

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE ADVENTURES OF
HARRY RICHMOND.
VOLUME 5

George Meredith
The Adventures of Harry
Richmond. Volume 5

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CHAPTER XXXIII

WHAT CAME OF A SHILLING

The surgeon, who attended us both, loudly admired our mutual delicacy in sparing arteries and vital organs: but a bullet cuts a rougher pathway than the neat steel blade, and I was prostrate when the prince came to press my hand on his departure for his quarters at Laibach. The utterly unreasonable nature of a duel was manifested by his declaring to me, that he was now satisfied I did not mean to insult him and then laugh at him. We must regard it rather as a sudorific for feverish blood and brains. I felt my wound acutely, seeing his brisk step when he retired. Having overthrown me bodily, it threw my heart back to its first emotions, and I yearned to set eyes on my father, with a haunting sense that I had of late injured him and owed him reparation. It vanished after he had been in my room an hour, to return when he had quitted it, and incessantly and inexplicably it went and came in this manner. He was depressed. I longed for drollery,

relieved only by chance allusions to my beloved one, whereas he could not conceal his wish to turn the stupid duel to account.

'Pencil a line to her,' he entreated me, and dictated his idea of a moving line, adding urgently, that the crippled letters would be affecting to her, as to the Great Frederick his last review of his invalid veterans. 'Your name—the signature of your name alone, darling Richie,' and he traced a crooked scrawl with a forefinger,—", Still, dearest angel, in contempt of death and blood, I am yours to eternity, Harry Lepel Richmond, sometimes called Roy—a point for your decision in the future, should the breath everlastingly devoted to the most celestial of her sex, continue to animate the frame that would rise on wings to say adieu! adieu!"—Richie, just a sentence?'

He was distracting.

His natural tenderness and neatness of hand qualified him for spreading peace in a sick-room; but he was too full of life and his scheme, and knowing me out of danger, he could not forbear giving his despondency an outlet. I heard him exclaim in big sighs: 'Heavens! how near!' and again, 'She must hear of it!' Never was man so incorrigibly dramatic.

He would walk up to a bookcase and take down a volume, when the interjectional fit waxed violent, flip the pages, affecting a perplexity he would assuredly have been struck by had he perused them, and read, as he did once,—'Italy, the land of the sun! and she is to be hurried away there, and we are left to groan. The conspiracy is infamous! One of the Family takes it upon

himself to murder us! and she is to be hurried out of hearing! And so we are to have the blood of the Roys spilt for nothing?—no!' and he shut up the book with a report, and bounded to my side to beg pardon of me. From his particular abuse of the margravine, the iteration of certain phrases, which he uttered to denounce and defy them, I gathered that an interview had passed between the two, and that she had notified a blockade against all letters addressed to the princess. He half admitted having rushed to the palace on his road to me.

'But, Richie,' said he, pressing me again to write the moving line, 'a letter with a broad black border addressed by me might pass.' He looked mournfully astute. 'The margravine might say to herself," Here's Doctor Death in full diploma come to cure the wench of her infatuation." I am but quoting the coarse old woman, Richie; confusion on her and me! for I like her. It might pass in my handwriting, with a smudge for paternal grief—it might. "To Her Serene Highness the Margravine of Rippau, etc., etc., etc., in trust for the Most Exalted the Princess of Eppenwelzen- Sarkeld." I transpose or omit a title or so. "Aha!" says she, "there's verwirrung in Roy's poor head, poor fellow; the boy has sunk to a certainty. Here (to the princess), it seems, my dear, this is for you. Pray do not communicate the contents for a day or so, or a month.'"

His imitation of the margravine was the pleasantest thing I heard from him. The princess's maid and confidante, he regretted to state, was incorruptible, which I knew. That line

of Otilia's writing, 'Violets are over,' read by me in view of the root-mountain of the Royal House of Princes, scoffed at me insufferably whenever my father showed me these openings of his mind, until I was dragged down to think almost that I had not loved the woman and noble soul, but only the glorified princess — the carved gilt frame instead of the divine portrait! a shameful acrid suspicion, ransacking my conscience with the thrusting in of a foul torch here and there.

For why had I shunned him of late? How was it that he tortured me now? Did I in no degree participate in the poignant savour of his scheme? Such questionings set me flushing in deadly chills. My brain was weak, my heart exhausted, my body seemed truthful perforce and confessed on the rack. I could not deny that I had partly, insensibly clung to the vain glitter of hereditary distinction, my father's pitfall; taking it for a substantial foothold, when a young man of wit and sensibility and, mark you, true pride, would have made it his first care to trample that under heel. Excellent is pride; but oh! be sure of its foundations before you go on building monument high. I know nothing to equal the anguish of an examination of the basis of one's pride that discovers it not solidly fixed; an imposing, self-imposing structure, piled upon empty cellarage. It will inevitably, like a tree striking bad soil, betray itself at the top with time. And the anguish I speak of will be the sole healthy sign about you. Whether in the middle of life it is adviseable to descend the pedestal altogether, I dare not say. Few take the precaution to

build a flight of steps inside—it is not a labour to be proud of; fewer like to let themselves down in the public eye—it amounts to a castigation; you must, I fear, remain up there, and accept your chance in toppling over. But in any case, delude yourself as you please, your lofty baldness will assuredly be seen with time. Meanwhile, you cannot escape the internal intimations of your unsoundness. A man's pride is the front and headpiece of his character, his soul's support or snare. Look to it in youth. I have to thank the interminable hours on my wretched sick-bed for a singularly beneficial investigation of the ledger of my deeds and omissions and moral stock. Perhaps it has already struck you that one who takes the trouble to sit and write his history for as large a world as he can obtain, and shape his style to harmonize with every development of his nature, can no longer have much of the hard grain of pride in him. A proud puppet-showman blowing into Pandaeon pipes is an inconceivable object, except to those who judge of characteristics from posture.

It began to be observed by others that my father was not the most comforting of nurses to me. My landlady brought a young girl up to my room, and introduced her under the name of Lieschen, saying that she had for a long time been interested in me, and had been diligent in calling to inquire for news of my condition. Commanded to speak for herself, this Lieschen coloured and said demurely, 'I am in service here, sir, among good-hearted people, who will give me liberty to watch by you, for three hours of the afternoon and three of the early part of the

night, if you will honour me.'

My father took her shoulder between finger and thumb, and slightly shook her to each ejaculation of his emphatic 'No! no! no! no! What! a young maiden nurse to a convalescent young gentleman! Why, goodness gracious me! Eh?'

She looked at me softly, and I said I wished her to come.

My father appealed to the sagacity of the matron. So jealous was he of a suggested partner in his task that he had refused my earnest requests to have Mr. Peterborough to share the hours of watching by my side. The visits of college friends and acquaintances were cut very short, he soon reduced them to talk in a hush with thumbs and nods and eyebrows; and if it had not been so annoying to me, I could have laughed at his method of accustoming the regular visitors to make ready, immediately after greeting, for his affectionate dismissal of them. Lieschen went away with the mute blessing of his finger on one of her modest dimples; but, to his amazement, she returned in the evening. He gave her a lecture, to which she listened attentively, and came again in the morning. He was petrified. 'Idiots, insects, women, and the salt sea ocean!' said he, to indicate a list of the untameables, without distressing the one present, and, acknowledging himself beaten, he ruefully accepted his holiday.

The girl was like sweet Spring in my room. She spoke of Sarkeld familiarly. She was born in that neighbourhood, she informed me, and had been educated by a dear great lady. Her smile of pleasure on entering the room one morning, and seeing

me dressed and sitting in a grand- fatherly chair by the breezy window, was like a salutation of returning health. My father made another stand against the usurper of his privileges; he refused to go out.

'Then must I go,' said Lieschen, 'for two are not allowed here.'

'No! don't leave me,' I begged of her, and stretched out my hands for hers, while she gazed sadly from the doorway. He suspected some foolishness or he was actually jealous. 'Hum-oh!' He went forthwith a murmured groan.

She deceived me by taking her seat in perfect repose.

After smoothing her apron, 'Now I must go,' she said.

'What! to leave me here alone?'

She looked at the clock, and leaned out of the window.

'Not alone; oh, not alone!' the girl exclaimed. 'And please, please do not mention me—presently. Hark! do you hear wheels? Your heart must not beat. Now farewell. You will not be alone: at least, so I think. See what I wear, dear Mr. Patient!' She drew from her bosom, attached to a piece of blue ribbon, the half of an English shilling, kissed it, and blew a soft farewell to me:

She had not been long gone when the Princess Ottilia stood in her place.

A shilling tossed by an English boy to a couple of little foreign girls in a woodman's hut!—you would not expect it to withstand the common fate of silver coins, and preserve mysterious virtues by living celibate, neither multiplying nor reduced, ultimately to play the part of a powerful magician in bringing the boy grown

man to the feet of an illustrious lady, and her to his side in sickness, treasonably to the laws of her station. The little women quarrelled over it, and snatched and hid and contemplated it in secret, each in her turn, until the strife it engendered was put an end to by a doughty smith, their mother's brother, who divided it into equal halves, through which he drove a hole, and the pieces being now thrown out of the currency, each one wore her share of it in her bosom from that time, proudly appeased. They were not ordinary peasant children, and happily for them they had another friend that was not a bird of passage, and was endowed by nature and position to do the work of an angel. She had them educated to read, write, and knit, and learn pretty manners, and in good season she took one of the sisters to wait on her own person. The second went, upon her recommendation, into the household of a Professor of a neighbouring University. But neither of them abjured her superstitious belief in the proved merits of the talisman she wore. So when they saw the careless giver again they remembered him; their gratitude was as fresh as on that romantic morning of their childhood, and they resolved without concert to serve him after their own fashion, and quickly spied a way to it. They were German girls.

You are now enabled to guess more than was known to Ottilia and me of the curious agency at work to shuffle us together. The doors of her suite in the palace were barred against letters addressed to the princess; the delivery of letters to her was interdicted, she consenting, yet she found one: it lay on the broad

walk of the orange-trees, between the pleasure and the fruit-gardens, as if dropped by a falcon in mid air. Otilia beheld it, and started. Her little maid walking close by, exclaimed, scuttling round in front of her the while like an urchin in sabots,

'Ha! what is it? a snake? let me! let me !' The guileless mistress replied, 'A letter!' Whereupon the maid said: 'Not a window near! and no wall neither! Why, dearest princess, we have walked up and down here a dozen times and not seen it staring at us! Oh, my good heaven!' The letter was seized and opened, and Otilia read:

'He who loves you with his heart has been cruelly used. They have shot him. He is not dead. He must not die. He is where he has studied since long. He has his medicine and doctors, and they say the bullet did not lodge. He has not the sight that cures. Now is he, the strong young man, laid helpless at anybody's mercy.'

She supped at her father's table, and amused the margravine and him alternately with cards and a sonata. Before twelve at midnight she was driving on the road to the University, saying farewell to what her mind revered, so that her lover might but have sight of her. She imagined I had been assassinated. For a long time, and most pertinaciously, this idea dwelt with her. I could not dispossess her of it, even after uttering the word 'duel' I know not how often. I had flatly to relate the whole-of the circumstances.

'But Otto is no assassin,' she cried out.

What was that she revered? It was what she jeopardized

—her state, her rank, her dignity as princess and daughter of an ancient House, things typical to her of sovereign duties, and the high seclusion of her name. To her the escapades of foolish damsels were abominable. The laws of society as well as of her exalted station were in harmony with her intelligence. She thought them good, but obeyed them as a subject, not slavishly: she claimed the right to exercise her trained reason. The modestest, humblest, sweetest of women, undervaluing nothing that she possessed, least of all what was due from her to others, she could go whithersoever her reason directed her, putting anything aside to act justly according to her light. Nor would she have had cause to repent had I been the man she held me to be. Even with me she had not behaved precipitately. My course of probation was severe and long before she allowed her heart to speak.

Pale from a sleepless night and her heart's weariful eagerness to be near me, she sat by my chair, holding my hand, and sometimes looking into my eyes to find the life reflecting hers as in a sunken well that has once been a spring. My books and poor bachelor comforts caught her attention between-whiles. We talked of the day of storm by the lake; we read the unsigned letter. With her hand in mine I slept some minutes, and awoke grasping it, doubting and terrified, so great a wave of life lifted me up.

'No! you are not gone,' I sighed.

'Only come,' said she.

The nature of the step she had taken began to dawn on me.

'But when they miss you at the palace? Prince Ernest?'

'Hush! they have missed me already. It is done.' She said it smiling.

'Ottilia, will he take you away?'

'Us, dear, us.'

'Can you meet his anger?'

'Our aunt will be the executioner. We have a day of sweet hours before she can arrive.'

'May I see her first?'

'We will both see her as we are now.'

'We must have prompt answers for the margravine.'

'None, Harry. I do not defend myself ever.'

Distant hills, and folds of receding clouds and skies beyond them, were visible from my window, and beyond the skies I felt her soul.

'Ottilia, you were going to Italy?'

'Yes: or whither they please, for as long as they please. I wished once to go, I have told you why. One of the series' (she touched the letter lying on a reading-table beside her) 'turned the channel of all wishes and intentions. My friends left me to fall at the mercy of this one. I consented to the injunction that I should neither write nor receive letters. Do I argue ill in saying that a trust was implied? Surely it was a breach of the trust to keep me ignorant of the danger of him I love! Now they know it. I dared not consult them—not my dear father! about any design of mine when I had read this odd copybook writing, all

in brief sentences, each beginning "he" and "he." It struck me like thrusts of a sword; it illuminated me like lightning. That "he" was the heart within my heart. The writer must be some clever woman or simple friend, who feels for us very strongly. My lover assassinated, where could I be but with him?'

Her little Ann coming in with chocolate and strips of fine white bread to dip in it stopped my efforts to explain the distinction between an assassination and a duel. I noticed then the likeness of Aennchen to Lieschen.

'She has a sister here,' said Otilia; 'and let her bring Lieschen to visit me here this afternoon.'

Aennchen, with a blush, murmured, that she heard and would obey. I had a memorable pleasure in watching my beloved eat and drink under my roof.

The duel remained incomprehensible to her. She first frightened me by remarking that duels were the pastime of brainless young men. Her next remark, in answer to my repeated attempts to shield my antagonist from a capital charge: 'But only military men and Frenchmen fight duels!' accompanied by a slightly investigating glance of timid surprise, gave me pain, together with a flashing apprehension of what she had forfeited, whom offended, to rush to the succour of a duellist. I had to repeat to her who my enemy was, so that there should be no further mention of assassination. Prince Otto's name seemed to entangle her understanding completely.

'Otto! Otto!' she murmured; 'he has, I have heard, been

obliged by some so-called laws of honour once or twice to—to—he is above suspicion of treachery! To my mind it is one and the same, but I would not harshly exclude the view the world puts on things; and I use the world's language in saying that he could not do a dishonourable deed. How far he honours himself is a question apart. That may be low enough, while the world is full of a man's praises.'

She knew the nature of a duel. 'It is the work of soulless creatures!' she broke through my stammered explanations with unwonted impatience, and pressing my hand: 'Ah! You are safe. I have you still. Do you know, Harry, I am not yet able to endure accidents and misadventures: I have not fortitude to meet them, or intelligence to account for them. They are little ironical laughter. Say we build so high: the lightning strikes us:—why build at all? The Summer fly is happier. If I had lost you! I can almost imagine that I should have asked for revenge. For why should the bravest and purest soul of my worship be snatched away? I am not talking wisdom, only my shaken self will speak just now! I pardon Otto, though he has behaved basely.'

'No, not basely,' I felt bound to plead on his behalf, thinking, in spite of a veritable anguish of gathering dread, that she had become enlightened and would soon take the common view of our case; 'not basely. He was excessively irritated, without cause in my opinion; he simply misunderstood certain matters. Dearest, you have nations fighting: a war is only an exaggerated form of duelling.'

'Nations at war are wild beasts,' she replied. 'The passions of these hordes of men are not an example for a living soul. Our souls grow up to the light: we must keep eye on the light, and look no lower. Nations appear to me to have no worse than a soiled mirror of themselves in mobs. They are still uncivilized: they still bear a resemblance to the old monsters of the mud. Do you not see their claws and fangs, Harry? Do you find an apology in their acts for intemperate conduct? Men who fight duels appear in my sight no nobler than the first desperate creatures spelling the cruel A B C of the passions.'

'No, nor in mine,' I assented hastily. 'We are not perfect. But hear me. Yes, the passions are cruel. Circumstances however—I mean, there are social usages—Ay, if one were always looking up t. But should we not be gentle with our comparisons if we would have our views in proportion?'

She hung studiously silent, and I pursued:

'I trust you so much as my helper and my friend that I tell you what we do not usually tell to women—the facts, and the names connected with them. Sooner or later you would have learnt everything. Beloved, I do not wait to let you hear it by degrees, to be reconciled to it piecemeal.'

'And I forgive him,' she sighed. 'I scarcely bring myself to believe that Harry has bled from Otto's hand.'

'It was the accident of the case, Ottilia. We had to meet.'

'To meet?'

'There are circumstances when men will not accept apologies;

they—we—heaven knows, I was ready to do all that a man could do to avoid this folly—wickedness; give it the worst of titles!

'It did not occur accidentally?' she inquired. Her voice sounded strange, half withheld in the utterance.

'It occurred,' said I, feeling my strength ebb and despair set in, 'it occurred—the prince compelled me to the meet him.'

'But my cousin Otto is no assassin?

'Compelled, I say: that is, he conceived I had injured him, and left me no other way of making amends.'

Her defence of Otto was in reality the vehement cherishing of her idea of me. This caused her bewilderment, and like a barrier to the flowing of her mind it resisted and resisted. She could not suffer herself to realize that I was one of the brainless young savages, creatures with claws and fangs.

Her face was unchanged to me. The homeliness of her large mild eyes embraced me unshadowed, and took me to its inner fire unreservedly. Leaning in my roomy chair, I contemplated her at leisure while my heart kept saying 'Mine! mine!' to awaken an active belief in its possession. Her face was like the quiet morning of a winter day when cloud and sun intermix and make an ardent silver, with lights of blue and faint fresh rose; and over them the beautiful fold of her full eyebrow on the eyelid like a bending upper heaven. Those winter mornings are divine. They move on noiselessly. The earth is still, as if awaiting. A wren warbles, and flits through the lank drenched brambles; hill-side opens green; elsewhere is mist, everywhere expectancy. They bear the veiled

sun like a sangreal aloft to the wavy marble flooring of stainless cloud.

She was as fair. Gazing across her shoulder's gentle depression, I could have desired to have the couchant brow, and round cheek, and rounding chin no more than a young man's dream of woman, a picture alive, without the animating individual awful mind to judge of me by my acts. I chafed at the thought that one so young and lovely should meditate on human affairs at all. She was of an age to be maidenly romantic: our situation favoured it. But she turned to me, and I was glad of the eyes I knew. She kissed me on the forehead.

'Sleep,' she whispered.

I feigned sleep to catch my happiness about me.

Some disenchanting thunder was coming, I was sure, and I was right. My father entered.

'Princess !' He did amazed and delighted homage, and forthwith uncontrollably poured out the history of my heroism, a hundred words for one;—my promptitude in picking the prince's glove up on my sword's point, my fine play with the steel, my scornful magnanimity, the admiration of my fellow-students;—every line of it; in stupendous language; an artillery celebration of victory. I tried to stop him. Ottilia rose, continually assenting, with short affirmatives, to his glorifying interrogations—a method he had of recapitulating the main points. She glanced to right and left, as if she felt caged.

'Is it known?' I heard her ask, in the half audible strange voice

which had previously made me tremble.

'Known? I certify to you, princess,'—the unhappy man spouted his withering fountain of interjections over us anew; known in every Court and garrison of Germany! Known by this time in Old England! And, what was more, the correct version of it was known! It was known that the young Englishman had vanquished his adversary with the small sword, and had allowed him, because he had raged demoniacally on account of his lamed limb, to have a shot in revenge.

'The honour done me by the princess in visiting me is not to be known,' I summoned energy enough to say.

She shook her head.

My father pledged himself to the hottest secresy, equivalent to a calm denial of the fact, if necessary.

'Pray be at no trouble,' she addressed him.

The 'Where am I?' look was painful in her aspect.

It led me to perceive the difference of her published position in visiting a duellist lover instead of one assassinated. In the latter case, the rashness of an hereditary virgin princess avowing her attachment might pass condoned or cloaked by general compassion. How stood it in the former? I had dragged her down to the duellist's level! And as she was not of a nature to practise concealments, and scorned to sanction them, she was condemned, seeing that concealment as far as possible was imperative, to suffer bitterly in her own esteem. This, the cruellest, was the least of the evils. To keep our names disjointed

was hopeless. My weakened frame and mental misery coined tears when thoughts were needed.

Presently I found the room empty of our poor unconscious tormentor.

Otilia had fastened her hand to mine again.

'Be generous,' I surprised her by saying. 'Go back at once. I have seen you! Let my father escort you the road. You will meet the margravine, or some one. I think, with you, it will be the margravine, and my father puts her in good humour. Pardon a wretched little scheme to save you from annoyance! So thus you return within a day, and the margravine, shelters you. Your name will not be spoken. But go at once, for the sake of Prince Ernest. I have hurt him already; help me to avoid doing him a mortal injury. It was Schwartz who drove you? our old Schwartz ! Old Warhead! You see, we may be safe; only every fresh minute adds to the danger. And another reason for going—another—'

'Ah!' she breathed, 'my Harry will talk himself into a fever.'

'I shall have it if the margravine comes here.'

'She shall not be admitted.'

'Or if I hear her, or hear that she has come! Consent at once, and revive me. Oh! I am begging you to leave me, and wishing it with all my soul. Think over what I have done. Do not write to me. I shall see the compulsion of mere kindness between the lines. You consent. Your wisdom I never doubt—I doubt my own.'

'When it is yours you would persuade me to confide in?' said

she, with some sorrowful archness.

Wits clear as hers could see that I had advised well, except in proposing my father for escort. It was evidently better that she should go as she came.

I refrained from asking her what she thought of me now. Suing for immediate pardon would have been like the applying of a lancet to a vein for blood: it would have burst forth, meaning mere words coloured by commiseration, kindness, desperate affection, anything but her soul's survey of herself and me; and though I yearned for the comfort passion could give me, I knew the mind I was dealing with, or, rather, I knew I was dealing with a mind; and I kept my tongue silent. The talk between us was of the possible date of my recovery, the hour of her return to the palace, the writer of the unsigned letters, books we had read apart or peeped into together. She was a little quicker in speech, less meditative. My sensitive watchfulness caught no other indication of a change.

My father drove away an hour in advance of the princess to encounter the margravine.

'By,' said he, rehearsing his exclamation of astonishment and delight at meeting her, 'by the most miraculous piece of good fortune conceivable, dear madam. And now comes the question, since you have condescended to notice a solitary atom of your acquaintance on the public highroad, whether I am to have the honour of doubling the freight of your carriage, or you will deign to embark in mine? But the direction of the horses' heads must

be reversed, absolutely it must, if your Highness would repose in a bed to-night. Good. So. And now, at a conversational trot, we may happen to be overtaken by acquaintances.'

I had no doubt of his drawing on his rarely-abandoned seven-league boots of jargon, once so delicious to me, for the margravine's entertainment. His lack of discernment in treating the princess to it ruined my patience.

The sisters Aennchen and Lieschen presented themselves a few minutes before his departure. Lieschen dropped at her feet.

'My child,' said the princess, quite maternally, 'could you be quit of your service with the Mahrlens for two weeks, think you, to do duty here?'

'The Professor grants her six hours out of the twenty-four already,' said

I.

'To go where?' she asked, alarmed.

'To come here.'

'Here? She knows you? She did not curtsy to you.'

'Nurses do not usually do that.'

The appearance of both girls was pitiable; but having no suspicion of the cause for it, I superadded,

'She was here this morning.'

'Ah! we owe her more than we were aware of.'

The princess looked on her kindly, though with suspense in the expression.

'She told me of my approaching visitor,' I said.

'Oh! not told!' Lieschen burst out.

'Did you,'—the princess questioned her, and murmured to me, 'These children cannot speak falsehoods,' they shone miserably under the burden of uprightness 'did you make sure that I should come?'

Lieschen thought—she supposed. But why? Why did she think and suppose? What made her anticipate the princess's arrival? This inveterate why communicated its terrors to Aennchen, upon whom the princess turned scrutinizing eyes, saying, 'You write of me to your sister?'

'Yes, princess.'

'And she to you?'

Lieschen answered: 'Forgive me, your Highness, dearest lady!'

'You offered yourself here unasked?'

'Yes, princess.'

'Have you written to others besides your sister?'

'Seldom, princess; I do not remember.'

'You know the obligation of signatures to letters?'

'Ah!'

'You have been remiss in not writing to me, child.'

'Oh, princess! I did not dare to.'

'You have not written to me?'

'Ah! princess, how dared I?'

'Are you speaking truthfully?'

The unhappy girls stood trembling. Otilia spared them the leap into the gulfs of confession. Her intuitive glance, assisted

by a combination of minor facts, had read the story of their misdeeds in a minute. She sent them down to the carriage, suffering her culprits to kiss her fingers; while she said to one: 'This might be a fable of a pair of mice.'

When she was gone, after many fits of musing, the signification of it was revealed to my slower brain. I felt that it could not but be an additional shock to the regal pride of such a woman that these little maidens should have been permitted to act forcibly on her destiny. The mystery of the letters was easily explained as soon as a direct suspicion fell on one of the girls who lived in my neighbourhood and the other who was near the princess's person. Doubtless the revelation of their effective mouse plot had its humiliating bitterness for her on a day of heavy oppression, smile at it as she subsequently might. The torture of heart with which I twisted the meaning of her words about the pair of mice to imply that the pair had conspired to make a net for an eagle and had enmeshed her, may have struck a vein of the truth. I could see no other antithesis to the laudable performance of the single mouse of fable. Lieschen, when she next appeared in the character of nurse, met my inquiries by supplicating me to imitate her sister's generous mistress, and be merciful.

She remarked by-and-by, of her own accord: 'Princess Ottilia does not regret that she had us educated.'

A tender warmth crept round me in thinking that a mind thus lofty would surely be, however severe in its insight, above regrets and recantations.

CHAPTER XXXIV

I GAIN A PERCEPTION OF PRINCELY STATE

I had a visit from Prince Ernest, nominally one of congratulation on my escape. I was never in my life so much at any man's mercy: he might have fevered me to death with reproaches, and I expected them on hearing his name pronounced at the door. I had forgotten the ways of the world. For some minutes I listened guardedly to his affable talk. My thanks for the honour done me were awkward, as if they came upon reflection. The prince was particularly civil and cheerful. His relative, he said, had written of me in high terms—the very highest, declaring that I was blameless in the matter, and that, though he had sent the horse back to my stables, he fully believed in the fine qualities of the animal, and acknowledged his fault in making it a cause of provocation. To all of which I assented with easy nods.

'Your Shakespeare, I think,' said the prince, 'has a scene of young Frenchmen praising their horses. I myself am no stranger to the enthusiasm: one could not stake life and honour on a nobler brute. Pardon me if I state my opinion that you young Englishmen of to-day are sometimes rather overbearing in your assumption of a superior knowledge of horseflesh. We Germans

in the Baltic provinces and in the Austrian cavalry think we have a right to a remark or two; and if we have not suborned the testimony of modern history, the value of our Hanoverian troopers is not unknown to one at least of your Generals. However, the odds are that you were right and Otto wrong, and he certainly put himself in the wrong to defend his ground.'

I begged him to pass a lenient sentence upon fiery youth. He assured me that he remembered his own. Our interchange of courtesies was cordially commonplace: we walked, as it were, arm-in-arm on thin ice, rivalling one another's gentlemanly composure. Satisfied with my discretion, the prince invited me to the lake-palace, and then a week's shooting in Styria to recruit. I thanked him in as clear a voice as I could command:

'Your Highness, the mine flourishes, I trust?'

'It does; I think I may say it does,' he replied. 'There is always the want of capital. What can be accomplished, in the present state of affairs, your father performs, on the whole, well. You smile—but I mean extraordinarily well. He has, with an accountant at his elbow, really the genius of management. He serves me busily, and, I repeat, well. A better employment for him than the direction of Court theatricals?'

'Undoubtedly it is.'

'Or than bestriding a bronze horse, personifying my good ancestor! Are you acquainted with the Chancellor von Redwitz?'

'All I know of him, sir, is that he is fortunate to enjoy the particular confidence of his master.'

'He has a long head. But, now, he is a disappointing man in action; responsibility overturns him. He is the reverse of Roy, whose advice I do not take, though I'm glad to set him running. Von Redwitz is in the town. He shall call on you, and amuse an hour or so of your convalescence.'

I confessed that I began to feel longings for society.

Prince Ernest was kind enough to quit me without unmasking. I had not to learn that the simplest visits and observations of ruling princes signify more than lies on the surface. Interests so highly personal as theirs demand from them a decent insincerity.

Chancellor von Redwitz called on me, and amused me with secret anecdotes of all the royal Houses of Germany, amusing chiefly through the veneration he still entertained for them. The grave senior was doing his utmost to divert one of my years. The immoralities of blue blood, like the amours of the Gods, were to his mind tolerable, if not beneficial to mankind, and he presumed I should find them toothsome. Nay, he besought me to coincide in his excuses of a widely charming young archduchess, for whom no estimable husband of a fitting rank could anywhere be discovered, so she had to be bestowed upon an archducal imbecile; and hence—and hence—Oh, certainly! Generous youth and benevolent age joined hands of exoneration over her. The princess of Sattenberg actually married, under covert, a colonel of Uhlans at the age of seventeen; the marriage was quashed, the colonel vanished, the princess became the scandalous Duchess of Ilm-Ilm, and was surprised one infamous

night in the outer court of the castle by a soldier on guard, who dragged her into the guard-room and unveiled her there, and would have been summarily shot for his pains but for the locket on his breast, which proved him to be his sovereign's son.—A perfect romance, Mr. Chancellor. We will say the soldier son loved a delicate young countess in attendance on the duchess. The countess spies the locket, takes it to the duchess, is reprimanded, when behold! the locket opens, and Colonel von Bein appears as in his blooming youth, in Lancer uniform.—Young sir, your piece of romance has exaggerated history to caricature. Romances are the destruction of human interest. The moment you begin to move the individuals, they are puppets. 'Nothing but poetry, and I say it who do not read it'—(Chancellor von Redwitz is the speaker)'nothing but poetry makes romances passable: for poetry is the everlastingly and embracingly human. Without it your fictions are flat foolishness, non-nourishing substance—a species of brandy and gruel!—diet for craving stomachs that can support nothing solider, and must have the weak stuff stiffened. Talking of poetry, there was an independent hereditary princess of Leiterstein in love with a poet!—a Leonora d'Este!—This was no Tasso. Nevertheless, she proposed to come to nuptials. Good, you observe? I confine myself to the relation of historical circumstances; in other words, facts; and of good or bad I know not.'

Chancellor von Redwitz smoothed the black silk stocking of his crossed leg, and set his bunch of seals and watch-key

swinging. He resumed, entirely to amuse me,

'The Princess Elizabeth of Leiterstein promised all the qualities which the most solicitous of paternal princes could desire as a guarantee for the judicious government of the territory to be bequeathed to her at his demise. But, as there is no romance to be extracted from her story, I may as well tell you at once that she did not espouse the poet.'

'On the contrary, dear Mr. Chancellor, I am interested in the princess.

Proceed, and be as minute as you please.'

'It is but a commonplace excerpt of secret historical narrative buried among the archives of the Family, my good Mr. Richmond. The Princess Elizabeth thoughtlessly pledged her hand to the young sonneteer. Of course, she could not fulfil her engagement.'

'Why not?'

'You see, you are impatient for romance, young gentleman.'

'Not at all, Mr. Chancellor. I do but ask a question.'

'You fence. Your question was dictated by impatience.'

'Yes, for the facts and elucidations!'

'For the romance, that is. You wish me to depict emotions.'

Hereupon this destroyer of temper embrowned his nostrils with snuff, adding,—'I am unable to.'

'Then one is not to learn why the princess could not fulfil her engagement?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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