

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE ORDEAL OF
RICHARD FEVEREL.
VOLUME 2

George Meredith

**The Ordeal of Richard
Feverel. Volume 2**

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Содержание

CHAPTER XII	5
CHAPTER XIII	11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	14

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CHAPTER XII

Laying of ghosts is a public duty, and, as the mystery of the apparition that had frightened little Clare was never solved on the stage of events at Raynham, where dread walked the Abbey, let us go behind the scenes a moment. Morally superstitious as the baronet was, the character of his mind was opposed to anything like spiritual agency in the affairs of men, and, when the matter was made clear to him, it shook off a weight of weakness and restored his mental balance; so that from this time he went about more like the man he had once been, grasping more thoroughly the great truth, that This World is well designed. Nay, he could laugh on hearing Adrian, in reminiscence of the ill luck of one of the family members at its first manifestation, call the uneasy spirit, Algernon's Leg.

Mrs. Doria was outraged. She maintained that her child had seen— Not to believe in it was almost to rob her of her personal property. After satisfactorily studying his old state of mind in her, Sir Austin, moved by pity, took her aside one day and showed her that her Ghost could write words in the flesh. It was a letter from the unhappy lady who had given Richard birth,—brief cold lines, simply telling him his house would be disturbed by her no more. Cold lines, but penned by what heart-broken abnegation, and underlying them with what anguish of soul! Like most who dealt with him, Lady Feverel thought her husband a man fatally stern and implacable, and she acted as silly creatures will act when they fancy they see a fate against them: she neither petitioned for her right nor claimed it: she tried to ease her heart's yearning by stealth, and, now she renounced all. Mrs. Doria, not wanting in the family tenderness and softness, shuddered at him for accepting the sacrifice so composedly: but he bade her to think how distracting to this boy would be the sight of such relations between mother and father. A few years, and as man he should know, and judge, and love her. "Let this be her penance, not inflicted by me!" Mrs. Doria bowed to the System for another, not opining when it would be her turn to bow for herself.

Further behind the scenes we observe Rizzio and Mary grown older, much disenchanting: she discrowned, dishevelled,—he with gouty fingers on a greasy guitar. The Diaper Sandoe of promise lends his pen for small hires. His fame has sunk; his bodily girth has sensibly increased. What he can do, and will do, is still his theme; meantime the juice of the juniper is in requisition, and it seems that those small hires cannot be performed without it. Returning from her wretched journey to her wretcheder home, the lady had to listen to a mild reproof from easy-going Diaper,—a reproof so mild that he couched it in blank verse: for, seldom writing metrically now, he took to talking it. With a fluent sympathetic tear, he explained to her that she was damaging her interests by these proceedings; nor did he shrink from undertaking to elucidate wherefore. Pluming a smile upon his succulent mouth, he told her that the poverty she lived in was utterly unbecoming her gentle nurture, and that he had reason to believe—could assure her—that an annuity was on the point of being granted her by her husband. And Diaper broke his bud of a smile into full flower as he delivered this information. She learnt that he had applied to her husband for money. It is hard to have one's prop of self-respect cut away just when we are suffering a martyr's agony at the stake. There was a five minutes' tragic colloquy in the recesses behind the scenes,—totally tragic to Diaper, who had fondly hoped to bask in the warm sun of that annuity, and re-emerge from his state of grub. The lady then wrote the letter Sir Austin held open to his sister. The atmosphere behind the scenes is not wholesome, so, having laid the Ghost, we will return and face the curtain.

That infinitesimal dose of The World which Master Ripton Thompson had furnished to the System with such instantaneous and surprising effect was considered by Sir Austin to have worked

well, and to be for the time quite sufficient, so that Ripton did not receive a second invitation to Raynham, and Richard had no special intimate of his own age to rub his excessive vitality against, and wanted none. His hands were full enough with Tom Bakewell. Moreover, his father and he were heart in heart. The boy's mind was opening, and turned to his father affectionately reverent. At this period, when the young savage grows into higher influences, the faculty of worship is foremost in him. At this period Jesuits will stamp the future of their chargin' flocks; and all who bring up youth by a System, and watch it, know that it is the malleable moment. Boys possessing any mental or moral force to give them a tendency, then predestinate their careers; or, if under supervision, take the impress that is given them: not often to cast it off, and seldom to cast it off altogether.

In Sir Austin's Note-book was written: "Between Simple Boyhood and Adolescence—The Blossoming Season—on the threshold of Puberty, there is one Unselfish Hour—say, Spiritual Seed-time."

He took care that good seed should be planted in Richard, and that the most fruitful seed for a youth, namely, Example, should be of a kind to germinate in him the love of every form of nobleness.

"I am only striving to make my son a Christian," he said, answering them who persisted in expostulating with the System. And to these instructions he gave an aim: "First be virtuous," he told his son, "and then serve your country with heart and soul." The youth was instructed to cherish an ambition for statesmanship, and he and his father read history and the speeches of British orators to some purpose; for one day Sir Austin found him leaning cross-legged, and with his hand to his chin, against a pedestal supporting the bust of Chatham, contemplating the hero of our Parliament, his eyes streaming with tears.

People said the baronet carried the principle of Example so far that he only retained his boozing dyspeptic brother Hippias at Raynham in order to exhibit to his son the woeful retribution nature wreaked upon a life of indulgence; poor Hippias having now become a walking complaint. This was unjust, but there is no doubt he made use of every illustration to disgust or encourage his son that his neighbourhood afforded him, and did not spare his brother, for whom Richard entertained a contempt in proportion to his admiration of his father, and was for flying into penitential extremes which Sir Austin had to soften.

The boy prayed with his father morning and night.

"How is it, sir," he said one night, "I can't get Tom Bakewell to pray?"

"Does he refuse?" Sir Austin asked.

"He seems to be ashamed to," Richard replied. "He wants to know what is the good? and I don't know what to tell him."

"I'm afraid it has gone too far with him," said Sir Austin, "and until he has had some deep sorrows he will not find the divine want of Prayer. Strive, my son, when you represent the people, to provide for their education. He feels everything now through a dull impenetrable rind. Culture is half-way to heaven. Tell him, my son, should he ever be brought to ask how he may know the efficacy of Prayer, and that his prayer will be answered, tell him (he quoted *The Pilgrim's Scrip*):

"Who rises from Prayer a better man, his prayer is answered."

"I will, sir," said Richard, and went to sleep happy.

Happy in his father and in himself, the youth now lived. Conscience was beginning to inhabit him, and he carried some of the freightage known to men; though in so crude a form that it overweighed him, now on this side, now on that.

The wise youth Adrian observed these further progressionary developments in his pupil, soberly cynical. He was under Sir Austin's interdict not to banter him, and eased his acrid humours inspired by the sight of a felonious young rick-burner turning saint, by grave affectations of sympathy and extreme accuracy in marking the not widely-distant dates of his various changes. The Bread-and-water phase lasted a fortnight: the Vegetarian (an imitation of his cousin Austin), little better than a month: the religious, somewhat longer: the religious-propagandist (when he was for converting the

heathen of Lobourne and Burnley, and the domestics of the Abbey, including Tom Bakewell), longer still, and hard to bear;—he tried to convert Adrian! All the while Tom was being exercised like a raw recruit. Richard had a drill-sergeant from the nearest barracks down for him, to give him a proper pride in himself, and marched him to and fro with immense satisfaction, and nearly broke his heart trying to get the round-shouldered rustic to take in the rudiments of letters: for the boy had unbounded hopes for Tom, as a hero in grain.

Richard's pride also was cast aside. He affected to be, and really thought he was, humble. Whereupon Adrian, as by accident, imparted to him the fact that men were animals, and he an animal with the rest of them.

"I an animal!" cries Richard in scorn, and for weeks he was as troubled by this rudiment of self-knowledge as Tom by his letters. Sir Austin had him instructed in the wonders of anatomy, to restore his self-respect.

Seed-Time passed thus smoothly, and adolescence came on, and his cousin Clare felt what it was to be of an opposite sex to him. She too was growing, but nobody cared how she grew. Outwardly even her mother seemed absorbed in the sprouting of the green off-shoot of the Feverel tree, and Clare was his handmaiden, little marked by him.

Lady Blandish honestly loved the boy. She would tell him: "If I had been a girl, I would have had you for my husband." And he with the frankness of his years would reply: "And how do you know I would have had you?" causing her to laugh and call him a silly boy, for had he not heard her say she would have had him? Terrible words, he knew not then the meaning of!

"You don't read your father's Book," she said. Her own copy was bound in purple velvet, gilt-edged, as decorative ladies like to have holier books, and she carried it about with her, and quoted it, and (Adrian remarked to Mrs. Doria) hunted a noble quarry, and deliberately aimed at him therewith, which Mrs. Doria chose to believe, and regretted her brother would not be on his guard.

"See here," said Lady Blandish, pressing an almondy finger-nail to one of the Aphorisms, which instanced how age and adversity must clay-enclose us ere we can effectually resist the magnetism of any human creature in our path. "Can you understand it, child?"

Richard informed her that when she read he could.

"Well, then, my squire," she touched his cheek and ran her fingers through his hair, "learn as quick as you can not to be all hither and yon with a hundred different attractions, as I was before I met a wise man to guide me."

"Is my father very wise?" Richard asked.

"I think so," the lady emphasized her individual judgment.

"Do you—" Richard broke forth, and was stopped by a beating of his heart.

"Do I—what?" she calmly queried.

"I was going to say, do you—I mean, I love him so much."

Lady Blandish smiled and slightly coloured.

They frequently approached this theme, and always retreated from it; always with the same beating of heart to Richard, accompanied by the sense of a growing mystery, which, however, did not as yet generally disturb him.

Life was made very pleasant to him at Raynham, as it was part of Sir Austin's principle of education that his boy should be thoroughly joyous and happy; and whenever Adrian sent in a satisfactory report of his pupil's advancement, which he did pretty liberally, diversions were planned, just as prizes are given to diligent school-boys, and Richard was supposed to have all his desires gratified while he attended to his studies. The System flourished. Tall, strong, bloomingly healthy, he took the lead of his companions on land and water, and had more than one bondsman in his service besides Ripton Thompson—the boy without a Destiny! Perhaps the boy with a Destiny was growing up a trifle too conscious of it. His generosity to his occasional companions was princely, but was exercised something too much in the manner of a prince; and, notwithstanding his contempt for

baseness, he would overlook that more easily than an offence to his pride, which demanded an utter servility when it had once been rendered susceptible. If Richard had his followers he had also his feuds. The Papworths were as subservient as Ripton, but young Ralph Morton, the nephew of Mr. Morton, and a match for Richard in numerous promising qualities, comprising the noble science of fisticuffs, this youth spoke his mind too openly, and moreover would not be snubbed. There was no middle course for Richard's comrades between high friendship or absolute slavery. He was deficient in those cosmopolite habits and feelings which enable boys and men to hold together without caring much for each other; and, like every insulated mortal, he attributed the deficiency, of which he was quite aware, to the fact of his possessing a superior nature. Young Ralph was a lively talker: therefore, argued Richard's vanity, he had no intellect. He was affable: therefore he was frivolous. The women liked him: therefore he was a butterfly. In fine, young Ralph was popular, and our superb prince, denied the privilege of despising, ended by detesting him.

Early in the days of their contention for leadership, Richard saw the absurdity of affecting to scorn his rival. Ralph was an Eton boy, and hence, being robust, a swimmer and a cricketer. A swimmer and a cricketer is nowhere to be scorned in youth's republic. Finding that manoeuvre would not do, Richard was prompted once or twice to entrench himself behind his greater wealth and his position; but he soon abandoned that also, partly because his chilliness to ridicule told him he was exposing himself, and chiefly that his heart was too chivalrous. And so he was dragged into the lists by Ralph, and experienced the luck of champions. For cricket, and for diving, Ralph bore away the belt: Richard's middle-stump tottered before his ball, and he could seldom pick up more than three eggs underwater to Ralph's half-dozen. He was beaten, too, in jumping and running. Why will silly mortals strive to the painful pinnacles of championship? Or why, once having reached them, not have the magnanimity and circumspection to retire into private life immediately? Stung by his defeats, Richard sent one of his dependent Papworths to Poer Hall, with a challenge to Ralph Barthrop Morton; matching himself to swim across the Thames and back, once, twice, or thrice, within a less time than he, Ralph Barthrop Morton, would require for the undertaking. It was accepted, and a reply returned, equally formal in the trumpeting of Christian names, wherein Ralph Barthrop Morton acknowledged the challenge of Richard Doria Feverel, and was his man. The match came off on a midsummer morning, under the direction of Captain Algernon. Sir Austin was a spectator from the cover of a plantation by the river-side, unknown to his son, and, to the scandal of her sex, Lady Blandish accompanied the baronet. He had invited her attendance, and she, obeying her frank nature, and knowing what *The Pilgrim's Scrip* said about prudes, at once agreed to view the match, pleasing him mightily. For was not here a woman worthy the Golden Ages of the world? one who could look upon man as a creature divinely made, and look with a mind neither tempted, nor taunted, by the Serpent! Such a woman was rare. Sir Austin did not discompose her by uttering his praises. She was conscious of his approval only in an increased gentleness of manner, and something in his voice and communications, as if he were speaking to a familiar, a very high compliment from him. While the lads were standing ready for the signal to plunge from the steep decline of greensward into the shining waters, Sir Austin called upon her to admire their beauty, and she did, and even advanced her head above his shoulder delicately. In so doing, and just as the start was given, a bonnet became visible to Richard. Young Ralph was heels in air before he moved, and then he dropped like lead. He was beaten by several lengths.

The result of the match was unaccountable to all present, and Richard's friends unanimously pressed him to plead a false start. But though the youth, with full confidence in his better style and equal strength, had backed himself heavily against his rival, and had lost his little river-yacht to Ralph, he would do nothing of the sort. It was the Bonnet had beaten him, not Ralph. The Bonnet, typical of the mystery that caused his heart those violent palpitations, was his dear, detestable enemy.

And now, as he progressed from mood to mood, his ambition turned towards a field where Ralph could not rival him, and where the Bonnet was etherealized, and reigned glorious mistress.

A cheek to the pride of a boy will frequently divert him to the path where lie his subtlest powers. Richard gave up his companions, servile or antagonistic: he relinquished the material world to young Ralph, and retired into himself, where he was growing to be lord of kingdoms where Beauty was his handmaid, and History his minister and Time his ancient harper, and sweet Romance his bride; where he walked in a realm vaster and more gorgeous than the great Orient, peopled with the heroes that have been. For there is no princely wealth, and no loftiest heritage, to equal this early one that is made bountifully common to so many, when the ripening blood has put a spark to the imagination, and the earth is seen through rosy mists of a thousand fresh-awakened nameless and aimless desires; panting for bliss and taking it as it comes; making of any sight or sound, perforce of the enchantment they carry with them, a key to infinite, because innocent, pleasure. The passions then are gambolling cubs; not the ravaging gluttons they grow to. They have their teeth and their talons, but they neither tear nor bite. They are in counsel and fellowship with the quickened heart and brain. The whole sweet system moves to music.

Something akin to the indications of a change in the spirit of his son, which were now seen, Sir Austin had marked down to be expected, as due to his plan. The blushes of the youth, his long vigils, his clinging to solitude, his abstraction, and downcast but not melancholy air, were matters for rejoicing to the prescient gentleman. "For it comes," said he to Dr. Clifford of Lobourne, after consulting him medically on the youth's behalf and being assured of his soundness, "it comes of a thoroughly sane condition. The blood is healthy, the mind virtuous: neither instigates the other to evil, and both are perfecting toward the flower of manhood. If he reach that pure—in the untainted fulness and perfection of his natural powers—I am indeed a happy father! But one thing he will owe to me: that at one period of his life he knew paradise, and could read God's handwriting on the earth! Now those abominations whom you call precocious boys—your little pet monsters, doctor!—and who can wonder that the world is what it is? when it is full of them—as they will have no divine time to look back upon in their own lives, how can they believe in innocence and goodness, or be other than sons of selfishness and the Devil? But my boy," and the baronet dropped his voice to a key that was touching to hear, "my boy, if he fall, will fall from an actual region of purity. He dare not be a sceptic as to that. Whatever his darkness, he will have the guiding light of a memory behind him. So much is secure."

To talk nonsense, or poetry, or the dash between the two, in a tone of profound sincerity, and to enunciate solemn discordances with received opinion so seriously as to convey the impression of a spiritual insight, is the peculiar gift by which monomaniacs, having first persuaded themselves, contrive to influence their neighbours, and through them to make conquest of a good half of the world, for good or for ill. Sir Austin had this gift. He spoke as if he saw the truth, and, persisting in it so long, he was accredited by those who did not understand him, and silenced them that did.

"We shall see," was all the argument left to Dr. Clifford, and other unbelievers.

So far certainly the experiment had succeeded. A comelier, bracer, better boy was nowhere to be met. His promise was undeniable. The vessel, too, though it lay now in harbour and had not yet been proved by the buffets of the elements on the great ocean, had made a good trial trip, and got well through stormy weather, as the records of the Bakewell Comedy witnessed to at Raynham. No augury could be hopefuller. The Fates must indeed be hard, the Ordeal severe, the Destiny dark, that could destroy so bright a Spring! But, bright as it was, the baronet relaxed nothing of his vigilant supervision. He said to his intimates: "Every act, every fostered inclination, almost every thought, in this Blossoming Season, bears its seed for the Future. The living Tree now requires incessant watchfulness." And, acting up to his light, Sir Austin did watch. The youth submitted to an examination every night before he sought his bed; professedly to give an account of his studies, but really to recapitulate his moral experiences of the day. He could do so, for he was pure. Any wildness in him that his father noted, any remoteness or richness of fancy in his expressions, was set down as incidental to the Blossoming Season. There is nothing like a theory for binding the wise. Sir Austin, despite his rigid watch and ward, knew less of his son than the servant of his household. And he was

deaf, as well as blind. Adrian thought it his duty to tell him that the youth was consuming paper. Lady Blandish likewise hinted at his mooning propensities. Sir Austin from his lofty watch-tower of the System had foreseen it, he said. But when he came to hear that the youth was writing poetry, his wounded heart had its reasons for being much disturbed.

"Surely," said Lady Blandish, "you knew he scribbled?"

"A very different thing from writing poetry," said the baronet. "No Feverel has ever written poetry."

"I don't think it's a sign of degeneracy," the lady remarked. "He rhymes very prettily to me."

A London phrenologist, and a friendly Oxford Professor of poetry, quieted Sir Austin's fears.

The phrenologist said he was totally deficient in the imitative faculty; and the Professor, that he was equally so in the rhythmic, and instanced several consoling false quantities in the few effusions submitted to him. Added to this, Sir Austin told Lady Blandish that Richard had, at his best, done what no poet had ever been known to be capable of doing: he had, with his own hands, and in cold blood, committed his virgin manuscript to the flames: which made Lady Blandish sigh forth, "Poor boy!"

Killing one's darling child is a painful imposition. For a youth in his Blossoming Season, who fancies himself a poet, to be requested to destroy his first-born, without a reason (though to pretend a reason cogent enough to justify the request were a mockery), is a piece of abhorrent despotism, and Richard's blossoms withered under it. A strange man had been introduced to him, who traversed and bisected his skull with sagacious stiff fingers, and crushed his soul while, in an infallible voice, declaring him the animal he was making him feel such an animal! Not only his blossoms withered, his being seemed to draw in its shoots and twigs. And when, coupled thereunto (the strange man having departed, his work done), his father, in his tenderest manner, stated that it would give him pleasure to see those same precocious, utterly valueless, scribblings among the cinders, the last remaining mental blossoms spontaneously fell away. Richard's spirit stood bare. He protested not. Enough that it could be wished! He would not delay a minute in doing it. Desiring his father to follow him, he went to a drawer in his room, and from a clean-linen recess, never suspected by Sir Austin, the secretive youth drew out bundle after bundle: each neatly tied, named, and numbered: and pitched them into flames. And so Farewell my young Ambition! and with it farewell all true confidence between Father and Son.

CHAPTER XIII

It was now, as Sir Austin had written it down, The Magnetic Age: the Age of violent attractions, when to hear mention of love is dangerous, and to see it, a communication of the disease. People at Raynham were put on their guard by the baronet, and his reputation for wisdom was severely criticized in consequence of the injunctions he thought fit to issue through butler and housekeeper down to the lower household, for the preservation of his son from any visible symptom of the passion. A footman and two housemaids are believed to have been dismissed on the report of heavy Benson that they were in or inclining to the state; upon which an undercook and a dairymaid voluntarily threw up their places, averring that "they did not want no young men, but to have their sex spied after by an old wretch like that," indicating the ponderous butler, "was a little too much for a Christian woman," and then they were ungenerous enough to glance at Benson's well-known marital calamity, hinting that some men met their deserts. So intolerable did heavy Benson's espionage become, that Raynham would have grown depopulated of its womankind had not Adrian interfered, who pointed out to the baronet what a fearful arm his butler was wielding. Sir Austin acknowledged it despondently. "It only shows," said he, with a fine spirit of justice, "how all but impossible it is to legislate where there are women!"

"I do not object," he added; "I hope I am too just to object to the exercise of their natural inclinations. All I ask from them is discreetness."

"Ay," said Adrian, whose discreetness was a marvel.

"No gadding about in couples," continued the baronet, "no kissing in public. Such occurrences no boy should witness. Whenever people of both sexes are thrown together, they will be silly; and where they are high-fed, uneducated, and barely occupied, it must be looked for as a matter of course. Let it be known that I only require discreetness."

Discreetness, therefore, was instructed to reign at the Abbey. Under Adrian's able tuition the fairest of its domestics acquired that virtue.

Discreetness, too, was enjoined to the upper household. Sir Austin, who had not previously appeared to notice the case of Lobourne's hopeless curate, now desired Mrs. Doria to interdict, or at least discourage, his visits, for the appearance of the man was that of an embodied sigh and groan.

"Really, Austin!" said Mrs. Doria, astonished to find her brother more awake than she had supposed, "I have never allowed him to hope."

"Let him see it, then," replied the baronet; "let him see it."

"The man amuses me," said Mrs. Doria. "You know, we have few amusements here, we inferior creatures. I confess I should like a barrel-organ better; that reminds one of town and the opera; and besides, it plays more than one tune. However, since you think my society bad for him, let him stop away."

With the self-devotion of a woman she grew patient and sweet the moment her daughter Clare was spoken of, and the business of her life in view. Mrs. Doria's maternal heart had betrothed the two cousins, Richard and Clare; had already beheld them espoused and fruitful. For this she yielded the pleasures of town; for this she immured herself at Raynham; for this she bore with a thousand follies, exactions, inconveniences, things abhorrent to her, and heaven knows what forms of torture and self-denial, which are smilingly endured by that greatest of voluntary martyrs—a mother with a daughter to marry. Mrs. Doria, an amiable widow, had surely married but for her daughter Clare. The lady's hair no woman could possess without feeling it her pride. It was the daily theme of her lady's-maid,—a natural aureole to her head. She was gay, witty, still physically youthful enough to claim a destiny; and she sacrificed it to accomplish her daughter's! sacrificed, as with heroic scissors, hair, wit, gaiety—let us not attempt to enumerate how much! more than may be said. And she was only one of thousands; thousands who have no portion of the hero's reward; for he may reckon on

applause, and condolence, and sympathy, and honour; they, poor slaves! must look for nothing but the opposition of their own sex and the sneers of ours. O, Sir Austin! had you not been so blinded, what an Aphorism might have sprung from this point of observation! Mrs. Doria was coolly told, between sister and brother, that during the Magnetic Age her daughter's presence at Raynham was undesirable. Instead of nursing offence, her sole thought was the mountain of prejudice she had to contend against. She bowed, and said, Clare wanted sea-air—she had never quite recovered the shock of that dreadful night. How long, Mrs. Doria wished to know, might the Peculiar Period be expected to last?

"That," said Sir Austin, "depends. A year, perhaps. He is entering on it. I shall be most grieved to lose you, Helen. Clare is now—how old?"

"Seventeen."

"She is marriageable."

"Marriageable, Austin! at seventeen! don't name such a thing. My child shall not be robbed of her youth."

"Our women marry early, Helen."

"My child shall not!"

The baronet reflected a moment. He did not wish to lose his sister.

"As you are of that opinion, Helen," said he, "perhaps we may still make arrangements to retain you with us. Would you think it advisable to send Clare—she should know discipline—to some establishment for a few months?"

"To an asylum, Austin?" cried Mrs. Doria, controlling her indignation as well as she could.

"To some select superior seminary, Helen. There are such to be found."

"Austin!" Mrs. Doria exclaimed, and had to fight with a moisture in her eyes. "Unjust! absurd!" she murmured. The baronet thought it a natural proposition that Clare should be a bride or a schoolgirl.

"I cannot leave my child." Mrs. Doria trembled. "Where she goes, I go. I am aware that she is only one of our sex, and therefore of no value to the world, but she is my child. I will see, poor dear, that you have no cause to complain of her."

"I thought," Sir Austin remarked, "that you acquiesced in my views with regard to my son."

"Yes—generally," said Mrs. Doria, and felt culpable that she had not before, and could not then, tell her brother that he had set up an Idol in his house—an Idol of flesh! more retributive and abominable than wood or brass or gold. But she had bowed to the Idol too long—she had too entirely bound herself to gain her project by subserviency. She had, and she dimly perceived it, committed a greater fault in tactics, in teaching her daughter to bow to the Idol also. Love of that kind Richard took for tribute. He was indifferent to Clare's soft eyes. The parting kiss he gave her was ready and cold as his father could desire. Sir Austin now grew eloquent to him in laudation of manly pursuits: but Richard thought his eloquence barren, his attempts at companionship awkward, and all manly pursuits and aims, life itself, vain and worthless. To what end? sighed the blossomless youth, and cried aloud, as soon as he was relieved of his father's society, what was the good of anything? Whatever he did—whichever path he selected, led back to Raynham. And whatever he did, however wretched and wayward he showed himself, only confirmed Sir Austin more and more in the truth of his previsions. Tom Bakewell, now the youth's groom, had to give the baronet a report of his young master's proceedings, in common with Adrian, and while there was no harm to tell, Tom spoke out. "He do ride like fire every day to Pig's Snout," naming the highest hill in the neighbourhood, "and stand there and stare, never movin', like a mad 'un. And then hoam agin all slack as if he'd been beaten in a race by somebody."

"There is no woman in that!" mused the baronet. "He would have ridden back as hard as he went," reflected this profound scientific humanist, "had there been a woman in it. He would shun vast expanses, and seek shade, concealment, solitude. The desire for distances betokens emptiness and undirected hunger: when the heart is possessed by an image we fly to wood and forest, like the guilty."

Adrian's report accused his pupil of an extraordinary access of cynicism.

"Exactly," said the baronet. "As I foresaw. At this period an insatiate appetite is accompanied by a fastidious palate. Nothing but the quintessences of existence, and those in exhaustless supplies, will satisfy this craving, which is not to be satisfied! Hence his bitterness. Life can furnish no food fitting for him. The strength and purity of his energies have reached to an almost divine height, and roam through the Inane. Poetry, love, and such-like, are the drugs earth has to offer to high natures, as she offers to low ones debauchery. 'Tis a sign, this sourness, that he is subject to none of the empiricisms that are afloat. Now to keep him clear of them!"

The Titans had an easier task in storming Olympus. As yet, however, it could not be said that Sir Austin's System had failed. On the contrary, it had reared a youth, handsome, intelligent, well-bred, and, observed the ladies, with acute emphasis, innocent. Where, they asked, was such another young man to be found?

"Oh!" said Lady Blandish to Sir Austin, "if men could give their hands to women unsoiled—how different would many a marriage be! She will be a happy girl who calls Richard husband."

"Happy, indeed!" was the baronet's caustic ejaculation. "But where shall

I meet one equal to him, and his match?"

"I was innocent when I was a girl," said the lady.

Sir Austin bowed a reserved opinion.

"Do you think no girls innocent?"

Sir Austin gallantly thought them all so.

"No, that you know they are not," said the lady, stamping. "But they are more innocent than boys, I am sure."

"Because of their education, madam. You see now what a youth can be. Perhaps, when my System is published, or rather—to speak more humbly—when it is practised, the balance may be restored, and we shall have virtuous young men."

"It's too late for poor me to hope for a husband from one of them," said the lady, pouting and laughing.

"It is never too late for beauty to waken love," returned the baronet, and they trifled a little. They were approaching Daphne's Bower, which they entered, and sat there to taste the coolness of a descending midsummer day.

The baronet seemed in a humour for dignified fooling; the lady for serious converse.

"I shall believe again in Arthur's knights," she said. "When I was a girl I dreamed of one."

"And he was in quest of the San Greal?"

"If you like."

"And showed his good taste by turning aside for the more tangible San Blandish?"

"Of course you consider it would have been so," sighed the lady, ruffling.

"I can only judge by our generation," said Sir Austin, with a bend of homage.

The lady gathered her mouth. "Either we are very mighty or you are very weak."

"Both, madam."

"But whatever we are, and if we are bad, bad! we love virtue, and truth, and lofty souls, in men: and, when we meet those qualities in them, we are constant, and would die for them—die for them. Ah! you know men but not women."

"The knights possessing such distinctions must be young, I presume?" said

Sir Austin.

"Old, or young!"

"But if old, they are scarce capable of enterprise?"

"They are loved for themselves, not for their deeds."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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