

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE TALE OF CHLOE: AN
EPISODE IN THE
HISTORY OF BEAU
BEAMISH

George Meredith
**The Tale of Chloe: An Episode
in the History of Beau Beamish**

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36092917
The Tale of Chloe: An Episode in the History of Beau Beamish:*

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	19
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

George Meredith

The Tale of Chloe: An Episode in the History of Beau Beamish

'Fair Chloe, we toasted of old,
As the Queen of our festival meeting;
Now Chloe is lifeless and cold;
You must go to the grave for her greeting.
Her beauty and talents were framed
To enkindle the proudest to win her;
Then let not the mem'ry be blamed
Of the purest that e'er was a sinner!'

Captain Chanter's Collection.

CHAPTER I

A proper tenderness for the Peerage will continue to pass current the illustrious gentleman who was inflamed by Cupid's darts to espouse the milkmaid, or dairymaid, under his ballad title of Duke of Dewlap: nor was it the smallest of the services rendered him by Beau Beamish, that he clapped the name upon her rustic Grace, the young duchess, the very first day of her arrival at the Wells. This happy inspiration of a wit never failing at a pinch has rescued one of our princeliest houses from the assaults of the vulgar, who are ever too rejoiced to bespatter and disfigure a brilliant coat-of-arms; insomuch that the ballad, to which we are indebted for the narrative of the meeting and marriage of the ducal pair, speaks of Dewlap in good faith

O the ninth Duke of Dewlap I am, Susie dear!

without a hint of a domino title. So likewise the pictorial historian is merry over 'Dewlap alliances' in his description of the society of that period. He has read the ballad, but disregarded the memoirs of the beau. Writers of pretension would seem to have an animus against individuals of the character of Mr. Beamish. They will treat of the habits and manners of highwaymen, and quote obscure broadsheets and songs of the people to colour their story, yet decline to bestow more than a passing remark upon our domestic kings: because they are not hereditary, we may suppose. The ballad of 'The Duke and the Dairymaid,' ascribed

with questionable authority to the pen of Mr. Beamish himself in a freak of his gaiety, was once popular enough to provoke the moralist to animadversions upon an order of composition that 'tempted every bouncing country lass to sidle an eye in a blowsy cheek' in expectation of a coronet for her pains—and a wet ditch as the result! We may doubt it to have been such an occasion of mischief. But that mischief may have been done by it to a nobility-loving people, even to the love of our nobility among the people, must be granted; and for the particular reason, that the hero of the ballad behaved so handsomely. We perceive a susceptibility to adulteration in their worship at the sight of one of their number, a young maid, suddenly snatched up to the gaping heights of Luxury and Fashion through sheer good looks. Remembering that they are accustomed to a totally reverse effect from that possession, it is very perceptible how a breach in their reverence may come of the change.

Otherwise the ballad is innocent; certainly it is innocent in design. A fresher national song of a beautiful incident of our country life has never been written. The sentiments are natural, the imagery is apt and redolent of the soil, the music of the verse appeals to the dullest ear. It has no smell of the lamp, nothing foreign and far-fetched about it, but is just what it pretends to be, the carol of the native bird. A sample will show, for the ballad is much too long to be given entire:

Sweet Susie she tripped on a shiny May morn,

As blithe as the lark from the green-springing corn,
When, hard by a stile, 'twas her luck to behold
A wonderful gentleman covered with gold!

There was gold on his breeches and gold on his coat,
His shirt-frill was grand as a fifty-pound note;
The diamonds glittered all up him so bright,
She thought him the Milky Way clothing a Sprite!

'Fear not, pretty maiden,' he said with a smile;
'And, pray, let me help you in crossing the stile.
She bobbed him a curtsy so lovely and smart,
It shot like an arrow and fixed in his heart.

As light as a robin she hopped to the stone,
But fast was her hand in the gentleman's own;
And guess how she stared, nor her senses could trust,
When this creamy gentleman knelt in the dust!

With a rhapsody upon her beauty, he informs her of his rank, for a flourish to the proposal of honourable and immediate marriage. He cannot wait. This is the fatal condition of his love: apparently a characteristic of amorous dukes. We read them in the signs extended to us. The minds of these august and solitary men have not yet been sounded; they are too distant. Standing upon their lofty pinnacles, they are as legible to the rabble below as a line of cuneiform writing in a page of old copybook roundhand. By their deeds we know them, as heathendom knows

of its gods; and it is repeatedly on record that the moment they have taken fire they must wed, though the lady's finger be circled with nothing closer fitting than a ring of the bed-curtain. Vainly, as becomes a candid country lass, blue-eyed Susan tells him that she is but a poor dairymaid. He has been a student of women at Courts, in which furnace the sex becomes a transparency, so he recounts to her the catalogue of material advantages he has to offer. Finally, after his assurances that she is to be married by the parson, really by the parson, and a real parson—

Sweet Susie is off for her parents' consent,
And long must the old folk debate what it meant.
She left them the eve of that happy May morn,
To shine like the blossom that hangs from the thorn!

Apart from its historical value, the ballad is an example to poets of our day, who fly to mythological Greece, or a fanciful and morbid mediaevalism, or—save the mark!—abstract ideas, for themes of song, of what may be done to make our English life poetically interesting, if they would but pluck the treasures presented them by the wayside; and Nature being now as then the passport to popularity, they have themselves to thank for their little hold on the heart of the people. A living native duke is worth fifty Phoebus Apollos to Englishmen, and a buxom young lass of the fields mounting from a pair of pails to the estate of duchess, a more romantic object than troops of your visionary Yseults and Guineveres.

CHAPTER II

A certain time after the marriage, his Grace alighted at the Wells, and did himself the honour to call on Mr. Beamish. Addressing that gentleman, to whom he was no stranger, he communicated the purport of his visit.

'Sir, and my very good friend,' he said, 'first let me beg you to abate the severity of your countenance, for if I am here in breach of your prohibition, I shall presently depart in compliance with it. I could indeed deplore the loss of the passion for play of which you effectually cured me. I was then armed against a crueller, that allows of no interval for a man to make his vow to recover!'

'The disease which is all crisis, I apprehend,' Mr. Beamish remarked.

'Which, sir, when it takes hold of dry wood, burns to the last splinter. It is now'—the duke fetched a tender groan—'three years ago that I had a caprice to marry a grandchild!'

'Of Adam's,' Mr. Beamish said cheerfully. 'There was no legitimate bar to the union.'

'Unhappily none. Yet you are not to suppose I regret it. A most admirable creature, Mr. Beamish, a real divinity! And the better known, the more adored. There is the misfortune. At my season of life, when the greater and the minor organs are in a conspiracy to tell me I am mortal, the passion of love must be welcomed as a calamity, though one would not be free of it for the renewal

of youth. You are to understand, that with a little awakening taste for dissipation, she is the most innocent of angels. Hitherto we have lived . . . To her it has been a new world. But she is beginning to find it a narrow one. No, no, she is not tired of my society. Very far from that. But in her present station an inclination for such gatherings as you have here, for example, is like a desire to take the air: and the healthy habits of my duchess have not accustomed her to be immured. And in fine, devote ourselves as we will, a term approaches when the enthusiasm for serving as your wife's playfellow all day, running round tables and flying along corridors before a knotted handkerchief, is mightily relaxed. Yet the dread of a separation from her has kept me at these pastimes for a considerable period beyond my relish of them. Not that I acknowledge fatigue. I have, it seems, a taste for reflection; I am now much disposed to read and meditate, which cannot be done without repose. I settle myself, and I receive a worsted ball in my face, and I am expected to return it. I comply; and then you would say a nursery in arms. It would else be the deplorable spectacle of a beautiful young woman yawning.'

'Earthquake and saltpetre threaten us less terribly,' said Mr. Beamish.

'In fine, she has extracted a promise that 'this summer she shall visit the Wells for a month, and I fear I cannot break my pledge of my word; I fear I cannot.'

'Very certainly I would not,' said Mr. Beamish.

The duke heaved a sigh. 'There are reasons, family reasons,

why my company and protection must be denied to her here. I have no wish . . . indeed my name, for the present, until such time as she shall have found her feet . . . and there is ever a penalty to pay for that. Ah, Mr. Beamish, pictures are ours, when we have bought them and hung them up; but who insures us possession of a beautiful work of Nature? I have latterly betaken me to reflect much and seriously. I am tempted to side with the Divines in the sermons I have read; the flesh is the habitation of a rebellious devil.'

'To whom we object in proportion as we ourselves become quit of him,' Mr.

Beamish acquiesced.

'But this mania of young people for pleasure, eternal pleasure, is one of the wonders. It does not pall on them; they are insatiate.'

'There is the cataract, and there is the cliff. Potentate to potentate, duke—so long as you are on my territory, be it understood. Upon my way to a place of worship once, I passed a Puritan, who was complaining of a butterfly that fluttered prettily abroad in desecration of the Day of Rest. "Friend," said I to him, "conclusively you prove to me that you are not a butterfly." Surly did no more than favour me with the anathema of his countenance.'

'Cousin Beamish, my complaint of these young people is, that they miss their pleasure in pursuing it. I have lectured my duchess —'

'Ha!'

'Foolish, I own,' said the duke. 'But suppose, now, you had caught your butterfly, and you could neither let it go nor consent to follow its vagaries. That poses you.'

'Young people,' said Mr. Beamish, 'come under my observation in this poor realm of mine—young and old. I find them prodigiously alike in their love of pleasure, differing mainly in their capacity to satisfy it. That is no uncommon observation. The young, have an edge which they are desirous of blunting; the old contrariwise. The cry of the young for pleasure is actually—I have studied their language—a cry for burdens. Curious! And the old ones cry for having too many on their shoulders: which is not astonishing. Between them they make an agreeable concert both to charm the ears and guide the steps of the philosopher, whose wisdom it is to avoid their tracks.'

'Good. But I have asked you for practical advice, and you give me an essay.'

'For the reason, duke, that you propose a case that suggests hanging. You mention two things impossible to be done. The alternative is, a garter and the bedpost. When we have come upon crossways, and we can decide neither to take the right hand nor the left, neither forward nor back, the index of the board which would direct us points to itself, and emphatically says, Gallows.'

'Beamish, I am distracted. If I refuse her the visit, I foresee dissensions, tears, games at ball, romps, not one day of rest remaining to me. I could be of a mind with your Puritan, positively. If I allow it, so innocent a creature in the atmosphere

of a place like this must suffer some corruption. You should know that the station I took her from was . . . it was modest. She was absolutely a buttercup of the fields. She has had various masters. She dances . . . she dances prettily, I could say bewitchingly. And so she is now for airing her accomplishments: such are women!

'Have you heard of Chloe?' said Mr. Beamish. 'There you have an example of a young lady uncorrupted by this place—of which I would only remark that it is best unvisited, but better tasted than longed for.'

'Chloe? A lady who squandered her fortune to redeem some ill-requiting rascal: I remember to have heard of her. She is here still? And ruined, of course?'

'In purse.'

'That cannot be without the loss of reputation.'

'Chloe's champion will grant that she is exposed to the evils of improvidence. The more brightly shine her native purity, her goodness of heart, her trustfulness. She is a lady whose exaltation glows in her abasement.'

'She has, I see, preserved her comeliness,' observed the duke, with a smile.

'Despite the flying of the roses, which had not her heart's patience. 'Tis now the lily that reigns. So, then, Chloe shall be attached to the duchess during her stay, and unless the devil himself should interfere, I guarantee her Grace against any worse harm than experience; and that,' Mr. Beamish added, as the duke raised his arms at the fearful word, 'that shall be mild. Play she

will; she is sure to play. Put it down at a thousand. We map her out a course of permissible follies, and she plays to lose the thousand by degrees, with as telling an effect upon a connubial conscience as we can produce.'

'A thousand,' said the duke, 'will be cheap indeed. I think now I have had a description of this fair Chloe, and from an enthusiast; a brune? elegantly mannered and of a good landed family; though she has thought proper to conceal her name. And that will be our difficulty, cousin Beamish.'

'She was, under my dominion, Miss Martinsward,' Mr. Beamish pursued. 'She came here very young, and at once her suitors were legion. In the way of women, she chose the worst among them; and for the fellow Caseldy she sacrificed the fortune she had inherited of a maternal uncle. To release him from prison, she paid all his debts; a mountain of bills, with the lawyers piled above—Pelion upon Ossa, to quote our poets. In fact, obeying the dictates of a soul steeped in generosity, she committed the indiscretion to strip herself, scandalizing propriety. This was immediately on her coming of age; and it was the death-blow to her relations with her family. Since then, honoured even by rakes, she has lived impoverished at the Wells. I dubbed her Chloe, and man or woman disrespectful to Chloe packs. From being the victim of her generous disposition, I could not save her; I can protect her from the shafts of malice.'

'She has no passion for play?' inquired the duke.

'She nourishes a passion for the man for whom she bled, to the

exclusion of the other passions. She lives, and I believe I may say that it is the motive of her rising and dressing daily, in expectation of his advent.'

'He may be dead.'

'The dog is alive. And he has not ceased to be Handsome Caseldy, they say. Between ourselves, duke, there is matter to break her heart. He has been the Count Caseldy of Continental gaming tables, and he is recently Sir Martin Caseldy, settled on the estate she made him free to take up intact on his father's decease.'

'Pah! a villain!'

'With a blacker brand upon him every morning that he looks forth across his property, and leaves her to languish! She still—I say it to the redemption of our sex—has offers. Her incomparable attractions of mind and person exercise the natural empire of beauty. But she will none of them. I call her the Fair Suicide. She has died for love; and she is a ghost, a good ghost, and a pleasing ghost, but an apparition, a taper.

The duke fidgeted, and expressed a hope to hear that she was not of melancholy conversation; and again, that the subject of her discourse was not confined to love and lovers, happy or unhappy. He wished his duchess, he said, to be entertained upon gayer topics: love being a theme he desired to reserve to himself. 'This month!' he said, prognostically shaking and moaning. 'I would this month were over, and that we were well purged of it.'

Mr. Beamish reassured him. The wit and sprightliness of

Chloe were so famous as to be considered medical, he affirmed; she was besieged for her company; she composed and sang impromptu verses, she played harp and harpsichord divinely, and touched the guitar, and danced, danced like the silvery moon on the waters of the mill pool. He concluded by saying that she was both humane and wise, humble-minded and amusing, virtuous yet not a Tartar; the best of companions for her Grace the young duchess. Moreover, he boldly engaged to carry the duchess through the term of her visit under a name that should be as good as a masquerade for concealing his Grace's, while giving her all the honours due to her rank.

'You strictly interpret my wishes,' said the duke; 'all honours, the foremost place, and my wrath upon man or woman gainsaying them!'

'Mine! if you please, duke,' said Mr. Beamish.

'A thousand pardons! I leave it to you, cousin. I could not be in safer hands. I am heartily bounders to you. Chloe, then. By the way, she has a decent respect for age?'

'She is reverentially inclined.'

'Not that. She is, I would ask, no wanton prattler of the charms and advantages of youth?'

'She has a young adorer that I have dubbed Alonzo, whom she scarce notices.'

'Nothing could be better. Alonzo: h'm! A faithful swain?'

'Life is his tree, upon which unceasingly he carves his mistress's initials.'

'She should not be too cruel. I recollect myself formerly: I was . . . Young men will, when long slighted, transfer their affections, and be warmer to the second flame than to the first. I put you on your guard. He follows her much? These lovers' paintings and puffings in the neighbourhood of the most innocent of women are contagious.'

'Her Grace will be running home all the sooner.'

'Or off!—may she forgive me! I am like a King John's Jew, forced to lend his treasure without security. What a world is ours! Nothing, Beamish, nothing desirable will you have which is not coveted! Catch a prize, and you will find you are at war with your species. You have to be on the defensive from that moment. There is no such thing as peaceable procession on earth. Let it be a beautiful young woman!—Ah!'

Mr. Beamish replied bracingly, 'The champion wrestler challenges all comers while he wears the belt.'

The duke dejectedly assented. 'True; or he is challenged, say. Is there any tale we could tell her of this Alonzo? You could deport him for the month, my dear Beamish.'

'I commit no injustice unless with sufficient reason. It is an estimable youth, as shown by his devotion to a peerless woman. To endow her with his name and fortune is his only thought.'

'I perceive; an excellent young fellow! I have an incipient liking for this young Alonzo. You must not permit my duchess to laugh at him. Encourage her rather to advance his suit. The silliness of a young man will be no bad spectacle. Chloe, then.

You have set my mind at rest, Beamish, and it is but another obligation added to the heap; so, if I do not speak of payment, the reason is that I know you would not have me bankrupt.'

The remainder of the colloquy of the duke and Mr. Beamish referred to the date of her Grace's coming to the Wells, the lodgement she was to receive, and other minor arrangements bearing upon her state and comfort; the duke perpetually observing, 'But I leave it all to you, Beamish,' when he had laid down precise instructions in these respects, even to the specification of the shopkeepers, the confectioner and the apothecary, who were to balance or cancel one another in the opposite nature of their supplies, and the haberdasher and the jeweller, with whom she was to make her purchases. For the duke had a recollection of giddy shops, and of giddy shopmen too; and it was by serving as one for a day that a certain great nobleman came to victory with a jealously guarded dame beautiful as Venus. 'I would have challenged the goddess!' he cried, and subsided from his enthusiasm plaintively, like a weak wind instrument. 'So there you see the prudence of a choice of shops. But I leave it to you, Beamish.' Similarly the great military commander, having done whatsoever a careful prevision may suggest to insure him victory, casts himself upon Providence, with the hope of propitiating the unanticipated and darkly possible.

CHAPTER III

The splendid equipage of a coach and six, with footmen in scarlet and green, carried Beau Beamish five miles along the road on a sunny day to meet the young duchess at the boundary of his territory, and conduct her in state to the Wells. Chloe sat beside him, receiving counsel with regard to her prospective duties. He was this day the consummate beau, suave, but monarchical, and his manner of speech partook of his external grandeur. 'Spy me the horizon, and apprise me if somewhere you distinguish a chariot,' he said, as they drew up on the rise of a hill of long descent, where the dusty roadway sank between its brown hedges, and crawled mounting from dry rush-spotted hollows to corn fields on a companion height directly facing them, at a remove of about three-quarters of a mile. Chloe looked forth, while the beau passingly raised his hat for coolness, and murmured, with a glance down the sultry track: 'It sweats the eye to see!'

Presently Chloe said, 'Now a dust blows. Something approaches. Now I discern horses, now a vehicle; and it is a chariot!'

Orders were issued to the outriders for horns to be sounded.

Both Chloe and Beau Beamish wrinkled their foreheads at the disorderly notes of triple horns, whose pealing made an acid in the air instead of sweetness.

'You would say, kennel dogs that bay the moon!' said the wincing beau. 'Yet, as you know, these fellows have been exercised. I have had them out in a meadow for hours, baked and drenched, to get them rid of their native cacophony. But they love it, as they love bacon and beans. The musical taste of our people is in the stage of the primitive appetite for noise, and for that they are gluttons.'

'It will be pleasant to hear in the distance,' Chloe replied.

'Ay, the extremer the distance, the pleasanter to hear. Are they advancing?'

'They stop. There is a cavalier at the window. Now he doffs his hat.'

'Sweepingly?'

Chloe described a semicircle in the grand manner.

The beau's eyebrows rose. 'Powers divine !' he muttered. 'She is let loose from hand to hand, and midway comes a cavalier. We did not count on the hawks. So I have to deal with a cavalier! It signifies, my dear Chloe, that I must incontinently affect the passion if I am to be his match: nothing less.'

'He has flown,' said Chloe.

'Whom she encounters after meeting me, I care not,' quoth the beau, snapping a finger. 'But there has been an interval for damage with a lady innocent as Eve. Is she advancing?'

'The chariot is trotting down the hill. He has ridden back. She has no attendant horseman.'

'They were dismissed at my injunction ten miles off

particularly to the benefit of the cavaliering horde, it would appear. In the case of a woman, Chloe, one blink of the eyelids is an omission of watchfulness.'

'That is an axiom fit for the harem of the Grand Signior.'

'The Grand Signior might give us profitable lessons for dealing with the sex.'

'Distrust us, and it is a declaration of war!'

'Trust you, and the stopper is out of the smelling-bottle.'

'Mr. Beamish, we are women, but we have souls.'

'The pip in the apple whose ruddy cheek allures little Tommy to rob the orchard is as good a preservative.'

'You admit that men are our enemies?'

'I maintain that they carry the banner of virtue.'

'Oh, Mr. Beamish, I shall expire.'

'I forbid it in my lifetime, Chloe, for I wish to die believing in one woman.'

'No flattery for me at the expense of my sisters!'

'Then fly to a hermitage; for all flattery is at somebody's expense, child. 'Tis an essence-extract of humanity! To live on it, in the fashion of some people, is bad—it is downright cannibal. But we may sprinkle our handkerchiefs with it, and we should, if we would caress our noses with an air. Society, my Chloe, is a recommencement upon an upper level of the savage system; we must have our sacrifices. As, for instance, what say you of myself beside our booted bumpkin squires?'

'Hundreds of them, Mr. Beamish !'

'That is a holocaust of squires reduced to make an incense for me, though you have not performed Druid rites and packed them in gigantic osier ribs. Be philosophical, but accept your personal dues. Grant us ours too. I have a serious intention to preserve this young duchess, and I expect my task to be severe. I carry the banner aforesaid; verily and penitentially I do. It is an error of the vulgar to suppose that all is dragon in the dragon's jaws.'

'Men are his fangs and claws.'

'Ay, but the passion for his fiery breath is in woman. She will take her leap and have her jump, will and will! And at the point where she will and she won't, the dragon gulps and down she goes! However, the business is to keep our buttercup duchess from that same point. Is she near?'

'I can see her,' said Chloe.

Beau Beamish requested a sketch of her, and Chloe began: 'She is ravishing.'

Upon which he commented, 'Every woman is ravishing at forty paces, and still more so in imagination.'

'Beautiful auburn hair, and a dazzling red and white complexion, set in a blue coif.'

'Her eyes?'

'Melting blue.'

"Tis an English witch!" exclaimed the beau, and he compassionately invoked her absent lord.

Chloe's optics were no longer tasked to discern the fair lady's lineaments, for the chariot windows came flush with those of the

beau on the broad plateau of the hill. His coach door was opened. He sat upright, levelling his privileged stare at Duchess Susan until she blushed.

'Ay, madam,' quoth he, 'I am not the first.'

'La, sir!' said she; 'who are you?'

The beau deliberately raised his hat and bowed. 'He, madam, of whose approach the gentleman who took his leave of you on yonder elevation informed you.'

She looked artlessly over her shoulder, and at the beau alighting from his carriage. 'A gentleman?'

'On horseback.'

The duchess popped her head through the window on an impulse to measure the distance between the two hills.

'Never!' she cried.

'Why, madam, did he deliver no message to announce me?' said the beau, ruffling.

'Goodness gracious! You must be Mr. Beamish,' she replied.

He laid his hat on his bosom, and invited her to quit her carriage for a seat beside him. She stipulated, 'If you are really Mr. Beamish?' He frowned, and raised his head to convince her; but she would not be impressed, and he applied to Chloe to establish his identity. Hearing Chloe's name, the duchess called out, 'Oh! there, now, that's enough, for Chloe's my maid here, and I know she's a lady born, and we're going to be friends. Hand me to Chloe. And you are Chloe?' she said, after a frank stride from step to step of the carriages. 'And don't mind being my

maid? You do look a nice, kind creature. And I see you're a lady born; I know in a minute. You're dark, I'm fair; we shall suit. And tell me— hush!—what dreadful long eyes he has! I shall ask you presently what you think of me. I was never at the Wells before. Dear me! the coach has turned. How far off shall we hear the bells to say I'm coming? I know I'm to have bells. Mr. Beamish, Mr. Beamish! I must have a chatter with a woman, and I'm in awe of you, sir, that I am, but men and men I see to talk to for a lift of my finger, by the dozen, in my duke's palace—though they're old ones, that's true—but a woman who's a lady, and kind enough to be my maid, I haven't met yet since I had the right to wear a coronet. There, I'll hold Chloe's hand, and that'll do. You would tell me at once, Chloe, if I was not dressed to your taste; now, wouldn't you? As for talkative, that's a sign with me of my liking people. I really don't know what to say to my duke sometimes. I sit and think it so funny to be having a duke instead of a husband. You're off!"

The duchess laughed at Chloe's laughter. Chloe excused herself, but was informed by her mistress that it was what she liked.

'For the first two years,' she resumed, 'I could hardly speak a syllable. I stammered, I reddened, I longed to be up in my room brushing and curling my hair, and was ready to curtsy to everybody. Now I'm quite at home, for I've plenty of courage—except about death, and I'm worse about death than I was when I was a simple body with a gawk's "lawks!" in her round eyes and

mouth for an egg. I wonder why that is? But isn't death horrible? And skeletons!' The duchess shuddered.

'It depends upon the skeleton,' said Beau Beamish, who had joined the conversation. 'Yours, madam, I would rather not meet, because she would precipitate me into transports of regret for the loss of the flesh. I have, however, met mine own and had reason for satisfaction with the interview.'

'Your own skeleton, sir!' said the duchess wonderingly and appalled.

'Unmistakably mine. I will call you to witness by an account of him.'

Duchess Susan gaped, and, 'Oh, don't!' she cried out; but added, 'It 's broad day, and I've got some one to sleep anigh me after dark'; with which she smiled on Chloe, who promised her there was no matter for alarm.

'I encountered my gentleman as I was proceeding to my room at night,' said the beau, 'along a narrow corridor, where it was imperative that one of us should yield the 'pas;' and, I must confess it, we are all so amazingly alike in our bones, that I stood prepared to demand place of him. For indubitably the fellow was an obstruction, and at the first glance repulsive. I took him for anybody's skeleton, Death's ensign, with his cachinnatory skull, and the numbered ribs, and the extraordinary splay feet—in fact, the whole ungainly and shaky hobbledehoy which man is built on, and by whose image in his weaker moments he is haunted. I had, to be frank, been dancing on a supper

with certain of our choicest Wits and Beauties. It is a recipe for conjuring apparitions. Now, then, thinks I, my fine fellow, I will bounce you; and without a salutation I pressed forward. Madam, I give you my word, he behaved to the full pitch as I myself should have done under similar circumstances. Retiring upon an inclination of his structure, he draws up and fetches me a bow of the exact middle nick between dignity and service. I advance, he withdraws, and again the bow, devoid of obsequiousness, majestically condescending. These, thinks I, be royal manners. I could have taken him for the Sable King in person, stripped of his mantle. On my soul, he put me to the blush.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.