GEORGE MEREDITH

THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD FEVEREL. VOLUME 3

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Meredith G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER XXI

By twelve o'clock at noon next day the inhabitants of Raynham Abbey knew that Berry, the baronet's man, had arrived post-haste from town, with orders to conduct Mr. Richard thither, and that Mr. Richard had refused to go, had sworn he would not, defied his father, and despatched Berry to the Shades. Berry was all that Benson was not. Whereas Benson hated woman, Berry admired her warmly. Second to his own stately person, woman occupied his reflections, and commanded his homage. Berry was of majestic port, and used dictionary words. Among the maids of Raynham his conscious calves produced all the discord and the frenzy those adornments seem destined to create in tender bosoms. He had, moreover, the reputation of having suffered for the sex; which assisted his object in inducing the sex to suffer for him. What with his calves, and his dictionary words, and the attractive halo of the mysterious vindictiveness of Venus surrounding him, this Adonis of the lower household was a mighty man below, and he moved as one.

On hearing the tumult that followed Berry's arrival, Adrian sent for him, and was informed of the nature of his mission, and its result.

"You should come to me first," said Adrian. "I should have imagined you were shrewd enough for that, Berry?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Adrian," Berry doubled his elbow to explain. "Pardon me, sir. Acting recipient of special injunctions I was not a free agent."

"Go to Mr. Richard again, Berry. There will be a little confusion if he holds back. Perhaps you had better throw out a hint or so of apoplexy. A slight hint will do. And here—Berry! when you return to town, you had better not mention anything—to quote Johnson—of Benson's spiflication."

"Certainly not, sir."

The wise youth's hint had the desired effect on Richard.

He dashed off a hasty letter by Tom to Belthorpe, and, mounting his horse, galloped to the Bellingham station.

Sir Austin was sitting down to a quiet early dinner at his hotel, when the Hope of Raynham burst into his room.

The baronet was not angry with his son. On the contrary, for he was singularly just and self-accusing while pride was not up in arms, he had been thinking all day after the receipt of Benson's letter that he was deficient in cordiality, and did not, by reason of his excessive anxiety, make himself sufficiently his son's companion: was not enough, as he strove to be, mother and father to him.; preceptor and friend; previsor and associate. He had not to ask his conscience where he had lately been to blame towards the System. He had slunk away from Raynham in the very crisis of the Magnetic Age, and this young woman of the parish (as Benson had termed sweet Lucy in his letter) was the consequence.

Yes! pride and sensitiveness were his chief foes, and he would trample on them. To begin, he embraced his son: hard upon an Englishman at any time—doubly so to one so shamefaced at emotion in cool blood, as it were. It gave him a strange pleasure, nevertheless. And the youth seemed to answer to it; he was excited. Was his love, then, beginning to correspond with his father's as in those intimate days before the Blossoming Season?

But when Richard, inarticulate at first in his haste, cried out,

"My dear, dear father! You are safe! I feared—You are better, sir?

Thank God!" Sir Austin stood away from him.

"Safe?" he said. "What has alarmed you?"

Instead of replying, Richard dropped into a chair, and seized his hand and kissed it.

Sir Austin took a seat, and waited for his son to explain.

"Those doctors are such fools!" Richard broke out. "I was sure they were wrong. They don't know headache from apoplexy. It's worth the ride, sir, to see you. You left Raynham so suddenly.—But you are well! It was not an attack of real apoplexy?"

His father's brows contorted, and he said, No, it was not. Richard pursued:

"If you were ill, I couldn't come too soon, though, if coroners' inquests sat on horses, those doctors would be found guilty of mare-slaughter. Cassandra'll be knocked up. I was too early for the train at Bellingham, and I wouldn't wait. She did the distance in four hours and three- quarters. Pretty good, sir, wasn't it?"

"It has given you appetite for dinner, I hope," said the baronet, not so well pleased to find that it was not simple obedience that had brought the youth to him in such haste.

"I'm ready," replied Richard. "I shall be in time to return by the last train to-night. I will leave Cassandra in your charge for a rest."

His father quietly helped him to soup, which he commenced gobbling with an eagerness that might pass for appetite.

"All well at Raynham?" said the baronet.

"Quite, sir."

"Nothing new?"

"Nothing, sir."

"The same as when I left?"

"No change whatever!"

"I shall be glad to get back to the old place," said the baronet. "My stay in town has certainly been profitable. I have made some pleasant acquaintances who may probably favour us with a visit there in the late autumn—people you may be pleased to know. They are very anxious to see Raynham."

"I love the old place," cried Richard. "I never wish to leave it."

"Why, boy, before I left you were constantly begging to see town."

"Was I, sir? How odd! Well! I don't want to remain here. I've seen enough of it."

"How did you find your way to me?"

Richard laughed, and related his bewilderment at the miles of brick, and the noise, and the troops of people, concluding, "There's no place like home!"

The baronet watched his symptomatic brilliant eyes, and favoured him with a double-dealing sentence—

"To anchor the heart by any object ere we have half traversed the world, is youth's foolishness, my son. Reverence time! A better maxim that than your Horatian."

"He knows all!" thought Richard, and instantly drew away leagues from his father, and threw up fortifications round his love and himself.

Dinner over, Richard looked hurriedly at his watch, and said, with much briskness, "I shall just be in time, sir, if we walk. Will you come with me to the station?"

The baronet did not answer.

Richard was going to repeat the question, but found his father's eyes fixed on him so meaningly that he wavered, and played with his empty glass.

"I think we will have a little more claret," said the baronet.

Claret was brought, and they were left alone.

The baronet then drew within arm's-reach of his son, and began:

"I am not aware what you may have thought of me, Richard, during the years we have lived together; and indeed I have never been in a hurry to be known to you; and, if I had died before my

work was done, I should not have complained at losing half my reward, in hearing you thank me. Perhaps, as it is, I never may. Everything, save selfishness, has its recompense. I shall be content if you prosper."

He fetched a breath and continued: "You had in your infancy a great loss." Father and son coloured simultaneously. "To make that good to you I chose to isolate myself from the world, and devote myself entirely to your welfare; and I think it is not vanity that tells me now that the son I have reared is one of the most hopeful of God's creatures. But for that very reason you are open to be tempted the most, and to sink the deepest. It was the first of the angels who made the road to hell."

He paused again. Richard fingered at his watch.

"In our House, my son, there is peculiar blood. We go to wreck very easily. It sounds like superstition; I cannot but think we are tried as most men are not. I see it in us all. And you, my son, are compounded of two races. Your passions are violent. You have had a taste of revenge. You have seen, in a small way, that the pound of flesh draws rivers of blood. But there is now in you another power. You are mounting to the table-land of life, where mimic battles are changed to real ones. And you come upon it laden equally with force to create and to destroy." He deliberated to announce the intelligence, with deep meaning: "There are women in the world, my son!"

The young man's heart galloped back to Raynham.

"It is when you encounter them that you are thoroughly on trial. It is when you know them that life is either a mockery to you, or, as some find it, a gift of blessedness. They are our ordeal. Love of any human object is the soul's ordeal; and they are ours, loving them, or not."

The young man heard the whistle of the train. He saw the moon-lighted wood, and the vision of his beloved. He could barely hold himself down and listen.

"I believe," the baronet spoke with little of the cheerfulness of belief, "good women exist."

Oh, if he knew Lucy!

"But," and he gazed on Richard intently, "it is given to very few to meet them on the threshold —I may say, to none. We find them after hard buffeting, and usually, when we find the one fitted for us, our madness has misshaped our destiny, our lot is cast. For women are not the end, but the means, of life. In youth we think them the former, and thousands, who have not even the excuse of youth, select a mate—or worse—with that sole view. I believe women punish us for so perverting their uses. They punish Society."

The baronet put his hand to his brow as his mind travelled into consequences.

'Our most diligent pupil learns not so much as an earnest teacher,' says The Pilgrim's Scrip; and Sir Austin, in schooling himself to speak with moderation of women, was beginning to get a glimpse of their side of the case.

Cold Blood now touched on love to Hot Blood.

Cold Blood said, "It is a passion coming in the order of nature, the ripe fruit of our animal being."

Hot Blood felt: "It is a divinity! All that is worth living for in the world."

Cold Blood said: "It is a fever which tests our strength, and too often leads to perdition."

Hot Blood felt: "Lead whither it will, I follow it."

Cold Blood said: "It is a name men and women are much in the habit of employing to sanctify their appetites."

Hot Blood felt: "It is worship; religion; life!"

And so the two parallel lines ran on.

The baronet became more personal:

"You know my love for you, my son. The extent of it you cannot know; but you must know that it is something very deep, and—I do not wish to speak of it—but a father must sometimes petition for gratitude, since the only true expression of it is his son's moral good. If you care for my love, or love me in return, aid me with all your energies to keep you what I have made you, and guard you

from the snares besetting you. It was in my hands once. It is ceasing to be so. Remember, my son, what my love is. It is different, I fear, with most fathers: but I am bound up in your welfare: what you do affects me vitally. You will take no step that is not intimate with my happiness, or my misery. And I have had great disappointments, my son."

So far it was well. Richard loved his father, and even in his frenzied state he could not without emotion hear him thus speak.

Unhappily, the baronet, who by some fatality never could see when he was winning the battle, thought proper in his wisdom to water the dryness of his sermon with a little jocoseness, on the subject of young men fancying themselves in love, and, when they were raw and green, absolutely wanting to be—that most awful thing, which the wisest and strongest of men undertake in hesitation and after self-mortification and penance— married! He sketched the Foolish Young Fellow—the object of general ridicule and covert contempt. He sketched the Woman—the strange thing made in our image, and with all our faculties—passing to the rule of one who in taking her proved that he could not rule himself, and had no knowledge of her save as a choice morsel which he would burn the whole world, and himself in the bargain, to possess. He harped upon the Foolish Young Fellow, till the foolish young fellow felt his skin tingle and was half suffocated with shame and rage.

After this, the baronet might be as wise as he pleased: he had quite undone his work. He might analyze Love and anatomize Woman. He might accord to her her due position, and paint her fair: he might be shrewd, jocose, gentle, pathetic, wonderfully wise: he spoke to deaf ears.

Closing his sermon with the question, softly uttered: "Have you anything to tell me, Richard?" and hoping for a confession, and a thorough re- establishment of confidence, the callous answer struck him cold: "I have not."

The baronet relapsed in his chair, and made diagrams of his fingers.

Richard turned his back on further dialogue by going to the window. In the section of sky over the street twinkled two or three stars; shining faintly, feeling the moon. The moon was rising: the woods were lifting up to her: his star of the woods would be there. A bed of moss set about flowers in a basket under him breathed to his nostril of the woodland keenly, and filled him with delirious longing.

A succession of hard sighs brought his father's hand on his shoulder.

"You have nothing you could say to me, my son? Tell me, Richard! Remember, there is no home for the soul where dwells a shadow of untruth!"

"Nothing at all, sir," the young man replied, meeting him with the full orbs of his eyes.

The baronet withdrew his hand, and paced the room.

At last it grew impossible for Richard to control his impatience, and he said: "Do you intend me to stay here, sir? Am I not to return to Raynham at all to-night?"

His father was again falsely jocular:

"What? and catch the train after giving it ten minutes' start?"

"Cassandra will take me," said the young man earnestly. "I needn't ride her hard, sir. Or perhaps you would lend me your Winkelried? I should be down with him in little better than three hours."

"Even then, you know, the park-gates would be locked."

"Well, I could stable him in the village. Dowling knows the horse, and would treat him properly. May I have him, sir?"

The cloud cleared off Richard's face as he asked. At least, if he missed his love that night he would be near her, breathing the same air, marking what star was above her bedchamber, hearing the hushed night-talk of the trees about her dwelling: looking on the distances that were like hope half fulfilled and a bodily presence bright as Hesper, since he knew her. There were two swallows under the eaves shadowing Lucy's chamber-windows: two swallows, mates in one nest, blissful birds, who twittered and cheep- cheeped to the sole-lying beauty in her bed. Around these birds the lover's heart revolved, he knew not why. He associated them with all his close-veiled dreams of happiness.

Seldom a morning passed when he did not watch them leave the nest on their breakfast-flight, busy in the happy stillness of dawn. It seemed to him now that if he could be at Raynham to see them in to-morrow's dawn he would be compensated for his incalculable loss of to-night: he would forgive and love his father, London, the life, the world. Just to see those purple backs and white breasts flash out into the quiet morning air! He wanted no more.

The baronet's trifling had placed this enormous boon within the young man's visionary grasp.

He still went on trying the boy's temper.

"You know there would be nobody ready for you at Raynham. It is unfair to disturb the maids."

Richard overrode every objection.

"Well, then, my son," said the baronet, preserving his half-jocular air, "I must tell you that it is my wish to have you in town."

"Then you have not been ill at all, sir!" cried Richard, as in his despair he seized the whole plot.

"I have been as well as you could have desired me to be," said his father.

"Why did they lie to me?" the young man wrathfully exclaimed.

"I think, Richard, you can best answer that," rejoined Sir Austin, kindly severe.

Dread of being signalized as the Foolish Young Fellow prevented Richard from expostulating further. Sir Austin saw him grinding his passion into powder for future explosion, and thought it best to leave him for awhile.

CHAPTER XXII

For three weeks Richard had to remain in town and endure the teachings of the System in a new atmosphere. He had to sit and listen to men of science who came to renew their intimacy with his father, and whom of all men his father wished him to respect and study; practically scientific men being, in the baronet's estimation, the only minds thoroughly mated and enviable. He had to endure an introduction to the Grandisons, and meet the eyes of his kind, haunted as he was by the Foolish Young Fellow. The idea that he might by any chance be identified with him held the poor youth in silent subjection. And it was horrible. For it was a continued outrage on the fair image he had in his heart. The notion of the world laughing at him because he loved sweet Lucy stung him to momentary frenzies, and developed premature misanthropy in his spirit. Also the System desired to show him whither young women of the parish lead us, and he was dragged about at nighttime to see the sons and daughters of darkness, after the fashion prescribed to Mr. Thompson; how they danced and ogled down the high road to perdition. But from this sight possibly the teacher learnt more than his pupil, since we find him seriously asking his meditative hours, in the Note-book: "Wherefore Wild Oats are only of one gender?" a question certainly not suggested to him at Raynham; and again—"Whether men might not be attaching too rigid an importance?"…to a subject with a dotted tail apparently, for he gives it no other in the Note-book. But, as I apprehend, he had come to plead in behalf of women here, and had deduced something from positive observation. To Richard the scenes he witnessed were strange wild pictures, likely if anything to have increased his misanthropy, but for his love.

Certain sweet little notes from Lucy sustained the lover during the first two weeks of exile. They ceased; and now Richard fell into such despondency that his father in alarm had to take measures to hasten their return to Raynham. At the close of the third week Berry laid a pair of letters, bearing the Raynham post-mark, on the breakfast-table, and, after reading one attentively, the baronet asked his son if he was inclined to quit the metropolis.

"For Raynham, air?" cried Richard, and relapsed, saying, "As you will!" aware that he had given a glimpse of the Foolish Young Fellow.

Berry accordingly received orders to make arrangements for their instant return to Raynham.

The letter Sir Austin lifted his head from to bespeak his son's wishes was a composition of the wise youth Adrian's, and ran thus:

"Benson is doggedly recovering. He requires great indemnities. Happy when a faithful fool is the main sufferer in a household! I quite agree with you that our faithful fool is the best servant of great schemes. Benson is now a piece of history. I tell him that this is indemnity enough, and that the sweet Muse usually insists upon gentlemen being half-flayed before she will condescend to notice them; but Benson, I regret to say, rejects the comfort so fine a reflection should offer, and had rather keep his skin and live opaque. Heroism seems partly a matter of training. Faithful folly is Benson's nature: the rest has been thrust upon.

"The young person has resigned the neighbourhood. I had an interview with the fair Papist myself, and also with the man Blaize. They were both sensible, though one swore and the other sighed. She is pretty. I hope she does not paint. I can affirm that her legs are strong, for she walks to Bellingham twice a week to take her Scarlet bath, when, having confessed and been made clean by the Romish unction, she walks back the brisker, of which my Protestant muscular systems is yet aware. It was on the road to Bellingham I engaged her. She is well in the matter of hair. Madam Godiva might challenge her, it would be a fair match. Has it never struck you that Woman is nearer the vegetable than Man?—Mr. Blaize intends her for his son a junction that every lover of fairy mythology must desire to see consummated. Young Tom is heir to all the agremens of the Beast. The maids of Lobourne say (I hear) that he is a very Proculus among them. Possibly the envious men say it for the maids. Beauty does not speak bad grammar—and altogether she is better out of the way."

The other letter was from Lady Blandish, a lady's letter, and said:

"I have fulfilled your commission to the best of my ability, and heartily sad it has made me. She is indeed very much above her station—pity that it is so! She is almost beautiful—quite beautiful at times, and not in any way what you have been led to fancy. The poor child had no story to tell. I have again seen her, and talked with her for an hour as kindly as I could. I could gather nothing more than we know. It is just a woman's history as it invariably commences. Richard is the god of her idolatry. She will renounce him, and sacrifice herself for his sake. Are we so bad? She asked me what she was to do. She would do whatever was imposed upon her—all but pretend to love another, and that she never would, and, I believe, never will. You know I am sentimental, and I confess we dropped a few tears together. Her uncle has sent her for the Winter to the institution where it appears she was educated, and where they are very fond of her and want to keep her, which it would be a good thing if they were to do. The man is a good sort of man. She was entrusted to him by her father, and he never interferes with her religion, and is very scrupulous about all that pertains to it, though, as he says, he is a Christian himself. In the Spring (but the poor child does not know this) she is to come back, and be married to his lout of a son. I am determined to prevent that. May I not reckon on your promise to aid me? When you see her, I am sure you will. It would be sacrilege to look on and permit such a thing. You know, they are cousins. She asked me, where in the world there was one like Richard? What could I answer? They were your own words, and spoken with a depth of conviction! I hope he is really calm. I shudder to think of him when he comes, and discovers what I have been doing. I hope I have been really doing right! A good deed, you say, never dies; but we cannot always know—I must rely on you. Yes, it is; I should think, easy to suffer martyrdom when one is sure of one's cause! but then one must be sure of it. I have done nothing lately but to repeat to myself that saying of yours, No. 54, C. 7, P.S.; and it has consoled me, I cannot say why, except that all wisdom consoles, whether it applies directly or not:

"'For this reason so many fall from God, who have attained to Him; that they cling to Him with their Weakness, not with their Strength.'

"I like to know of what you are thinking when you composed this or that saying—what suggested it. May not one be admitted to inspect the machinery of wisdom? I feel curious to know how thoughts—real thoughts —are born. Not that I hope to win the secret. Here is the beginning of one (but we poor women can never put together even two of the three ideas which you say go to form a thought): 'When a wise man makes a false step, will he not go farther than a fool?' It has just flitted through me.

"I cannot get on with Gibbon, so wait your return to recommence the readings. I dislike the sneering essence of his writings. I keep referring to his face, until the dislike seems to become personal. How different is it with Wordsworth! And yet I cannot escape from the thought that he is always solemnly thinking of himself (but I do reverence him). But this is curious; Byron was a greater egoist, and yet I do not feel the same with him. He reminds me of a beast of the desert, savage and beautiful; and the former is what one would imagine a superior donkey reclaimed from the heathen to be—a very superior donkey, I mean, with great power of speech and great natural complacency, and whose stubbornness you must admire as part of his mission. The worst is that no one will imagine anything sublime in a superior donkey, so my simile is unfair and false. Is it not strange? I love Wordsworth best, and yet Byron has the greater power over me. How is that?"

("Because," Sir Austin wrote beside the query in pencil, "women are cowards, and succumb to Irony and Passion, rather than yield their hearts to Excellence and Nature's Inspiration.")

The letter pursued:

"I have finished Boiardo and have taken up Berni. The latter offends me. I suppose we women do not really care for humour. You are right in saying we have none ourselves, and 'cackle' instead of laugh. It is true (of me, at least) that 'Falstaff is only to us an incorrigible fat man.' I want to know what he illustrates. And Don Quixote—what end can be served in making a noble mind ridiculous?

—I hear you say—practical. So it is. We are very narrow, I know. But we like wit—practical again! Or in your words (when I really think they generally come to my aid— perhaps it is that it is often all your thought); we 'prefer the rapier thrust, to the broad embrace, of Intelligence.'"

He trifled with the letter for some time, re-reading chosen passages as he walked about the room, and considering he scarce knew what. There are ideas language is too gross for, and shape too arbitrary, which come to us and have a definite influence upon us, and yet we cannot fasten on the filmy things and make them visible and distinct to ourselves, much less to others. Why did he twice throw a look into the glass in the act of passing it? He stood for a moment with head erect facing it. His eyes for the nonce seemed little to peruse his outer features; the grey gathered brows, and the wrinkles much action of them had traced over the circles half up his high straight forehead; the iron-grey hair that rose over his forehead and fell away in the fashion of Richard's plume. His general appearance showed the tints of years; but none of their weight, and nothing of the dignity of his youth, was gone. It was so far satisfactory, but his eyes were wide, as one who looks at his essential self through the mask we wear.

Perhaps he was speculating as he looked on the sort of aspect he presented to the lady's discriminative regard. Of her feelings he had not a suspicion. But he knew with what extraordinary lucidity women can, when it pleases them, and when their feelings are not quite boiling under the noonday sun, seize all the sides of a character, and put their fingers on its weak point. He was cognizant of the total absence of the humorous in himself (the want that most shut him out from his fellows), and perhaps the clear-thoughted, intensely self-examining gentleman filmily conceived, Me also, in common with the poet, she gazes on as one of the superior—grey beasts!

He may have so conceived the case; he was capable of that great- mindedness, and could snatch at times very luminous glances at the broad reflector which the world of fact lying outside our narrow compass holds up for us to see ourselves in when we will. Unhappily, the faculty of laughter, which is due to this gift, was denied him; and having seen, he, like the companion of friend Balsam, could go no farther. For a good wind of laughter had relieved him of much of the blight of self- deception, and oddness, and extravagance; had given a healthier view of our atmosphere of life; but he had it not.

Journeying back to Bellingham in the train, with the heated brain and brilliant eye of his son beside him, Sir Austin tried hard to feel infallible, as a man with a System should feel; and because he could not do so, after much mental conflict, he descended to entertain a personal antagonism to the young woman who had stepped in between his experiment and success. He did not think kindly of her. Lady Blandish's encomiums of her behaviour and her beauty annoyed him. Forgetful that he had in a measure forfeited his rights to it, he took the common ground of fathers, and demanded, "Why he was not justified in doing all that lay in his power to prevent his son from casting himself away upon the first creature with a pretty face he encountered?" Deliberating thus, he lost the tenderness he should have had for his experiment—the living, burning youth at his elbow, and his excessive love for him took a rigorous tone. It appeared to him politic, reasonable, and just, that the uncle of this young woman, who had so long nursed the prudent scheme of marrying her to his son, should not only not be thwarted in his object but encouraged and even assisted. At least, not thwarted. Sir Austin had no glass before him while these ideas hardened in his mind, and he had rather forgotten the letter of Lady Blandish.

Father and son were alone in the railway carriage. Both were too preoccupied to speak. As they neared Bellingham the dark was filling the hollows of the country. Over the pine-hills beyond the station a last rosy streak lingered across a green sky. Richard eyed it while they flew along. It caught him forward: it seemed full of the spirit of his love, and brought tears of mournful longing to his eyelids. The sad beauty of that one spot in the heavens seemed to call out to his soul to swear to his Lucy's truth to him: was like the sorrowful visage of his fleur-de- luce as he called her, appealing to him for faith. That tremulous tender way she had of half-closing and catching light on the nether-

lids, when sometimes she looked up in her lover's face—as look so mystic-sweet that it had grown to be the fountain of his dreams: he saw it yonder, and his blood thrilled.

Know you those wand-like touches of I know not what, before which our grosser being melts; and we, much as we hope to be in the Awaking, stand etherealized, trembling with new joy? They come but rarely; rarely even in love, when we fondly think them revelations. Mere sensations they are, doubtless: and we rank for them no higher in the spiritual scale than so many translucent glorious polypi that quiver on the shores, the hues of heaven running through them. Yet in the harvest of our days it is something for the animal to have had such mere fleshly polypian experiences to look back upon, and they give him an horizon—pale seas of luring splendour. One who has had them (when they do not bound him) may find the Isles of Bliss sooner than another. Sensual faith in the upper glories is something. "Let us remember," says The Pilgrim's Scrip, "that Nature, though heathenish, reaches at her best to the footstool of the Highest. She is not all dust, but a living portion of the spheres. In aspiration it is our error to despise her, forgetting that through Nature only can we ascend. Cherished, trained, and purified, she is then partly worthy the divine mate who is to make her wholly so. St. Simeon saw the Hog in Nature, and took Nature for the Hog."

It was one of these strange bodily exaltations which thrilled the young man, he knew not how it was, for sadness and his forebodings vanished.

The soft wand touched him. At that moment, had Sir Austin spoken openly, Richard might have fallen upon his heart. He could not.

He chose to feel injured on the common ground of fathers, and to pursue his System by plotting. Lady Blandish had revived his jealousy of the creature who menaced it, and jealousy of a System is unreflecting and vindictive as jealousy of woman.

Heath-roots and pines breathed sharp in the cool autumn evening about the Bellingham station. Richard stood a moment as he stepped from the train, and drew the country air into his lungs with large heaves of the chest. Leaving his father to the felicitations of the station-master, he went into the Lobourne road to look for his faithful Tom, who had received private orders through Berry to be in attendance with his young master's mare, Cassandra, and was lurking in a plantation of firs unenclosed on the borders of the road, where Richard, knowing his retainer's zest for conspiracy too well to seek him anywhere but in the part most favoured with shelter and concealment, found him furtively whiffing tobacco.

"What news, Tom? Is there an illness?"

Tom sent his undress cap on one side to scratch at dilemma, an old agricultural habit to which he was still a slave in moments of abstract thought or sudden difficulty.

"No, I don't want the rake, Mr. Richard," he whinnied with a false grin, as he beheld his master's eye vacantly following the action.

"Speak out!" he was commanded. "I haven't had a letter for a week!"

Richard learnt the news. He took it with surprising outward calm, only getting a little closer to Cassandra's neck, and looking very hard at Tom without seeing a speck of him, which had the effect on Tom of making him sincerely wish his master would punch his head at once rather than fix him in that owl-like way.

"Go on!" said Richard, huskily. "Yes? She's gone! Well?"

Tom was brought to understand he must make the most of trifles, and recited how he had heard from a female domestic at Belthorpe of the name of Davenport, formerly known to him, that the young lady never slept a wink from the hour she knew she was going, but sat up in her bed till morning crying most pitifully, though she never complained. Hereat the tears unconsciously streamed down Richard's cheeks. Tom said he had tried to see her, but Mr. Adrian kept him at work, ciphering at a terrible sum—that and nothing else all day! saying, it was to please his young master on his return. "Likewise something in Lat'n," added Tom. "Nom'tive Mouser!—'nough to make ye mad, sir!" he exclaimed with pathos. The wretch had been put to acquire a Latin declension.

Tom saw her on the morning she went away, he said: she was very sorrowful-looking, and nodded kindly to him as she passed in the fly along with young Tom Blaize. "She have got uncommon kind eyes, sir," said Tom, "and cryin' don't spoil them." For which his hand was wrenched.

Tom had no more to tell, save that, in rounding the road, the young lady had hung out her hand, and seemed to move it forward and back, as much as to sap, Good-bye, Tom! "And though she couldn't see me," said Tom, "I took off my hat. I did take it so kind of her to think of a chap like me." He was at high-pressure sentiment—what with his education for a hero and his master's love-stricken state.

"You saw no more of her, Tom?"

"No, sir. That was the last!"

"That was the last you saw of her, Tom?"

"Well, sir, I saw nothin' more."

"And so she went out of sight!"

"Clean gone, that she were, sir."

"Why did they take her away? what have they done with her? where have they taken her to?"

These red-hot questionings were addressed to the universal heaven rather than to Tom.

"Why didn't she write?" they were resumed. "Why did she leave? She's mine. She belongs to me! Who dared take her away? Why did she leave without writing?—Tom!"

"Yes, sir," said the well-drilled recruit, dressing himself up to the word of command. He expected a variation of the theme from the change of tone with which his name had been pronounced, but it was again, "Where have they taken her to?" and this was even more perplexing to Tom than his hard sum in arithmetic had been. He could only draw down the corners of his mouth hard, and glance up queerly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.