

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE GENTLEMAN OF
FIFTY AND THE DAMSEL
OF NINETEEN (AN EARLY
UNCOMPLETED
FRAGMENT)

George Meredith

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The Damsel of Nineteen (An
early uncompleted fragment)**

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CHAPTER I

Passing over Ickleworth Bridge and rounding up the heavily-shadowed river of our narrow valley, I perceived a commotion as of bathers in a certain bright space immediately underneath the vicar's terrace-garden steps. My astonishment was considerable when it became evident to me that the vicar himself was disporting in the water, which, reaching no higher than his waist, disclosed him in the ordinary habiliments of his cloth. I knew my friend to be one of the most absent-minded of men, and my first effort to explain the phenomenon of his appearance there, suggested that he might have walked in, the victim of a fit of abstraction, and that he had not yet fully comprehended his plight; but this idea was dispersed when I beheld the very portly lady, his partner in joy and adversity, standing immersed, and perfectly attired, some short distance nearer to the bank. As I advanced along the bank opposed to them, I was further amazed to hear them discoursing quite equably together, so that it was impossible to say on the face of it whether a catastrophe had occurred, or the great heat of a cloudless summer day had tempted an eccentric couple to seek for coolness in the directest fashion, without absolute disregard to propriety. I made a point of listening for the accentuation of the 'my dear' which was being interchanged, but the key-note to the harmony existing between husband and wife was neither excessively unctuous, nor shrewd, and the connubial shuttlecock was so well kept up on both sides that I chose to await the issue rather than speculate on the origin of this strange exhibition. I therefore, as I could not be accused of an outrage to modesty, permitted myself to maintain what might be invidiously termed a satyr-like watch from behind a forward flinging willow, whose business in life was to look at its image in a brown depth, branches, trunk, and roots. The sole indication of discomfort displayed by the pair was that the lady's hand worked somewhat fretfully to keep her dress from ballooning and puffing out of all proportion round about her person, while the vicar, who stood without his hat, employed a spongy handkerchief from time to time in tempering the ardours of a vertical sun. If you will consent to imagine a bald blackbird, his neck being shrunk in apprehensively, as you may see him in the first rolling of the thunder, you will gather an image of my friend's appearance.

He performed his capital ablutions with many loud 'poofs,' and a casting up of dazzled eyes, an action that gave point to his recital of the invocation of Chryses to Smintheus which brought upon the Greeks disaster and much woe. Between the lines he replied to his wife, whose remarks increased in quantity, and also, as I thought, in emphasis, under the river of verse which he poured forth un baffled, broadening his chest to the sonorous Greek music in a singular rapture of obliviousness.

A wise man will not squander his laughter if he can help it, but will keep the agitation of it down as long as he may. The simmering of humour sends a lively spirit into the mind, whereas the boiling over is but a prodigal expenditure and the disturbance of a clear current: for the comic element is visible to you in all things, if you do but keep your mind charged with the perception of it, as I have heard a great expounder deliver himself on another subject; and he spoke very truly. So, I continued to look on with the gravity of Nature herself, and I could not but fancy, and with less than our usual wilfulness when we fancy things about Nature's moods, that the Mother of men beheld this scene with half a smile, differently from the simple observation of those cows whisking the flies from their flanks at the edge of the shorn meadow and its aspens, seen beneath the curved roof of a broad oak-branch. Save for this happy upward curve of the branch, we are encompassed by breathless foliage;

even the gloom was hot; the little insects that are food for fish tried a flight and fell on the water's surface, as if panting. Here and there, a sullen fish consented to take them, and a circle spread, telling of past excitement.

I had listened to the vicar's Homeric lowing for the space of a minute or so—what some one has called, the great beast-like, bellow-like, roar and roll of the Iliad hexameter: it stopped like a cut cord. One of the numerous daughters of his house appeared in the arch of white cluster-roses on the lower garden-terrace, and with an exclamation, stood petrified at the extraordinary spectacle, and then she laughed outright. I had hitherto resisted, but the young lady's frank and boisterous laughter carried me along, and I too let loose a peal, and discovered myself. The vicar, seeing me, acknowledged a consciousness of his absurd position with a laugh as loud. As for the scapegrace girl, she went off into a run of high-pitched shriekings like twenty woodpeckers, crying: I Mama, mama, you look as if you were in Jordan!

The vicar cleared his throat admonishingly, for it was apparent that Miss Alice was giving offence to her mother, and I presume he thought it was enough for one of the family to have done so.

'Wilt thou come out of Jordan?' I cried.

'I am sufficiently baptized with the water,' said the helpless man. . .

'Indeed, Mr. Amble,' observed his spouse, 'you can lecture a woman for not making the best of circumstances; I hope you'll bear in mind that it's you who are irreverent. I can endure this no longer. You deserve Mr. Pollingray's ridicule.'

Upon this, I interposed: 'Pray, ma'am, don't imagine that you have anything but sympathy from me.'—but as I was protesting, having my mouth open, the terrible Miss Alice dragged the laughter remorselessly out of me.

They have been trying Frank's new boat, Mr. Pollingray, and they've upset it. Oh! oh! and again there was the woodpeckers' chorus.

'Alice, I desire you instantly to go and fetch John the gardener,' said the angry mother.

'Mama, I can't move; wait a minute, only a minute. John's gone about the geraniums. Oh! don't look so resigned, papa; you'll kill me! Mama, come and take my hand. Oh! oh!'

The young lady put her hands in against her waist and rolled her body like a possessed one.

'Why don't you come in through the boat-house?' she asked when she had mastered her fit.

'Ah!' said the vicar. I beheld him struck by this new thought.

'How utterly absurd you are, Mr. Amble!' exclaimed his wife, 'when you know that the boat-house is locked, and that the boat was lying under the camshot when you persuaded me to step into it.'

Hearing this explanation of the accident, Alice gave way to an ungovernable emotion.

'You see, my dear,' the vicar addressed his wife, she can do nothing; it's useless. If ever patience is counselled to us, it is when accidents befall us, for then, as we are not responsible, we know we are in other hands, and it is our duty to be comparatively passive. Perhaps I may say that in every difficulty, patience is a life-belt. I beg of you to be patient still.'

'Mr. Amble, I shall think you foolish,' said the spouse, with a nod of more than emphasis.

'My dear, you have only to decide,' was the meek reply.

By this time, Miss Alice had so far conquered the fiend of laughter that she could venture to summon her mother close up to the bank and extend a rescuing hand. Mrs. Amble waded to within reach, her husband following. Arrangements were made for Alice to pull, and the vicar to push; both in accordance with Mrs. Amble's stipulations, for even in her extremity of helplessness she affected rule and sovereignty. Unhappily, at the decisive moment, I chanced (and I admit it was more than an inadvertence on my part, it was a most ill-considered thing to do) I chanced, I say, to call out—and that I refrained from quoting Voltaire is something in my favour:

'How on earth did you manage to tumble in?'

There can be no contest of opinion that I might have kept my curiosity waiting, and possibly it may be said with some justification that I was the direct cause of my friend's unparalleled behaviour;

but could a mortal man guess that in the very act of assisting his wife's return to dry land, and while she was—if I may put it so—modestly in his hands, he would turn about with a quotation that compared him to old Palinurus, all the while allowing his worthy and admirable burden to sink lower and dispread in excess upon the surface of the water, until the vantage of her daughter's help was lost to her; I beheld the consequences of my indiscretion, dismayed. I would have checked the preposterous Virgilian, but in contempt of my uplifted hand and averted head, and regardless of the fact that his wife was then literally dependent upon him, the vicar declaimed (and the drenching effect produced by Latin upon a lady at such a season, may be thought on):

Vix primos inopina quies laxaverat artus,
Et super incumbens, cum puppis parte revulsa
Cumque gubernaclo liquidas projecit in undas.'

It is not easy when you are unacquainted with the language, to retort upon Latin, even when the attempt to do so is made in English. Very few even of the uneducated ears can tolerate such anti-climax vituperative as English after sounding Latin. Mrs. Amble kept down those sentiments which her vernacular might have expressed. I heard but one groan that came from her as she lay huddled indistinguishably in the arms of her husband.

'Not—praecipitem! I am happy to say,' my senseless friend remarked further, and laughed cheerfully as he fortified his statement with a run of negatives. 'No, no'; in a way peculiar to him. 'No, no. If I plant my grey hairs anywhere, it will be on dry land: no. But, now, my dear; he returned to his duty; why, you're down again. Come: one, two, and up.'

He was raising a dead weight. The passion for sarcastic speech was manifestly at war with common prudence in the bosom of Mrs. Amble; prudence, however, overcame it. She cast on him a look of a kind that makes matrimony terrific in the dreams of bachelors, and then wedding her energy to the assistance given she made one of those senseless springs of the upper half of the body, which strike the philosophic eye with the futility of an effort that does not arise from a solid basis. Owing to the want of concert between them, the vicar's impulsive strength was expended when his wife's came into play. Alice clutched her mother bravely. The vicar had force enough to stay his wife's descent; but Alice (she boasts of her muscle) had not the force in the other direction—and no wonder. There are few young ladies who could pull fourteen stone sheer up a camshot.

Mrs. Amble remained in suspense between the two.

Oh, Mr. Pollingray, if you were only on this side to help us,' Miss Alice exclaimed very piteously, though I could see that she was half mad with the internal struggle of laughter at the parents and concern for them.

'Now, pull, Alice,' shouted the vicar.

'No, not yet,' screamed Mrs. Amble; I'm sinking.'

'Pull, Alice.'

'Now, Mama.'

'Oh!'

'Push, Papa.'

'I'm down.'

'Up, Ma'am; Jane; woman, up.'

'Gently, Papa: Abraham, I will not.'

'My dear, but you must.'

'And that man opposite.'

'What, Pollingray? He's fifty.'

I found myself walking indignantly down the path. Even now I protest my friend was guilty of bad manners, though I make every allowance for him; I excuse, I pass the order; but why—

what justifies one man's bawling out another man's age? What purpose does it serve? I suppose the vicar wished to reassure his wife, on the principle (I have heard him enunciate it) that the sexes are merged at fifty—by which he means, I must presume, that something which may be good or bad, and is generally silly —of course, I admire and respect modesty and pudeur as much as any man — something has gone: a recognition of the bounds of division. There is, if that is a lamentable matter, a loss of certain of our young tricks at fifty. We have ceased to blush readily: and let me ask you to define a blush. Is it an involuntary truth or an ingenuous lie? I know that this will sound like the language of a man not a little jealous of his youthful compeers. I can but leave it to rightly judging persons to consider whether a healthy man in his prime, who has enough, and is not cursed by ambition, need be jealous of any living soul.

A shriek from Miss Alice checked my retreating steps. The vicar was staggering to support the breathing half of his partner while she regained her footing in the bed of the river. Their effort to scale the camshot had failed. Happily at this moment I caught sight of Master Frank's boat, which had floated, bottom upwards, against a projecting mud-bank of forget-me-nots. I contrived to reach it and right it, and having secured one of the sculls, I pulled up to the rescue; though not before I had plucked a flower, actuated by a motive that I cannot account for. The vicar held the boat firmly against the camshot, while I, at the imminent risk of joining them (I shall not forget the combined expression of Miss Alice's retreating eyes and the malicious corners of her mouth) hoisted the lady in, and the river with her. From the seat of the boat she stood sufficiently high to project the step towards land without peril. When she had set her foot there, we all assumed an attitude of respectful attention, and the vicar, who could soar over calamity like a fairweather swallow, acknowledged the return of his wife to the element with a series of apologetic yesses and short coughings.

'That would furnish a good concert for the poets,' he remarked. 'A parting, a separation of lovers; "even as a body from the watertorn," or "from the water plucked"; eh? do you think—"so I weep round her, tearful in her track," an excellent—'

But the outraged woman, dripping in grievous discomfort above him, made a peremptory gesture.

'Mr. Amble, will you come on shore instantly, I have borne with your stupidity long enough. I insist upon your remembering, sir, that you have a family dependent upon you. Other men may commit these follies.'

This was a blow at myself, a bachelor whom the lady had never persuaded to dream of relinquishing his freedom.

'My dear, I am coming,' said the vicar.

'Then, come at once, or I shall think you idiotic,' the wife retorted.

'I have been endeavouring,' the vicar now addressed me, 'to prove by a practical demonstration that women are capable of as much philosophy as men, under any sudden and afflicting revolution of circumstances.'

'And if you get a sunstroke, you will be rightly punished, and I shall not be sorry, Mr. Amble.'

'I am coming, my dear Jane. Pray run into the house and change your things.'

'Not till I see you out of the water, sir.'

'You are losing your temper, my love.'

'You would make a saint lose his temper, Mr. Amble.'

'There were female saints, my dear,' the vicar mildly responded; and addressed me further: 'Up to this point, I assure you, Pollingray, no conduct could have been more exemplary than Mrs. Amble's. I had got her into the boat—a good boat, a capital boat—but getting in myself, we overturned. The first impulse of an ordinary woman would have been to reproach and scold; but Mrs. Amble succumbed only to the first impulse. Discovering that all effort unaided to climb the bank was fruitless, she agreed to wait patiently and make the best of circumstances; and she did; and she learnt to enjoy it. There is marrow in every bone. My dear. Jane, I have never admired you so much. I tried

her, Pollingray, in metaphysics. I talked to her of the opera we last heard, I think fifty years ago. And as it is less endurable for a woman to be patient in tribulation—the honour is greater, when she overcomes the fleshy trial. Insomuch,' the vicar put on a bland air of abnegation of honour, 'that I am disposed to consider any male philosopher our superior; when you've found one, ha, ha—when you've found one. O sol pulcher! I am ready to sing that the day has been glorious, so far. Pulcher ille dies.'

Mrs. Amble appealed to me. 'Would anybody not swear that he is mad to see him standing waist-deep in the water and the sun on his bald head, I am reduced to entreat you not to—though you have no family of your own—not to encourage him. It is amusing to you. Pray, reflect that such folly is too often fatal. Compel him to come on shore.'

The logic of the appeal was no doubt distinctly visible in the lady's mind, though it was not accurately worded. I saw that I stood marked to be the scape goat of the day, and humbly continued to deserve well, notwithstanding. By dint of simple signs and nods of affirmative, and a constant propulsion of my friend's arm, I drew him into the boat, and thence projected him up to the level with his wife, who had perhaps deigned to understand that it was best to avoid the arresting of his divergent mind by any remark during the passage, and remained silent. No sooner was he established on his feet, than she plucked him away.

'Your papa's hat,' she called, flashing to her daughter, and streamed up the lawn into the rose-trellised pathways leading on aloft to the vicarage house. Behind roses the weeping couple disappeared. The last I saw of my friend was a smiting of his hand upon his head in a vain effort to catch at one of the fleeting ideas sowed in him by the quick passage of objects before his vision, and shaken out of him by abnormal hurry. The Rev. Abraham Amble had been lord of his wife in the water, but his innings was over. He had evidently enjoyed it vastly, and I now understood why he had chosen to prolong it as much as possible. Your eccentric characters are not uncommonly amateurs of petty artifice. There are hours of vengeance even for henpecked men.

I found myself sighing over the enslaved condition of every Benedict of my acquaintance, when the thought came like a surprise that I was alone with Alice. The fair and pleasant damsel made a clever descent into the boat, and having seated herself, she began to twirl the scull in the rowlock, and said: 'Do you feel disposed to join me in looking after the other scull and papa's hat, Mr. Pollingray?' I suggested 'Will you not get your feet wet? I couldn't manage to empty all the water in the boat.'

'Oh' cried she, with a toss of her head; I wet feet never hurt young people.'

There was matter for an admonitory lecture in this. Let me confess I was about to give it, when she added: But Mr. Pollingray, I am really afraid that your feet are wet! You had to step into the water when you righted the boat:

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