they have begun to reflect. The void of Justice is a godless region. Women, to whom the solitary thought has come as a blown candle, illumining the fringes of their storm, ask themselves whether they are God's creatures or man's. The question deals a sword-stroke of division between them and their human masters. Young women, animated by the passions their feeling bosoms of necessity breed, and under terror discover, do not distinguish an abstract justice from a concrete. They are of the tribe too long hereditarily enslaved to conceive an abstract. So it is with them, that their God is the God of the slave, as it is with all but the bravest of boys. He is a Thing to cry to, a Punisher, not much of a Supporter—the Biblical Hebrew's right reading of Nature, favouring man, yet prompt to confound him, and with woman for the instrument of vengeance. By such a maze the blindfolded, are brought round to see Justice on earth. If women can only believe in some soul of justice, they will feel they belong to God—of the two; and the peril for them then is, that they will set the one incomprehensible Power in opposition to the other, urging them unsatisfied natures to make secret appeal away from man and his laws altogether, at the cost of losing clear sight of the God who shines in thought. It is a manner whereby the desperately harried among these creatures of the petted heart arrive upon occasion at an agreeable, almost reposeful, contemplation of the reverse of God.

There is little pleasure to be on the lecture-rostrum for a narrator sensible to the pulses of his audience. Justice compels at times. In truth, there are times when the foggy obscurities of the preacher are by comparison broad daylight beside the whirling loose tissues of a woman unexplained. Aminta was one born to prize rectitude, to walk on the traced line uprightly; and while the dark rose overflowed the soft brown of her cheeks, under musings upon her unlicensed heart's doings overnight, she not only pleaded for woeful creatures of her sex burdened as she and erring, she weighed them in the scales with men, and put her heart where Justice pointed, sending men to kick aloft.

Her husband, the man-riddle: she was unable to rede or read him. Her will could not turn him; nor her tongue combat; nor was it granted her to pique the mailed veteran. Every poor innocent little bit of an art had been exhausted. Her title was Lady Ormont her condition actually slave. A luxuriously established slave, consorting with a singularly enfranchised set,—as, for instance, Mrs. Lawrence Finchley and Lord Adderwood; Sir John Randeller and Lady Staines; Mrs. May, Amy May, notorious wife of a fighting captain, the loneliest of blondes; and other ladies, other gentlemen, Mr. Morsfield in the list, paired or not yet paired: gossip raged. Aminta was of a disposition too generously cordial to let her be the rigorous critic of people with whom she was in touch. But her mind knew relief when she recollected that her humble little school-mate, Selina Collect, who had suffered on her behalf in old days, was coming up to her from the Suffolk coast on a visit for a week. However much a slave and an unloved woman, she could be a constant and protecting friend. Besides, Lord Ormont was gracious to little Selina. She thought of his remarks about the modest-minded girl after first seeing her. From that she struck upon a notion of reserves of humaneness being in him, if she might find the path to them: and thence, fortified by the repose her picture of little Selina's merit had bestowed, she sprang to the idea of valiancy, that she would woo him to listen to her, without inflicting a scene. He had been a listening lover, seeming lover, once, later than the Granada sunsets. The letter in her jewel-box urged Aminta to clear her conscience by some means, for leaving it unburnt.

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