

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE SENTIMENTALISTS

George Meredith
The Sentimentalists

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The Sentimentalists

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

HOMEWARE.

PROFESSOR SPIRAL.

ARDEN,..... In love with Astraea.

SWITHIN,..... Sympathetics.

OSIER,

DAME DRESDEN,..... Sister to Homeware.

ASTRAEA,..... Niece to Dame Dresden and Homeware.

LYRA,..... A Wife.

LADY OLDLACE.

VIRGINIA.

WINIFRED.

The scene is a Surrey garden in early summer. The paths are shaded by tall box-wood hedges. The—time is some sixty years ago.

SCENE I

PROFESSOR SPIRAL, DAME DRESDEN, LADY OLDLACE,
VIRGINIA, WINIFRED, SWITHIN, and OSIER

(As they slowly promenade the garden, the professor is delivering one of his exquisite orations on Woman.)

SPIRAL: One husband! The woman consenting to marriage takes but one. For her there is no widowhood. That punctuation of the sentence called death is not the end of the chapter for her. It is the brilliant proof of her having a soul. So she exalts her sex. Above the wrangle and clamour of the passions she is a fixed star. After once recording her obedience to the laws of our common nature—that is to say, by descending once to wedlock—she passes on in sovereign disengagement—a dedicated widow.

(By this time they have disappeared from view. HOMEWARE appears; he craftily avoids joining their party, like one who is unworthy of such noble oratory. He desires privacy and a book, but is disturbed by the arrival of ARDEN, who is painfully anxious to be polite to 'her uncle Homeware'.')

SCENE II

HOMEWARE, ARDEN

ARDEN: A glorious morning, sir.

HOMEWARE: The sun is out, sir.

ARDEN: I am happy in meeting you, Mr. Homeware.

HOMEWARE: I can direct you to the ladies, Mr. Arden. You will find them up yonder avenue.

ARDEN: They are listening, I believe, to an oration from the mouth of Professor Spiral.

HOMEWARE: On an Alpine flower which has descended to flourish on English soil. Professor Spiral calls it Nature's 'dedicated widow.'

ARDEN: 'Dedicated widow'?

HOMEWARE: The reference you will observe is to my niece Astraea.

ARDEN: She is dedicated to whom?

HOMEWARE: To her dead husband! You see the reverse of Astraea, says the professor, in those world-infamous widows who marry again.

ARDEN: Bah!

HOMEWARE: Astraea, it is decided, must remain solitary, virgin cold, like the little Alpine flower. Professor Spiral has his theme.

ARDEN: He will make much of it. May I venture to say that I prefer my present company?

HOMEWARE: It is a singular choice. I can supply you with no weapons for the sort of stride in which young men are usually engaged. You belong to the camp you are avoiding.

ARDEN: Achilles was not the worse warrior, sir, for his probation in petticoats.

HOMEWARE: His deeds proclaim it. But Alexander was the better chieftain until he drank with Lais.

ARDEN: No, I do not plead guilty to Bacchus.

HOMEWARE: You are confessing to the madder form of drunkenness.

ARDEN: How, sir, I beg?

HOMEWARE: How, when a young man sees the index to himself in everything spoken!

ARDEN: That might have the look. I did rightly in coming to you, sir.

HOMEWARE: 'Her uncle Homeware'?

ARDEN: You read through us all, sir.

HOMEWARE: It may interest you to learn that you are the third of the gentlemen commissioned to consult the lady's uncle Homeware.

ARDEN: The third.

HOMEWARE: Yes, she is pursued. It could hardly be otherwise. Her attractions are acknowledged, and the house is not a convent. Yet, Mr. Arden, I must remind you that all of you are upon an enterprise held to be profane by the laws of this region. Can you again forget that Astraea is a widow?

ARDEN: She was a wife two months; she has been a widow two years.

HOMEWARE: The widow of the great and venerable Professor Towers is not to measure her widowhood by years. His, from the altar to the tomb. As it might be read, a one day's walk!

ARDEN: Is she, in the pride of her youth, to be sacrificed to a whimsical feminine delicacy?

HOMEWARE: You have argued it with her?

ARDEN: I have presumed.

HOMEWARE: And still she refused her hand!

ARDEN: She commended me to you, sir. She has a sound judgement of persons.

HOMEWARE: I should put it that she passes the Commissioners of Lunacy, on the ground of her being a humorous damsel. Your predecessors had also argued it with her; and they, too, discovered their enemy in a whimsical feminine delicacy. Where is the difference between you? Evidently she cannot perceive it, and I have to seek: You will have had many conversations with Astraea?

ARDEN: I can say, that I am thrice the man I was before I had them.

HOMEWARE: You have gained in manhood from conversations with a widow in her twenty-second year; and you want more of her.

ARDEN: As much as I want more wisdom.

HOMEWARE: You would call her your Muse?

ARDEN: So prosaic a creature as I would not dare to call her that.

HOMEWARE: You have the timely mantle of modesty, Mr. Arden. She has prepared you for some of the tests with her uncle Homeware.

ARDEN: She warned me to be myself, without a spice of affectation.

HOMEWARE: No harder task could be set a young man in modern days. Oh, the humorous damsel. You sketch me the dimple at her mouth.

ARDEN: Frankly, sir, I wish you to know me better; and I think I can bear inspection. Astraea sent me to hear the reasons why she refuses me a hearing.

HOMEWARE: Her reason, I repeat, is this; to her idea, a second wedlock is unholy. Further, it passes me to explain. The young lady lands us where we were at the beginning; such must have been her humorous intention.

ARDEN: What can I do?

HOMEWARE: Love and war have been compared. Both require strategy and tactics, according to my recollection of the campaign.

ARDEN: I will take to heart what you say, sir.

HOMEWARE: Take it to head. There must be occasional descent of lovers' heads from the clouds. And Professor Spiral,—But here we have a belated breeze of skirts.

(The reference is to the arrival of LYRA, breathless.)

SCENE III

HOMEWARE, ARDEN, LYRA

LYRA: My own dear uncle Homeware!

HOMEWARE: But where is Pluriel?

LYRA: Where is a woman's husband when she is away from him?

HOMEWARE: In Purgatory, by the proper reckoning. But hurry up the avenue, or you will be late for Professor Spiral's address.

LYRA: I know it all without hearing. Their Spiral! Ah, Mr. Arden! You have not chosen badly. The greater my experience, the more do I value my uncle Homeware's company.

(She is affectionate to excess but has a roguish eye withal, as of one who knows that uncle Homeware suspects all young men and most young women.)

HOMEWARE: Agree with the lady promptly, my friend.

ARDEN: I would gladly boast of so lengthened an experience, Lady Pluriel.

LYRA: I must have a talk with Astraea, my dear uncle. Her letters breed suspicions. She writes feverishly. The last one hints at service on the West Coast of Africa.

HOMEWARE: For the draining of a pestiferous land, or an enlightenment of the benighted black, we could not despatch a missionary more effective than the handsomest widow in Great Britain.

LYRA: Have you not seen signs of disturbance?

HOMEWARE: A great oration may be a sedative.

LYRA: I have my suspicions.

HOMEWARE: Mr. Arden, I could counsel you to throw yourself at Lady Pluriel's feet, and institute her as your confessional priest.

ARDEN: Madam, I am at your feet. I am devoted to the lady.

LYRA: Devoted. There cannot be an objection. It signifies that a man asks for nothing in return!

HOMEWARE: Have a thought upon your words with this lady, Mr. Arden!

ARDEN: Devoted, I said. I am. I would give my life for her.

LYRA: Expecting it to be taken to-morrow or next day? Accept my encomiums. A male devotee is within an inch of a miracle. Women had been looking for this model for ages, uncle.

HOMEWARE: You are the model, Mr Arden!

LYRA: Can you have intended to say that it is in view of marriage you are devoted to the widow of Professor Towers?

ARDEN: My one view.

LYRA: It is a star you are beseeching to descend.

ARDEN: It is.

LYRA: You disappoint me hugely. You are of the ordinary tribe after all; and your devotion craves an enormous exchange, infinitely surpassing the amount you bestow.

ARDEN: It does. She is rich in gifts; I am poor. But I give all I have.

LYRA: These lovers, uncle Homeware!

HOMEWARE: A honey-bag is hung up and we have them about us. They would persuade us that the chief business of the world is a march to the altar.

ARDEN: With the right partner, if the business of the world is to be better done.

LYRA: Which right partner has been chosen on her part, by a veiled woman, who marches back from the altar to discover that she has chained herself to the skeleton of an idea, or is in charge of that devouring tyrant, an uxorious husband. Is Mr. Arden in favour with the Dame, uncle?

HOMEWARE: My sister is an unsuspecting potentate, as you know.

Pretenders to the hand of an inviolate widow bite like waves at a rock.

LYRA: Professor Spiral advances rapidly.

HOMEWARE: Not, it would appear, when he has his audience of ladies and their satellites.

LYRA: I am sure I hear a spring-tide of enthusiasm coming.

ARDEN: I will see.

(He goes up the path.)

LYRA: Now! my own dear uncle, save me from Pluriel. I have given him the slip in sheer desperation; but the man is at his shrewdest when he is left to guess at my heels. Tell him I am anywhere but here. Tell him I ran away to get a sense of freshness in seeing him again. Let me have one day of liberty, or, upon my word, I shall do deeds; I shall console young Arden: I shall fly to Paris and set my cap at presidents and foreign princes. Anything rather than be eaten up every minute, as I am. May no woman of my acquaintance marry a man of twenty years her senior! She marries a gigantic limpet. At that period of his life a man becomes too voraciously constant.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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