

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

BEAUCHAMP'S
CAREER.
VOLUME 7

George Meredith
Beauchamp's Career. Volume 7

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Beauchamp's Career – Volume 7:*

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CHAPTER L AT THE COTTAGE ON THE COMMON

Rain went with Lord Romfrey in a pursuing cloud all the way to Bevisham, and across the common to the long garden and plain little green-shuttered, neat white cottage of Dr. Shrapnel. Carriages were driving from the door; idle men with hands deep in their pockets hung near it, some women pointing their shoulders under wet shawls, and boys. The earl was on foot. With no sign of discomposure, he stood at the half-open door and sent in his card, bearing the request for permission to visit his nephew. The reply failing to come to him immediately, he began striding to and fro. That garden gate where he had flourished the righteous whip was wide. Foot-farers over the sodden common were attracted to the gateway, and lingered in it, looking at the long, green-extended windows, apparently listening, before they broke away to exchange undertone speech here and there. Boys

had pushed up through the garden to the kitchen area. From time to time a woman in a dripping bonnet whimpered aloud.

An air of a country churchyard on a Sunday morning when the curate has commenced the service prevailed. The boys were subdued by the moisture, as they are when they sit in the church aisle or organ-loft, before their members have been much cramped.

The whole scene, and especially the behaviour of the boys, betokened to Lord Romfrey that an event had come to pass.

In the chronicle of a sickness the event is death.

He bethought him of various means of stopping the telegraph and smothering the tale, if matters should have touched the worst here. He calculated abstrusely the practicable shortness of the two routes from Bevisham to Romfrey, by post-horses on the straightest line of road, or by express train on the triangle of railway, in case of an extreme need requiring him to hasten back to his wife and renew his paternal-despotic system with her. She had but persuaded him of the policy of a liberal openness and confidence for the moment's occasion: she could not turn his nature, which ran to strokes of craft and blunt decision whenever the emergency smote him and he felt himself hailed to show generalship.

While thus occupied in thoughtfulness he became aware of the monotony of a tuneless chant, as if, it struck him, an insane young chorister or canon were galloping straight on end hippomaniacally through the Psalms. There was a creak at

intervals, leading him to think it a machine that might have run away with the winder's arm.

The earl's humour proposed the notion to him that this perhaps was one of the forms of Radical lamentation, ululation, possibly practised by a veteran impietist like Dr. Shrapnel for the loss of his youngster, his political cub—poor lad!

Deriding any such pagantry, and aught that could be set howling, Lord Romfrey was presently moved to ask of the small crowd at the gate what that sound was.

'It's the poor commander, sir,' said a wet-shawled woman, shivering.

'He's been at it twenty hours already, sir,' said one of the boys.

'Twenty-foor hour he 've been at it,' said another.

A short dispute grew over the exact number of hours. One boy declared that thirty hours had been reached. 'Father heerd'n yesterday morning as he was aff to 's work in the town afore six: that brings 't nigh thirty and he ha'n't stopped yet.'

The earl was invited to step inside the gate, a little way up to the house, and under the commander's window, that he might obtain a better hearing.

He swung round, walked away, walked back, and listened.

If it was indeed a voice, the voice, he would have said, was travelling high in air along the sky.

Yesterday he had described to his wife Nevil's chattering of hundreds to the minute. He had not realized the description, which had been only his manner of painting delirium: there

had been no warrant for it. He heard the wild scudding voice imperfectly: it reminded him of a string of winter geese changing waters. Shower gusts, and the wail and hiss of the rows of fir-trees bordering the garden, came between, and allowed him a moment's incredulity as to its being a human voice. Such a cry will often haunt the moors and wolds from above at nightfall. The voice hied on, sank, seemed swallowed; it rose, as if above water, in a hush of wind and trees. The trees bowed their heads raging, the voice drowned; once more to rise, chattering thrice rapidly, in a high-pitched key, thin, shrill, weird, interminable, like winds through a crazy chamber-door at midnight.

The voice of a broomstick-witch in the clouds could not be thinner and stranger: Lord Romfrey had some such thought.

Dr. Gannet was the bearer of Miss Denham's excuses to Lord Romfrey for the delay in begging him to enter the house: in the confusion of the household his lordship's card had been laid on the table below, and she was in the sick-room.

'Is my nephew a dead man?' said the earl.

The doctor weighed his reply. 'He lives. Whether he will, after the exhaustion of this prolonged fit of raving, I don't dare to predict. In the course of my experience I have never known anything like it. He lives: there's the miracle, but he lives.'

'On brandy?'

'That would soon have sped him.'

'Ha. You have everything here that you want?'

'Everything.'

'He's in your hands, Gannet.'

The earl was conducted to a sitting-room, where Dr. Gannet left him for a while.

Mindful that he was under the roof of his enemy, he remained standing, observing nothing.

The voice overheard was off at a prodigious rate, like the far sound of a yell ringing on and on.

The earl unconsciously sought a refuge from it by turning the leaves of a book upon the table, which was a complete edition of Harry Denham's Poems, with a preface by a man named Lydiard; and really, to read the preface one would suppose that these poets were the princes of the earth. Lord Romfrey closed the volume. It was exquisitely bound, and presented to Miss Denham by the Mr. Lydiard. 'The works of your illustrious father,' was written on the title-page. These writers deal queerly with their words of praise of one another. There is no law to restrain them. Perhaps it is the consolation they take for the poor devil's life they lead!

A lady addressing him familiarly, invited him to go upstairs.

He thanked her. At the foot of the stairs he turned; he had recognized Cecilia Halkett.

Seeing her there was more strange to him than being there himself; but he bowed to facts.

'What do you think?' he said.

She did not answer intelligibly.

He walked up.

The crazed gabbling tongue had entire possession of the

house, and rang through it at an amazing pitch to sustain for a single minute.

A reflection to the effect that dogs die more decently than we men, saddened the earl. But, then, it is true, we shorten their pangs by shooting them.

A dismal figure loomed above him at the head of the stairs.

He distinguished it in the vast lean length he had once whipped and flung to earth.

Dr. Shrapnel was planted against the wall outside that raving chamber, at the salient angle of a common prop or buttress. The edge of a shoulder and a heel were the supports to him sideways in his distorted attitude. His wall arm hung dead beside his pendent frock-coat; the hair of his head had gone to wildness, like a field of barley whipped by tempest. One hand pressed his eyeballs: his unshaven jaw dropped.

Lord Romfrey passed him by.

The dumb consent of all present affirmed the creature lying on the bed to be Nevil Beauchamp.

Face, voice, lank arms, chicken neck: what a sepulchral sketch of him!

It was the revelry of a corpse.

Shudders of alarm for his wife seized Lord Romfrey at the sight. He thought the poor thing on the bed must be going, resolving to a cry, unwinding itself violently in its hurricane of speech, that was not speech nor exclamation, rather the tongue let loose to run to the death. It seemed to be out in mid-sea, up

wave and down wave.

A nurse was at the pillow smoothing it. Miss Denham stood at the foot of the bed.

'Is that pain?' Lord Romfrey said low to Dr. Gannet.

'Unconscious,' was the reply.

Miss Denham glided about the room and disappeared.

Her business was to remove Dr. Shrapnel, that he might be out of the way when Lord Romfrey should pass him again: but Dr. Shrapnel heard one voice only, and moaned, 'My Beauchamp!' She could not get him to stir.

Miss Denham saw him start slightly as the earl stepped forth and, bowing to him, said: 'I thank you, sir, for permitting me to visit my nephew.'

Dr. Shrapnel made a motion of the hand, to signify freedom of access to his house. He would have spoken the effort fetched a burst of terrible chuckles. He covered his face.

Lord Romfrey descended. The silly old wretch had disturbed his equanimity as a composer of fiction for the comfort and sustainment of his wife: and no sooner had he the front door in view than the calculation of the three strides requisite to carry him out of the house plucked at his legs, much as young people are affected by a dancing measure; for he had, without deigning to think of matters disagreeable to him in doing so, performed the duty imposed upon him by his wife, and now it behoved him to ward off the coming blow from that double life at Romfrey Castle.

He was arrested in his hasty passage by Cecilia Halkett.

She handed him a telegraphic message: Rosamund requested him to stay two days in Bevisham. She said additionally: 'Perfectly well. Shall fear to see you returning yet. Have sent to Tourdestelle. All his friends. Ni espoir, ni crainte, mais point de deceptions. Lumiere. Ce sont les tenebres qui tuent.'

Her nimble wits had spied him on the road he was choosing, and outrun him.

He resigned himself to wait a couple of days at Bevisham. Cecilia begged him to accept a bed at Mount Laurels. He declined, and asked her: 'How is it you are here?'

'I called here,' said she, compressing her eyelids in anguish at a wilder cry of the voice overhead, and forgetting to state why she had called at the house and what services she had undertaken. A heap of letters in her handwriting explained the nature of her task.

Lord Romfrey asked her where the colonel was.

'He drives me down in the morning and back at night, but they will give me a bed or a sofa here to-night—I can't . . .' Cecilia stretched her hand out, blinded, to the earl.

He squeezed her hand.

'These letters take away my strength: crying is quite useless, I know that,' said she, glancing at a pile of letters that she had partly replied to. 'Some are from people who can hardly write. There were people who distrusted him! Some are from people who abused him and maltreated him. See those poor creatures

out in the rain!

Lord Romfrey looked through the venetian blinds of the parlour window.

'It's as good as a play to them,' he remarked.

Cecilia lit a candle and applied a stick of black wax to the flame, saying: 'Envelopes have fallen short. These letters will frighten the receivers. I cannot help it.'

'I will bring letter paper and envelopes in the afternoon,' said Lord Romfrey. 'Don't use black wax, my dear.'

'I can find no other: I do not like to trouble Miss Denham. Letter paper has to be sealed. These letters must go by the afternoon post: I do not like to rob the poor anxious people of a little hope while he lives. Let me have note paper and envelopes quickly: not black-edged.'

'Plain; that's right,' said Lord Romfrey.

Black appeared to him like the torch of death flying over the country.

'There may be hope,' he added.

She sighed: 'Oh! yes.'

'Gannet will do everything that man can do to save him.'

'He will, I am sure.'

'You don't keep watch in the room, my dear, do you?'

'Miss Denham allows me an hour there in the day: it is the only rest she takes. She gives me her bedroom.'

'Ha: well: women!' ejaculated the earl, and paused. 'That sounded like him!'

'At times,' murmured Cecilia. 'All yesterday! all through the night! and to-day!'

'He'll be missed.'

Any sudden light of happier expectation that might have animated him was extinguished by the flight of chatter following the cry which had sounded like Beauchamp.

He went out into the rain, thinking that Beauchamp would be missed. The fellow had bothered the world, but the world without him would be heavy matter.

The hour was mid-day, workmen's meal-time. A congregation of shipyard workmen and a multitude of children crowded near the door. In passing through them, Lord Romfrey was besought for the doctor's report of Commander Beauchamp, variously named Beesham, Bosham, Bitcham, Bewsham. The earl heard his own name pronounced as he particularly disliked to hear it—Rumfree. Two or three men scowled at him.

It had not occurred to him ever before in his meditations to separate his blood and race from the common English; and he was not of a character to dwell on fantastical and purposeless distinctions, but the mispronunciation of his name and his nephew's at an instant when he was thinking of Nevil's laying down his life for such men as these gross excessive breeders, of ill shape and wooden countenance, pushed him to reflections on the madness of Nevil in endeavouring to lift them up and brush them up; and a curious tenderness for Nevil's madness worked in his breast as he contrasted this much-abused nephew of his with

our general English—the so-called nobles, who were sunk in the mud of the traders: the traders, who were sinking in the mud of the workmen: the workmen, who were like harbour-flats at ebb tide round a stuck-fast fleet of vessels big and little.

Decidedly a fellow like Nevil would be missed by him!

These English, huddling more and more in flocks, turning to lumps, getting to be cut in a pattern and marked by a label—how they bark and snap to rend an obnoxious original! One may chafe at the botheration everlastingly raised by the fellow; but if our England is to keep her place she must have him, and many of him. Have him? He's gone!

Lord Romfrey reasoned himself into pathetic sentiment by degrees.

He purchased the note paper and envelopes in the town for Cecilia. Late in the afternoon he deposited them on the parlour table at Dr. Shrapnel's. Miss Denham received him. She was about to lie down for her hour of rest on the sofa. Cecilia was upstairs. He inquired if there was any change in his nephew's condition.

'Not any,' said Miss Denham.

The voice was abroad for proof of that.

He stood with a swelling heart.

Jenny flung out a rug to its length beside the sofa, and; holding it by one end, said: 'I must have my rest, to be of service, my lord.'

He bowed. He was mute and surprised.

The young lady was like no person of her age and sex that he

remembered ever to have met.

'I will close the door,' he said, retiring softly.

'Do not, my lord.'

The rug was over her, up to her throat, and her eyes were shut. He looked back through the doorway in going out. She was asleep.

'Some delirium. Gannet of good hope. All in the usual course'; he transmitted intelligence to his wife.

A strong desire for wine at his dinner-table warned him of something wrong with his iron nerves.

CHAPTER LI

IN THE NIGHT

The delirious voice haunted him. It came no longer accompanied by images and likenesses to this and that of animate nature, which were relieving and distracting; it came to him in its mortal nakedness—an afflicting incessant ringing peal, bare as death's ribs in telling of death. When would it stop? And when it stopped, what would succeed? What ghastly silence!

He walked to within view of the lights of Dr. Shrapnel's at night: then home to his hotel.

Miss Denham's power of commanding sleep, as he could not, though contrary to custom he tried it on the right side and the left, set him thinking of her. He owned she was pretty. But that, he contended, was not the word; and the word was undiscoverable. Not Cecilia Halkett herself had so high-bred an air, for Cecilia had not her fineness of feature and full quick eyes, of which the thin eyelids were part of the expression. And Cecilia sobbed, sniffed, was patched about the face, reddish, bluish. This girl was pliable only to service, not to grief: she did her work for three-and-twenty hours, and fell to her sleep of one hour like a soldier. Lord Romfrey could not recollect anything in a young woman that had taken him so much as the girl's tossing out of the rug and covering herself, lying down and going to sleep under his nose,

absolutely independent of his presence.

She had not betrayed any woman's petulance with him for his conduct to her uncle or guardian. Nor had she hypocritically affected the reverse, as ductile women do, when they feel wanting in force to do the other. She was not unlike Nevil's marquise in face, he thought: less foreign of course; looking thrice as firm. Both were delicately featured.

He had a dream.

It was of an interminable procession of that odd lot called the People. All of them were quarrelling under a deluge. One party was for umbrellas, one was against them: and sounding the dispute with a question or two, Everard held it logical that there should be protection from the wet: just as logical on the other hand that so frail a shelter should be discarded, considering the tremendous downpour. But as he himself was dry, save for two or three drops, he deemed them all lunatics. He requested them to gag their empty chatter-boxes, and put the mother upon that child's cry.

He was now a simple unit of the procession. Asking naturally whither they were going, he saw them point. 'St. Paul's,' he heard. In his own bosom it was, and striking like the cathedral big bell.

Several ladies addressed him sorrowfully. He stood alone. It had become notorious that he was to do battle, and no one thought well of his chances. Devil an enemy to be seen! he muttered. Yet they said the enemy was close upon him. His right arm was paralyzed. There was the enemy hard in front, mailed,

vized, gauntleted. He tried to lift his right hand, and found it grasping an iron ring at the bottom of the deep Steynham well, sunk one hundred feet through the chalk. But the unexampled cunning of his left arm was his little secret; and, acting upon this knowledge, he telegraphed to his first wife at Steynham that Dr. Gannet was of good hope, and thereupon he re-entered the ranks of the voluminous procession, already winding spirally round the dome of St. Paul's. And there, said he, is the tomb of Beauchamp. Everything occurred according to his predictions, and he was entirely devoid of astonishment. Yet he would fain have known the titles of the slain admiral's naval battles. He protested he had a right to know, for he was the hero's uncle, and loved him. He assured the stupid scowling people that he loved Nevil Beauchamp, always loved the boy, and was the staunchest friend the fellow had. And saying that, he certainly felt himself leaning up against the cathedral rails in the attitude of Dr. Shrapnel, and crying, 'Beauchamp! Beauchamp!' And then he walked firmly out of Romfrey oakwoods, and, at a mile's distance from her, related to his countess Rosamund that the burial was over without much silly ceremony, and that she needed to know nothing of it whatever.

Rosamund's face awoke him. It was the face of a chalk-quarry, featureless, hollowed, appalling.

The hour was no later than three in the morning. He quitted the detestable bed where a dream—one of some half-dozen in the course of his life—had befallen him. For the maxim of the

healthy man is: up, and have it out in exercise when sleep is for foisting base coin of dreams upon you! And as the healthy only are fit to live, their maxims should be law. He dressed and directed his leisurely steps to the common, under a black sky, and stars of lively brilliancy. The lights of a carriage gleamed on Dr. Shrapnel's door. A footman informed Lord Romfrey that Colonel Halkett was in the house, and soon afterward the colonel appeared.

'Is it over? I don't hear him,' said Lord Romfrey.

Colonel Halkett grasped his hand. 'Not yet,' he said. 'Cissy can't be got away. It's killing her. No, he's alive. You may hear him now.'

Lord Romfrey bent his ear.

'It's weaker,' the colonel resumed. 'By the way, Romfrey, step out with me. My dear friend, the circumstances will excuse me: you know I'm not a man to take liberties. I'm bound to tell you what your wife writes to me. She says she has it on her conscience, and can't rest for it. You know women. She wants you to speak to the man here—Shrapnel. She wants Nevil to hear that you and he were friendly before he dies; thinks it would console the poor dear fellow. That's only an idea; but it concerns her, you see. I'm shocked to have to talk to you about it.'

'My dear colonel, I have no feeling against the man,' Lord Romfrey replied. 'I spoke to him when I saw him yesterday. I bear no grudges. Where is he? You can send to her to say I have spoken to him twice.'

'Yes, yes,' the colonel assented.

He could not imagine that Lady Romfrey required more of her husband. 'Well, I must be off. I leave Blackburn Tuckham here, with a friend of his; a man who seems to be very sweet with Mrs. Wardour-Devereux.'

'Ha! Fetch him to me, colonel; I beg you to do that,' said Lord Romfrey.

The colonel brought out Lydiard to the earl.

'You have been at my nephew's bedside, Mr. Lydiard?'

'Within ten minutes, my lord.'

'What is your opinion of the case?'

'My opinion is, the chances are in his favour.'

'Lay me under obligation by communicating that to Romfrey Castle at the first opening of the telegraph office to-morrow morning.'

Lydiard promised.

'The raving has ended?'

'Hardly, sir, but the exhaustion is less than we feared it would be.'

'Gannet is there?'

'He is in an arm-chair in the room.'

'And Dr. Shrapnel?'

'He does not bear speaking to; he is quiet.'

'He is attached to my nephew?'

'As much as to life itself.'

Lord Romfrey thanked Lydiard courteously. 'Let us hope, sir,

that some day I shall have the pleasure of entertaining you, as well as another friend of yours.'

'You are very kind, my lord.'

The earl stood at the door to see Colonel Halkett drive off: he declined to accompany him to Mount Laurels.

In the place of the carriage stood a man, who growled 'Where's your horsewhip, butcher?'

He dogged the earl some steps across the common. Everard returned to his hotel and slept soundly during the remainder of the dark hours.

CHAPTER LII

QUESTION OF A PILGRIMAGE AND AN ACT OF PENANCE

Then came a glorious morning for sportsmen. One sniffed the dews, and could fancy fresh smells of stubble earth and dank woodland grass in the very streets of dirty Bevisham. Sound sleep, like hearty dining, endows men with a sense of rectitude, and sunlight following the former, as a pleasant spell of conversational ease or sweet music the latter, smiles a celestial approval of the performance: Lord Romfrey dismissed his anxieties. His lady slightly ruffled him at breakfast in a letter saying that she wished to join him. He was annoyed at noon by a message, wherein the wish was put as a request. And later arrived another message, bearing the character of an urgent petition. True, it might be laid to the account of telegraphic brevity.

He saw Dr. Shrapnel, and spoke to him, as before, to thank him for the permission to visit his nephew. Nevil he contemplated for the space of five minutes. He cordially saluted Miss Denham. He kissed Cecilia's hand.

'All here is going on so well that I am with you for a day or two to-morrow,' he despatched the message to his wife.

Her case was now the gravest. He could not understand why she desired to be in Bevisham. She must have had execrable

dreams!—rank poison to mothers.

However, her constitutional strength was great, and his pride in the restoration of his House by her agency flourished anew, what with fair weather and a favourable report from Dr. Gannet: The weather was most propitious to the hopes of any soul bent on dispersing the shadows of death, and to sportsmen. From the windows of his railway carriage he beheld the happy sportsmen stalking afield. The birds whirred and dropped just where he counted on their dropping. The smoke of the guns threaded to dazzling silver in the sunshine. Say what poor old Nevil will, or did say, previous to the sobering of his blood, where is there a land like England? Everard rejoiced in his country temperately. Having Nevil as well,—of which fact the report he was framing in his mind to deliver to his wife assured him—he was rich. And you that put yourselves forward for republicans and democrats, do you deny the aristocracy of an oaklike man who is young upon the verge of eighty?

These were poetic flights, but he knew them not by name, and had not to be ashamed of them.

Rosamund met him in the hall of the castle. 'You have not deceived me, my dear lord,' she said, embracing him. 'You have done what you could for me. The rest is for me to do.'

He reciprocated her embrace warmly, in commendation of her fresher good looks.

She asked him, 'You have spoken to Dr. Shrapnel?'

He answered her, 'Twice.'

The word seemed quaint. She recollected that he was quaint.

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