

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

BEAUCHAMP'S
CAREER,
VOLUME 5

George Meredith
Beauchamp's Career. Volume 5

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Beauchamp's Career – Volume 5

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE FACE OF RENEE

Shortly before the ringing of the dinner-bell Rosamund knocked at Beauchamp's dressing-room door, the bearer of a telegram from Bevisham.

He read it in one swift run of the eyes, and said: 'Come in, ma'am, I have something for you. Madame de Rouaillout sends you this.'

Rosamund saw her name written in a French hand on the back of the card.

'You stay with us, Nevil?'

'To-night and to-morrow, perhaps. The danger seems to be over.'

'Has Dr. Shrapnel been in danger?'

'He has. If it's quite over now!'

'I declare to you, Nevil . . .'

'Listen to me, ma'am; I'm in the dark about this murderous business:—an old man, defenceless, harmless as a child!—but I know this, that you are somewhere in it.'

'Nevil, do you not guess at some one else?'

'He! yes, he! But Cecil Baskett led no blind man to Dr. Shrapnel's gate.'

'Nevil, as I live, I knew nothing of it!'

'No, but you set fire to the train. You hated the old man, and you taught Mr. Romfrey to think that you had been insulted. I see it all. Now you must have the courage to tell him of your error. There's no other course for you. I mean to take Mr. Romfrey to Dr. Shrapnel, to save the honour of our family, as far as it can be saved.'

'What? Nevil!' exclaimed Rosamund, gaping.

'It seems little enough, ma'am. But he must go. I will have the apology spoken, and man to man.'

'But you would never tell your uncle that?'

He laughed in his uncle's manner.

'But, Nevil, my dearest, forgive me, I think of you—why are the Halketts here? It is not entirely with Colonel Halkett's consent. It is your uncle's influence with him that gives you your chance. Do you not care to avail yourself of it? Ever since he heard Dr. Shrapnel's letter to you, Colonel Halkett has, I am sure, been tempted to confound you with him in his mind: ah! Nevil, but recollect that it is only Mr. Romfrey who can help to give you your Cecilia. There is no dispensing with him. Postpone your attempt to humiliate—I mean, that is, Oh! Nevil, whatever you intend to do to overcome your uncle, trust to time, be friends with him; be a little worldly! for her sake! to ensure her happiness!'

Beauchamp obtained the information that his cousin Cecil had read out the letter of Dr. Shrapnel at Mount Laurels.

The bell rang.

'Do you imagine I should sit at my uncle's table if I did not intend to force him to repair the wrong he has done to himself and to us?' he said.

'Oh! Nevil, do you not see Captain Baskett at work here?'

'What amends can Cecil Baskett make? My uncle is a man of honour: it is in his power. There, I leave you to speak to him; you will do it to-night, after we break up in the drawing-room.'

Rosamund groaned: 'An apology to Dr. Shrapnel from Mr. Romfrey! It is an impossibility, Nevil! utter!'

'So you say to sit idle: but do as I tell you.'

He went downstairs.

He had barely reproached her. She wondered at that; and then remembered his alien sad half-smile in quitting the room.

Rosamund would not present herself at her lord's dinner-table when there were any guests at Steynham. She prepared to receive Miss Halkett in the drawing-room, as the guests of the house this evening chanced to be her friends.

Madame de Rouaillout's present to her was a photograph of M. de Croisnel, his daughter and son in a group. Rosamund could not bear to look at the face of Renee, and she put it out of sight. But she had looked. She was reduced to look again.

Roland stood beside his father's chair; Renee sat at his feet, clasping his right hand. M. de Croisnel's fallen eyelids and unshorn white chin told the story of the family reunion. He was dying: his two children were nursing him to the end.

Decidedly Cecilia was a more beautiful woman than Renee: but on which does the eye linger longest—which draws the heart? a radiant landscape, where the tall ripe wheat flashes between shadow and shine in the stately march of Summer, or the peep into dewy woodland on to dark water?

Dark-eyed Renee was not beauty but attraction; she touched the double chords within us which are we know not whether harmony or discord, but a divine discord if an uncertified harmony, memorable beyond plain sweetness or majesty. There are touches of bliss in anguish that superhumanize bliss, touches of mystery in simplicity, of the eternal in the variable. These two chords of poignant antiphony she struck throughout the range of the hearts of men, and strangely interwove them in vibrating unison. Only to look at her face, without hearing her voice, without the charm of her speech, was to feel it. On Cecilia's entering the drawing-room sofa, while the gentlemen drank claret, Rosamund handed her the card of the photographic artist of Tours, mentioning no names.

'I should say the portrait is correct. A want of spirituality,' Rosamund said critically, using one of the insular commonplaces, after that manner of fastening upon what there is not in a piece of Art or nature.

Cecilia's avidity to see and study the face preserved her at a higher mark.

She knew the person instantly; had no occasion to ask who this was. She sat over the portrait blushing burningly: 'And that is a brother?' she said.

'That is her brother Roland, and very like her, except in complexion,' said Rosamund.

Cecilia murmured of a general resemblance in the features. Renee enchained her. Though but a sun-shadow, the vividness of this French face came out surprisingly; air was in the nostrils and speech flew from the tremulous mouth. The eyes? were they quivering with internal light, or were they set to seem so in the sensitive strange curves of the eyelids whose awakened lashes appeared to tremble on some borderland between lustreful significance and the mists? She caught at the nerves like certain aoristic combinations in music, like tones of a stringed instrument swept by the wind, enticing, unseizable. Yet she sat there at her father's feet gazing out into the world indifferent to spectators, indifferent even to the common sentiment of gracefulness. Her left hand clasped his right, and she supported herself on the floor with the other hand leaning away from him, to the destruction of conventional symmetry in the picture. None but a woman of consummate breeding dared have done as she did. It was not Southern suppleness that saved her from the charge of harsh audacity, but something of the kind of genius in her mood which has hurried the greater poets of sound and speech to impose their naturalness upon accepted laws, or show the laws to have been our meagre limitations.

The writer in this country will, however, be made safest, and the excellent body of self-appointed thongmen, who walk up and down our ranks flapping their leathern straps to terrorize us from experiments in imagery, will best be satisfied, by the statement that she was indescribable: a term that exacts no labour of mind from him or from them, for it flows off the pen as readily as it fills a vacuum.

That posture of Renee displeased Cecilia and fascinated her. In an exhibition of paintings she would have passed by it in pure displeasure: but here was Nevil's first love, the woman who loved him; and she was French. After a continued study of her Cecilia's growing jealousy betrayed itself in a conscious rivalry of race, coming to the admission that Englishwomen cannot fling themselves about on the floor without agonizing the graces: possibly, too, they cannot look singularly without risks in the direction of slyness and brazen archness; or talk animatedly without dipping in slang. Conventional situations preserve them and interchange dignity with them; still life befits them; pre-eminently that judicial seat from which in briefest speech they deliver their judgements upon their foreign sisters. Jealousy it was that plucked Cecilia from her majestic place and caused her to envy in Renee things she would otherwise have disapproved.

At last she had seen the French lady's likeness! The effect of it was a horrid trouble in Cecilia's cool blood, abasement, a sense of eclipse, hardly any sense of deserving worthiness: 'What am I but an heiress!' Nevil had once called her beautiful; his praise had given her beauty. But what is beauty when it is outshone! Ask the owners of gems. You think them rich; they are pining.

Then, too, this Renee, who looked electrical in repose, might really love Nevil with a love that sent her heart out to him in his enterprises, justifying and adoring him, piercing to the hero in his very thoughts.

Would she not see that his championship of the unfortunate man Dr. Shrapnel was heroic?

Cecilia surrendered the card to Rosamund, and it was out of sight when Beauchamp stepped in the drawing-room. His cheeks were flushed; he had been one against three for the better part of an hour.

'Are you going to show me the downs to-morrow morning?' Cecilia said to him; and he replied, 'You will have to be up early.'

'What's that?' asked the colonel, at Beauchamp's heels.

He was volunteering to join the party of two for the early morning's ride to the downs. Mr. Romfrey pressed his shoulder, saying, 'There's no third horse can do it in my stables.'

Colonel Halkett turned to him.

'I had your promise to come over the kennels with me and see how I treat a cry of mad dog, which is ninety-nine times out of a hundred mad fool man,' Mr. Romfrey added.

By that the colonel knew he meant to stand by Nevil still and offer him his chance of winning Cecilia.

Having pledged his word not to interfere, Colonel Halkett submitted, and muttered, 'Ah! the kennels.' Considering however what he had been witnessing of Nevil's behaviour to his uncle, the colonel was amazed at Mr. Romfrey's magnanimity in not cutting him off and disowning him.

'Why the downs?' he said.

'Why the deuce, colonel?' A question quite as reasonable, and Mr. Romfrey laughed under his breath. To relieve an uncertainty in Cecilia's face, that might soon have become confusion, he described the downs fronting the paleness of earliest dawn, and then their arch and curve and dip against the pearly grey of the half-glow; and then, among their hollows, lo, the illumination of the East all around, and up and away, and a gallop for miles along the turfy thymy rolling billows, land to left, sea to right, below you. 'It's the nearest hit to wings we can make, Cecilia.' He surprised her with her Christian name, which kindled in her the secret of something he expected from that ride on the downs. Compare you the Alps with them? If you could jump on the back of an eagle, you might. The Alps have height. But the downs have swiftness. Those long stretching lines of the downs are greyhounds in full career. To look at them is to set the blood racing! Speed is on the downs, glorious motion, odorous air of sea and herb, exquisite as in the isles of Greece. And the Continental travelling ninnies leave England for health!—run off and forth from the downs to the steamboat, the railway, the steaming hotel, the tourist's shivering mountain-top, in search of sensations! There on the downs the finest and liveliest are at their bidding ready to fly through them like hosts of angels.

He spoke somewhat in that strain, either to relieve Cecilia or prepare the road for Nevil, not in his ordinary style; on the contrary, with a swing of enthusiasm that seemed to spring of ancient heartfelt fervours. And indeed soon afterward he was telling her that there on those downs, in full view of Steynham, he and his wife had first joined hands.

Beauchamp sat silent. Mr. Romfrey despatched orders to the stables, and Rosamund to the kitchen. Cecilia was rather dismayed by the formal preparations for the ride. She declined the early cup of coffee. Mr. Romfrey begged her to take it. 'Who knows the hour when you 'll be back?' he said. Beauchamp said nothing.

The room grew insufferable to Cecilia. She would have liked to be wafted to her chamber in a veil, so shamefully unveiled did she seem to be. But the French lady would have been happy in her place! Her father kissed her as fathers do when they hand the bride into the travelling-carriage. His 'Good-night, my darling!' was in the voice of a soldier on duty. For a concluding sign that her dim apprehensions pointed correctly, Mr. Romfrey kissed her on the forehead. She could not understand how it had come to pass that she found herself suddenly on this incline, precipitated whither she would fain be going, only less hurriedly, less openly, and with her secret merely peeping, like a dove in the breast.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE RIDE IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

That pure opaque of the line of downs ran luminously edged against the pearly morning sky, with its dark landward face crepusculine yet clear in every combe, every dotting copse and furze-bush, every wavy fall, and the ripple, crease, and rill-like descent of the turf. Beauty of darkness was there, as well as beauty of light above.

Beauchamp and Cecilia rode forth before the sun was over the line, while the West and North-west sides of the rolling downs were stamped with such firmness of dusky feature as you see on the indentations of a shield of tarnished silver. The mounting of the sun behind threw an obscurer gloom, and gradually a black mask overcame them, until the rays shot among their folds and windings, and shadows rich as the black pansy, steady as on a dialplate rounded with the hour.

Mr. Everard Romfrey embraced this view from Steynham windows, and loved it. The lengths of gigantic 'greyhound backs' coursing along the South were his vision of delight; no image of repose for him, but of the life in swiftmess. He had known them when the great bird of the downs was not a mere tradition, and though he owned conscientiously to never having beheld the bird, a certain mystery of holiness hung about the region where the bird had been in his time. There, too, with a timely word he had gained a wealthy and good wife. He had now sent Nevil to do the same.

This astute gentleman had caught at the idea of a ride of the young couple to the downs with his customary alacrity of perception as being the very best arrangement for hurrying them to the point. At Steynham Nevil was sure to be howling all day over his tumbled joss Shrapnel. Once away in the heart of the downs, and Cecilia beside him, it was a matter of calculation that two or three hours of the sharpening air would screw his human nature to the pitch. In fact, unless each of them was reluctant, they could hardly return unbetrothed. Cecilia's consent was foreshadowed by her submission in going: Mr. Romfrey had noticed her fright at the suggestive formalities he cast round the expedition, and felt sure of her. Taking Nevil for a man who could smell the perfume of a ripe affirmative on the sweetest of lips, he was pretty well sure of him likewise. And then a truce to all that Radical rageing and hot-pokering of the country! and lie in peace, old Shrapnel! and get on your legs when you can, and offend no more; especially be mindful not to let fly one word against a woman! With Cecilia for wife, and a year of marriage devoted to a son and heir, Nevil might be expected to resume his duties as a naval officer, and win an honourable name for the inheritance of the young one he kissed.

There was benevolence in these previsions of Mr. Romfrey, proving how good it is for us to bow to despotic authority, if only we will bring ourselves unquestioningly to accept the previous deeds of the directing hand.

Colonel Halkett gave up his daughter for lost when she did not appear at the breakfast-table: for yet more decidedly lost when the luncheon saw her empty place; and as time drew on toward the dinner-hour, he began to think her lost beyond hope, embarked for good and all with the madbrain. Some little hope of a dissension between the pair, arising from the natural antagonism of her strong sense to Nevil's extravagance, had buoyed him until it was evident that they must have alighted at an inn to eat, which signified that they had overleaped the world and its hurdles, and were as dreamy a leash of lovers as ever made a dreamland of hard earth. The downs looked like dreamland through the long afternoon. They shone as in a veil of silk-softly fair, softly dark. No spot of harshness was on them save where a quarry South-westward gaped at the evening sun.

Red light struck into that round chalk maw, and the green slopes and channels and half-circle hollows were brought a mile-stride higher Steynham by the level beams.

The poor old colonel fell to a more frequent repetition of the 'Well!' with which he had been unconsciously expressing his perplexed mind in the kennels and through the covers during the day. None of the gentlemen went to dress. Mr. Culbrett was indoors conversing with Rosamund Culling.

'What's come to them?' the colonel asked of Mr. Romfrey, who said shrugging, 'Something wrong with one of the horses.' It had happened to him on one occasion to set foot in the hole of a baked hedgehog that had furnished a repast, not without succulence, to some shepherd of the downs. Such a case might have recurred; it was more likely to cause an upset at a walk than at a gallop: or perhaps a shoe had been cast; and young people break no bones at a walking fall; ten to one if they do at their top speed. Horses manage to kill their seniors for them: the young are exempt from accident.

Colonel Halkett nodded and sighed: 'I daresay they're safe. It's that man Shrapnel's letter—that letter, Romfrey! A private letter, I know; but I've not heard Nevil disown the opinions expressed in it. I submit. It's no use resisting. I treat my daughter as a woman capable of judging for herself. I repeat, I submit. I haven't a word against Nevil except on the score of his politics. I like him. All I have to say is, I don't approve of a republican and a sceptic for my son-in-law. I yield to you, and my daughter, if she . . . !'

'I think she does, colonel. Marriage 'll cure the fellow. Nevil will slough his craze. Off! old coat. Cissy will drive him in strings. "My wife!" I hear him.' Mr. Romfrey laughed quietly. 'It's all "my country," now. The dog'll be uxorious. He wants fixing; nothing worse.'

'How he goes on about Shrapnel!'

'I shouldn't think much of him if he didn't.'

'You're one in a thousand, Romfrey. I object to seeing a man worshipped.'

'It's Nevil's green-sickness, and Shrapnel's the god of it.'

'I trust to heaven you're right. It seems to me young fellows ought to be out of it earlier.'

'They generally are.' Mr. Romfrey named some of the processes by which they are relieved of brain-flightiness, adding philosophically, 'This way or that.'

His quick ear caught a sound of hoofs cantering down the avenue on the Northern front of the house.

He consulted his watch. 'Ten minutes to eight. Say a quarter-past for dinner. They're here, colonel.'

Mr. Romfrey met Nevil returning from the stables. Cecilia had disappeared.

'Had a good day?' said Mr. Romfrey.

Beauchamp replied: 'I'll tell you of it after dinner,' and passed by him.

Mr. Romfrey edged round to Colonel Halkett, conjecturing in his mind: They have not hit it; as he remarked: 'Breakfast and luncheon have been omitted in this day's fare,' which appeared to the colonel a confirmation of his worst fears, or rather the extinction of his last spark of hope.

He knocked at his daughter's door in going upstairs to dress.

Cecilia presented herself and kissed him.

'Well?' said he.

'By-and-by, papa,' she answered. 'I have a headache. Beg Mr. Romfrey to excuse me.'

'No news for me?'

She had no news.

Mrs. Culling was with her. The colonel stepped on mystified to his room.

When the door had closed Cecilia turned to Rosamund and burst into tears. Rosamund felt that it must be something grave indeed for the proud young lady so to betray a troubled spirit.

'He is ill—Dr. Shrapnel is very ill,' Cecilia responded to one or two subdued inquiries in as clear a voice as she could command.

'Where have you heard of him?' Rosamund asked.

'We have been there.'

'Bevisham? to Bevisham?' Rosamund was considering the opinion Mr.

Romfrey would form of the matter from the point of view of his horses.

'It was Nevil's wish,' said Cecilia.

'Yes? and you went with him,' Rosamund encouraged her to proceed, gladdened at hearing her speak of Nevil by that name; 'you have not been on the downs at all?'

Cecilia mentioned a junction railway station they had ridden to; and thence, boxing the horses, by train to Bevisham. Rosamund understood that some haunting anxiety had fretted Nevil during the night; in the morning he could not withstand it, and he begged Cecilia to change their destination, apparently with a vehemence of entreaty that had been irresistible, or else it was utter affection for him had reduced her to undertake the distasteful journey. She admitted that she was not the most sympathetic companion Nevil could have had on the way, either going or coming. She had not entered Dr. Shrapnel's cottage. Remaining on horseback she had seen the poor man reclining in his garden chair. Mr. Lydiard was with him, and also his ward Miss Denham, who had been summoned by telegraph by one of the servants from Switzerland. And Cecilia had heard Nevil speak of his uncle to her, and too humbly, she hinted. Nor had the expression of Miss Denham's countenance in listening to him pleased her; but it was true that a heavily burdened heart cannot be expected to look pleasing. On the way home Cecilia had been compelled in some degree to defend Mr. Romfrey. Blushing through her tears at the remembrance of a past emotion that had been mixed with foresight, she confessed to Rosamund she thought it now too late to prevent a rupture between Nevil and his uncle. Had some one whom Nevil trusted and cared for taken counsel with him and advised him before uncle and nephew met to discuss this most unhappy matter, then there might have been hope. As it was, the fate of Dr. Shrapnel had gained entire possession of Nevil. Every retort of his uncle's in reference to it rose up in him: he used language of contempt neighbouring abhorrence: he stipulated for one sole thing to win back his esteem for his uncle; and that was, the apology to Dr. Shrapnel.

'And to-night,' Cecilia concluded, 'he will request Mr. Romfrey to accompany him to Bevisham to-morrow morning, to make the apology in person. He will not accept the slightest evasion. He thinks Dr. Shrapnel may die, and the honour of the family—what is it he says of it?' Cecilia raised her eyes to the ceiling, while Rosamund blinked in impatience and grief, just apprehending the alien state of the young lady's mind in her absence of recollection, as well as her bondage in the effort to recollect accurately.

'Have you not eaten any food to-day, Miss Halkett?' she said; for it might be the want of food which had broken her and changed her manner.

Cecilia replied that she had ridden for an hour to Mount Laurels.

'Alone? Mr. Romfrey must not hear of that,' said Rosamund.

Cecilia consented to lie down on her bed. She declined the dainties Rosamund pressed on her. She was feverish with a deep and unconcealed affliction, and behaved as if her pride had gone. But if her pride had gone she would have eased her heart by sobbing outright. A similar division harassed her as when her friend Nevil was the candidate for Bevisham. She condemned his extreme wrath with his uncle, yet was attracted and enchained by the fire of passionate attachment which aroused it: and she was conscious that she had but shown obedience to his wishes throughout the day, not sympathy with his feelings. Under cover of a patient desire to please she had nursed irritation and jealousy; the degradation of the sense of jealousy increasing the irritation. Having consented to the ride to Dr. Shrapnel, should she not, to be consistent, have dismounted there? O half heart! A whole one, though it be an erring, like that of the French lady, does at least live, and has a history, and makes music: but the faint and uncertain is jarred in action, jarred in memory, ever behind the day and in the shadow of it! Cecilia reviewed herself: jealous, disappointed, vexed, ashamed, she had been all day a graceless companion, a bad actress: and at the day's close she was loving Nevil the better for what had dissatisfied, distressed, and wounded her. She was loving him in emulation of his devotedness to another person: and that other was a revolutionary common people's doctor! an infidel, a traitor to his country's dearest interests! But Nevil loved him, and it had become impossible for her not to

covet the love, or to think of the old offender without the halo cast by Nevil's attachment being upon him. So intensely was she moved by her intertwisting reflections that in an access of bodily fever she stood up and moved before the glass, to behold the image of the woman who could be the victim of these childish emotions: and no wonderful contrast struck her eyes; she appeared to herself as poor and small as they. How could she aspire to a man like Nevil Beauchamp? If he had made her happy by wooing her she would not have adored him as she did now. He likes my hair, she said, smoothing it out, and then pressing her temples, like one insane. Two minutes afterward she was telling Rosamund her head ached less.

'This terrible Dr. Shrapnel!' Rosamund exclaimed, but reported that no loud voices were raised in the dining-room.

Colonel Halkett came to see his daughter, full of anxiety and curiosity. Affairs had been peaceful below, for he was ignorant of the expedition to Bevisham. On hearing of it he frowned, questioned Cecilia as to whether she had set foot on that man's grounds, then said: 'Ah! well, we leave to-morrow: I must go, I have business at home; I can't delay it. I sanctioned no calling there, nothing of the kind. From Steynham to Bevisham? Goodness, it's rank madness. I'm not astonished you're sick and ill.'

He waited till he was assured Cecilia had no special matter to relate, and recommending her to drink the tea Mrs. Culling had made for her, and then go to bed and sleep, he went down to the drawing-room, charged with the worst form of hostility toward Nevil, the partly diplomatic.

Cecilia smiled at her father's mention of sleep. She was in the contest of the two men, however inanimately she might be lying overhead, and the assurance in her mind that neither of them would give ground, so similar were they in their tenacity of will, dissimilar in all else, dragged her this way and that till she swayed lifeless between them. One may be as a weed of the sea while one's fate is being decided. To love is to be on the sea, out of sight of land: to love a man like Nevil Beauchamp is to be on the sea in tempest. Still to persist in loving would be noble, and but for this humiliation of utter helplessness an enviable power. Her thoughts ran thus in shame and yearning and regret, dimly discerning where her heart failed in the strength which was Nevil's, though it was a full heart, faithful and not void of courage. But he never brooded, he never blushed from insufficiency—the faintness of a desire, the callow passion that cannot fly and feed itself: he never tottered; he walked straight to his mark. She set up his image and Renee's, and cowered under the heroic shapes till she felt almost extinct. With her weak limbs and head worthlessly paining, the little infantile I within her ceased to wail, dwindled beyond sensation. Rosamund, waiting on her in the place of her maid, saw two big drops come through her closed eyelids, and thought that if it could be granted to Nevil to look for a moment on this fair and proud young lady's loveliness in abandonment, it would tame, melt, and save him. The Gods presiding over custom do not permit such renovating sights to men.

CHAPTER XXXVI

PURSUIT OF THE APOLOGY OF Mr. ROMFREY TO DR. SHRAPNEL

The contest, which was an alternation of hard hitting and close wrestling, had recommenced when Colonel Halkett stepped into the drawing-room.

'Colonel, I find they've been galloping to Bevisham and back,' said Mr. Romfrey.

'I've heard of it,' the colonel replied. Not perceiving a sign of dissatisfaction on his friend's face, he continued: 'To that man Shrapnel.'

'Cecilia did not dismount,' said Beauchamp.

'You took her to that man's gate. It was not with my sanction. You know my ideas of the man.'

'If you were to see him now, colonel, I don't think you would speak harshly of him.'

'We 're not obliged to go and look on men who have, had their measure dealt them.'

'Barbarously,' said Beauchamp.

Mr. Romfrey in the most placid manner took a chair. 'Windy talk, that!' he said.

Colonel Halkett seated himself. Stukely Culbrett turned a sheet of manuscript he was reading.

Beauchamp began a caged lion's walk on the rug under the mantelpiece.

'I shall not spare you from hearing what I think of it, sir.'

'We 've had what you think of it twice over,' said Mr. Romfrey. 'I suppose it was the first time for information, the second time for emphasis, and the rest counts to keep it alive in your recollection.'

'This is what you have to take to heart, sir; that Dr. Shrapnel is now seriously ill.'

'I'm sorry for it, and I'll pay the doctor's bill.'

'You make it hard for me to treat you with respect.'

'Fire away. Those Radical friends of yours have to learn a lesson, and it's worth a purse to teach them that a lady, however feeble she may seem to them, is exactly of the strength of the best man of her acquaintance.'

'That's well said!' came from Colonel Halkett.

Beauchamp stared at him, amazed by the commendation of empty language.

'You acted in error; barbarously, but in error,' he addressed his uncle.

'And you have got a fine topic for mouthing,' Mr. Romfrey rejoined.

'You mean to sit still under Dr. Shrapnel's forgiveness?'

'He's taken to copy the Christian religion, has he?'

'You know you were deluded when you struck him.'

'Not a whit.'

'Yes, you know it now: Mrs. Culling—'

'Drag in no woman, Nevil Beauchamp!'

'She has confessed to you that Dr. Shrapnel neither insulted her nor meant to ruffle her.'

'She has done no such nonsense.'

'If she has not!—but I trust her to have done it.'

'You play the trumpeter, you terrorize her.'

'Into opening her lips wider; nothing else. I'll have the truth from her, and no mincing: and from Cecil Baskett and Palmet.'

'Give Cecil a second licking, if you can, and have him off to Shrapnel.'

'You!' cried Beauchamp.

At this juncture Stukely Culbrett closed the manuscript in his hands, and holding it out to Beauchamp, said:

'Here's your letter, Nevil. It's tolerably hard to decipher. It's mild enough; it's middling good pulpit. I like it.'

'What have you got there?' Colonel Halkett asked him.

'A letter of his friend Dr. Shrapnel on the Country. Read a bit, colonel.'

'I? That letter! Mild, do you call it?' The colonel started back his chair in declining to touch the letter.

'Try it,' said Stukely. 'It's the letter they have been making the noise about. It ought to be printed. There's a hit or two at the middle-class that I should like to see in print. It's really not bad pulpit; and I suspect that what you object to, colonel, is only the dust of a well-thumped cushion. Shrapnel thumps with his fist. He doesn't say much that's new. If the parsons were men they'd be saying it every Sunday. If they did, colonel, I should hear you saying, amen.'

'Wait till they do say it.'

'That's a long stretch. They're turn-cocks of one Water-company—to wash the greasy citizens!'

'You're keeping Nevil on the gape;' said Mr. Romfrey, with a whimsical shrewd cast of the eye at Beauchamp, who stood alert not to be foiled, arrow-like in look and readiness to repeat his home-shot. Mr. Romfrey wanted to hear more of that unintelligible 'You!' of Beauchamp's. But Stukely Culbrett intended that the latter should be foiled, and he continued his diversion from the angry subject.

'We'll drop the sacerdotals,' he said. 'They're behind a veil for us, and so are we for them. I'm with you, colonel; I wouldn't have them persecuted; they sting fearfully when whipped. No one listens to them now except the class that goes to sleep under them, to "set an example" to the class that can't understand them. Shrapnel is like the breeze shaking the turf-grass outside the church-doors; a trifle fresher. He knocks nothing down.'

'He can't!' ejaculated the colonel.

'He sermonizes to shake, that's all. I know the kind of man.'

'Thank heaven, it's not a common species in England!'

'Common enough to be classed.'

Beauchamp struck through the conversation of the pair: 'Can I see you alone to-night, sir, or to-morrow morning?'

'You may catch me where you can,' was Mr. Romfrey's answer.

'Where's that? It's for your sake and mine, not for Dr. Shrapnel's.'

I have to speak to you, and must. You have done your worst with him; you can't undo it. You have to think of your honour as a gentleman.

I intend to treat you with respect, but wolf is the title now, whether I say it or not.'

'Shrapnel's a rather long-legged sheep?'

'He asks for nothing from you.'

'He would have got nothing, at a cry of peccavi!'

'He was innocent, perfectly blameless; he would not lie to save himself.'

You mistook that for—but you were an engine shot along a line of rails.

He does you the justice to say you acted in error.'

'And you're his parrot.'

'He pardons you.'

'Ha! t' other cheek!'

'You went on that brute's errand in ignorance. Will you keep to the character now you know the truth? Hesitation about it doubles the infamy. An old man! the best of men! the kindest and truest! the most unselfish!'

'He tops me by half a head, and he's my junior.'

Beauchamp suffered himself to give out a groan of sick derision: 'Ah!'

'And it was no joke holding him tight,' said Mr. Romfrey, 'I'd as lief snap an ash. The fellow (he leaned round to Colonel Halkett) must be a fellow of a fine constitution. And he took his punishment

like a man. I've known worse: and far worse: gentlemen by birth. There's the choice of taking it upright or fighting like a rabbit with a weasel in his hole. Leave him to think it over, he'll come right. I think no harm of him, I've no animus. A man must have his lesson at some time of life. I did what I had to do.'

'Look here, Nevil,' Stukely Culbrett checked Beauchamp in season: 'I beg to inquire what Dr. Shrapnel means by "the people." We have in our country the nobles and the squires, and after them, as I understand it, the people: that's to say, the middle-class and the working-class—fat and lean. I'm quite with Shrapnel when he lashes the fleshpots. They want it, and they don't get it from "their organ," the Press. I fancy you and I agree about their organ; the dimmallest organ that ever ground a hackneyed set of songs and hymns to madden the thoroughfares.'

'The Press of our country!' interjected Colonel Halkett in moaning parenthesis.

'It's the week-day Parson of the middle-class, colonel. They have their thinking done for them as the Chinese have their dancing. But, Nevil, your Dr. Shrapnel seems to treat the traders as identical with the aristocracy in opposition to his "people." The traders are the cursed middlemen, bad friends of the "people," and infernally treacherous to the nobles till money hoists them. It's they who pull down the country. They hold up the nobles to the hatred of the democracy, and the democracy to scare the nobles. One's when they want to swallow a privilege, and the other's when they want to ring-fence their gains. How is it Shrapnel doesn't expose the trick? He must see through it. I like that letter of his. People is one of your Radical big words that burst at a query. He can't mean Quince, and Bottom, and Starveling, Christopher Sly, Jack Cade, Caliban, and poor old Hodge? No, no, Nevil. Our clowns are the stupidest in Europe. They can't cook their meals. They can't spell; they can scarcely speak. They haven't a jig in their legs. And I believe they're losing their grin! They're nasty when their blood's up. Shakespeare's Cade tells you what he thought of Radicalizing the people. "And as for your mother, I 'll make her a duke"; that 's one of their songs. The word people, in England, is a dyspeptic agitator's dream when he falls nodding over the red chapter of French history. Who won the great liberties for England? My book says, the nobles. And who made the great stand later?—the squires. What have the middlemen done but bid for the people they despise and fear, dishonour us abroad and make a hash of us at home? Shrapnel sees that. Only he has got the word people in his mouth. The people of England, my dear fellow, want heading. Since the traders obtained power we have been a country on all fours. Of course Shrapnel sees it: I say so. But talk to him and teach him where to look for the rescue.'

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