

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE TRAGIC
COMEDIANS: A STUDY
IN A WELL-KNOWN
STORY. VOLUME 1

George Meredith
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in a Well-known Story. Volume 1

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The word 'fantastical' is accentuated in our tongue to so scornful an utterance that the constant good service it does would make it seem an appointed instrument for reviewers of books of imaginative matter distasteful to those expository pens. Upon examination, claimants to the epithet will be found outside of books and of poets, in many quarters, Nature being one of the prominent, if not the foremost. Wherever she can get to drink her fill of sunlight she pushes forth fantastically. As for that wandering ship of the drunken pilot, the mutinous crew and the angry captain, called Human Nature, 'fantastical' fits it no less completely than a continental baby's skull-cap the stormy infant.

Our sympathies, one may fancy, will be broader, our critical acumen shrewder, if we at once accept the thing as a part of us and worthy of study.

The pair of tragic comedians of whom there will be question pass under this word as under their banner and motto. Their acts are incredible: they drank sunlight and drove their bark in a manner to eclipse historical couples upon our planet. Yet they do

belong to history, they breathed the stouter air than fiction's, the last chapter of them is written in red blood, and the man pouring out that last chapter, was of a mighty nature not unheroical, a man of the active grappling modern brain which wrestles with facts, to keep the world alive, and can create them, to set it spinning.

A Faust-like legend might spring from him: he had a devil. He was the leader of a host, the hope of a party, venerated by his followers, well hated by his enemies, respected by the intellectual chiefs of his time, in the pride of his manhood and his labours when he fell. And why this man should have come to his end through love, and the woman who loved him have laid her hand in the hand of the slayer, is the problem we have to study, nothing inventing, in the spirit and flesh of both. To ask if it was love is useless. Love may be celestial fire before it enters into the systems of mortals. It will then take the character of its place of abode, and we have to look not so much for the pure thing as for the passion. Did it move them, hurry them, animating the giants and gnomes of one, the elves and sprites of the other, and putting animal nature out of its fashionable front rank? The bare railway-line of their story tells of a passion honest enough to entitle it to be related. Nor is there anything invented, because an addition of fictitious incidents could never tell us how she came to do this, he to do that; or how the comic in their natures led by interplay to the tragic issue. They are real creatures, exquisitely fantastical, strangely exposed to the world by a lurid catastrophe, who teach us, that fiction, if it can imagine events and persons

more agreeable to the taste it has educated, can read us no such
furrowing lesson in life.

CHAPTER I

An unresisted lady-killer is probably less aware that he roams the pastures in pursuit of a coquette, than is the diligent Arachne that her web is for the devouring lion. At an early age Clotilde von Rudiger was dissatisfied with her conquests, though they were already numerous in her seventeenth year, for she began precociously, having at her dawn a lively fancy, a womanly person, and singular attractions of colour, eyes, and style. She belonged by birth to the small aristocracy of her native land. Nature had disposed her to coquetry, which is a pastime counting among the arts of fence, and often innocent, often serviceable, though sometimes dangerous, in the centres of polished barbarism known as aristocratic societies, where nature is not absent, but on the contrary very extravagant, tropical, by reason of her idle hours for the imbibing of copious draughts of sunlight. The young lady of charming countenance and sprightly manners is too much besought to choose for her choice to be decided; the numbers beseeching prevent her from choosing instantly, after the fashion of holiday schoolboys crowding a buffet of pastry. These are not coquettish, they clutch what is handy: and little so is the starved damsel of the sequestered village, whose one object of the worldly picturesque is the passing curate; her heart is his for a nod. But to be desired ardently of trooping hosts is an incentive to taste to try for

yourself. Men (the jury of householders empanelled to deliver verdicts upon the ways of women) can almost understand that. And as it happens, tasting before you have sounded the sense of your taste will frequently mislead by a step or two difficult to retrieve: the young coquette must then be cruel, as necessarily we kick the waters to escape drowning: and she is not in all cases dealing with simple blocks or limp festoons, she comes upon veteran tricksters that have a knowledge of her sex, capable of outfencing her nascent individuality. The more imagination she has, for a source of strength in the future days, the more is she a prey to the enemy in her time of ignorance.

Clotilde's younger maiden hours and their love episodes are wrapped in the mists Diana considerably drops over her adventurous favourites. She was not under a French mother's rigid supervision. In France the mother resolves that her daughter shall be guarded from the risks of that unequal rencounter between foolish innocence and the predatory. Vigilant foresight is not so much practised where the world is less accurately comprehended. Young people of Clotilde's upper world everywhere, and the young women of it especially, are troubled by an idea drawn from what they inhale and guess at in the spirituous life surrounding them, that the servants of the devil are the valiant host, this world's elect, getting and deserving to get the best it can give in return for a little dashing audacity, a flavour of the Fronde in their conduct; they sin, but they have the world; and then they repent perhaps, but they have had the

world. The world is the golden apple. Thirst for it is common during youth: and one would think the French mother worthy of the crown of wisdom if she were not so scrupulously provident in excluding love from the calculations on behalf of her girl.

Say (for Diana's mists are impenetrable and freeze curiosity) that Clotilde was walking with Count Constantine, the brilliant Tartar trained in Paris, when first she met Prince Marko Romaris, at the Hungarian Baths on the borders of the Styrian highlands. The scene at all events is pretty, and weaves a fable out of a variety of floating threads. A stranger to the Baths, dressed in white and scarlet, sprang from his carriage into a group of musical gypsies round an inn at the arch of the chestnut avenue, after pulling up to listen to them for a while. The music had seized him. He snatched bow and fiddle from one of the ring, and with a few strokes kindled their faces. Then seating himself, on a bench he laid the fiddle on his knee, and pinched the strings and flung up his voice, not ceasing to roll out the spontaneous notes when Clotilde and her cavalier, and other couples of the party, came nigh; for he was on the tide of the song, warm in it, and loved it too well to suffer intruders to break the flow, or to think of them. They were close by when the last of it rattled (it was a popular song of a fiery tribe) to its finish: He rose and saluted Clotilde, smiled and jumped back to his carriage, sending a cry of adieu to the swarthy, lank-locked, leather-hued circle, of which his dark oriental eyes and skin of burnished walnut made him look an offshoot, but one of the celestial branch.

He was in her father's reception-room when she reached home: he was paying a visit of ceremony on behalf of his family to General von Rudiger; which helped her to remember that he had been expected, and also that his favourite colours were known to be white and scarlet. In those very colours, strange to tell, Clotilde was dressed; Prince Marko had recognized her by miraculous divination, he assured her he could have staked his life on the guess as he bowed to her. Adieu to Count Constantine. Fate had interposed the prince opportunely, we have to suppose, for she received a strong impression of his coming straight from her invisible guardian; and the stroke was consequently trenchant which sent the conquering Tartar raving of her fickleness. She struck, like fate, one blow. She discovered that the prince, in addition to his beauty and sweet manners and gift of song, was good; she fell in love with goodness, whereof Count Constantine was not an example: so she set her face another way, soon discovering that there may be fragility in goodness. And now first her imagination conceived the hero who was to subdue her. Could Prince Marko be he, soft as he was, pliable, a docile infant, burning to please her, enraptured in obeying?—the hero who would wrestle with her, overcome and hold her bound? Siegfried could not be dreamed in him, or a Siegfried's baby son-in-arms. She caught a glorious image of the woman rejecting him and his rival, and it informed her that she, dissatisfied with an Adonis, and more than a match for a famous conqueror, was a woman of decisive and independent, perhaps unexampled, force

of character. Her idea of a spiritual superiority that could soar over those two men, the bad and the good—the bad because of his vileness, the good because of his frailness—whispered to her of deserving, possibly of attracting, the best of men: the best, that is, in the woman's view of us—the strongest, the great eagle of men, lord of earth and air.

One who will dominate me, she thought.

Now when a young lady of lively intelligence and taking charm has brought her mind to believe that she possesses force of character, she persuades the rest of the world easily to agree with her, and so long as her pretensions are not directly opposed to their habits of thought, her parents will be the loudest in proclaiming it, fortifying so the maid's presumption, which is ready to take root in any shadow of subserviency. Her father was a gouty general of infantry in the diplomatic service, disinclined to unnecessary disputes, out of consideration for his vehement irritability when roused. Her mother had been one of the beauties of her set, and was preserving an attenuated reign, through the conversational arts, to save herself from fading into the wall. Her brothers and sisters were not of an age to contest her lead. The temper of the period was revolutionary in society by reflection of the state of politics, and juniors were sturdy democrats, letting their elders know that they had come to their inheritance, while the elders, confused by the impudent topsy-turvy, put on the gaping mask (not unfamiliar to history) of the disestablished conservative, whose astounded state paralyzes his wrath.

Clotilde maintained a decent measure in the liberty she claimed, and it was exercised in wildness of dialogue rather than in capricious behaviour. If her flowing tongue was imperfectly controlled, it was because she discoursed by preference to men upon our various affairs and tangles, and they encouraged her with the tickled wonder which bids the bold advance yet farther into bogland. Becoming the renowned original of her society, wherever it might be, in Germany, Italy, Southern France, she grew chillily sensible of the solitude decreed for their heritage to our loftiest souls. Her Indian Bacchus, as a learned professor supplied Prince Marko's title for her, was a pet, not a companion. She to him was what she sought for in another. As much as she pitied herself for not lighting on the predestined man, she pitied him for having met the woman, so that her tenderness for both inspired many signs of warm affection, not very unlike the thing it moaned secretly the not being. For she could not but distinguish a more poignant sorrow in the seeing of the object we yearn to vainly than in vainly yearning to one unseen. Dressed, to delight him, in Prince Marko's colours, the care she bestowed on her dressing was for the one absent, the shrouded comer: so she pleased the prince to be pleasing to her soul's lord, and this, owing to an appearance of satisfactory deception that it bore, led to her thinking guiltily. We may ask it: an eagle is expected, and how is he to declare his eagleship save by breaking through our mean conventional systems, tearing links asunder, taking his own in the teeth of vulgar ordinances? Clotilde's imagination

drew on her reading for the knots it tied and untied, and its ideas of grandeur. Her reading was an interfusion of philosophy skimmed, and realistic romances deep-sounded. She tried hard, but could get no other terrible tangle for her hero's exhibition of flaming azure divineness than the vile one of the wedded woman. Further thinking of it, she revived and recovered; she despised the complication, yet without perceiving how else he was to manifest himself legitimately in a dull modern world. The rescuing her from death would be a poor imitation of worn-out heroes. His publication of a trumpeting book fell appallingly flat in her survey. Deeds of gallantry done as an officer in war (defending his country too) distinguished the soldier, but failed to add the eagle feather to the man. She had a mind of considerable soaring scope, and eclectic: it analyzed a Napoleon, and declined the position of his empress. The man must be a gentleman. Poets, princes, warriors, potentates, marched before her speculative fancy unselected.

So far, as far as she can be portrayed introductorily, she is not without exemplars in the sex. Young women have been known to turn from us altogether, never to turn back, so poor and shrunken, or so fleshly-bulgy have we all appeared in the fairy jacket they wove for the right one of us to wear becomingly. But the busy great world was round Clotilde while she was malleable, though she might be losing her fresh ideas of the hammer and the block, and that is a world of much solicitation to induce a vivid girl to merge an ideal in a living image. Supposing, when she has

accomplished it, that men justify her choice, the living will retain the colours of the ideal. We have it on record that he may seem an eagle.

'You talk curiously like Alvan, do you know,' a gentleman of her country said to her as they were descending the rock of Capri, one day. He said it musingly.

He belonged to a circle beneath her own: the learned and artistic. She had not heard of this Alvan, or had forgotten him; but professing universal knowledge, especially of celebrities, besides having an envious eye for that particular circle, which can pretend to be the choicest of all, she was unwilling to betray her ignorance, and she dimpled her cheek, as one who had often heard the thing said to her before. She smiled musingly.

CHAPTER II

'Who is the man they call Alvan?' She put the question at the first opportunity to an aunt of hers.

Up went five-fingered hands. This violent natural sign of horror was comforting: she saw that he was a celebrity indeed.

'Alvan! My dear Clotilde! What on earth can you want to know about a creature who is the worst of demagogues, a disreputable person, and a Jew!'

Clotilde remarked that she had asked only who he was. 'Is he clever?'

'He is one of the basest of those wretches who are for upsetting the Throne and Society to gratify their own wicked passions: that is what he is.'

'But is he clever?'

'Able as Satan himself, they say. He is a really dangerous, bad man.'

You could not have been curious about a worse one.'

'Politically, you mean.'

'Of course I do.'

The lady had not thought of any other kind of danger from a man of that station.

The likening of one to Satan does not always exclude meditation upon him. Clotilde was anxious to learn in what way her talk resembled Alvan's. He being that furious creature, she

thought of herself at her wildest, which was in her estimation her best; and consequently, she being by no means a furious creature, though very original, she could not meditate on him without softening the outlines given him by report; all because of the likeness between them; and, therefore, as she had knowingly been taken for furious by very foolish people, she settled it that Alvan was also a victim of the prejudices he scorned. It had pleased her at times to scorn our prejudices and feel the tremendous weight she brought on herself by the indulgence. She drew on her recollections of the Satanic in her bosom when so situated, and never having admired herself more ardently than when wearing that aspect, she would have admired the man who had won the frightful title in public, except for one thing—he was a Jew.

The Jew was to Clotilde as flesh of swine to the Jew. Her parents had the same abhorrence of Jewry. One of the favourite similes of the family for whatsoever grunted in grossness, wriggled with meanness, was Jew: and it was noteworthy from the fact that a streak of the blood was in the veins of the latest generation and might have been traced on the maternal side.

Now a meanness that clothes itself in the Satanic to terrify cowards is the vilest form of impudence venturing at insolence; and an insolent impudence with Jew features, the Jew nose and lips, is past endurance repulsive. She dismissed her contemplation of Alvan. Luckily for the gentleman who had compared her to the Jew politician, she did not meet him again

in Italy.

She had meanwhile formed an idea of the Alvanesque in dialogue; she summoned her forces to take aim at it, without becoming anything Jewish, still remaining clean and Christian; and by her astonishing practice of the art she could at any time blow up a company—scatter mature and seasoned dames, as had they been balloons on a wind, ay, and give our stout sex a shaking.

Clotilde rejected another aspirant proposed by her parents, and falling into disgrace at home, she went to live for some months with an ancient lady who was her close relative residing in the capital city where the brain of her race is located. There it occurred that a dashing officer of social besides military rank, dancing with her at a ball, said, for a comment on certain boldly independent remarks she had been making: 'I see you know Alvan.'

Alvan once more.

'Indeed I do not,' she said, for she was addressing an officer high above Alvan in social rank; and she shrugged, implying that she was almost past contradiction of the charge.

'Surely you must,' said he; 'where is the lady who could talk and think as you do without knowing Alvan and sharing his views!'

Clotilde was both startled and nettled.

'But I do not know him at all; I have never met him, never seen him. I am unlikely to meet the kind of person,' she protested; and she was amazed yet secretly rejoiced on hearing him, a noble of

her own circle, and a dashing officer, rejoin: 'Come, come, let us be honest. That is all very well for the little midges floating round us to say of Alvan, but we two can clasp hands and avow proudly that we both know and love the man.'

'Were it true, I would own it at once, but I repeat, that he is a total stranger to me,' she said, seeing the Jew under quite a different illumination.

'Actually?'

'In honour.'

'You have never met, never seen him, never read any of his writings?'

'Never. I have heard his name, that is all.'

'Then,' the officer's voice was earnest, 'I pity him, and you no less, while you remain strangers, for you were made for one another. Those ideas you have expressed, nay, the very words, are Alvan's: I have heard him use them. He has just the same original views of society and history as yours; they're identical; your features are not unlike . . . you talk alike: I could fancy your voice the sister of his. You look incredulous? You were speaking of Pompeius, and you said "Plutarch's Pompeius," and more for it is almost incredible under the supposition that you do not know and have never listened to Alvan—you said that Pompeius appeared to have been decorated with all the gifts of the Gods to make the greater sacrifice of him to Caesar, who was not personally worth a pretty woman's "bite." Come, now—you must believe me: at a supper at Alvan's table the other night,

the talk happened to be of a modern Caesar, which led to the real one, and from him to "Plutarch's Pompeius," as Alvan called him; and then he said of him what you have just said, absolutely the same down to the allusion to the bite. I assure you. And you have numbers of little phrases in common: you are partners in aphorisms: Barriers are for those who cannot fly: that is Alvan's. I could multiply them if I could remember; they struck me as you spoke.'

'I must be a shameless plagiarist,' said Clotilde.

'Or he,' said Count Kollin.

It is here the place of the Chorus to state that these: ideas were in the air at the time; sparks of the Vulcanic smithy at work in politics and pervading literature: which both Alvan and Clotilde might catch and give out as their own, in the honest belief that the epigram was, original to them. They were not members of a country where literature is confined to its little paddock, without, influence on the larger field (part lawn, part marsh) of the social world: they were readers in sympathetic action with thinkers and literary artists. Their saying in common, 'Plutarch's Pompeius,' may be traceable to a reading of some professorial article on the common portrait-painting of the sage of Chaeroneia. The dainty savageness in the 'bite' Plutarch mentions, evidently struck on a similarity of tastes in both, as it has done with others. And in regard to Caesar, Clotilde thought much of Caesar; she had often wished that Caesar (for the additional pleasure in thinking of him) had been endowed with the beauty of his rival: one or

two of Plutarch's touches upon the earlier history of Pompeius had netted her fancy, faintly (your generosity must be equal to hearing it) stung her blood; she liked the man; and if he had not been beaten in the end, she would have preferred him femininely. His name was not written Pompey to her, as in English, to sound absurd: it was a note of grandeur befitting great and lamentable fortunes, which the young lady declined to share solely because of her attraction to the victor, her compulsion to render unto the victor the sunflower's homage. She rendered it as a slave: the splendid man beloved to ecstasy by the flower of Roman women was her natural choice.

Alvan could not be even a Caesar in person, he was a Jew. Still a Jew of whom Count Kollin spoke so warmly must be exceptional, and of the exceptional she dreamed. He might have the head of a Caesar. She imagined a huge head, the cauldron of a boiling brain, anything but bright to the eye, like a pot always on the fire, black, greasy, encrusted, unkempt: the head of a malicious tremendous dwarf. Her hungry inquiries in a city where Alvan was well known, brought her full information of one who enjoyed a highly convivial reputation besides the influence of his political leadership; but no description of his aspect accompanied it, for where he was nightly to be met somewhere about the city, none thought of describing him, and she did not push that question because she had sketched him for herself, and rather wished, the more she heard of his genius, to keep him repulsive. It appeared that his bravery was as well

proved as his genius, and a brilliant instance of it had been given in the city not long since. He had her ideas, and he won multitudes with them: he was a talker, a writer, and an orator; and he was learned, while she could not pretend either to learning or to a flow of rhetoric. She could prattle deliciously, at times pointedly, relying on her intuition to tell her more than we get from books, and on her sweet impudence for a richer original strain. She began to appreciate now a reputation for profound acquirements. Learned professors of jurisprudence and history were as enthusiastic for Alvan in their way as Count Kollin. She heard things related of Alvan by the underbreath. That circle below her own, the literary and artistic, idolized him; his talk, his classic breakfasts and suppers, his undisguised ambition, his indomitable energy, his dauntlessness and sway over her sex, were subjects of eulogy all round her; and she heard of an enamoured baroness. No one blamed Alvan. He had shown his chivalrous valour in defending her. The baroness was not a young woman, and she was a hardbound Blue. She had been the first to discover the prodigy, and had pruned, corrected, and published him; he was one of her political works, promising to be the most successful. An old affair apparently; but the association of a woman's name with Alvan's, albeit the name of a veteran, roused the girl's curiosity, leading her to think his mental and magnetic powers must be of the very highest, considering his physical repulsiveness, for a woman of rank to yield him such extreme devotion. She commissioned her princely serving-man,

who had followed and was never far away from her, to obtain precise intelligence of this notorious Alvan.

Prince Marko did what he could to please her; he knew something of the rumours about Alvan and the baroness. But why should his lady trouble herself for particulars of such people, whom it could scarcely be supposed she would meet by accident? He asked her this. Clotilde said it was common curiosity. She read him a short lecture on the dismal narrowness of their upper world; and on the advantage of taking an interest in the world below them and more enlightened; a world where ideas were current and speech was wine. The prince nodded; if she had these opinions, it must be good for him to have them too, and he shared them, as it were, by the touch of her hand, and for the length of time that he touched her hand, as an electrical shock may be taken by one far removed from the battery, susceptible to it only through the link; he was capable of thinking all that came to him from her a blessing—shocks, wounds and disruptions. He did not add largely to her stock of items, nor did he fetch new colours. The telegraph wire was his model of style. He was more or less a serviceless Indian Bacchus, standing for sign of the beauty and vacuity of their world: and how dismally narrow that world was, she felt with renewed astonishment at every dive out of her gold-fish pool into the world of tides below; so that she was ready to scorn the cultivation of the graces, and had, when not submitting to the smell, fanciful fits of a liking for tobacco smoke—the familiar incense of those homes where speech was wine.

At last she fell to the asking of herself whether, in the same city with him, often among his friends, hearing his latest intimate remarks—things homely redolent of him as hot bread of the oven—she was ever to meet this man upon whom her thoughts were bent to the eclipse of all others. She desired to meet him for comparison's sake, and to criticize a popular hero. It was inconceivable that any one popular could approach her standard, but she was curious; flame played about him; she had some expectation of easing a spiteful sentiment created by the recent subjection of her thoughts to the prodigious little Jew; and some feeling of closer pity for Prince Marko she had, which urged her to be rid of her delusion as to the existence of a wonder-working man on our earth, that she might be sympathetically kind to the prince, perhaps compliant, and so please her parents, be good and dull, and please everybody, and adieu to dreams, good night, and so to sleep with the beasts! . . .

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