

One of Our Conquerors — Volume 2 eBook

One of Our Conquerors — Volume 2 by George Meredith

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Author: George Meredith

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

Release Date: September, 2003 [Etext #4472] [Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule] [This file was first posted on February 19, 2002]

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ONE OF OUR CONQUERORS

By George Meredith

1897

BOOK 2.

XII. *Treats of the dumbness possible with members of A household
having one heart*

XIII. *The latest of Mrs. Burman*



- XIV. *Discloses A stage on the drive to Paris*
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CHAPTER XII

Treats of the dumbness possible with members of A household having one heart

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Two that live together in union are supposed to be intimate on every leaf. Particularly when they love one another and the cause they have at heart is common to them in equal measure, the uses of a cordial familiarity forbid reserves upon important matters between them, as we think; not thinking of an imposed secretiveness, beneath the false external of submissiveness, which comes of an experience of repeated inefficiency to maintain a case in opposition, on the part of the loquently weaker of the pair. In Constitutional Kingdoms a powerful Government needs not to be tyrannical to lean oppressively; it is more serviceable to party than agreeable to country; and where the alliance of men and women binds a loving couple, of whom one is a torrent of persuasion, their differings are likely to make the other resemble a log of the torrent. It is borne along; it dreams of a distant corner of the way for a determined stand; it consents to its whirling in anticipation of an undated hour when it will no longer be neutral.

There may be, moreover, while each has the key of the fellow breast, a mutually sensitive nerve to protest against intrusion of light or sound. The cloud over the name of their girl could now strike Nataly and Victor dumb in their taking of counsel. She divined that his hint had encouraged him to bring the crisis nearer, and he that her comprehension had become tremblingly awake. They shrank, each of them, the more from an end drawing closely into view. All subjects glooming off or darkening up to it were shunned by them verbally, and if they found themselves entering beneath that shadow, conversation passed to an involuntary gesture, more explicit with him, significant of the prohibited, though not acknowledging it.

All the stronger was it Victor's purpose, leaping in his fashion to the cover of action as an escape from perplexity, to burn and scheme for the wedding of their girl—the safe wedding of that dearest, to have her protected, secure, with the world warm about her. And he well knew why his Nataly had her look of a closed vault (threatening, if opened, to thunder upon Life) when he dropped his further hints. He chose to call it feminine inconsistency, in a woman who walked abroad with a basket of marriage-ties for the market on her arm. He knew that she would soon have to speak the dark words to their girl; and the idea of any doing of it, caught at his throat. Reasonably she dreaded the mother's task; pardonably indeed. But it is for the mother to do, with a girl. He deputed it lightly to the mother because he could see himself stating the facts to a son. 'And, my dear boy, you will from this day draw your five thousand a year, and we double it on the day of your marriage, living at Lakelands or where you will.'

His desire for his girl's protection by the name of one of our great Families, urged him to bind Nataly to the fact, with the argument, that it was preferable for the girl to hear their story during her green early youth, while she reposed her beautiful blind faith in the discretion of her parents, and as an immediate step to the placing of her hand in a husband's. He feared that her mother required schooling to tell the story vindicatingly and proudly, in a manner to distinguish instead of degrading or temporarily seeming to accept degradation.



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The world would weigh on her confession of the weight of the world on her child; she would want inciting and strengthening, if one judged of her capacity to meet the trial by her recent bearing; and how was he to do it! He could not imagine himself encountering the startled, tremulous, nascent intelligence in those pure brown darklashed eyes of Nesta; he pitied the poor mother. Fancifully directing her to say this and that to the girl, his tongue ran till it was cut from his heart and left to wag dead colourless words.

The prospect of a similar business of exposition, certainly devolving upon the father in treaty with the fortunate youth, gripped at his vitals a minute, so intense was his pride in appearing woundless and scarless, a shining surface, like pure health's, in the sight of men. Nevertheless he skimmed the story, much as a lecturer strikes his wand on the prominent places of a map, that is to show us how he arrived at the principal point, which we are all agreed to find chiefly interesting. This with Victor was the naming of Nesta's bridal endowment. He rushed to it. 'My girl will have ten thousand a year settled on her the day of her marriage.' Choice of living at Lakelands was offered.

It helped him over the unpleasant part of that interview. At the same time, it moved him to a curious contempt of the youth. He had to conjure-up an image of the young man in person, to correct the sentiment:—and it remained as a kind of bruise only half cured.

Mr. Dudley Sowerby was not one of the youths whose presence would rectify such an abstract estimate of the genus pursuer. He now came frequently of an evening, to practise a duet for flutes with Victor;—a Mercadante, honeyed and flowing; too honeyed to suit a style that, as Fenellan characterized it to Nataly, went through the music somewhat like an inquisitive tourist in a foreign town, conscientious to get to the end of the work of pleasure; until the notes had become familiar, when it rather resembled a constable's walk along the midnight streets into collision with a garlanded roysterer; and the man of order and the man of passion, true to the measure though they were, seeming to dissent, almost to wrangle, in their different ways of winding out the melody, on to the last movement; which was plainly a question between home to the strayed reveller's quarters or off to the lockup. Victor was altogether the younger of the two. But his vehement accompaniment was a tutorship; Mr. Sowerby improved; it was admitted by Nesta and mademoiselle that he gained a show of feeling; he had learnt that feeling was wanted. Passion, he had not a notion of: otherwise he would not be delaying; the interview, dramatized by the father of the young bud of womanhood, would be taking place, and the entry into Lakelands calculable, for Nataly's comfort, as under the aegis of the Cantor earldom. Gossip flies to a wider circle round the members of a great titled family, is inaudible; or no longer the diptherian whisper the commonalty hear of the commonalty: and so we see the social uses of our aristocracy survive. We do not want the shield of any family; it is the situation that wants it; Nataly ought to be awake to the fact. One blow and we have silenced our enemy: Nesta's wedding-day has relieved her parents.



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Victor's thoughts upon the instrument for striking that, blow, led him to suppose Mr. Sowerby might be meditating on the extent of the young lady's fortune. He talked randomly of money, in a way to shatter Nataly's conception of him. He talked of City affairs at table, as it had been his practice to shun the doing; and hit the resounding note on mines, which have risen in the market like the crest of a serpent, casting a certain spell upon the mercantile understanding. 'Fred's diamonds from her own mine, or what once was—and she still reserves a share,' were to be shown to Mr. Sowerby.

Nataly respected the young fellow for not displaying avidity at the flourish of the bait, however it might be affecting him; and she fancied that he did laboriously, in his way earnestly, study her girl, to sound for harmony between them, previous to a wooing. She was a closer reader of social character than Victor; from refraining to run on the broad lines which are but faintly illustrative of the individual one in being common to all—unless we have hit by chance on an example of the downright in roguery or folly or simple goodness. Mr. Sowerby's bearing to Nesta was hardly warmed by the glitter of diamonds. His next visit showed him livelier in courtliness, brighter, fresher; but that was always his way at the commencement of every visit, as if his reflections on the foregone had come to a satisfactory conclusion; and the labours of the new study of the maiden ensued again in due course to deaden him.

Gentleman he was. In the recognition of his quality as a man of principle and breeding, Nataly was condemned by thoughts of Nesta's future to question whether word or act of hers should, if inclination on both sides existed, stand between her girl and a true gentleman. She counselled herself, as if the counsel were in requisition, to be passive; and so doing, she more acutely than Victor—save in his chance flashes—discerned the twist of her very nature caused by their false position. And her panacea for ills, the lost little cottage, would not have averted it: she would there have had the same coveting desire to name a man of breeding, honour, station, for Nesta's husband. Perhaps in the cottage, choosing at leisure, her consent to see the brilliant young creature tied to the best of dull men would have been unready, without the girl to push it. For the Hon. Dudley was lamentably her pupil in liveliness; he took the second part, as it is painful for a woman with the old-fashioned ideas upon the leading of the sexes to behold; resembling in his look the deaf, who constantly require to have an observation repeated; resembling the most intelligent of animals, which we do not name, and we reprove ourselves for seeing likeness.



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Yet the likeness or apparent likeness would suggest that we have not so much to fear upon the day of the explanation to him. Some gain is there. Shameful thought! Nataly hastened her mind to gather many instances or indications testifying to the sterling substance in young Mr. Sowerby, such as a mother would pray for her son-in-law to possess. She discovered herself feeling as the burdened mother, not providently for her girl, in the choice of a mate. The perception was clear, and not the less did she continue working at the embroidery of Mr. Sowerby on the basis of his excellent moral foundations, all the while hoping, praying, that he might not be lured on to the proposal for Nesta. But her subservience to the power of the persuasive will in Victor—which was like the rush of a conflagration—compelled her to think realizingly of any scheme he allowed her darkly to read.

Opposition to him, was comparable to the stand of blocks of timber before flame. Colney Durance had done her the mischief we take from the pessimist when we are overweighted: in darkening the vision of external aid from man or circumstance to one who felt herself mastered. Victor could make her treacherous to her wishes, in revolt against them, though the heart protested. His first conquest of her was in her blood, to weaken a spirit of resistance. For the precedent of submission is a charm upon the faint-hearted through love: it unwinds, unwill them. Nataly resolved fixedly, that there must be a day for speaking; and she had her moral sustainment in the resolve; she had also a tormenting consciousness of material support in the thought, that the day was not present, was possibly distant, might never arrive. Would Victor's release come sooner? And that was a prospect bearing resemblance to hopes of the cure of a malady through a sharp operation.

These were matters going on behind the curtain; as wholly vital to her, and with him at times almost as dominant, as the spiritual in memory, when flesh has left but its shining track in dust of a soul outwritten; and all their talk related to the purchase of furniture, the expeditions to Lakelands, music, public affairs, the pardonable foibles of friends created to amuse their fellows, operatic heroes and heroines, exhibitions of pictures, the sorrows of Crowned Heads, so serviceable ever to mankind as an admonition to the ambitious, a salve to the envious!—in fine, whatsoever can entertain or affect the most social of couples, domestically without a care to appearance. And so far they partially — dramatically—deceived themselves by imposing on the world while they talked and duetted; for the purchase of furniture from a flowing purse is a cheerful occupation; also a City issuing out of hospital, like this poor City of London, inspires good citizens to healthy activity. But the silence upon what they were most bent on, had the sinister effect upon Victor, of obscuring his mental hold of



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the beloved woman, drifting her away from him. In communicating Fenellan's news through the lawyer Carling of Mrs. Burman's intentions, he was aware that there was an obstacle to his being huggingly genial, even candidly genial with her, until he could deal out further news, corroborative and consecutive, to show the action of things as progressive. Fenellan had sunk into his usual apathy:—and might plead the impossibility of his moving faster than the woman professing to transform herself into, beneficence out of malignity;—one could hear him saying the words! Victor had not seen him since last Concert evening, and he deemed it as well to hear the words Fenellan's mouth had to say. He called at an early hour of the Westward tidal flow at the Insurance Office looking over the stormy square of the first of Seamen.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LATEST OF MRS. BURMAN

After cursory remarks about the business of the Office and his friend's contributions to periodical literature, in which he was interested for as long as he had assurance that the safe income depending upon official duties was not endangered by them, Victor kicked his heels to and fro. Fenellan waited for him to lead.

'Have you seen that man, her lawyer, again?'

'I have dined with Mr. Carling:—capital claret.'

Emptiness was in the reply.

Victor curbed himself and said: 'By the way, you're not likely to have dealings with Blathenoy. The fellow has a screw to the back of a shifty eye; I see it at work to fix the look for business. I shall sit on the Board of my Bank. One hears things. He lives in style at Wrensham. By the way, Fredi has little Mab Mountney from Creckholt staying with her. You said of little Mabsy—"Here she comes into the room all pink and white, like a daisy." She's the daisy still; reminds us of our girl at that age.—So, then, we come to another dead block!'

'Well, no; it's a chemist's shop, if that helps us on,' said Fenellan, settling to a new posture in his chair. 'She's there of an afternoon for hours.'

'You mean it's she?'

'The lady. I'll tell you. I have it from Carling, worthy man; and lawyers can be brought to untruss a point over a cup of claret. He's a bit of a "Mackenzie Man," as old aunts of mine used to say at home—a Man of Feeling. Thinks he knows the world, from having



sifted and sorted a lot of our dustbins; as the modern Realists imagine it's an exposition of positive human nature when they've pulled down our noses to the worst parts—if there's a worse where all are useful: but the Realism of the dogs is to have us by the nose:—excite it and befoul it, and you're fearfully credible! You don't read that olfactory literature. However, friend Carling is a conciliatory carle. Three or four days of the week the lady, he says, drives to her chemist's, and there she sits in



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the shop; round the corner, as you enter; and sees all Charing in the shop looking-glass at the back; herself a stranger spectacle, poor lady, if Carling's picture of her is not overdone; with her fashionable no-bonnet striding the contribution chignon on the crown, and a huge square green shade over her forehead. Sits hours long, and cocks her ears at orders of applicants for drugs across the counter, and sometimes catches wind of a prescription, and consults her chemist, and thinks she 'll try it herself. It's a basket of medicine bottles driven to Regent's Park pretty well every day.'

'Ha! Regent's Park!' exclaimed Victor, and shook at recollections of the district and the number of the house, dismal to him. London buried the woman deep until a mention of her sent her flaring over London. 'A chemist's shop! She sits there?'

'Mrs. Burman. We pass by the shop.'

'She had always a turn for drugs.—Not far from here, did you say? And every day! under a green shade?'

'Dear fellow, don't be suggesting ballads; we'll go now,' said Fenellan. 'It 's true it's like sitting on the banks of the Stygian waters.'

He spied at an obsequious watch, that told him it was time to quit the office.

'You've done nothing?' Victor asked in a tone of no expectation.

'Only to hear that her latest medical man is Themison.'

'Where did you hear?'

'Across the counter of Boyle and Luckwort, the lady's chemists. I called the day before yesterday, after you were here at our last Board Meeting.'

'The Themison?'

'The great Dr. Themison; who kills you kindlier than most, and is much in request for it.'

'There's one of your echoes of Colney!' Victor cried. 'One gets dead sick of that worn-out old jibeing at doctors. They don't kill, you know very well. It 's not to their interest to kill. They may take the relish out of life; and upon my word, I believe that helps to keep the patient living!'

Fenellan sent an eye of discreet comic penetration travelling through his friend.



'The City's mending; it's not the weary widow woman of the day when we capsized the diurnal with your royal Old Veuve,' he said, as they trod the pavement. 'Funny people, the English! They give you all the primeing possible for amusement and jollity, and devil a sentry-box for the exercise of it; and if you shake a leg publicly, partner or not, you're marched off to penitence. I complain, that they have no philosophical appreciation of human nature.'

'We pass the shop?' Victor interrupted him.



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'You're in view of it in a minute. And what a square, for recreative dancing! And what a people, to be turning it into a place of political agitation! And what a country, where from morning to night it's an endless wrangle about the first conditions of existence! Old Colney seems right now and then: they 're the offspring of pirates, and they 've got the manners and tastes of their progenitors, and the trick of quarrelling everlastingly over the booty. I 'd have band-music here for a couple of hours, three days of the week at the least; and down in the East; and that forsaken North quarter of London; and the Baptist South too. But just as those omnibus-wheels are the miserable music of this London of ours, it 's only too sadly true that the people are in the first rumble of the notion of the proper way to spend their lives. Now you see the shop: Boyle and Luckwort: there.'

Victor looked. He threw his coat open, and pulled the waistcoat, and swelled it, ahemming. 'That shop?' said he. And presently: 'Fenellan, I'm not superstitious, I think. Now listen; I declare to you, on the day of our drinking Old Veuve together last—you remember it,—I walked home up this way across the square, and I was about to step into that identical shop, for some household prescription in my pocket, having forgotten Nataly's favourite City chemists Fenbird and Jay, when—I'm stating a fact—I distinctly—I 'm sure of the shop—felt myself plucked back by the elbow; pulled back the kind of pull when you have to put a foot backward to keep your equilibrium.'

So does memory inspired by the sensations contribute an additional item for the colouring of history.

He touched the elbow, showed a flitting face of crazed amazement in amusement, and shrugged and half-laughed, dismissing the incident, as being perhaps, if his hearer chose to have it so, a gem of the rubbish tumbled into the dustcart out of a rather exceptional householder's experience.

Fenellan smiled indulgently. 'Queer things happen. I recollect reading in my green youth of a clergyman, who mounted a pulpit of the port where he was landed after his almost solitary rescue from a burning ship at midnight in mid-sea, to inform his congregation, that he had overnight of the catastrophe a personal Warning right in his ear from a Voice, when at his bed or bunk-side, about to perform the beautiful ceremony of undressing: and the Rev. gentleman was to lie down in his full uniform, not so much as to relieve himself of his boots, the Voice insisted twice; and he obeyed it, despite the discomfort to his poor feet; and he jumped up in his boots to the cry of Fire, and he got them providentially over the scuffling deck straight at the first rush into the boat awaiting them, and had them safe on and polished the day he preached the sermon of gratitude for the special deliverance. There was a Warning! and it might well be called, as he called it, from within. We're cared for, never doubt. Aide-toi. Be ready dressed to help yourself in a calamity, or you'll not stand in boots at your next Sermon, contrasting with the burnt. That sounds like the moral.'



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'She could have seen me,' Victor threw out an irritable suggestion. The idea of the recent propinquity set hatred in motion.

'Scarcely likely. I'm told she sits looking on her lap, under the beetling shade, until she hears an order for tinctures or powders, or a mixture that strikes her fancy. It's possible to do more suicidal things than sit the afternoons in a chemist's shop and see poor creatures get their different passports to Orcus.'

Victor stepped mutely beneath the windows of the bellied glass-urns of chemical wash. The woman might be inside there now! She might have seen his figure in the shop-mirror! And she there! The wonder of it all seemed to be, that his private history was not walking the streets. The thinness of the partition concealing it, hardly guaranteed a day's immunity: because this woman would live in London, in order to have her choice of a central chemist's shop, where she could feed a ghastly imagination on the various recipes . . . and while it would have been so much healthier for her to be living in a recess of the country!

He muttered: 'Diseases—drugs!'

Those were the corresponding two strokes of the pendulum which kept the woman going.

'And deadly spite.' That was the emanation of the monotonous horrible conflict, for which, and by which, the woman lived.

In the neighbourhood of the shop, he could not but think of her through the feelings of a man scorched by a furnace.

A little further on, he said: 'Poor soul!' He confessed to himself, that latterly he had, he knew not why, been impatient with her, rancorous in thought, as never before. He had hitherto aimed at a picturesque tolerance of her vindictiveness; under suffering, both at Craye and Creckholt; and he had been really forgiving. He accused her of dragging him down to humanity's lowest.

But if she did that, it argued the possession of a power of a sort.

Her station in the chemist's shop he passed almost daily, appeared to him as a sudden and a terrific rush to the front; though it was only a short drive from the house in Regent's Park; but having shaken-off that house, he had pushed it back into mists, obliterated it. The woman certainly had a power.

He shot away to the power he knew of in himself; his capacity for winning men in bodies, the host of them, when it came to an effort of his energies: men and, individually, women. Individually, the women were to be counted on as well; warm supporters.



It was the admission of a doubt that he might expect to enroll them collectively. Eyeing the men, he felt his command of them. Glancing at congregated women, he had a chill. The Wives and Spinster in ghostly judicial assembly: that is, the phantom of the offended collective woman: that is, the regnant Queen Idea issuing from our concourse of civilized life to govern Society, and pronounce on the orderly, the tolerable, the legal, and banish the rebellious: these maintained an aspect of the stand against him.



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Did Nataly read the case: namely, that the crowned collective woman is not to be subdued? And what are we to say of the indefinite but forcible Authority, when we see it upholding Mrs. Burman to crush a woman like Nataly!

Victor's novel exercises in reflection were bringing him by hard degrees to conceive it to be the impalpable which has prevailing weight. Not many of our conquerors have scored their victories on the road of that index: nor has duration been granted them to behold the minute measure of value left even tangible after the dust of the conquest subsides. The passing by a shop where a broken old woman might be supposed to sit beneath her green forehead-shade—Venetian-blind of a henbane-visage!— had precipitated him into his first real grasp of the abstract verity: and it opens on to new realms, which are a new world to the practical mind. But he made no advance. He stopped in a fever of sensibility, to contemplate the powerful formless vapour rolling from a source that was nothing other than yonder weak lonely woman.

In other words, the human nature of the man was dragged to the school of its truancy by circumstances, for him to learn the commonest of sums done on a slate, in regard to payment of debts and the unrelaxing grip of the creditor on the defaulter. Debtors are always paying like those who are guilty of the easiest thing in life, the violation of Truth, they have made themselves bondmen to pay, if not in substance, then in soul; and the nipping of the soul goes on for as long as the concrete burden is undischarged. You know the Liar; you must have seen him diminishing, until he has become a face without features, withdrawn to humanity's preliminary sketch (some half-dozen frayed threads of woeful outline on our original tapestry-web); and he who did the easiest of things, he must from such time sweat in being the prodigy of inventive nimbleness, up to the day when he propitiates Truth by telling it again. There is a repentance that does reconstitute! It may help to the tracing to springs of a fable whereby men have been guided thus far out of the wood.

Victor would have said truly that he loved Truth; that he paid every debt with a scrupulous exactitude: money, of course; and prompt apologies for a short brush of his temper. Nay, he had such a conscience for the smallest eruptions of a transient irritability, that the wish to say a friendly mending word to the Punctilio donkey of London Bridge, softened his retrospective view of the fall there, more than once. Although this man was a presentation to mankind of the force in Nature which drives to unresting speed, which is the vitality of the heart seen at its beating after a plucking of it from the body, he knew himself for the reverse of lawless; he inclined altogether to good citizenship. So social a man could not otherwise incline. But when it came to the examination of accounts between Mrs. Burman and himself, spasms

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of physical revulsion, loathings, his excessive human nature, put her out of Court. To men, it was impossible for him to speak the torments of those days of the monstrous alliance. The heavens were cognizant. He pleaded his case in their accustomed hearing:—a youngster tempted by wealth, attracted, besought, snared, revolted, *etc.* And Mrs. Burman, when roused to jealousy, had shown it by teasing him for a confession of his admiration of splendid points in the beautiful Nataly, the priceless fair woman living under their roof, a contrast of very life, with the corpse and shroud; and she seen by him daily, singing with him, her breath about him, her voice incessantly upon every chord of his being!

He pleaded successfully. But the silence following the verdict was heavy; the silence contained an unheard thunder. It was the sound, as when out of Court the public is dissatisfied with a verdict. Are we expected to commit a social outrage in exposing our whole case to the public?—Imagine it for a moment as done. Men are ours at a word—or at least a word of invitation. Women we woo; fluent smooth versions of our tortures, mixed with permissible courtship, win the individual woman. And that unreasoning collective woman, icy, deadly, condemns the poor racked wretch who so much as remembers them! She is the enemy of Nature.—Tell us how? She is the slave of existing conventions.—And from what cause? She is the artificial production of a state that exalts her so long as she sacrifices daily and hourly to the artificial.

Therefore she sides with Mrs. Burman—the foe of Nature: who, with her arts and gold lures, has now possession of the Law (the brass idol worshipped by the collective) to drive Nature into desolation.

He placed himself to the right of Mrs. Burman, for the world to behold the couple: and he lent the world a sigh of disgust.

What he could not do, as in other matters he did, was to rise above the situation, in a splendid survey and rapid view of the means of reversing it. He was too social to be a captain of the socially insurgent; imagination expired.

But having a courageous Nataly to second him!—how then? It was the succour needed. Then he would have been ready to teach the world that Nature—honest Nature—is more to be prized than Convention: a new Era might begin.

The thought was tonic for an instant and illuminated him springingly. It sank, excused for the flaccidity by Nataly's want of common adventurous daring. She had not taken to Lakelands; she was purchasing furniture from a flowing purse with a heavy heart—unfeminine, one might say; she preferred to live obscurely; she did not, one had to think—but it was unjust: and yet the accusation, that she did not cheerfully make a strain and spurt on behalf of her child, pressed to be repeated.

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These short glimpses at reflection in Victor were like the verberant twang of a musical instrument that has had a smart blow, and wails away independent of the player's cunning hand. He would have said, that he was more his natural self when the cunning hand played on him, to make him praise and uplift his beloved: mightily would it have astonished him to contemplate with assured perception in his own person the Nature he invoked. But men invoking Nature, do not find in her the Holy Mother she in such case becomes to her daughters, whom she so persecutes. Men call on her for their defence, as a favourable witness: she is a note of their rhetoric. They are not bettered by her sustainment; they have not, as women may have, her enaemic aid at a trying hour. It is not an effort at epigram to say, that whom she scourges most she most supports.

An Opera-placard drew his next remark to Fenellan.

'How Wagner seems to have stricken the Italians! Well, now, the Germans have their Emperor to head their armies, and I say that the German emperor has done less for their lasting fame and influence than Wagner has done. He has affected the French too; I trace him in Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette*—and we don't gain by it; we have a poor remuneration for the melody gone; think of the little shepherd's pipeing in *Mireille*; and there's another in *Sapho-delicious*. I held out against Wagner as long as I could. The Italians don't much more than Wagnerize in exchange for the loss of melody. They would be wiser in going back to Pergolese, *Campagnole*. The *Mefistofole* was good—of the school of the foreign master. *Aida* and *Otello*, no. I confess to a weakness for the old barley-sugar of Bellini or a Donizetti-Serenade. Aren't you seduced by cadences? Never mind Wagner's tap of his paedagogue's baton—a cadence catches me still. Early taste for barley-sugar, perhaps! There's a march in Verdi's *Attila* and *I Lombardi*, I declare I'm in military step when I hear them, as in the old days, after leaving the Opera. Fredi takes little Mab Mountney to her first Opera to-night. Enough to make us old ones envious! You remember your first Opera, Fenellan? *Sonnambula*, with me. I tell you, it would task the highest poetry—say, require, if you like—showing all that's noblest, splendidest, in a young man, to describe its effect on me. I was dreaming of my box at the Opera for a year after. The *Huguenots* to-night. Not the best suited for little Mabsy; but she'll catch at the *Rataplan*. Capital Opera; we used to think it the best, before we had *Tannhauser* and *Lohengrin* and the *Meistersinger*.'



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Victor hinted notes of the Conspiracy Scene closing the Third Act of the Huguenots. That sombre Chorus brought Mrs. Burman before him. He drummed the Rataplan, which sent her flying. The return of a lively disposition for dinner and music completed his emancipation from the yoke of the baleful creature sitting half her days in the chemist's shop; save that a thought of drugs brought the smell, and the smell the picture; she threatened to be an apparition at any moment pervading him through his nostrils. He spoke to Fenellan of hunger for dinner, a need for it; singular in one whose appetite ran to the stroke of the hour abreast with Armandine's kitchen-clock. Fenellan proposed a glass of sherry and bitters at his Club over the way. He had forgotten a shower of black-balls (attributable to the conjurations of old Ate) on a certain past day. Without word of refusal, Victor entered a wine-merchant's office, where he was unknown, and stating his wish for bitters and dry sherry, presently received the glass, drank, nodded to the administering clerk, named the person whom he had obliged and refreshed, and passed out, remarking to Fenellan: 'Colney on Clubs! he's right; they're the mediaeval in modern times, our Baron's castles, minus the Baron; dead against public life and social duties. Business excuses my City Clubs; but I shall take my name off my Club up West.'

'More like monasteries, with a Committee for Abbot, and Whist for the services,' Fenellan said. 'Or tabernacles for the Chosen, and Grangousier playing Divinity behind the veil. Well, they're social.'

'Sectionally social, means anything but social, my friend. However—and the monastery had a bell for the wanderer! Say, I'm penniless or poundless, up and down this walled desert of a street, I feel, I must feel, these palaces—if we're Christian, not Jews: not that the Jews are uncharitable; they set an: example, in fact'

He rambled, amusingly to the complacent hearing of Fenellan, who thought of his pursuit of wealth and grand expenditure.

Victor talked as a man having his mind at leaps beyond the subject. He was nearing to the Idea he had seized and lost on London Bridge.

The desire for some good news wherewith to inspirit Nataly, withdrew him from his ineffectual chase. He had nought to deliver; on the contrary, a meditation concerning her comfort pledged him to concealment which was the no step, or passive state, most abhorrent to him.

He snatched at the name of Themison.

With Dr. Themison fast in his grasp, there was a report of progress to be made to Nataly; and not at all an empty report.

Themison, then: he leaned on Themison. The woman's doctor should have an influence approaching to authority with her.

Land-values in the developing Colonies, formed his theme of discourse to Fenellan: let Banks beware.

Fenellan saw him shudder and rub the back of his head. 'Feel the wind?' he said.



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Victor answered him with that humane thrill of the deep tones, which at times he had: 'No: don't be alarmed; I feel the devil. If one has wealth and a desperate wish, he will speak. All he does, is to make me more charitable to those who give way to him. I believe in a devil.'

'Horns and tail?'

'Bait and hook.'

'I haven't wealth, and I wish only for dinner,' Fenellan said.

'You know that Armandine is never two minutes late. By the way, you haven't wealth—you have me.'

'And I thank God for you!' said Fenellan, acutely reminiscent of his having marked the spiritual adviser of Mrs. Burman, the Rev. Groseman Buttermore, as a man who might be useful to his friend.

CHAPTER XIV

DISCLOSES A STAGE ON THE DRIVE TO PARIS

A fortnight later, an extremely disconcerting circumstance occurred: Armandine was ten minutes behind the hour with her dinner. But the surprise and stupefaction expressed by Victor, after glances at his watch, were not so profound as Fenellan's, on finding himself exchanging the bow with a gentleman bearing the name of Dr. Themison. His friend's rapidity in pushing the combinations he conceived, was known: Fenellan's wonder was not so much that Victor had astonished him again, as that he should be called upon again to wonder at his astonishment. He did; and he observed the doctor and Victor and Nataly: aided by dropping remarks. Before the evening was over, he gathered enough of the facts, and had to speculate only on the designs. Dr. Themison had received a visit from the husband of Mrs. Victor Radnor concerning her state of health. At an interview with the lady, laughter greeted him; he was confused by her denial of the imputation of a single ailment: but she, to recompose him, let it be understood, that she was anxious about her husband's condition, he being certainly overworked; and the husband's visit passed for a device on the part of the wife. She admitted a willingness to try a change of air, if it was deemed good for her husband. Change of air was prescribed to each for both. 'Why not drive to Paris?' the doctor said, and Victor was taken with the phrase.

He told Fenellan at night that Mrs. Burman, he had heard, was by the sea, on the South coast. Which of her maladies might be in the ascendant, he did not know. He knew little. He fancied that Dr. Themison was unsuspecting of the existence of a relationship between him and Mrs. Burman: and Fenellan opined, that there had been no



communication upon private affairs. What, then, was the object in going to Dr. Themison? He treated her body merely; whereas the Rev. Groseman Buttermore could be expected to impose upon her conduct. Fenellan appreciated his own discernment of the superior uses to which a spiritual adviser may be put, and he too agreeably flattered himself for the corrective reflection



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to ensue, that he had not done anything. It disposed him to think a happy passivity more sagacious than a restless activity. We should let Fortune perform her part at the wheel in working out her ends, should we not?— for, ten to one, nine times out of ten we are thwarting her if we stretch out a hand. And with the range of enjoyments possessed by Victor, why this unceasing restlessness? Why, when we are not near drowning, catch at apparent straws, which may be instruments having sharp edges? Themison, as Mrs. Burman's medical man, might tell the lady tales that would irritate her bag of venom.

Rarely though Fenellan was the critic on his friend, the shadow cast over his negligent hedonism by Victor's boiling pressure, drove him into the seat of judgement. As a consequence, he was rather a dull table-guest in the presence of Dr. Themison, whom their host had pricked to anticipate high entertainment from him. He did nothing to bridge the crevasse and warm the glacier air at table when the doctor, anecdotal intentionally to draw him out, related a decorous but pungent story of one fair member of a sweet new sisterhood in agitation against the fixed establishment of our chain-mail marriage-tie. An anecdote of immediate diversion was wanted, expected: and Fenellan sat stupidly speculating upon whether the doctor knew of a cupboard locked. So that Dr. Themison was carried on by Lady Grace Halley's humourous enthusiasm for the subject to dilate and discuss and specify, all in the irony of a judicial leaning to the side of the single-minded social adventurers, under an assumed accord with his audience; concluding: 'So there's an end of Divorce.'

'By the trick of multiplication,' Fenellan, now reassured, was content to say. And that did not extinguish the cracker of a theme; handled very carefully, as a thing of fire, it need scarce be remarked, three young women being present.

Nataly had eyes on her girl, and was pleased at an alertness shown by Mr. Sowerby to second her by crossing the dialogue. As regarded her personal feelings, she was hardened, so long as the curtains were about her to keep the world from bending black brows of inquisition upon one of its culprits. But her anxiety was vigilant to guard her girl from an infusion of any of the dread facts of life not coming through the mother's lips: and she was a woman having the feminine mind's pudency in that direction, which does not consent to the revealing of much. Here was the mother's dilemma: her girl—Victor's girl, as she had to think in this instance,—the most cloudless of the young women of earth, seemed, and might be figured as really, at the falling of a crumb off the table of knowledge, taken by the brain to shoot up to terrific heights of surveyal; and there she rocked; and only her youthful healthiness brought her down to grass and flowers. She had once or twice received the electrical stimulus, to feel and be as lightning, from a seizure of facts in infinitesimal



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doses, guesses caught off maternal evasions or the circuitous explanation of matters touching sex in here and there a newspaper, harder to repress completely than sewer-gas in great cities: and her mother had seen, with an apprehensive pang of anguish, how witheringly the scared young intelligence of the innocent creature shocked her sensibility. She foresaw the need to such a flameful soul, as bride, wife, woman across the world, of the very princeliest of men in gifts of strength, for her sustainer and guide. And the provident mother knew this peerless gentleman: but he had his wife.

Delusions and the pain of the disillusioning were to be feared for the imaginative Nesta; though not so much as that on some future day of a perchance miserable yokemating—a subjection or an entanglement—the nobler passions might be summoned to rise for freedom, and strike a line to make their logically estimable sequence from a source not honourable before the public. Constantly it had to be thought, that the girl was her father's child.

At present she had no passions; and her bent to the happiness she could so richly give, had drawn her sailing smoothly over the harbour-bar of maidenhood; where many of her sisters are disconcerted to the loss of simplicity. If Nataly with her sleepless watchfulness and forecasts partook of the French mother, Nesta's Arcadian independence likened her somewhat in manner to the Transatlantic version of the English girl. Her high physical animation and the burden of themes it plucked for delivery carried her flowing over impediments of virginal self-consciousness, to set her at her ease in the talk with men; she had not gone through the various Nursery exercises in dissimulation; she had no appearance of praying forgiveness of men for the original sin of being woman; and no tricks of lips or lids, or traitor scarlet on the cheeks, or assumptions of the frigid mask, or indicated reserve-cajolerics. Neither ignorantly nor advisedly did she play on these or other bewitching strings of her sex, after the fashion of the stamped innocents, who are the boast of Englishmen and matrons, and thrill societies with their winsome ingenuousness; and who sometimes when unguarded meet an artful serenader, that is a cloaked bandit, and is provoked by their performances, and knows anthropologically the nature behind the devious show; a scintial rascal; as little to be excluded from our modern circles as Eve's own old deuce from Eden's garden whereupon, opportunity inviting, both the fool and the cunning, the pure donkey princess of insular eulogy, and the sham one, are in a perilous pass.



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Damsels of the swiftness of mind of Nesta cannot be ignorant utterly amid a world where the hints are hourly scattering seed of the inklings; when vileness is not at work up and down our thoroughfares, proclaiming its existence with tableau and trumpet. Nataly encountered her girl's questions, much as one seeks to quiet an enemy. The questions had soon ceased. Excepting repulsive and rejected details, there is little to be learnt when a little is known: in populous communities, density only will keep the little out. Only stupidity will suppose that it can be done for the livelier young. English mothers forethoughtful for their girls, have to take choice of how to do battle with a rough-and-tumble Old England, that lumbers bumping along, craving the precious things, which can be had but in semblance under the conditions allowed by laziness to subsist, and so curst of its shifty inconsequence as to worship in the concrete an hypocrisy it abhors in the abstract. Nataly could smuggle or confiscate here and there a newspaper; she could not interdict or withhold every one of them, from a girl ardent to be in the race on all topics of popular interest: and the newspapers are occasionally naked savages; the streets are imperfectly garmented even by day; and we have our stumbling social anecdotist, our spot-mouthed young man, our eminently silly woman; our slippery one; our slimy one, the Rahab of Society; not to speak of Mary the maid and the footman William. A vigilant mother has to contend with these and the like in an increasing degree. How best?

There is a method: one that Colney Durance advocated. The girl's intelligence and sweet blood invited a trial of it. Since, as he argued, we cannot keep the poisonous matter out, mothers should prepare and strengthen young women for the encounter with it, by lifting the veil, baring the world, giving them knowledge to arm them for the fight they have to sustain; and thereby preserve them further from the spiritual collapse which follows the nursing of a false ideal of our life in youth:—this being, Colney said, the prominent feminine disease of the time, common to all our women; that is, all having leisure to shine in the sun or wave in the wind as flowers of the garden.

Whatever there was of wisdom in his view, he spoilt it for English hearing, by making use of his dry compressed sentences. Besides he was a bachelor; therefore but a theorist. And his illustrations of his theory were grotesque; meditation on them extracted a corrosive acid to consume, in horrid derision, the sex, the nation, the race of man. The satirist too devotedly loves his lash to be a persuasive teacher. Nataly had excuses to cover her reasons for not listening to him.



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One reason was, as she discerned through her confusion at the thought, that the day drew near for her speaking fully to Nesta; when, between what she then said and what she said now, a cruel contrast might strike the girl and in toneing revelations now, to be more consonant with them then;—in softening and shading the edges of social misconduct, it seemed painfully possible to be sowing in the girl's mind something like the reverse of moral precepts, even to smoothing the way to a rebelliousness partly or wholly similar to her own. But Nataly's chief and her appealing reason for pursuing the conventional system with this exceptional young creature, referred to the sentiments on that subject of the kind of young man whom a mother elects from among those present and eligible, as perhaps next to worthy to wed the girl, by virtue of good promise in the moral department. She had Mr. Dudley Sowerby under view; far from the man of her choice and still the practice of decorum, discretion, a pardonable fastidiousness, appears, if women may make any forecast of the behaviour of young men or may trust the faces they see, to, promise a future stability in the husband. Assuredly a Dudley Sowerby would be immensely startled to find in his bride a young woman more than bably aware of the existence of one particular form of naughtiness on earth.

Victor was of no help: he had not an idea upon the right education of the young of the sex. Repression and mystery, he considered wholesome for girls; and he considered the enlightening of them—to some extent—a prudential measure for their defence; and premature instruction is a fire-water to their wild-in-woods understanding; and histrionic innocence is no doubt the bloom on corruption; also the facts of current human life, in the crude of the reports or the cooked of the sermon in the newspapers, are a noxious diet for our daughters; whom nevertheless we cannot hope to be feeding always on milk: and there is a time when their adorable pretty ignorance, if credibly it exists out of noodledom, is harmful:—but how beautiful the shining simplicity of our dear young English girls! He was one of the many men to whose minds women come in pictures and are accepted much as they paint themselves. Like his numerous fellows, too, he required a conflict with them, and a worsting at it, to be taught, that they are not the mere live stock we scheme to dispose of for their good: unless Love should interpose, he would have exclaimed. He broke from his fellows in his holy horror of a father's running counter to love. Nesta had only to say, that she loved another, for Dudley Sowerby to be withdrawn into the background of aspirants. But love was unknown to the girl.



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Outwardly, the plan of the Drive to Paris had the look of Victor's traditional hospitality. Nataly smiled at her incorrigibly lagging intelligence of him, on hearing that he had invited a company: 'Lady Grace, for gaiety; Peridon and Catkin, fiddles; Dudley Sowerby and myself, flutes; Barmby, intonation; in all, nine of us; and by the dear old Normandy route, for the sake of the voyage, as in old times; towers of Dieppe in the morning-light; and the lovely road to the capital! Just three days in Paris, and home by any of the other routes. It's the drive we want. Boredom in wet weather, we defy; we have our Concert—an hour at night and we're sure of sleep.' It had a sweet simple air, befitting him; as when in bygone days they travelled with the joy of children. For travelling shook Nataly out of her troubles and gave her something of the child's inheritance of the wisdom of life—the living ever so little ahead of ourselves; about as far as the fox in view of the hunt. That is the soul of us out for novelty, devouring as it runs, an endless feast; and the body is eagerly after it, recording the pleasures, a daily chase. Remembrance of them is almost a renewal, anticipation a revival. She enraptured Victor with glimpses of the domestic fun she had ceased to show sign of since the revelation of Lakelands. Her only regret was on account of the exclusion of Colney Durance from the party, because of happy memories associating him with the Seine-land, and also that his bilious criticism of his countrymen was moderated by a trip to the Continent. Fenellan reported Colney to be 'busy in the act of distilling one of his Prussic acid essays.' Fenellan would have jumped to go. He informed Victor, as a probe, that the business of the Life Insurance was at periods 'fearfully necrological! Inexplicably, he was not invited. Did it mean, that he was growing dull? He looked inside instead of out, and lost the clue.

His behaviour on the evening of the departure showed plainly what would have befallen Mr. Sowerby on the expedition, had not he as well as Colney been excluded. Two carriages and a cab conveyed the excursionists, as they merrily called themselves, to the terminus. They were Victor's guests; they had no trouble, no expense, none of the nipper reckonings which dog our pleasures; the state of pure bliss. Fenellan's enviousness drove him at the Rev. Mr. Barmby until the latter jumped to the seat beside Nesta in her carriage, Mademoiselle de Seilles and Mr. Sowerby facing them. Lady Grace Halley, in the carriage behind, heard Nesta's laugh; which Mr. Barmby had thought vacuous, beseeeming little girls, that laugh at nothings. She questioned Fenellan.

'Oh,' said he, 'I merely mentioned that the Rev. gentleman carries his musical instrument at the bottom of his trunk.'

She smiled: 'And who are in the cab?'

'Your fiddles are in the cab, in charge of Peridon and Catkin. Those two would have writhed like head and tail of a worm, at a division on the way to the station. Point a finger at Peridon, you run Catkin through the body. They're a fabulous couple.'



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Victor cut him short. 'I deny that those two are absurd.'

'And Catkin's toothache is a galvanic battery upon Peridon.'

Nataly strongly denied it. Peridon and Catkin pertained to their genial picture of the dear sweet nest in life; a dale never traversed by the withering breath they dreaded.

Fenellan then, to prove that he could be as bad in his way as Colney, fell to work on the absent Miss Priscilla Graves and Mr. Pempton, with a pitchfork's exaltation of the sacred attachment of the divergently meritorious couple, and a melancholy reference to implacable obstacles in the principles of each. The pair were offending the amatory corner in the generous good sense of Nataly and Victor; they were not to be hotly protected, though they were well enough liked for their qualities, except by Lady Grace, who revelled in the horrifying and scandalizing of Miss Graves. Such a specimen of the Puritan middle English as Priscilla Graves, was eastwind on her skin, nausea to her gorge. She wondered at having drifted into the neighbourhood of a person resembling in her repellent formal chill virtuousness a windy belfry tower, down among those districts of suburban London or appalling provincial towns passed now and then with a shudder, where the funereal square bricks-up the Church, that Arctic hen-mother sits on the square, and the moving dead are summoned to their round of penitential exercise by a monosyllabic tribulation-bell. Fenellan's graphic sketch of the teetotaler woman seeing her admirer pursued by Eumenides flagons—abominations of emptiness—to the banks of the black river of suicides, where the one most wretched light is Inebriation's nose; and of the vegetarian violoncello's horror at his vision of the long procession of the flocks and herds into his lady's melodious Ark of a mouth, excited and delighted her antipathy. She was amused to transports at the station, on hearing Mr. Barmby, in a voice all ophicleide, remark: 'No, I carry no instrument.' The habitation of it at the bottom of his trunk, was not forgotten when it sounded.

Reclining in warmth on the deck of the vessel at night, she said, just under Victor's ear: 'Where are those two?'

'Bid me select the couple,' said he.

She rejoined: 'Silly man'; and sleepily gave him her hand for good night, and so paralyzed his arm, that he had to cover the continued junction by saying more than he intended: 'If they come to an understanding!'

'Plain enough on one side.'

'You think it suitable?'

'Perfection; and well-planned to let them discover it.' 'This is really my favourite route; I love the saltwater and the night on deck.'



'Go on.'

'How?'

'Number your loves. It would tax your arithmetic.'

'I can hate.'

'Not me?'



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Positively the contrary, an impulsive squeeze of fingers declared it; and they broke the link, neither of them sensibly hurt; though a leaf or two of the ingenuities, which were her thoughts, turned over in the phantasies of the lady; and the gentleman was taught to feel that a never so slightly lengthened compression of the hand female shoots within us both straight and far and round the corners. There you have Nature, if you want her naked in her elements, for a text. He loved his Nataly truly, even fervently, after the twenty years of union; he looked about at no other woman; it happened only that the touch of one, the chance warm touch, put to motion the blind forces of our mother so remarkably surcharging him. But it was without kindling. The lady, the much cooler person, did nurse a bit of flame. She had a whimsical liking for the man who enjoyed simple things when commanding the luxuries; and it became a fascination, by extreme contrast, at the reminder of his adventurous enterprises in progress while he could so childishly enjoy. Women who dance with the warrior-winner of battles, and hear him talk his ball-room trifles to amuse, have similarly a smell of gunpowder to intoxicate them.

For him, a turn on the deck brought him into new skies. Nataly lay in the cabin. She used to be where Lady Grace was lying. A sort of pleadable, transparent, harmless hallucination of the renewal of old service induced him to refresh and settle the fair semi-slumberer's pillow, and fix the tarpaulin over her silks and wraps; and bend his head to the soft mouth murmuring thanks. The women who can dare the nuit blanche, and under stars; and have a taste for holiday larks after their thirtieth, are rare; they are precious. Nataly nevertheless was approved for guarding her throat from the nightwind. And a softer southerly breath never crossed Channel! The very breeze he had wished for! Luck was with him.

Nesta sat by the rails of the vessel beside her Louise. Mr. Sowerby in passing, exchanged a description of printed agreement with her, upon the beauty of the night—a good neutral topic for the encounter of the sexes not that he wanted it neutral; it furnished him with a vocabulary. Once he perceptibly washed his hands of dutiful politeness, in addressing Mademoiselle de Seilles, likewise upon the beauty of the night; and the French lady, thinking—too conclusively from the breath on the glass at the moment, as it is the Gallic habit—that if her dear Nesta must espouse one of the uninteresting creatures called men in her native land, it might as well be this as another, agreed that the night was very beautiful.

'He speaks grammatical French,' Nesta commented on his achievement. 'He contrives in his walking not to wet his boots,' mademoiselle rejoined.



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Mr. Peridon was a more welcome sample of the islanders, despite an inferior pretension to accent. He burned to be near these ladies, and he passed them but once. His enthusiasm for Mademoiselle de Seilles was notorious. Gratefully the compliment was acknowledged by her, in her demure fashion; with a reserve of comic intellectual contempt for the man who could not see that women, or Frenchwomen, or eminently she among them, must have their enthusiasm set springing in the breast before they can be swayed by the most violent of outer gales. And say, that she is uprooted;—he does but roll a log. Mr. Peridon's efforts to perfect himself in the French tongue touched her.

A night of May leaning on June, is little more than a deliberate wink of the eye of light. Mr. Barmby, an exile from the ladies by reason of an addiction to tobacco, quitted the forepart of the vessel at the first greying. Now was the cloak of night worn threadbare, and grey astir for the heralding of gold, day visibly ready to show its warmer throbs. The gentle waves were just a stronger grey than the sky, perforce of an interfusion that shifted gradations; they were silken, in places oily grey; cold to drive the sight across their playful monotonousness for refuge on any far fisher-sail.

Miss Radnor was asleep, eyelids benignly down, lips mildly closed. The girl's cheeks held colour to match a dawn yet unawakened though born. They were in a nest shading amid silks of pale blue, and there was a languid flutter beneath her chin to the catch of the morn-breeze. Bacchanal threads astray from a disorderly front-lock of rich brown hair were alive over an eyebrow showing like a seal upon the lightest and securest of slumbers.

Mr. Barmby gazed, and devoutly. Both the ladies were in their oblivion; the younger quite saintly; but the couple inseparably framed, elevating to behold; a reproach to the reminiscence of pipes. He was near; and quietly the eyelids of mademoiselle lifted on him. Her look was grave, straight, uninquiring, soon accurately perusing; an arrow of Artemis for penetration. He went by, with the sound in the throat of a startled bush-bird taking to wing; he limped off some nail of the deck, as if that young Frenchwoman had turned the foot to a hoof. Man could not be more guiltless, yet her look had perturbed him; nails conspired; in his vexation, he execrated tobacco. And ask not why, where reason never was.

Nesta woke babbling on the subject she had relinquished for sleep. Mademoiselle touched a feathery finger at her hair and hood during their silvery French chimes.

Mr. Sowerby presented the risen morning to them, with encomiums, after they had been observing every variation in it. He spoke happily of the pleasant passage, and of the agreeable night; particularly of the excellent idea of the expedition by this long route at night; the prospect of which had disfigured him with his grimace of speculation—apparently a sourness that did not exist. Nesta had a singular notion, coming of a girl's mingled observation and intuition, that the impressions upon this gentleman were in



arrear, did not strike him till late. Mademoiselle confirmed it when it was mentioned; she remembered to have noticed the same in many small things. And it was a pointed perception.



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Victor sent his girl down to Nataly, with a summons to hurry up and see sunlight over the waters. Nataly came; she looked, and the outer wakened the inner, she let the light look in on her, her old feelings danced to her eyes like a string of bubbles in ascent. 'Victor, Victor, it seems only yesterday that we crossed, twelve years back—was it?—and in May, and saw the shoal of porpoises, and five minutes after, Dieppe in view. Dear French people! I share your love for France.'

'Home of our holidays!—the "drives"; and they may be the happiest. And fifty minutes later we were off the harbour; and Natata landed, a stranger; and at night she was the heroine of the town.'

Victor turned to a stately gentleman and passed his name to Nataly: 'Sir Rodwell Balchington, a neighbour of Lakelands! She understood that Lady Grace Halley was acquainted with Sir Rodwell:—hence this dash of brine to her lips while she was drinking of happy memories, and Victor evidently was pluming himself upon his usual luck in the fortuitous encounter with an influential neighbour of Lakelands. He told Sir Rodwell the story of how they had met in the salle a manger of the hotel the impresario of a Concert in the town, who had in his hand the doctor's certificate of the incapacity of the chief cantatrice to appear, and waved it, within a step of suicide. 'Well, to be brief, my wife—"noble dame Anglaise," as the man announced her on the Concert platform, undertook one of the songs, and sang another of her own-pure contralto voice, as you will say; with the result that there was a perfect tumult of enthusiasm. Next day, the waiters of the hotel presented her with a bouquet of Spring flowers, white, and central violets. It was in the Paris papers, under the heading: Une amie d'outre Manche—I think that was it?' he asked Nataly.

'I forget,' said she.

He glanced at her: a cloud had risen. He rallied her, spoke of the old Norman silver cross which the manager of the Concert had sent, humbly imploring her to accept the small memento of his gratitude. She nodded an excellent artificial brightness.

And there was the coast of France under young sunlight over the waters. Once more her oft-petitioning wish through the years, that she had entered the ranks of professional singers, upon whom the moral scrutiny is not so microscopic, invaded her, resembling a tide-swell into rock-caves, which have been filled before and left to emptiness, and will be left to emptiness again. Nataly had the intimation visiting us when, in a decline of physical power, the mind's ready vivacity to conjure illusions forsakes us; and it was, of a wall ahead, and a force impelling her against it, and no hope of deviation. And this is the featureless thing, Destiny; not without eyes, if we have a conscience to throw them into it to look at us.

Counsel to her to live in the hour, came, as upon others on the vessel, from an active breath of the salt prompting to healthy hunger; and hardly less from the splendour of the

low full sunlight on the waters, the skimming and dancing of the thousands of golden shells away from under the globe of fire.



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CHAPTER XV

A PATRIOT ABROAD

Nine days after his master's departure, Daniel Skepsey, a man of some renown of late, as a subject of reports and comments in the newspapers, obtained a passport, for the identification, if need were, of his missing or misapprehended person in a foreign country, of the language of which three unpronounceable words were knocking about his head to render the thought of the passport a staff of safety; and on the morning that followed he was at speed through Normandy, to meet his master rounding homeward from Paris, at a town not to be spoken as it is written, by reason of the custom of the good people of the country, with whom we would fain live on neighbourly terms:—yes, and they had proof of it, not so very many years back, when they were enduring the worst which can befall us—though Mr. Durance, to whom he was indebted for the writing of the place of his destination large on a card, and the wording of the French sound beside it, besides the jotting down of trains and the station for the change of railways, Mr. Durance could say, that the active form of our sympathy consisted in the pouring of cheeses upon them when they were prostrate and unable to resist!

A kind gentleman, Mr. Durance, as Daniel Skepsey had recent cause to know, but often exceedingly dark; not so patriotic as desirable, it was to be feared; and yet, strangely indeed, Mr. Durance had said cogent things on the art of boxing and on manly exercises, and he hoped—he was emphatic in saying he hoped—we should be regenerated. He must have meant, that boxing—on a grand scale would contribute to it. He said, that a blow now and then was wholesome for us all. He recommended a monthly private whipping for old gentlemen who decline the use of the gloves, to disperse their humours; not excluding Judges and Magistrates: he could hardly be in earnest. He spoke in a clergyman's voice, and said it would be payment of good assurance money, beneficial to their souls: he seemed to mean it. He said, that old gentlemen were bottled vapours, and it was good for them to uncork them periodically. He said, they should be excused half the strokes if they danced nightly—they resented motion. He seemed sadly wanting in veneration.

But he might not positively intend what he said. Skepsey could overlook everything he said, except the girding at England. For where is a braver people, notwithstanding appearances! Skepsey knew of dozens of gallant bruisers, ready for the cry to strip to the belt; worthy, with a little public encouragement, to rank beside their grandfathers of the Ring, in the brilliant times when royalty and nobility countenanced the manly art, our nursery of heroes, and there was not the existing unhappy division of classes. He still trusted to convince Mr. Durance, by means of argument and happy instances, historical and immediate, that the English may justly consider themselves the elect of nations, for reasons better than their accumulation of the piles of gold—better than 'usurers' reasons,' as Mr. Durance called them. Much that Mr. Durance had said at intervals was, although

remembered almost to the letter of the phrase, beyond his comprehension, and he put it aside, with penitent blinking at his deficiency.



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All the while, he was hearing a rattle of voluble tongues around him, and a shout of stations, intelligible as a wash of pebbles, and blocks in a torrent. Generally the men slouched when they were not running. At Dieppe he had noticed muscular fellows; he admitted them to be nimbler on the legs than ours; and that may count both ways, he consoled a patriotic vanity by thinking; instantly rebuking the thought; for he had read chapters of Military History. He sat eyeing the front row of figures in his third-class carriage, musing on the kind of soldiers we might, heaven designing it, have to face, and how to beat them; until he gazed on Rouen, knowing by the size of it and by what Mr. Durance had informed him of the city on the river, that it must be the very city of Rouen, not so many years back a violated place, at the mercy of a foreign foe. Strong pity laid hold of Skepsey. He fortified the heights for defence, but saw at a glance that it was the city for modern artillery to command, crush and enter. He lost idea of these afflicted people as foes, merely complaining of their attacks on England, and their menaces in their Journals and pamphlets; and he renounced certain views of the country to be marched over on the road by this route to Paris, for the dictation of terms of peace at the gates of the French capital, sparing them the shameful entry; and this after the rout of their attempt at an invasion of the Island!

A man opposite him was looking amicably on his lively grey eyes. Skepsey handed a card from his pocket. The man perused it, and crying: 'Dreux?' waved out of the carriage-window at a westerly distance, naming Rouen as not the place, not at all, totally other. Thus we are taught, that a foreign General, ignorant of the language, must confine himself to defensive operations at home; he would be a child in the hands of the commonest man he meets. Brilliant with thanks in signs, Skepsey drew from his friend a course of instruction in French names, for our necessities on a line of march. The roads to Great Britain's metropolis, and the supplies of forage and provision at every stage of a march on London, are marked in the military offices of these people; and that, with their barking Journals, is a piece of knowledge to justify a belligerent return for it. Only we pray to be let live peacefully.

Fervently we pray it when this good man, a total stranger to us, conducts an ignorant foreigner from one station to another through the streets of Rouen, after a short stoppage at the buffet and assistance in the identification of coins; then, lifting his cap to us, retires.

And why be dealing wounds and death? It is a more blessed thing to keep the Commandments. But how is it possible to keep the Commandments if you have a vexatious wife?

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Martha Skepsey had given him a son to show the hereditary energy in his crying and coughing; and it was owing, he could plead, to her habits and her tongue, that he sometimes, that he might avoid the doing of worse—for she wanted correction and was improved by it—courted the excitement of a short exhibition of skill, man to man, on publicans' first floors. He could have told the magistrates so, in part apology for the circumstances dragging him the other day, so recently, before his Worship; and he might have told it, if he had not remembered Captain Dartrey Fenellan's words about treating women chivalrously which was interpreted by Skepsey as correcting them, when called upon to do it, but never exposing them only, if allowed to account for the circumstances pushing us into the newspapers, we should not present so guilty a look before the public.

Furthermore, as to how far it is the duty of a man to serve his master, there is likewise question: whether is he, while receiving reproof and punishment for excess of zeal in the service of his master, not to mention the welfare of the country, morally—without establishing it as a principle—exonerated? Miss Graves might be asked save that one would not voluntarily trouble a lady on such subjects. But supposing, says the opposing counsel, now at work in Skepsey's conscience, supposing this act, for which, contravening the law of the land, you are reprov'd and punished, to be agreeable to you, how then? We answer, supposing it—and we take uncomplainingly the magistrate's reproof and punishment—morally justified can it be expected of us to have the sense of guilt, although we wear and know we wear a guilty look before the public?

His master and the dear ladies would hear of it; perhaps they knew of it now; with them would rest the settlement of the distressing inquiry. The ladies would be shocked ladies cannot bear any semblance of roughness, not even with the gloves:—and knowing, as they must, that our practise of the manly art is for their protection.

Skepsey's grievous prospect of the hour to come under judgement of a sex that was ever a riddle unread, clouded him on the approach to Dreux. He studied the country and the people eagerly; he forbore to conduct great military operations. Mr. Durance had spoken of big battles round about the town of Dreux; also of a wonderful Mausoleum there, not equally interesting. The little man was in deeper gloom than a day sobering on crimson dusk when the train stopped and his quick ear caught the sound of the station, as pronounced by his friend at Rouen.

He handed his card to the station-master. A glance, and the latter signalled to a porter, saying: 'Paradis'; and the porter laid hold of Skepsey's bag. Skepsey's grasp was firm; he pulled, the porter pulled. Skepsey heard explanatory speech accompanying a wrench. He wrenched back with vigour, and in his own tongue exclaimed, that he held to the bag because his master's



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letters were in the bag, all the way from England. For a minute, there was a downright trial of muscle and will: the porter appeared furiously excited, Skepsey had a look of cooled steel. Then the Frenchman, requiring to shrug, gave way to the Englishman's eccentric obstinacy, and signified that he was his guide. Quite so, and Skepsey showed alacrity and confidence in following; he carried his bag. But with the remembrance of the kindly serviceable man at Rouen, he sought to convey to the porter, that the terms of their association were cordial. A waving of the right hand to the heavens ratified the treaty on the French side. Nods and smiles and gesticulations, with across-Channel vocables, as it were Dover cliffs to Calais sands and back, pleasantly beguiled the way down to the Hotel du Paradis, under the Mausoleum heights, where Skepsey fumbled at his pocket for coin current; but the Frenchman, all shaken by a tornado of negation, clapped him on the shoulder, and sang him a quatrain. Skepsey had in politeness to stand listening, and blinking, plunged in the contrition of ignorance, eclipsed. He took it to signify something to the effect, that money should not pass between friends. It was the amatory farewell address of Henri IV. to his Charmante Gabrielle; and with

'Perce de mille lords,
L'honneur m'appelle
Au champ de Mars,'

the Frenchman, in a backing of measured steps, apologized for his enforced withdrawal from the stranger who had captured his heart.

Skepsey's card was taken in the passage of the hotel. A clean-capped maid, brave on the legs, like all he had seen of these people, preceded him at quick march to an upper chamber. When he descended, bag in hand, she flung open the salon-door of a table d'hote, where a goodly number were dining and chattering; waiters drew him along to the section occupied by his master's party. A chair had been kept vacant for him; his master waved a hand, his dear ladies graciously smiled; he struck the bag in front of a guardian foot, growing happy. He could fancy they had not seen the English newspapers. And his next observation of the table showed him wrecked and lost: Miss Nesta's face was the oval of a woeful O at his wild behaviour in England during their absence. She smiled. Skepsey had nevertheless to consume his food—excellent, very tasty soup—with the sour sauce of the thought that he must be tongue-tied in his defence for the time of the dinner.

'No, dear Skips, please! you are to enjoy yourself,' said Nesta.

He answered confusedly, trying to assure her that he was doing so, and he choked.



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His master had fixed his arrival for twenty minutes earlier. Skepsey spoke through a cough of long delays at stations. The Rev. Septimus Barmby, officially peacemaker, sounded the consequent excuse for a belated comer. It was final; such is the power of sound. Looks were cast from the French section of the table at the owner of the prodigious organ. Some of the younger men, intent on the charms of Albion's daughters, expressed in a sign and a word or two alarm at what might be beneath the flooring: and 'Pas encore Lui!' and 'Son avant-courrier!' and other flies of speech passed on a whiff, under politest of cover, not to give offence. But prodigies, claim attention.

Our English, at the close of the dinner, consented to say it was good, without specifying a dish, because a selection of this or that would have seemed to italicize, and commit, them, in the presence of ladies, to a notice of the matter of-course, beneath us, or the confession of a low sensual enjoyment; until Lady Grace Halley named the particular dressing of a tete de veau approvingly to Victor; and he stating, that he had offered a suggestion for the menu of the day, Nataly exclaimed, that she had suspected it: upon which Mr. Sowerby praised the menu, Mr. Barmby, Peridon and Catkin named other dishes, there was the right after-dinner ring in Victor's ears, thanks to the woman of the world who had travelled round to nature and led the shackled men to deliver themselves heartily. One tap, and they are free. That is, in the moments after dinner, when nature is at the gates with them. Only, it must be a lady and a prevailing lady to give the tap. They need (our English) and will for the ages of the process of their transformation need a queen.

Skepsey, bag in hand, obeyed the motion of his master's head and followed him.

He was presently back, to remain with the ladies during his master's perusal of letters. Nataly had decreed that he was not to be troubled; so Nesta and mademoiselle besought him for a recital of his French adventures; and strange to say, he had nothing to tell. The journey, pregnant at the start, exciting in the course of it, was absolutely blank at the termination. French people had been very kind; he could not say more. But there was more; there was a remarkable fulness, if only he could subordinate it to narrative. The little man did not know, that time was wanted for imagination to make the roadway or riverway of a true story, unless we press to invent; his mind had been too busy on the way for him to clothe in speech his impressions of the passage of incidents at the call for them. Things had happened, numbers of interesting minor things, but they all slipped as water through the fingers; and he being of the band of honest creatures who will not accept a lift from fiction, drearily he sat before the ladies, confessing to an emptiness he was far from feeling.

Nesta professed excessive disappointment. 'Now, if it had been in England, Skips!' she said, under her mother's gentle gloom of brows.



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He made show of melancholy submission.

'There, Skepsey, you have a good excuse, we are sure,' Nataly said.

And women, when they are such ladies as these, are sent to prove to us that they can be a blessing; instead of the dreadful cry to Providence for the reason of the spread of the race of man by their means! He declared his readiness, rejecting excuses, to state his case to them, but for his fear of having it interpreted as an appeal for their kind aid in obtaining his master's forgiveness. Mr. Durance had very considerably promised to intercede. Skepsey dropped a hint or two of his naughty proceedings drily aware that their untutored antipathy to the manly art would not permit of warmth.

Nesta said: 'Do you know, Skips, we saw a grand exhibition of fencing in Paris.'

He sighed. 'Ladies can look on at fencing! foils and masks! Captain Dartrey Fenellan has shown me, and says, the French are our masters at it.' He bowed constrainedly to mademoiselle.

'You box, M. Skepsey!' she said.

His melancholy increased: 'Much discouragement from Government, Society! If ladies . . . but I do not venture. They are not against Games. But these are not a protection . . . to them, when needed; to the country. The country seems asleep to its position. Mr. Durance has remarked on it:—though I would not always quote Mr. Durance . . . indeed, he says, that England has invested an Old Maid's All in the Millennium, and is ruined if it delays to come. "Old Maid," I do not see. I do not—if I may presume to speak of myself in the same breath with so clever a gentleman, agree with Mr. Durance in everything. But the chest-measurement of recruits, the stature of the men enlisted, prove that we are losing the nursery of our soldiers.'

'We are taking them out of the nursery, Skips, if you 're for quoting Captain Dartrey,' said Nesta. 'We'll never haul down our flag, though, while we have him!'

'Ah! Captain Dartrey!' Skepsey was refreshed by the invocation of the name.

A summons to his master's presence cut short something he was beginning to say about Captain Dartrey.

CHAPTER XVI

ACCOUNTS FOR SKEPSEY'S MISCONDUCT, SHOWING HOW IT AFFECTED NATALY



His master opened on the bristling business.

'What's this, of your name in the papers, your appearing before a magistrate, and a fine? Tell the tale shortly.'

Skepsey fell upon his attitude for dialectical defence the modest form of the two hands at rolling play and the head deferentially sidecast. But knowing that he had gratified his personal tastes in the act of serving his master's interests, an interfusion of sentiments plunged him into self-consciousness; an unwonted state with him, clogging to a simple story.

'First, sir, I would beg you to pardon the printing of your name beside mine . . .'



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'Tush: on with you.'

'Only to say, necessitated by the circumstances of the case. I read, that there was laughter in the court at my exculpation of my conduct— as I have to call it; and there may have been. I may have expressed myself I have a strong feeling for the welfare of the country.'

'So, it seems, you said to the magistrate. Do you tell me, that the cause of your gross breach of the law, was a consideration for the welfare of the country? Run on the facts.'

'The facts—I must have begun badly, sir.' Skepsey rattled the dry facts in his head to right them. From his not having begun well, they had become dry as things underfoot. It was an error to have led off with the sentiments. 'Two very, two very respectable persons—respectable—were desirous to witness a short display of my, my system, I would say; of my science, they call it.'

'Don't be nervous. To the point; you went into a field five miles out of London, in broad day, and stood in a ring, the usual Tiff-raff about you!'

'With the gloves: and not for money, Sir: for the trial of skill; not very many people. I cannot quite see the breach of the law.'

'So you told the magistrate. You were fined for your inability to quite see. And you had to give security.'

'Mr. Durance was kindly responsible for me, sir: an acquaintance of the magistrate.'

'This boxing of yours is a positive mania, Skepsey. You must try to get the better of it—must! And my name too! I'm to be proclaimed, as having in my service an inveterate pugilist—who breaks the law from patriotism! Male or female, these very respectable persons—the people your show was meant for?'

'Male, sir. Females! . . . that is, not the respectable ones.'

'Take the opinion of the respectable ones for your standard of behaviour in future.'

'It was a mere trial of skill, sir, to prove to one of the spectators, that I could be as good as my word. I wished I may say, to conciliate him, partly. He would not—he judged by size—credit me with . . . he backed my adversary Jerry Scroom—a sturdy boxer, without the knowledge of the first principles.'

'You beat him?'



'I think I taught the man that I could instruct, sir; he was complimentary before we parted. He thought I could not have lasted. After the second round, the police appeared.'

'And you ran!'

'No, sir; I had nothing on my conscience.'

'Why not have had your pugilistic display in a publican's room in town, where you could have hammer-nailed and ding-donged to your heart's content for as long as you liked!'

'That would have been preferable, from the point of view of safety from intrusion, I can admit-speaking humbly. But one of the parties—I had a wish to gratify him—is a lover of old English times and habits and our country scenes. He wanted it to take place on green grass. We drove over Hampstead in three carts and a gig, as a company of pleasure—as it was. A very beautiful morning. There was a rest at a public-house. Mr. Shaplow traces the misfortune to that. Mr. Jarniman, I hear, thinks it what he calls a traitor in the camp. I saw no sign; we were all merry and friendly.'



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'Jarniman?' said Victor sharply. 'Who is the Jarniman?'

'Mr. Jarniman is, I am to understand from the acquaintance introducing us—a Mr. Shaplow I met in the train from Lakelands one day, and again at the corner of a street near Drury Lane, a ham and beef shop kept by a Mrs. Jarniman, a very stout lady, who does the chief carving in the shop, and is the mother of Mr. Jarniman: he is in a confidential place, highly trusted.' Skepsey looked up from the hands he soaped: 'He is a curious mixture; he has true enthusiasm for boxing, he believes in ghosts. He mourns for the lost days of prize-fighting, he thinks that spectres are on the increase. He has a very large appetite, depressed spirits. Mr. Shaplow informs me he is a man of substance, in the service of a wealthy lady in poor health, expecting a legacy and her appearance to him. He has the look—Mr. Shaplow assures me he does not drink to excess: he is a slow drinker.'

Victor straightened: 'Bad way of health, you said?'

'Mr. Jarniman spoke of his expectations, as being immediate: he put it, that he expected her spirit to be out for him to meet it any day—or night. He desires it. He says, she has promised it—on oath, he says, and must feel that she must do her duty to him before she goes, if she is to appear to him with any countenance after. But he is anxious for her in any case to show herself, and says, he should not have the heart to reproach her. He has principles, a tear for suffering; he likes to be made to cry. Mrs. Jarniman, his mother, he is not married, is much the same so far, except ghosts; she will not have them; except after strong tea, they come, she says, come to her bed. She is foolish enough to sleep in a close-curtained bed. But the poor lady is so exceedingly stout that a puff of cold would carry her off, she fears.'

Victor stamped his foot. 'This man Jarniman serves a lady now in a— serious, does he say? Was he precise?'

'Mr. Jarniman spoke of a remarkable number of diseases; very complicated, he says. He has no opinion of doctors. He says, that the lady's doctor and the chemist—she sits in a chemist's shop and swallows other people's prescriptions that take her fancy. He says, her continuing to live is wonderful. He has no reason to hurry her, only for the satisfaction of a natural curiosity.'

'He mentioned her name?'

'No name, sir.'

Skepsey's limpid grey eyes confirmed the negative to Victor, who was assured that the little man stood clean of any falsity.



'You are not on equal terms. You and the magistrate have helped him to know who it is you serve, Skepsey.'

'Would you please to direct me, sir.'

'Another time. Now go and ease your feet with a run over the town. We have music in half an hour. That you like, I know. See chiefly to amusing yourself.'

Skepsey turned to go; he murmured, that he had enjoyed his trip.



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Victor checked him: it was to ask whether this Jarniman had specified one, any one of the numerous diseases afflicting his aged mistress.

Now Jarniman had shocked Skepsey with his blunt titles for a couple of the foremost maladies assailing the poor lady's decayed constitution: not to be mentioned, Skepsey's thought, in relation to ladies; whose organs and functions we, who pay them a proper homage by restricting them to the sphere so worthily occupied by their mothers up to the very oldest date, respectfully curtain; their accepted masters are chivalrous to them, deploring their need at times for the doctors and drugs. He stood looking most unhappy. 'She was to appear, sir, in a few—perhaps a week, a month.'

A nod dismissed him.

The fun of the expedition (and Dudley Sowerby had wound himself up to relish it) was at night in the towns, when the sound of instrumental and vocal music attracted crowds beneath the windows of the hotel, and they heard zon, zon, violon, fete et basse; not bad fluting, excellent fiddling, such singing as a maestro, conducting his own Opera, would have approved. So Victor said of his darlings' voices. Nesta's and her mother's were a perfect combination; Mr. Barmby's trompe in union, sufficiently confirmed the popular impression, that they were artistes. They had been ceremoniously ushered to their carriages, with expressions of gratitude, at the departure from Rouen; and the Boniface at Gisors had entreated them to stay another night, to give an entertainment. Victor took his pleasure in letting it be known, that they were a quiet English family, simply keeping-up the habits they practiced in Old England: all were welcome to hear them while they were doing it; but they did not give entertainments.

The pride of the pleasure of reversing the general idea of English dulness among our neighbours, was perceived to have laid fast hold of Dudley Sowerby at Dreux. He was at the window from time to time, counting heads below. For this reason or a better, he begged Nesta to supplant the flute duet with the soprano and contralto of the Helena section of the Mefistofele, called the Serenade: La Luna immobile. She consulted her mother, and they sang it. The crowds below, swollen to a block of the street, were dead still, showing the instinctive good manners of the people. Then mademoiselle astonished them with a Provençal or Cevennes air, Huguenot, though she was Catholic; but it suited her mezzo-soprano tones; and it rang massively of the martial-religious. To what heights of spiritual grandeur might not a Huguenot France have marched! Dudley Sowerby, heedlessly, under an emotion that could be stirred in him with force, by the soul of religion issuing through music, addressed his ejaculation to Lady Grace Halley. She did not shrug or snub him, but rejoined: 'I could go to battle with that song in the ears.' She liked seeing him so happily transformed; and liked the effect of it on Nesta when



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his face shone in talking. He was at home with the girl's eyes, as he had never been. A song expressing in one of the combative and devotional, went to the springs of his blood; for he was of an old warrior race, beneath the thick crust of imposed peaceful maxims and commercial pursuits and habitual stiff correctness. As much as wine, will music bring out the native bent of the civilized man: endow him with language too. He was as if unlocked; he met Nesta's eyes and ran in a voluble interchange, that gave him flattering after-thoughts; and at the moment sensibly a new and assured, or to some extent assured, station beside a girl so vivid; by which the young lady would be helped to perceive his unvoiced solid gifts.

Nataly observed them, thinking of Victor's mastering subtlety. She had hoped (having clearly seen the sheep's eye in the shepherd) that Mr. Barmby would be watchful to act as a block between them; and therefore she had stipulated for his presence on the journey. She remembered Victor's rapid look of readiness to consent:—he reckoned how naturally Mr. Barmby would serve as a foil to any younger man. Mr. Barmby had tried all along to perform his part: he had always been thwarted; notably once at Gisors, where by some cunning management he and mademoiselle found themselves in the cell of the prisoner's Nail-wrought work while Nesta had to take Sowerby's hand for help at a passage here and there along the narrow outer castle-walls. And Mr. Barmby, upon occasions, had set that dimple in Nesta's cheek quivering, though Simeon Fenellan was not at hand, and there was no telling how it was done, beyond the evidence that Victor willed it so.

From the day of the announcement of Lakelands, she had been brought more into contact with his genius of dexterity and foresight than ever previously: she had bent to the burden of it more; had seen herself and everybody else outstripped—herself, of course; she did not count in a struggle with him. But since that red dawn of Lakelands, it was almost as if he had descended to earth from the skies. She now saw his mortality in the miraculous things he did. The reason of it was, that through the perceptible various arts and shifts on her level, an opposing spirit had plainer view of his aim, to judge it. She thought it a mean one.

The power it had to hurry her with the strength of a torrent to an end she dreaded, impressed her physically; so far subduing her mind, in consequence, as to keep the idea of absolute resistance obscure, though her bosom heaved with the breath; but what was her own of a mind hung hovering above him, criticizing; and involuntarily, discomfortingly. She could have prayed to be led blindly or blindly dashed on: she could trust him for success; and her critical mind seemed at times a treachery. Still she was compelled to judge.

When he said to her at night, pressing both her hands: 'This is the news of the day, my love! It's death at last. We shall soon be thanking heaven for freedom'; her fingers

writhed upon his and gripped them in a torture of remorse on his behalf. A shattering throb of her heart gave her sight of herself as well. For so it is with the woman who loves in subjection, she may be a critic of the man, she is his accomplice.'



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'You have a letter, Victor?'

'Confirmation all round: Fenellan, Themison, and now Skepsey.'

He told her the tale of Skepsey and Jarniman, colouring it, as any interested animated conduit necessarily will. Neither of them smiled.

The effort to think soberly exhausted and rolled her back on credulity.

It might not be to-day or next week or month: but so much testimony pointed to a day within the horizon, surely!

She bowed her head to heaven for forgiveness. The murderous hope stood up, stood out in forms and pictures. There was one of a woman at her ease at last in the reception of guests; contrasting with an ironic haunting figure of the woman of queenly air and stature under a finger of scorn for a bold-faced impostor. Nataly's lips twitched at the remembrance of quaint whimpers of complaint to the Fates, for directing that a large instead of a rather diminutive woman should be the social offender fearing exposure. Majesty in the criminal's dock, is a confounding spectacle. To the bosom of the majestic creature, all her glorious attributes have become the executioner's implements. She must for her soul's health believe that a day of release and exoneration approaches.

'Barmby!—if my dear girl would like him best,' Victor said, in tenderest undertones, observing the shadowing variations of her face; and pierced her cruelly, past explanation or understanding;—not that she would have objected to the Rev. Septimus as officiating clergyman.

She nodded. Down rolled the first big tear.

We cry to women; Land, ho!—a land of palms after storms at sea; and at once they inundate us with a deluge of eye-water.

'Half a minute, dear Victor, not longer,' Nataly said, weeping, near on laughing over his look of wanton abandonment to despair at sight of her tears. 'Don't mind me. I am rather like Fenellan's laundress, the tearful woman whose professional apparatus was her soft heart and a cake of soap. Skepsey has made his peace with you?'

Victor answered: 'Yes, yes; I see what he has been about. We're a mixed lot, all of us—the best! You've noticed, Skepsey has no laugh: however absurd the thing he tells you, not a smile!'

'But you trust his eyes; you look fathoms into them. Captain Dartrey thinks him one of the men most in earnest of any of his country.'



'So Nataly of course thinks the same. And he's a worthy little velocipede, as Fenellan calls him. One wishes Colney had been with us. Only Colney!—pity one can't cut his talons for the space before they grow again.'



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Ay, and in the presence of Colney Durance, Victor would not have been so encouraging, half boyishly caressing, with Dudley Sowerby! It was the very manner to sow seed of imitateness in the girl, devoted as she was to her father. Nataly sighed, foreseeing evil, owning it a superstition, feeling it a certainty. We are easily prophets, sure of being justified, when the cleverness of schemes devoted to material ends appears most delicately perfect. History, the tales of households, the tombstone, are with us to inspire. In Nataly's bosom, the reproof of her inefficiency for offering counsel where Victor for his soul's sake needed it, was beginning to thunder at whiles as a reproach of unfittingness in his mate, worse than a public denunciation of the sin against Society.

It might be decreed that she and Society were to come to reconciliation. A pain previously thought of, never previously so realized, seized her at her next sight of Nesta. She had not taken in her front mind the contrast of the innocent one condemned to endure the shadow from which the guilty was by a transient ceremony released. Nature could at a push be eloquent to defend the guilty. Not a word of vindicating eloquence rose up to clear the innocent. Nothing that she could do; no devotedness, not any sacrifice, and no treaty of peace, no possible joy to come, nothing could remove the shadow from her child. She dreamed of the succour in eloquence, to charm the ears of chosen juries while a fact spoke over the population, with a relentless rolling out of its one hard word. But eloquence, powerful on her behalf, was dumb when referred to Nesta. It seemed a cruel mystery. How was it permitted by the Merciful Disposer! . . . Nataly's intellect and her reverence clashed. They clash to the end of time if we persist in regarding the Spirit of Life as a remote Externe, who plays the human figures, to bring about this or that issue, instead of being beside us, within us, our breath, if we will; marking on us where at each step we sink to the animal, mount to the divine, we and ours who follow, offspring of body or mind. She was in her error, from judging of the destiny of man by the fate of individuals. Chiefly her error was, to try to be thinking at all amid the fevered tangle of her sensations.

A darkness fell upon the troubled woman, and was thicker overhead when her warm blood had drawn her to some acceptance of the philosophy of existence, in a savour of gratification at the prospect of her equal footing with the world while yet she lived. She hated herself for taking pleasure in anything to be bestowed by a world so hap-hazard, ill-balanced, unjust; she took it bitterly, with such naturalness as not to be aware that it was irony and a poisonous irony moving her to welcome the restorative ceremony because her largeness of person had a greater than common need of the protection.

CHAPTER XVII



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CHIEFLY UPON THE THEME OF A YOUNG MAID'S IMAGININGS

That Mausoleum at Dreux may touch to lift us. History, pleads for the pride of the great discrowned Family giving her illumination there. The pride is reverently postured, the princely mourning-cloak it wears becomingly braided at the hem with fair designs of our mortal humility in the presence of the vanquisher; against whom, acknowledging a visible conquest of the dust, it sustains a placid contention in coloured glass and marbles.

Mademoiselle de Seilles, a fervid Orleanist, was thanked for having advised the curvature of the route homeward to visit 'the spot of so impressive a monument': as it, was phrased by the Rev. Septimus Barmby; whose exposition to Nesta of the beautiful stained-glass pictures of incidents in the life of the crusading St. Louis, was toned to be likewise impressive:—Colney Durance not being at hand to bewail the pathos of his exhaustless 'whacking of the platitudes'; which still retain their tender parts, but cry unheard when there is no cynic near. Mr. Barmby laid-on solemnly.

Professional devoutness is deemed more righteous on such occasions than poetic fire. It robes us in the cloak of the place, as at a funeral. Generally, Mr. Barmby found, and justly, that it is in superior estimation among his countrymen of all classes. They are shown by example how to look, think, speak; what to do. Poets are disturbing; they cannot be comfortably imitated, they are unsafe, not certainly the metal, unless you have Laureates, entitled to speak by their pay and decorations; and these are but one at a time—and a quotation may remind us of a parody, to convulse the sacred dome! Established plain prose officials do better for our English. The audience moved round with heads of undertakers.

Victor called to recollection Fenellan's 'Rev. Glendoveer' while Mr. Barmby pursued his discourse, uninterrupted by tripping wags. And those who have schemes, as well as those who are startled by the criticism in laughter to discover that they have cause for shunning it, rejoice when wits are absent. Mr. Sowerby and Nesta interchanged a comment on Mr. Barmby's remarks: The Fate of Princes! The Paths of Glory! St. Louis was a very distant Roman Catholic monarch; and the young gentleman of Evangelical education could admire him as a Crusader. St. Louis was for Nesta a figure in the rich hues of royal Saintship softened to homeliness by tears. She doated on a royalty crowned with the Saint's halo, that swam down to us to lift us through holy human showers. She listened to Mr. Barmby, hearing few sentences, lending his eloquence all she felt: he rolled forth notes of a minster organ, accordant with the devotional service she was holding mutely. Mademoiselle upon St. Louis: 'Worthy to be named King of Kings!' swept her to a fount of thoughts, where the thoughts are not yet shaped, are yet in the breast of the mother emotions.



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Louise de Seilles had prepared her to be strangely and deeply moved. The girl had a heart of many strings, of high pitch, open to be musical to simplest wandering airs or to the gales. This crypt of the recumbent sculptured figures and the coloured series of acts in the passage of the crowned Saint thrilled her as with sight of flame on an altar-piece of History. But this King in the lines of the Crucifixion leading, gave her a lesson of life, not a message from death. With such a King, there would be union of the old order and the new, cessation to political turmoil: Radicalism, Socialism, all the monster names of things with heads agape in these our days to gobble-up the venerable, obliterate the beautiful, leave a stoniness of floods where field and garden were, would be appeased, transfigured. She hoped, she prayed for that glorious leader's advent.

On one subject, conceived by her only of late, and not intelligibly, not communicably: a subject thickly veiled; one which struck at her through her sex and must, she thought, ever be unnamed (the ardent young creature saw it as a very thing torn by the winds to show hideous gleams of a body raging with fire behind the veil): on this one subject, her hopes and prayers were dumb in her bosom. It signified shame. She knew not the how, for she had no power to contemplate it: there was a torment of earth and a writhing of lurid dust-clouds about it at a glimpse. But if the new crusading Hero were to come attacking that—if some born prince nobly man would head the world to take away the withering scarlet from the face of women, she felt she could kiss the print of his feet upon the ground. Meanwhile she had enjoyment of her plunge into the inmost forest-well of mediaeval imaginativeness, where youthful minds of good aspiration through their obscurities find much akin to them.

She had an eye for little Skepsey too: unaware that these French Princes had hurried him off to Agincourt, for another encounter with them and the old result—poor dear gentlemen, with whom we do so wish to be friendly! What amused her was, his evident fatigue in undergoing the slow parade, and sheer deference to his betters, as to the signification of a holiday on arrested legs. Dudley Sowerby's attention to him, in elucidating the scenes with historical scraps, greatly pleased her. The Rev. Septimus of course occupied her chiefly.

Mademoiselle was always near, to receive his repeated expressions of gratitude for the route she had counselled. Without personal objections to a well-meaning orderly man, whose pardonable error it was to be aiming too considerably higher than his head, she did but show him the voluble muteness of a Frenchwoman's closed lips; not a smile at all, and certainly no sign of hostility; when bowing to his reiterated compliment in the sentence of French. Mr. Barmby had noticed (and a strong sentiment rendered him observant, unwontedly) a similar alert immobility of her lips, indicating

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foreign notions of this kind or that, in England: an all but imperceptible shortening or loss of corners at the mouth, upon mention of marriages of his clergy: particularly once, at his reading of a lengthy report in a newspaper of a Wedding Ceremony involving his favourite Bishop for bridegroom: a report to make one glow like Hymen rollicking the Torch after draining the bumper to the flying slipper. He remembered the look, and how it seemed to intensify on the slumbering features, at a statement, that his Bishop was a widower, entering into nuptials in his fifty-fourth year. Why not? But we ask it of Heaven and Man, why not? Mademoiselle was pleasant: she was young or youngish; her own clergy were celibates, and—no, he could not argue the matter with a young or youngish person of her sex. Could it be a reasonable woman— a woman!—who, disapproved the holy nuptials of the pastors of the flocks? But we are forbidden to imagine the conducting of an argument thereon with a lady.

Luther . . . but we are not in Luther's time:—Nature . . . no, nor can there possibly be allusions to Nature. Mr. Barmby wondered at Protestant parents taking a Papistical governess for their young flower of English womanhood. However, she venerated St. Louis; he cordially also; there they met; and he admitted, that she had, for a Frenchwoman, a handsome face, and besides an agreeably artificial ingenuousness in the looks which could be so politely dubious as to appear only dubiously adverse.

The spell upon Nesta was not blown away on English ground; and when her father and mother were comparing their impressions, she could not but keep guard over the deeper among her own. At the Chateau de Gisors, leftward off Vernon on Seine, it had been one of romance and wonderment, with inquisitive historic soundings of her knowledge and mademoiselle's, a reverence for the prisoner's patient holy work, and picturings of his watchful waiting daily, Nail in hand, for the heaven-sent sunlight on the circular dungeon-wall through the slits of the meurtrieres. But the Mausoleum at Dreux spake religiously; it enfolded Mr. Barmby, his voice re-edified it. The fact that he had discoursed there, though not a word of the discourse was remembered, allied him to the spirit of a day rather increasing in sacredness as it receded and left her less the possessor of it, more the worshipper.

Mademoiselle had to say to herself: 'Impossible!' after seeing the drift of her dear Nesta's eyes in the wake of the colossal English clergyman. She fed her incredulousness indignantly on the evidence confounding it. Nataly was aware of unusual intonations, treble-stressed, in the Bethesda and the Galilee of Mr. Barmby on Concert evenings: as it were, the towering wood-work of the cathedral organ in quake under emission of its multitudinous out roar. The 'Which?' of the Rev. Septimus, addressed to Nesta, when song was demanded of him; and her 'Either'; and his gentle hesitation, upon a gaze at her for the directing choice, could not be unnoticed by women.



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Did he know a certain thing?—and dream of urging the suit, as an indulgent skipper of parental pages?

Such haunting interrogations were the conspirators' daggers out at any instant, or leaping in sheath, against Nataly's peace of mind. But she trusted her girl's laughing side to rectify any little sentimental overbalancing. She left the ground where maternal meditations are serious, at an image of Mr. Barmby knocking at Nesta's heart as a lover. Was it worth inquiry?

A feminine look was trailed across the eyes of mademoiselle, with mention of Mr. Barmby's name.

Mademoiselle rippled her shoulders. 'We are at present much enamoured of Bethesda.'

That watchfullest showing no alarm, the absurdity of the suspicion smothered it.

Nataly had moreover to receive startling new guests:

Lady Rodwell Blachington: Mrs. Fanning, wife of the General: young Mrs. Blathenoy, wife of the great bill-broker: ladies of Wrensham and about. And it was a tasking of her energies equal to the buffeting of recurrent waves on deep sea. The ladies were eager for her entry into Lakelands. She heard that Victor had appointed Lady Blachington's third son to the coveted post of clerk in the Indian house of Inchling and Radnor. These are the deluge days when even aristocracy will cry blessings on the man who procures a commercial appointment for one of its younger sons offended and rebutted by the barrier of Examinations for the Civil Service. 'To have our Adolphus under Mr. Victor Radnor's protection, is a step!' Lady Blachington said. Nataly was in an atmosphere of hints and revealings. There were City Dinners, to which one or other of the residents about Lakelands had been taken before he sat at Victor's London table. He was already winning his way, apparently without effort, to be the popular man of that neighbourhood. A subterranean tide or a slipping of earth itself seemed bearing her on. She had his promise indeed, that he would not ask of her to enter Lakelands until the day of his freedom had risen; but though she could trust to his word, the heart of the word went out of it when she heard herself thanked by Lady Blachington (who could so well excuse her at such a time of occupation for not returning her call, that she called in a friendly way a second time, warmly to thank her) for throwing open the Concert room at Lakelands in August, to an Entertainment in assistance of the funds for the purpose of erecting an East of London Clubhouse, where the children of the poor by day could play, and their parents pass a disengaged evening. Doubtless a worthy Charity. Nataly was alive to the duties of wealth. Had it been simply a demand for a donation, she would not have shown that momentary pucker of the brows, which Lady Blachington read as a contrast with the generous vivacity of the husband.



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Nataly read a leaf of her fate in this announcement. Nay, she beheld herself as the outer world wexedly beholds a creature swung along to the doing of things against the better mind. An outer world is thoughtless of situations which prepare us to meet the objectionable with a will benumbed;—if we do not, as does that outer world, belong to the party of the readily heroic. She scourged her weakness: and the intimation of the truth stood over her, more than ever manifest, that the deficiency affecting her character lay in her want of language. A tongue to speak and contend, would have helped her to carve a clearer way. But then again, the tongue to speak must be one which could reproach, and strike at errors; fence, and continually summon resources to engage the electrical vitality of a man like Victor. It was an exultation of their life together, a mark of his holiness for them both, that they had never breathed a reproach upon one another.

She dropped away from ideas of remonstrance; faintly seeing, in her sigh of submission, that the deficiency affecting her character would have been supplied by a greater force of character, pressing either to speech or acts. The confession of a fated inevitable in the mind, is weakness prostrate. She knew it: but she could point to the manner of man she was matched with; and it was not a poor excuse.

Mr. Barmby, she thought, deserved her gratitude in some degree for stepping between Mr. Sowerby and Nesta. The girl not having inclinations, and the young gentleman being devoid of stratagem, they were easily kept from the dangerous count of two.

Mademoiselle would have said, that the shepherd also had rarely if ever a minute quite alone with her lamb. Incredulously she perceived signs of a shock. The secret following the signs was betrayed by Nesta in return for a tender grasp of hands and a droll flutter of eyelids. Out it came, on a nod first; then a dreary mention of a date, and an incident, to bring it nearer to comprehension. Mr. Barmby—and decide who will whether it is that Love was made to elude or that curates impelled by his fires are subtle as nether—had outwitted French watchfulness by stealing minutes enough on a day at Lakelands to declare himself. And no wonder the girl looked so forlorn: he had shivered her mediaeval forest-palace of illuminated glass, to leave her standing like a mountain hind, that sniffs the tainted gale off the crag of her first quick leap from hounds; her instincts alarmed, instead of rich imagination colouring and fostering.

She had no memory for his words; so, and truly, she told her Louise: meaning that she had only a spiceless memory; especially for the word love in her ears from the mouth of a man.

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There had been a dream of it; with the life-awakening marvel it would be, the humbleness it would bring to her soul beneath the golden clothing of her body: one of those faint formless dreams, which are as the bend of grasses to the breath of a still twilight. She lived too spiritedly to hang on any dream; and had moreover a muffled dread-shadow-sister to the virginal desire—of this one, as of a fateful power that might drag her down, disorder, discolour. But now she had heard it: the word, the very word itself! in her own ears! addressed to her! in a man's voice! The first utterance had been heard, and it was over; the chapter of the book of bulky promise of the splendours and mysteries;—the shimmering woods and bushy glades, and the descent of the shape celestial, and the recognition—the mutual cry of affinity; and overhead the crimson outrolling of the flag of beneficent enterprises hand in hand, all was at an end. These, then, are the deceptions our elders tell of! That masculine voice should herald a new world to the maiden. The voice she had heard did but rock to ruin the world she had been living in.

Mademoiselle prudently forbore from satirical remarks on his person or on his conduct. Nesta had nothing to defend: she walked in a bald waste.

'Can I have been guilty of leading him to think . . .?' she said, in a tone that writhed, at a second discussion of this hapless affair.

'They choose to think,' mademoiselle replied. 'It is he or another. My dear and dearest, you have entered the field where shots fly thick, as they do to soldiers in battle; and it is neither your fault nor any one's, if you are hit.'

Nesta gazed at her, with a shy supplicating cry of 'Louise.'

Mademoiselle immediately answered the tone of entreaty. 'Has it happened to me? I am of the age of eight and twenty; passable, to look at: yes, my dear, I have gone through it. To spare you the questions tormenting you, I will tell you, that perhaps our experience of our feelings comes nigh on a kind of resemblance. The first gentleman who did me the honour to inform me of his passion, was a hunchback.'

Nesta cried 'Oh!' in a veritable pang of sympathy, and clapped hands to her ears, to shut out Mr. Barmby's boom of the terrific word attacking Louise from that deformed one.

Her disillusionment became of the sort which hears derision. A girl of quick blood and active though unregulated intellect, she caught at the comic of young women's hopes and experiences, in her fear of it.

'My own precious poor dear Louise! what injustice there is in the world for one like my Louise to have a hunchback to be the first . . . !'



'But, my dear, it did me no harm.'

'But if it had been known!'

'But it was known!'



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Nesta controlled a shuddering: 'It is the knowledge of it in ourselves— that it has ever happened;—you dear Louise, who deserve so much better! And one asks—Oh, why are we not left in peace! And do look at the objects it makes of us!' Mademoiselle: could see, that the girl's desperation had got hold of her humour for a life-buoy. 'It is really worse to have it unknown—when you are compelled to be his partner in sharing the secret, and feel as if it were a dreadful doll you conceal for fear that everybody will laugh at its face.'

She resumed her seriousness: 'I find it so hard to be vexed with him and really really like him. For he is a good man; but he will not let one shake him off. He distresses: because we can't quite meet as we did. Last Wednesday Concert evening, he kept away; and I am annoyed that I was glad.'

'Moths have to pass through showers, and keep their pretty patterns from damage as best they can,' said mademoiselle.

Nesta transformed herself into a disciple of Philosophy on the spot. 'Yes, all these feelings of ours are moth-dust! One feels them. I suppose they pass. They must. But tell me, Louise, dear soul, was your poor dear good little afflicted suitor—was he kindly pitied?'

'Conformably with the regulations prescribed to young damsels who are in request to surrender the custody of their hands. It is easy to commit a dangerous excess in the dispensing of that article they call pity of them.'

'And he—did he?—vowed to you he could not take No for an answer?'

At this ingenuous question, woefully uttered, mademoiselle was pricked, to smile pointedly. Nesta had a tooth on her under-lip. Then, shaking vapours to the winds, she said: 'It is an honour, to be asked; and we cannot be expected to consent. So I shall wear through it.—Only I do wish that Mr. Fenellan would not call him The Inchcape Bell!' She murmured this to herself.

Mr. Barmby was absent for two weeks. 'Can anything have offended him?' Victor inquired, in some consternation, appreciating the man's worth, and the grand basso he was; together with the need for him at the Lakelands Concert in August.

Nataly wrote Mr. Barmby a direct invitation. She had no reply. Her speculations were cut short by Victor, who handed her a brief note addressed to him and signed by the Rev. Septimus, petitioning for a private interview.

The formality of the request incensed Victor. 'Now, dear love, you see Colney's meaning, when he says, there are people who have no intimacy in them. Here's a man who visits me regularly once a week or more, has been familiar for years—four, at least;



and he wants to speak to me, and must obtain the “privilege” by special appointment!
What can be the meaning of it?’

‘You will hear to-morrow afternoon,’ Nataly said, seeing one paved way to the meaning
—a too likely meaning. . . ‘He hasn’t been . . . nothing about Fredi, surely!’



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'I have had no information.'

'Impossible! Barmby has good sense; Bottesini can't intend to come scraping on that string. But we won't lose him; he's one of us. Barmby counts for more at a Charity Concert than all the catalogue, and particularly in the country. But he's an excellent fellow—eh?'

'That he is,' Nataly agreed.

Victor despatched a cheerful curt consent to see Mr. Barmby privately on the late afternoon of the day to follow.

Nesta, returning home from the park at that hour of the interview, ignorant of Mr. Barmby's purpose though she was, had her fires extinguished by the rolling roar of curfew along the hall-passage, out of the library.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUITORS FOR THE HAND OF NESTA VICTORIA

When, upon the well-known quest, the delightful singer Orpheus took that downward way, coming in sight of old Cerberus centiceps, he astutely feigned inattention to the hostile appearances of the multiple beast, and with a wave of his plectrum over the responsive lyre, he at the stroke raised voice. This much you know. It may be communicated to you, that there was then beheld the most singular spectacle ever exhibited on the dizzy line of division between the living and the dead. For those unaccustomed musical tones in the last thin whiff of our sustaining air were so smartingly persuasive as to pierce to the vitals of the faithful Old Dog before his offended sentiments had leisure to rouse their heads against a beggar of a mortal. The terrible sugariness which poured into him worked like venom to cause an encounter and a wrestling: his battery of jaws expressed it. They gaped. At the same time, his eyeballs gave up. All the Dog, that would have barked the breathing intruder an hundredfold back to earth, was one compulsory centurion yawn. Tears, issue of the frightful internal wedding of the dulcet and the sour (a ravishing rather of the latter by the former), rolled off his muzzles.

Now, if you are not for insisting that a magnificent simile shall be composed of exactly the like notes in another octave, you will catch the fine flavour of analogy and be wafted in a beat of wings across the scene of the application of the Rev. Septimus Barmby to Mr. Victor Radnor, that he might enter the house in the guise of suitor for the hand of Nesta Victoria. It is the excelling merit of similes and metaphors to spring us to vault over gaps and thickets and dreary places. But, as with the visits of Immortals, we must



be ready to receive them. Beware, moreover, of examining them too scrupulously: they have a trick of wearing to vapour if closely scanned. Let it be gratefully for their aid.

So far the comparison is absolute, that Mr. Barmby passed: he was at liberty to pursue his quest.



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Victor could not explain how he had been brought to grant it. He was at pains to conceal the bewilderment Mr. Barmby had cast on him, and make Nataly see the smallness of the grant:—both of them were unwilling to lose Barmby; there was not the slightest fear about Fredi, he said; and why should not poor Barmby have his chance with the others in the race! —and his Nataly knew that he hated to speak unkindly: he could cry the negative like a crack of thunder in the City. But such matters as these! and a man pleading merely for the right to see the girl!—and pleading in a tone . . . ‘I assure you, my love, he touched chords.’

‘Did he allude to advantages in the alliance with him?’ Nataly asked smoothly.

‘His passion—nothing else. Candid enough. And he had a tone—he has a tone, you know. It’s not what he said. Some allusion to belief in a favourable opinion of him . . . encouragement . . . on the part of the mama. She would have him travelling with us! I foresaw it.’

‘You were astonished when it came.’

‘We always are.’

Victor taunted her softly with having encouraged Mr. Barmby.

She had thought in her heart—not seriously; on a sigh of despondency— that Mr. Barmby espousing the girl would smooth a troubled prospect: and a present resentment at her weakness rendered her shrewd to detect Victor’s cunning to cover his own: a thing imaginable of him previously in sentimental matters, yet never accurately and so legibly printed on her mind. It did not draw her to read him with a novel familiarity; it drew her to be more sensible of foregone intimations of the man he was — irresistible in attack, not impregnably defensive. Nor did he seem in this instance humanely considerate: if mademoiselle’s estimate of the mind of the girl was not wrong, then Mr. Barmby’s position would be both a ridiculous and a cruel one. She had some silly final idea that the poor man might now serve permanently to check the more dreaded applicant: a proof that her ordinary reflectiveness was blunted.

Nataly acknowledged, after rallying Victor for coming to have his weakness condoned, a justice in his counter-accusation, of a loss of her natural cheerfulness, and promised amendment, with a steely smile, that his lips mimicked fondly; and her smile softened. To strengthen the dear soul’s hopes, he spoke, as one who had received the latest information, of Dr. Themison and surgeons; little conscious of the tragic depths he struck or of the burden he gave her heart to bear. Her look alarmed him. She seemed to be hugging herself up to the tingling scalp, and was in a moment marble to sight and touch. She looked like the old engravings of martyrs taking the bite of the jaws of flame at the stake.



He held her embraced, feeling her body as if it were in the awful grip of fingers from the outside of life.

The seizure was over before it could be called ominous. When it was once over, and she had smiled again and rebuked him for excessive anxiety, his apprehensions no longer troubled him, but subsided sensationally in wrath at the crippled woman who would not obey the dictate of her ailments instantly to perish and spare this dear one annoyance.



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Subsequently, later than usual, he performed his usual mental penance for it. In consequence, the wrath, and the wish, and the penitence, haunted him, each swelling to possession of him in turn; until they united to head a plunge into retrospects; which led to his reviewing the army of charges against Mrs. Burman.

And of this he grew ashamed, attributing it to the morbid indulgence in reflection: a disease never afflicting him anterior to the stupid fall on London Bridge. He rubbed instinctively for the punctilio-bump, and could cheat his fancy to think a remainder of it there, just below, half an inch to the right of, the spot where a phrenologist, invited by Nataly in old days, had marked philo-progenitiveness on his capacious and enviable cerebrum. He knew well it was a fancy. But it was a fact also, that since the day of the fall (never, save in merest glimpses, before that day), he had taken to look behind him, as though an eye had been knocked in the back of his head.

Then, was that day of the announcement of Lakelands to Nataly, to be accounted a gloomy day? He would not have it so.

She was happily occupied with her purchases of furniture, Fredi with her singing lessons, and he with his business; a grasp of many ribands, reining-in or letting loose; always enjoyable in the act. Recently only had he known when at home, a relaxation, a positive pleasure in looking forward to the hours of the City office. This was odd, but so it was; and looking homeward from the City, he had a sense of disappointment when it was not Concert evening. The Cormyns, the Yatts, and Priscilla Graves, and Pempton, foolish fellow, and that bothering Barmby, and Peridon and Catkin, were the lining of his nest. Well, and so they had been before Lakelands rose. What had induced! . . . he suddenly felt foreign to himself. The shrouded figure of his lost Idea on London Bridge went by.

A peep into the folds of the shroud was granted him:—Is it a truth, that if we are great owners of money, we are so swollen with a force not native to us, as to be precipitated into acts the downright contrary of our tastes?

He inquired it of his tastes, which have the bad habit of unmeasured phrasing when they are displeased, and so they yield no rational answer. Still he gave heed to violent extraneous harpings against money. Epigrams of Colney's; abuse of it and the owners of it by Socialist orators reported in some newspaper corner; had him by the ears.

They ceased in the presence of Lady Grace Halley, who entered his office to tell him she was leaving town for Whinfold, her husband's family-seat, where the dear man lay in evil case. She signified her resignation to the decrees from above, saying generously:

'You look troubled, my friend. Any bad City news?'



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'I look troubled?' Victor said laughing, and bethought him of what the trouble might be. 'City news would not cause the look. Ah, yes;—I was talking in the street to a friend of mine on horseback the other day, and he kept noticing his horse's queer starts. We spied half a dozen children in the gutter, at the tail of the horse, one of them plucking at a hair. "Please, sir, may I have a hair out of your horse's tail?" said the mite. We patted the poor horse that grew a tail for urchins to pluck at. Men come to the fathers about their girls. It's my belief that mothers more easily say no. If they learn the word as maids, you'll say! However, there's no fear about my girl. Fredi's hard to snare. And what brings you Cityward?'

'I want to know whether I shall do right in selling out of the Tiddler mine.'

'You have multiplied your investment by ten.'

'If it had been thousands!'

'Clearly, you sell; always jump out of a mounted mine, unless you're at the bottom of it.'

'There are City-articles against the mine this morning—or I should have been on my way to Whinfold at this moment. The shares are lower.'

'The merry boys are at work to bring your balloon to the ground, that you may quit it for them to ascend. Tiddler has enemies, like the best of mines: or they may be named lovers, if you like. And mines that have gone up, go down for a while before they rise again; it's an affair of undulations; rocket mines are not so healthy. The stories are false, for the time. I had the latest from Dartrey Fenellan yesterday. He's here next month; some time in August.'

'He is married, is he not?'

'Was.'

Victor's brevity sounded oddly to Lady Grace.

'Is he not a soldier?' she said.

'Soldiers and parsons!' Victor interjected.

Now she saw. She understood the portent of Mr. Barmby's hovering offer of the choice of songs, and the recent tremulousness of the welling Bethesda.

But she had come about her own business; and after remarking, that when there is a prize there must be competition, or England will have to lower her flag, she declared her resolve to stick to Tiddler, exclaiming: 'It's only in mines that twenty times the stake is not a dream of the past!'



'The Riviera green field on the rock is always open to you,' said Victor.

She put out her hand to be taken. 'Not if you back me here. It really is not gambling when yours is the counsel I follow. And if I'm to be a widow, I shall have to lean on a friend, gifted like you. I love adventure, danger;—well, if we two are in it; just to see my captain in a storm. And if the worst happens, we go down together. It's the detestation of our deadly humdrum of modern life; some inherited love of fighting.'

'Say, brandy.'

'Does not Mr. Durance accuse you of an addiction to the brandy novel?'



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'Colney may call it what he pleases. If I read fiction, let it be fiction; airier than hard fact. If I see a ballet, my troop of short skirts must not go stepping like pavement policemen. I can't read dull analytical stuff or "stylists" when I want action—if I'm to give my mind to a story. I can supply the reflections. I'm English—if Colney's right in saying we always come round to the story with the streak of supernaturalism.

I don't ask for bloodshed: that's what his "brandy" means.'

'But Mr. Durance is right, we require a shedding; I confess I expect it where there's love; it's part of the balance, and justifies one's excitement. How otherwise do you get any real crisis? I must read and live something unlike this flat life around us.'

'There's the Adam life and the Macadam life, Fenellan says. Pass it in books, but in life we can have quite enough excitement coming out of our thoughts. No brandy there! And no fine name for personal predilections or things done in domino!' Victor said, with his very pleasant face, pressing her hand, to keep the act of long holding it in countenance and bring it to a well-punctuated conclusion: thinking involuntarily of the other fair woman, whose hand was his, and who betrayed a beaten visage despite—or with that poor kind of—trust in her captain. But the thought was not guilty of drawing comparisons. 'This is one that I could trust, as captain or mate,' he pressed the hand again before dropping it.

'You judge entirely by the surface, if you take me for a shifty person at the trial,' said Lady Grace.

Skepsey entered the room with one of his packets, and she was reminded of trains and husbands.

She left Victor uncomfortably rufed: and how? for she had none of the physical charms appealing peculiarly to the man who was taken with grandeur of shape. She belonged rather to the description physically distasteful to him.

It is a critical comment on a civilization carelessly distilled from the jealous East, when visits of fair women to City offices can have this effect. If the sexes are separated for an hour, the place where one is excluded or not common to see, becomes inflammable to that appearing spark. He does outrage to a bona Dea: she to the monasticism of the Court of Law: and he and she awaken unhallowed emotions. Supposing, however, that western men were to de-orientalize their gleeful notions of her, and dis-Turk themselves by inviting the woman's voluble tongue to sisterly occupation there in the midst of the pleading Court, as in the domestic circle: very soon would her eyes be harmless: unless directed upon us with intent.



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That is the burning core of the great Question, our Armageddon in Morality: Is she moral? Does she mean to be harmless? Is she not untamable Old Nature? And when once on an equal footing with her lordly half, would not the spangled beauty, in a turn, like the realistic transformation-trick of a pantomime, show herself to be that wanton old thing—the empress of disorderliness? You have to recollect, as the Conservative acutely suggests, that her timidities, at present urging her to support Establishments, pertain to her state of dependence. The party views of Conservatism are, must be, founded, we should remember, on an intimate acquaintance with her in the situations where she is almost unrestrictedly free and her laughter rings to confirm the sentences of classical authors and Eastern sages. Conservatives know what they are about when they refuse to fling the last lattice of an ancient harem open to air and sun—the brutal dispersers of mystery, which would despoil an ankle of its flying wink.

Victor's opinions were those of the entrenched majority; objecting to the occult power of women, as we have the women now, while legislating to maintain them so; and forbidding a step to a desperately wicked female world lest the step should be to wickeder. His opinions were in the background, rarely stirred; but the lady had brought them forward; and he fretted at his restlessness, vexed that it should be due to the intrusion of the sex instead of to the charms of the individual. No sting of the sort had bothered him, he called to mind, on board the Channel boat—nothing to speak of. 'Why does she come here! Why didn't she go to her husband! She gets into the City scramble blindfold, and catches at the nearest hand to help her out! Nice woman enough.' Yes, but he was annoyed with her for springing sensations that ran altogether heartless to the object, at the same time that they were disloyal to the dear woman their natural divinity. And between him and that dear woman, since the communication made by Skepsey in the town of Dreux, nightly the dividing spirit of Mrs. Burman lay cold as a corpse. They both felt her there. They kissed coldly, pressed a hand, said good night.

Next afternoon the announcement by Skepsey of the Hon. Dudley Sowerby, surprised Victor's eyebrows at least, and caused him genially to review the visit of Lady Grace.

Whether or not Colney Durance drew his description of a sunken nobility from the 'sick falcon' distinguishing the handsome features of Mr. Sowerby, that beaked invalid was particularly noticeable to Victor during the statement of his case, although the young gentleman was far from being one, in Colney's words, to enliven the condition of domestic fowl with an hereditary turn for 'preying'; eminently the reverse; he was of good moral repute, a worker, a commendable citizen. But there was the obligation upon him to speak—it is expected in such cases, if only as a formality—of his 'love':



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hard to do even in view and near to the damsel's reddening cheeks: it perplexed him. He dropped a veil on the bashful topic; his tone was the same as when he reverted to the material points; his present income, his position in the great Bank of Shotts and Co., his prospects, the health of the heir to the Cantor earldom. He considered that he spoke to a member of the City merchants, whose preference for the plain positive, upon the question of an alliance between families by marriage, lends them for once a resemblance to lords. When a person is not read by character, the position or profession is called on to supply raised print for the finger-ends to spell.

Hard on poor Fredi! was Victor's thought behind the smile he bent on this bald Cupid. She deserved a more poetical lover! His paternal sympathies for the girl besought in love, revived his past feelings as a wooer; nothing but a dread of the influence of Mr. Barmby's toned eloquence upon the girl, after her listening to Dudley Sowerby's addresses, checked his contempt for the latter. He could not despise the suitor he sided with against another and seemingly now a more dangerous. Unable quite to repress the sentiment, he proceeded immediately to put it to his uses. For we have no need to be scrupulously formal and precise in the exposition of circumstances to a fellow who may thank the stars if such a girl condescends to give him a hearing. He had this idea through the conception of his girl's generosity. And furthermore, the cognizant eye of a Lucretian Alma Mater having seat so strongly in Victor, demanded as a right an effusion of the promising amorous graces on the part of the acceptable applicant to the post of husband of that peerless. These being absent, evidently non-existent, it seemed sufficient for the present, after the fashion of the young gentleman, to capitulate the few material matters briefly.

They were dotted along with a fine disregard of the stateliness of the sum to be settled on Nesta Victoria, and with a distant but burning wish all the while, that the suitor had been one to touch his heart and open it, inspiriting it—as could have been done—to disclose for good and all the things utterable. Victor loved clear honesty, as he loved light: and though he hated to be accused of not showing a clean face in the light, he would have been moved and lifted to confess to a spot by the touch at his heart. Dudley Sowerby's deficiencies, however, were outweighed by the palpable advantages of his birth, his prospects, and his good repute for conduct; add thereto his gentlemanly manners. Victor sighed again over his poor Fredi; and in telling Mr. Sowerby that the choice must be left to her, he had the regrets of a man aware of his persuasive arts and how they would be used, to think that he was actually making the choice.



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Observe how fatefully he who has a scheme is the engine of it; he is no longer the man of his tastes or of his principles; he is on a line of rails for a terminus; and he may cast languishing eyes across waysides to right and left, he has doomed himself to proceed, with a self-devouring hunger for the half desired; probably manhood gone at the embrace of it. This may be or not, but Nature has decreed to him the forfeit of pleasure. She bids us count the passage of a sober day for the service of the morrow; that is her system; and she would have us adopt it, to keep in us the keen edge for cutting, which is the guarantee of enjoyment: doing otherwise, we lose ourselves in one or other of the furious matrix instincts; we are blunt to all else.

Young Dudley fully agreed that the choice must be with Miss Radnor; he alluded to her virtues, her accomplishments. He was waxing to fervidness. He said he must expect competitors; adding, on a start, that he was to say, from his mother, she, in the case of an intention to present Miss Radnor at Court

Victor waved hand for a finish, looking as though, his head had come out of hot water. He sacrificed Royalty to his necessities, under a kind of sneer at its functions: 'Court! my girl? But the arduous duties are over for the season. We are a democratic people retaining the seductions of monarchy, as a friend says; and of course a girl may like to count among the flowers of the kingdom for a day, in the list of Court presentations; no harm. Only there's plenty of time . . . very young girls have their heads turned—though I don't say, don't imagine, my girl would. By and by perhaps.'

Dudley was ushered into Mr. Inchling's room and introduced to the figure-head of the Firm of Inchling, Pennergate, and Radnor: a respectable City merchant indeed, whom Dudley could read-off in a glimpse of the downright contrast to his partner. He had heard casual remarks on the respectable City of London merchant from Colney Durance. A short analytical gaze at him, helped to an estimate of the powers of the man who kept him up. Mr. Inchling was a florid City-feaster, descendant of a line of City merchants, having features for a wife to identify; as drovers, they tell us, can single one from another of their round-bellied beasts. Formerly the leader of the Firm, he was now, after dreary fits of restiveness, kickings, false prophecies of ruin, Victor's obedient cart-horse. He sighed in set terms for the old days of the Firm, when, like trouts in the current, the Firm had only to gape for shoals of good things to fatten it: a tale of English prosperity in quiescence; narrated interjectorily among the by-ways of the City, and wanting only metre to make it our national Poem.



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Mr. Inchling did not deny that grand mangers of golden oats were still somehow constantly allotted to him. His wife believed in Victor, and deemed the loss of the balancing Pennergate a gain. Since that lamentable loss, Mr. Inchling, under the irony of circumstances the Tory of Commerce, had trotted and galloped whither driven, racing like mad against his will and the rival nations now in the field to force the pace; a name for enterprise; the close commercial connection of a man who speculated—who, to put it plainly, lived on his wits; hurried onward and onward; always doubting, munching, grumbling at satisfaction, in perplexity of the gratitude which is apprehensive of black Nemesis at a turn of the road,—to confound so wild a whip as Victor Radnor. He had never forgiven the youth's venture in India of an enormous purchase of Cotton many years back, and which he had repudiated, though not his share of the hundreds of thousands realized before the refusal to ratify the bargain had come to Victor. Mr. Inchling dated his first indigestion from that disquieting period. He assented to the praise of Victor's genius, admitting benefits; his heart refused to pardon, and consequently his head wholly to trust, the man who robbed him of his quondam comfortable feeling of security. And if you will imagine the sprite of the aggregate English Taxpayer personifying Steam as the malignant who has despoiled him of the blessed Safety-Assurance he once had from his God Neptune against invaders, you will comprehend the state of Mr. Inchling's mind in regard to his terrific and bountiful, but very disturbing partner.

He thanked heaven to his wife often, that he had nothing to do with North American or South American mines and pastures or with South Africa and, gold and diamonds: and a wife must sometimes listen, mastering her inward comparisons. Dr. Schlesien had met and meditated on this example of the island energy. Mr. Inchling was not permitted by his wife to be much the guest of the Radnor household, because of the frequent meeting there with Colney Durance; Colney's humour for satire being instantly in bristle at sight of his representative of English City merchants: 'over whom,' as he wrote of the venerable body, 'the disciplined and instructed Germans not deviously march; whom acute and adventurous Americans, with half a cock of the eye in passing, compassionately outstrip.' He and Dr. Schlesien agreed upon Mr. Inchling. Meantime the latter gentleman did his part at the tables of the wealthier City Companies, and retained his appearance of health; he was beginning to think, upon a calculation of the increased treasures of those Companies and the country, that we, the Taxpayer, ought not to leave it altogether to Providence to defend them; notwithstanding the watchful care of us hitherto shown by our briny Providence, to save us from anxiety and expense. But there are, he said, 'difficulties'; and the very word could stop him, as commonly when our difficulty lies in the exercise of thinking.

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Victor's African room, containing large wall-maps of auriferous regions, was inspected; and another, where clerks were busy over miscellaneous Continents. Dudley Sowerby hoped he might win the maiden.

He and Victor walked in company Westward. The shop of Boyle and Luckwort, chemists, was not passed on this occasion. Dudley grieved that he had to be absent from the next Concert for practise, owing to his engagement to his mother to go down to the family seat near Tunbridge Wells. Victor mentioned his relatives, the Duvidney maiden ladies, residing near the Wells. They measured the distance between Cronidge and Moorsedge, the two houses, as for half an hour on horseback.

Nesta told her father at home that the pair of them had been observed confidentially arm in arm, and conversing so profoundly.

'Who, do you think, was the topic?' Victor asked.

She would not chase the little blue butterfly of a guess.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Ask not why, where reason never was
Cover of action as an escape from perplexity
Honest creatures who will not accept a lift from fiction
Judgeing of the destiny of man by the fate of individuals
Memory inspired by the sensations
Nature could at a push be eloquent to defend the guilty
Satirist too devotedly loves his lash to be a persuasive teacher
Slave of existing conventions
Startled by the criticism in laughter
The impalpable which has prevailing weight
There is little to be learnt when a little is known
They kissed coldly, pressed a hand, said good night
Who enjoyed simple things when commanding the luxuries

[The End]

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