

Lord Ormont and His Aminta — Volume 3 eBook

Lord Ormont and His Aminta — Volume 3 by George Meredith

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BOOK 3.

XII. *More of Cuper’s boys*

XIII. *War at Olmer*

XIV. *Old lovers new friends*

XV. *Showing A secret fished without Angling*

XVI. *Along two roads to Steignton*

CHAPTER XII

MORE OF CUPER’S BOYS



Entering the dining-room at the appointed minute in a punctual household, Mrs. Lawrence informed the company that she had seen a Horse Guards orderly at the trot up the street. Weyburn said he was directing a boy to ring the bell of the house for him. Lord Ormont went to the window.

‘Amends and honours?’ Mrs. Lawrence hummed and added an operatic flourish of an arm. Something like it might really be imagined. A large square missive was handed to the footman. Thereupon the orderly trotted off.

My lord took seat at table, telling the footman to lay ‘that parcel’ beside the clock on the mantelpiece. Aminta and Mrs. Lawrence gave out a little cry of bird or mouse, pitiable to hear: they could not wait, they must know, they pished at sight of plates. His look deferred to their good pleasure, like the dead hand of a clock under key; and Weyburn placed the missive before him, seeing by the superscription that it was not official.



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It was addressed, in the Roman hand of a boy's copybook writing, to

General the Earl of Ormont, I.C.B., *etc.*,
Horse Guards,
London.'

The earl's eyebrows creased up over the address; they came down low on the contents.

He resumed his daily countenance. 'Nothing of importance,' he said to the ladies.

Mrs. Lawrence knocked the table with her knuckles. Aminta put out a hand, in sign of her wish.

'Pray let me see it.'

'After lunch will do.'

'No, no, no! We are women—we are women,' cried Mrs. Lawrence.

'How can it concern women?'

'As well ask how a battle-field concerns them!'

'Yes, the shots hit us behind you,' said Aminta; and she, too, struck the table.

He did not prolong their torture. Weyburn received the folio sheet and passed it on. Aminta read. Mrs. Lawrence jumped from her chair and ran to the countess's shoulder; her red lips formed the petitioning word to the earl for the liberty she was bent to take.

'Peep? if you like,' my lord said, jesting at the blank she would find, and soft to the pretty play of her mouth.

When the ladies had run to the end of it, he asked them: 'Well; now then?'

'But it's capital—the dear laddies!' Mrs. Lawrence exclaimed.

Aminta's eyes met Weyburn's.

She handed him the sheet of paper; upon the transmission of which empty thing from the Horse Guards my lord commented: 'An orderly!'

Weyburn scanned it rapidly, for the table had been served.

The contents were these:

'HighBrent near ARTSWELL.
'April 7th.

'To general the earl of Ormont
'Cavalry.

'May it please your Lordship, we, the boys of Mr. Cuper's school, are desirous to bring to the notice of the bravest officer England possesses now living, a Deed of Heroism by a little boy and girl, children of our school laundress, aged respectively eight and six, who, seeing a little fellow in the water out of depth, and sinking twice, before the third time jumped in to save him, though unable to swim themselves; the girl aged six first, we are sorry to say; but the brother, Robert Coop, followed her example, and together they made a line, and she caught hold of the drowning boy, and he held her petycoats, and so they pulled. We have seen the place: it is not a nice one. They got him ashore at last. The park-keeper here going along found them dripping, rubbing his hands, and blowing into his nostrils. Name, T. Shellen, son of a small cobbler here, and recovered.'May it please your Lordship, we make bold to apply, because you have been



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for a number of years, as far as the oldest can recollect, the Hero of our school, and we are so bold as to ask the favour of General Lord Ormont's name to head a subscription we are making to circulate for the support of their sick mother, who has fallen ill. We think her a good woman. Gentlemen and ladies of the neighbourhood are willing to subscribe. If we have a great name to head the list, we think we shall make a good subscription. Names:—

'Martha Mary Coop, mother.

'Robert Coop.

'Jane Coop, the girl, aged six.

'If we are not taking too great a liberty, a subscription paper will follow. We are sure General the Earl of Ormont's name will help to make them comfortable.

'We are obediently and respectfully,

'David Gowen,

'Walter Bench,

'James PANNERS Parsons,

'And seven others.'

Weyburn spared Aminta an answering look, that would have been a begging of Brownly to remember Matey.

'It 's genuine,' he said to Mrs. Lawrence, as he attacked his plate with the gusto for the repast previously and benignly observed by her. 'It ought to be the work of some of the younger fellows.'

'They spell correctly, on the whole.'

'Excepting,' said my lord, 'an article they don't know much about yet.'

Weyburn had noticed the word, and he smiled. 'Said to be the happy state! The three signing their names are probably what we called bellman and beemen, collector, and heads of the swarm-enthusiasts. If it is not the work of some of the younger hands, the school has levelled on minors. In any case it shows the school is healthy.'

'I subscribe,' said Mrs. Lawrence.

'The little girl aged six shall have something done for her,' said Aminta, and turned her eyes on the earl.

He was familiar with her thrilled voice at a story of bravery. He said—

'The boys don't say the girl's brother turned tail.'



'Only that the girl's brother aged eight followed the lead of the little girl aged six,' Mrs. Lawrence remarked. 'Well, I like the schoolboys, too—"we are sorry to say!" But they 're good lads. Boys who can appreciate brave deeds are capable of doing them.'

'Speak to me about it on Monday,' the earl said to Weyburn.

He bowed, and replied—

'I shall have the day to-morrow. I 'll walk it and call on Messrs.' (he glanced at the paper) 'Gowen, Bench, and Parsons. I have a German friend in London anxious to wear his legs down stumpier.'

'The name of the school?'

'It is called Cuper's.'

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Aminta, on hearing the name of Cuper a second time, congratulated herself on the happy invention of her pretext to keep Mrs. Pagnell from the table at midday. Her aunt had a memory for names: what might she not have exclaimed! There would have been little in it, but it was as well that the 'boy of the name of Weyburn' at Cuper's should be unmentioned. By an exaggeration peculiar to a disgust in fancy, she could hear her aunt vociferating 'Weyburn!' and then staring at Mr. Weyburn opposite—perhaps not satisfied with staring.

He withdrew after his usual hearty meal, during which his talk of boys and their monkey tricks, and what we can train them to, had been pleasant generally, especially to Mrs. Lawrence. Aminta was carried back to the minute early years at High Brent. A line or two of a smile touched her cheek.

'Yes, my dear countess, that is the face I want for Lady de Culme to-day,' said Mrs. Lawrence.' She likes a smiling face. Aunty—aunty has always been good; she has never been prim. I was too much for her, until I reflected that she was very old, and deserved to know the truth before she left us; and so I went to her; and then she said she wished to see the Countess of Ormont, because of her being my dearest friend. I fancy she entertains an 'arriere' idea of proposing her flawless niece Gracey, Marchioness of Fencaster, to present you. She 's quite equal to the fatigue herself. You 'll rejoice in her anecdotes. People were virtuous in past days: they counted their sinners. In those days, too, as I have to understand, the men chivalrously bore the blame, though the women were rightly punished. Now, alas! the initiative is with the women, and men are not asked for chivalry. Hence it languishes. Lady de Culme won't hear of the Queen of Blondes; has forbidden her these many years!'

Lord Ormont, to whom the lady's prattle was addressed, kept his visage moveless, except in slight jerks of the brows.

'What queen?'

'You insist upon renewing my old, old pangs of jealousy, my dear lord! The Queen of Cyprus, they called her, in the last generation; she fights our great duellist handsomely.'

'My dear Mrs. Lawrence!'

'He triumphs finally, we know, but she beats him every round.'

'It 's only tattle that says the duel has begun.'

'May is the month of everlasting beauty! There 's a widower marquis now who claims the right to cast the glove to any who dispute it.'

'Mrs. May is too good-looking to escape from scandal.'



'Amy May has the good looks of the Immortals.'

'She can't be thirty.'

'In the calendar of women she counts thirty-four.'

'Malignity! Her husband's a lucky man.'

'The shots have proved it.'

Lord Ormont nodded his head over the hopeless task of defending a woman from a woman, and their sharp interchange ceased. But the sight of his complacency in defeat told Aminta that he did not respect his fair client: it drew a sketch of the position he allotted his wife before the world side by side with this Mrs. Amy May, though a Lady de Culme was persuaded to draw distinctions.



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He had, however, quite complacently taken the dose intended for him by Mrs. Lawrence, who believed that the system of gently forcing him was the good one.

The ladies drove away in the afternoon. The earl turned his back on manuscript. He sent for a couple of walking sticks, and commanded Weyburn to go through his parades. He was no tyro, merely out of practice, and unacquainted with the later, simpler form of the great master of the French school, by which, at serious issues, the guarding of the line can be more quickly done: as, for instance, the 'parade de septime' supplanting the slower 'parade de prime;' the 'parade de quarte' having advantage over the 'parade de quince;' the 'parade de tierce' being readier and stronger than the 'parade de sixte;' the same said for the 'parade de seconde' instead of the weak 'parade d'octave.'

These were then new points of instruction. Weyburn demonstrated them as neatly as he could do with his weapon.

'Yes, the French think,' Lord Ormont said, grasping the stick to get conviction of thumb-strength and finger-strength from the parades advocated; 'their steel would thread the ribs of our louts before: they could raise a cry of parry; so here they 're pleased to sneer at fencing, as if it served no purpose but the duel. Fencing, for one thing, means, that with a good stick in his hand, a clever fencer can double up a giant or two, grant him choice of ground. Some of our men box; but the sword's the weapon for an officer, and precious few of 'em are fit for more than to kick the scabbard. Slashing comes easier to them: a plaguey cut, if it does cut—say, one in six. Navy too. Their cutlass-drill is like a woman's fling of the arm to fetch a slap from behind her shoulder. Pinking beats chopping. These English 'll have their lesson. It 's like what you call good writing: the simple way does the business, and that's the most difficult to learn, because you must give your head to it, as those French fellows do. 'Trop de finesse' is rather their fault. Anything's better than loutishness. Well! the lesson 'll come.'

He continued. He spoke as he thought: he was not speaking what he was thinking. His mind was directed on the visit of Aminta to Lady de Culme, and the tolerably wonderful twist whereby Mrs. Lawrence Finchley had vowed herself to his girl's interests. And he blamed neither of them; only he could not understand how it had been effected, for Aminta and Mrs. Lawrence had not been on such particularly intimate terms last week or yesterday. His ejaculation, 'Women!' was, as he knew, merely ignorance roaring behind a mask of sarcasm. But it allied him with all previous generations on the male side, and that was its virtue. His view of the shifty turns of women got no further, for the reason that he took small account of the operations of the feelings, to the sole exercise of which he by system condemned the sex.



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He was also insensibly half a grain more soured by the homage of those poor schoolboys, who called to him to take it for his reward in a country whose authorities had snubbed, whose Parliament had ignored, whose Press had abused him. The ridiculous balance made him wilfully oblivious that he had seen his name of late eulogized in articles and in books for the right martial qualities. Can a country treating a good soldier—not serving it for pay—in so scurvy a fashion, be struck too hard with our disdain? One cannot tell it in too plain a language how one despises its laws, its moralities, its sham of society. The Club, some choice anecdotists, two or three listeners to his dolences clothed as diatribes; a rubber, and the sight of his girl at home, composed, with a week's shooting now and then, his round of life now that she refused to travel. What a life for a soldier in his vigour. Weyburn was honoured by the earl's company on the walk to Chiallo's. In the street of elegant shops they met Lord Adderwood, and he, as usual, appeared in the act of strangling one of his flock of yawns, with gentlemanly consideration for the public. Exercise was ever his temporary specific for these incurables. Flinging off his coat, he cast away the cynic style engendering or engendered by them. He and Weyburn were for a bout. Sir John Randeller and Mr. Morsfield were at it, like Bull in training and desperado foiled. A French 'maitre d'armes,' famed in 'escrime,' standing near Captain Chiallo, looked amused in the eyes, behind a mask of professional correctness. He had come on an excursion for the display of his art. Sir John's very sturdy defence was pierced. Weyburn saluted the Frenchman as an acquaintance, and they shook hands, chatted, criticized, nodded. Presently he and his adversary engaged, vizored and in their buckram, and he soon proved to be too strong for Adderwood, as the latter expected and had notified to Lord Ormont before they crossed the steel. My lord had a pleasant pricking excitement in the sound. There was a pretty display between Weyburn and the 'escrimeur,' who neatly and kindly trifled, took a point and returned one, and at the finish complimented him. The earl could see that he had to be sufficiently alert.

Age mouthed an ugly word to the veteran insensible of it in his body, when a desire to be one with these pairs of nimble wrists and legs was like an old gamecock shown the pit and put back into the basket. He left the place, carrying away an image of the coxcombical attitudinizing of the man Morsfield at the salut, upon which he brought down his powers of burlesque.



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My lord sketched the scene he had just quitted to a lady who had stopped her carriage. She was the still beautiful Mrs. Amy May, wife of the famous fighting captain. Her hair was radiant in a shady street; her eyelids tenderly toned round the almond enclosure of blue pebbles, bright as if shining from the seawash. The lips of the fair woman could be seen to say that they were sweet when, laughing or discoursing, they gave sight of teeth proudly her own, rivalling the regularity of the grin of dentistry. A Venus of nature was melting into a Venus of art, and there was a decorous concealment of the contest and the anguish in the process, for which Lord Ormont liked her well enough to wink benevolently at her efforts to cheat the world at various issues, and maintain her duel with Time. The world deserved that she should beat it, even if she had been all deception.

She let the subject of Mr. Morsfield pass without remark from her, until the exhaustion of open-air topics hinted an end of their conversation, and she said—

'We shall learn next week what to think if the civilians. I have heard Mr. Morsfield tell that he is 'de premiere force.' Be on your guard. You are to know that I never forget a service, and you did me one once.' 'You have reason . . . ?' said the earl.

'If anybody is the dragon to the treasure he covets he is a spadassin who won't hesitate at provocations. Adieu.'

Lord Ormont's eye had been on Mr. Morsfield. He had seen what Mrs. Pagnell counselled her niece to let, him see. He thanked Mr. Morsfield for a tonic that made him young with anticipations of bracing; and he set his head to work upon an advance half-way to meet the gentleman, and safely exclude his wife's name.

Monday brought an account of Cuper's boys. Aminta received it while the earl was at his papers for the morning's news of the weightier deeds of men.

They were the right boys, Weyburn said; his interview with Gowen, Bench, Parsons, and the others assured him that the school was breathing big lungs. Mr. Cuper, too, had spoken well of them.

'You walked the twenty miles?' Aminta interrupted him.

'With my German friend: out and home: plenty of time in the day. He has taken to English boys, but asks why enthusiasm and worship of great deeds don't grow upward from them to their elders. And I, in turn, ask why Germans insist on that point more even than the French do.'

'Germans are sentimental. But the English boys he saw belonged to a school with traditions of enthusiasm sown by some one. The school remembered?'



'Curiously, Mr. Cuper tells me, the hero of the school has dropped and sprung up, stout as ever, twice—it tells me what I wish to believe— since Lord Ormont led their young heads to glory. He can't say how it comes. The tradition's there, and it 's kindled by some flying spark.'

'They remember who taught the school to think of Lord Ormont?'



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'I 'm a minor personage. I certainly did some good, and that 's a push forward.'

'They speak of you?'

It was Aminta more than the Countess of Ormont speaking to him.

'You take an interest in the boys,' he said, glowing. 'Yes, well, they have their talks. I happened to be a cricketer, counting wickets and scores. I don't fancy it's remembered that it was I preached my lord. A day of nine wickets and one catch doesn't die out of a school. The boy Gowen was the prime spirit in getting up the subscription for the laundress. But Bench and Parsons are good boys, too.'

He described them, dwelt on them. The enthusiast, when not lyrical, is perilously near to boring. Aminta was glad of Mrs. Lawrence's absence. She had that feeling because Matthew Weyburn would shun talk of himself to her, not from a personal sense of tedium in hearing of the boys; and she was quaintly reminded by suggestions, coming she knew not whence, of a dim likeness between her and these boys of the school when their hero dropped to nothing and sprang up again brilliantly—a kind of distant cousinship, in her susceptibility to be kindled by so small a flying spark as this one on its travels out of High Brent. Moreover, the dear boys tied her to her girlhood, and netted her fleeting youth for the moth-box. She pressed to hear more and more of them, and of the school-laundress Weyburn had called to see, and particularly of the child, little Jane, aged six. Weyburn went to look at the sheet of water to which little Jane had given celebrity over the county. The girl stood up to her shoulders when she slid off the bank and made the line for her brother to hold, he in the water as well. Altogether, Cuper's boys were justified in promoting a subscription, the mother being helpless.

'Modest little woman,' he said of Jane. 'We'll hope people won't spoil her. Don't forget, Lady Ormont, that the brother did his part; he had more knowledge of the danger than she.'

'You will undertake to convey our subscriptions? Lord Ormont spoke of the little ones and the schoolboys yesterday.'

'I'll be down again among them next Sunday, Lady Ormont. On the Monday I go to Olmer.'

'The girls of High Brent subscribe?'

There was a ripple under Weyburn's gravity.

'Messrs. Gowen, Bench, and Parsons thought proper to stop Miss Vincent at the head of her detachment in the park.'

'On the Sunday?'



'And one of them handed her a paper containing a report of their interview with Mrs. Coop and a neat eulogy of little Jane. But don't suspect them, I beg. I believe them to be good, honest fellows. Bench, they say, is religious; Gowen has written verses; Parsons generally harum-scarum. They're boyish in one way or another, and that'll do. The cricket of the school has been low: seems to be reviving.'

'Mr. Weyburn,' said the countess, after a short delay—and Aminta broke through—'it pleases me to hear of them, and think they have not forgotten you, or, at least, they follow the lead you gave. I should like to know whether an idea I have is true: Is much, I mean constant, looking down on young people likely to pull one's mind down to their level?'

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'Likely enough to betray our level, if there 's danger,' he murmured. 'Society offers an example that your conjecture is not unfounded, Lady Ormont. But if we have great literature and an interest in the world's affairs, can there be any fear of it? The schoolmaster ploughs to make a richer world, I hope. He must live with them, join with them in their games, accustom them to have their heads knocked with what he wants to get into them, leading them all the while, as the bigger schoolfellow does, if he is a good fellow. He has to be careful not to smell of his office. Doing positive good is the business of his every day—on a small scale, but it 's positive, if he likes his boys. 'Avaunt favouritism!' he must like all boys. And it 's human nature not so far removed from the dog; only it's a supple human nature: there 's the beauty of it. We train it. Nothing is more certain than that it will grow upward. I have the belief that I shall succeed, because I like boys, and they like me. It always was the case.'

'I know,' said Aminta.

Their eyes met. She looked moved at heart behind that deep forest of her chestnut eyes.

'And I think I can inspire confidence in fathers and mothers,' he resumed.' I have my boys already waiting for me to found the school. I was pleased the other day: an English friend brought an Italian gentleman to see me and discuss my system, up at Norwood, at my mother's—a Signor Calliani. He has a nephew; the parents dote on him. The uncle confesses that the boy wants—he has got hold of our word—"pluck." We had a talk. He has promised to send me the lad when I am established in Switzerland.'

'When?' said Aminta.

'A relative from whom a Reversion comes is near the end. It won't be later than September that I shall go. My Swiss friend has the school, and would take me at once before he retires.'

'You make friends wherever you go,' said Aminta.

'Why shouldn't everybody? I'm convinced it's because I show people I mean well, and I never nurse an injury, great or small. And besides, they see I look forward. I do hope good for the world. If at my school we have all nationalities—French boys and German, Italian, Russian, Spaniard—without distinction of race and religion and station, and with English intermixing—English games, English sense of honour and conception of gentleman—we shall help to nationalize Europe. Emile Grenat, Adolf Fleischer, and an Italian, Vincentino Chiuse, are prepared to start with me: and they are men of attainments; they will throw up their positions; they will do me the honour to trust to my leadership. It's not scaling Alps or commanding armies, true.'



'It may be better,' said Aminta, and thought as she spoke.

'Slow work, if we have a taste for the work, doesn't dispirit. Otherwise, one may say that an African or South American traveller has a more exciting time. I shall manage to keep my head on its travels.'



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'You have ideas about the education of girls?'

'They can't be carried out unaided.'

'Aid will come.'

Weyburn's confidence, high though it was, had not mounted to that pitch.

'One may find a mate,' he said. The woman to share and practically to aid in developing such ideas is not easily found: that he left as implied.

Aminta was in need of poetry; but the young schoolmaster's plain, well-directed prose of the view of a business in life was welcome to her.

Lord Ormont entered the room. She reminded him of the boys of High Brent and the heroine Jane. He was ready to subscribe his five-and-twenty guineas, he said. The amount of the sum gratified Weyburn, she could see. She was proud of her lord, and of the boys and the little girl; and she would have been happy to make the ardent young schoolmaster aware of her growing interest in the young.

The night before the earl's departure on the solitary expedition to which she condemned him, he surprised her with a visit of farewell, so that he need not disturb her in the early morning, he said. She was reading beside her open jewel-box, and she closed it with the delicate touch of a hand turned backward while listening to him, with no sign of nervousness.

CHAPTER XIII

WAR AT OLMER

Lively doings were on the leap to animate Weyburn at Olmer during Easter week. The Rev. Mr. Hampton-Evey, rector of Barborough, on hearing that Lady Charlotte Eglett was engaged in knocking at the doors of litigation with certain acts that constituted distinct breaches of the law and the peace, and were a violation of the rights of her neighbour, Mr. Gilbert Addicote, might hope that the troublesome parishioner whom he did not often number among his congregation would grant him a term of repose. Therein he was deceived. Alterations and enlargements of the church, much required, had necessitated the bricking up of a door regarded by the lady as the private entrance to the Olmer pew. She sent him notice of her intention to batter at the new brickwork; so there was the prospect of a pew-fight before him. But now she came to sit under him every Sunday; and he could have wished her absent; for she diverted his thoughts from piety to the selections of texts applicable in the case of a woman who sat with arms knotted, and the frown of an intemperate schoolgirl forbidden speech; while her pew's firelight startingly at intervals danced her sinister person into view, as from below. The



lady's inaccessible and unconquerable obtuseness to exhortation informed the picture with an evil spirit that cried for wrestlings.

Regularly every week-day she headed the war now rageing between Olmer and Addicotes, on the borders of the estates. It was open war, and herself to head the cavalry. Weyburn, driving up a lane in the gig she had sent to meet the coach, beheld a thicket of countrymen and boys along a ridge; and it swayed and broke, and through it burst the figure of a mounted warrior woman at the gallop, followed by what bore an appearance of horse and gun, minus carriage, drivers at the flanks cracking whips on foot. Off went the train, across a small gorse common, through a gate.



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'That's another down,' said his whip. 'Sound good wood it is, not made to fall. Her ladyship's at it hard to-day. She 'll teach Mr. Addicote a thing or two about things females can do. That is, when they stand for their rights.'

He explained to Weyburn that Mr. Addicote, a yeoman farmer and a good hunting man, but a rare obstinate one, now learning his lesson from her ladyship, was in dispute with her over rights of property on a stretch of fir-trees lining the ridge where the estates of Olmer and Addicotes met. Her ladyship had sworn that if he did not yield to her claim she would cut down every tree of the ridge and sell the lot for timber under his nose. She acted according to her oath, in the teeth of his men two feet across the border. All the world knew the roots of those trees were for the most part in Olmer soil, though Addicote shared the shade. All the people about mourned for the felling of those trees. All blamed Mr. Gilbert Addicote for provoking her ladyship, good hunting man though he was. But as to the merits of the question, under the magnifier of the gentlemen of the law, there were as many different opinions as wigs in the land.

'And your opinion?' said Weyburn.

To which the young groom answered: 'Oh, I don't form an opinion, sir. I 'm of my mistress's opinion; and if she says, Do it, think as we like, done it has to be.'

Lady Charlotte came at a trot through the gate, to supervise the limbering-up of another felled tree. She headed it as before. The log dragged bounding and twirling, rattling its chains; the crowd along the ridge, forbidden to cheer, watching it with intense repression of the roar. We have not often in England sight of a great lady challenging an unpopular man to battle and smacking him in the face like this to provoke him. Weyburn was driven on a half-circle of the lane to the gate, where he jumped out to greet Lady Charlotte trotting back for another smack in the face of her enemy,—a third rounding of her Troy with the vanquished dead at her heels, as Weyburn let a flimsy suggestion beguile his fancy, until the Homeric was overwhelming even to a playful mind, and he put her in a mediaeval frame. She really had the heroic aspect in a grandiose-grotesque, fitted to some lines of Ariosto. Her head wore a close hood, disclosing a fringe of grey locks, owlsh to see about features hooked for action.

'Ah, you! there you are: good—I'll join you in three minutes,' she sang out to him, and cantered to the ridge.

Hardly beyond the stated number she was beside him again, ranging her steed for the victim log to dance a gyration on its branches across the lane and enter a field among the fallen compeers. One of her men had run behind her. She slid from her saddle and tossed him the reins, catching up her skirts.

'That means war, as much as they'll have it in England,' she said, seeing his glance at the logs. 'My husband's wise enough to leave it to me, so I save him trouble with



neighbours. An ass of a Mr. Gilbert Addicote dares us to make good our claim on our property, our timber, because half a score of fir-tree roots go stretching on to his ground.'



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She swished her whip. Mr. Gilbert Addicote received the stroke and retired, a buried subject. They walked on at an even pace. 'You 'll see Leo to-morrow. He worships you. You may as well give him a couple of hours' coaching a day for the week. He'll be hanging about you, and you won't escape him. Well, and my brother Rowsley: how is Lord Ormont? He never comes to me now, since—Well, it 's nothing to me; but I like to see my brother. She can't make any change here. Olmer and Lady Charlotte 's bosom were both implied. 'What do you think?—you 've noticed: is he in good health? It 's the last thing he 'll be got to speak of.'

Weyburn gave the proper assurances.

'Not he!' said she. 'He's never ill. Men beat women in the long race, if they haven't overdone it when young. My doctor wants me to renounce the saddle. He says it 's time. Not if I 've got work for horseback!' she nicked her head emphatically: 'I hate old age. They sha'nt dismount me till a blow comes. Hate it! But I should despise myself if I showed signs, like a worm under heel. Let Nature do her worst; she can't conquer us as long as we keep up heart. You won't have to think of that for a good time yet. Now tell me why Lord Ormont didn't publish the "Plan for the Defence" you said he was writing; and he was, I know. He wrote it and he finished it; you made the fair copy. Well, and he read it,—there! see!' She took the invisible sheets in her hands and tore them. 'That's my brother. He's so proud. It would have looked like asking the country, that injured him, to forgive him. I wish it had been printed. But whatever he does I admire. That—she might have advised, if she 'd been a woman of public spirit or cared for his reputation. He never comes near me. Did she read your copy?'

The question was meant for an answer.

Weyburn replied: 'Lady Ormont had no sight of it.'

'Ah! she's Lady Ormont to the servants, I know. She has an aunt living in the house. If my brother's a sinner, and there's punishment for him, he has it from that aunt. Pag . . . something. He bears with her. He 's a Spartan. She 's his pack on his back, for what she covers and the game he plays. It looks just tolerably decent with her in the house. She goes gabbling a story about our Embassy at Madrid. To preserve propriety, as they call it. Her niece doesn't stoop to any of those tricks, I 'm told. I like her for that.'

Weyburn was roused: 'I think you would like Lady Ormont, if you knew her, my lady.'

'The chances of my liking the young woman are not in the dice-box. You call her Lady Ormont: you are not one of the servants. Don't call her Lady Ormont to me.'

'It is her title, Lady Charlotte.' She let fly a broadside at him.



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'You are one of the woman's dupes. I thought you had brains. How can you be the donkey not to see that my brother Rowsley, Lord Ormont, would never let a woman, lawfully bearing his name, go running the quadrille over London in couples with a Lady Staines and a Mrs. Lawrence Finchley, Lord Adderwood, and that man Morsfield, who boasts of your Lady Ormont, and does it unwhipped—tell me why? Pooh, you must be the poorest fool born to suppose it possible my brother would allow a man like that man Morsfield to take his wife's name in his mouth a second time. Have you talked much with this young person?'

'With Lady Ormont? I have had the honour occasionally.'

'Stick to the title and write yourself plush-breech. Can't you be more than a footman? Try to be a man of the world; you're old enough for that by now. I know she 's good-looking; the whole tale hangs on that. You needn't be singing me mooncalf hymn tunes of "Lady Ormont, Lady Ormont," solemn as a parson's clerk; the young woman brought good looks to market; and she got the exchange she had a right to expect. But it 's not my brother Rowsley's title she has got—except for footmen and tradesmen. When there's a true Countess of Ormont!..... Unless my brother has cut himself from his family. Not he. He's not mad.'

They passed through Olmer park-gates. Lady Charlotte preceded him, and she turned, waiting for him to rejoin her. He had taken his flagellation in the right style, neither abashed nor at sham crow: he was easy, ready to converse on any topic; he kept the line between supple courtier and sturdy independent; and he was a pleasant figure of a young fellow. Thinking which, a reminder that she liked him drew her by the road of personal feeling, as usual with her, to reflect upon another, and a younger, woman's observing and necessarily liking him too.

'You say you fancy I should like the person you call Lady Ormont?'

'I believe you would, my lady.'

'Are her manners agreeable?'

'Perfect; no pretension.'

'Ah! she sings, plays—all that?'

'She plays the harp and sings.'

'You have heard her?'

'Twice.'

'She didn't set you mewling?'



'I don't remember the impulse; at all events, it was restrained.'

'She would me; but I'm an old woman. I detest their squalling and strumming. I can stand it with Italians on the boards: they don't, stop conversation. She was present at that fencing match where you plucked a laurel? I had an account of it. I can't see the use of fencing in this country. Younger women can, I dare say. Now, look. If we're to speak of her, I can't call her Lady Ormont, and I don't want to hear you. Give me her Christian name.'

'It is'—Weyburn found himself on a slope without a stay—'Aminta.'

Lady Charlotte's eye was on him. He felt intolerably hot; his vexation at the betrayal of the senseless feeling made it worse, a conscious crimson.



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'Aminta,' said she, rather in the style of Cuper's boys, when the name was a strange one to them. 'I remember my Italian master reading out a poem when I was a girl. I read poetry then. You wouldn't have imagined that. I did, and liked it. I hate old age. It changes you so. None of my children know me as I was when I had life in me and was myself, and my brother Rowsley called me Cooley. They think me a hard old woman. I was Cooley through the woods and over the meadows and down stream to Rowsley. Old age is a prison wall between us and young people. They see a miniature head and bust, and think it a flattery—won't believe it. After I married I came to understand that the world we are in is a world to fight in, or under we go. But I pity the young who have to cast themselves off and take up arms. Young women above all.'

Why had she no pity for Aminta? Weyburn asked it of his feelings, and he had the customary insurgent reply from them.

'You haven't seen Steignton yet,' she continued. 'No place on earth is equal to Steignton for me. It's got the charm. Here at Olmer I'm a mother and a grandmother—the "devil of an old-woman" my neighbours take me to be. She hasn't been to Steignton, either. No, and won't go there, though she's working her way round, she supposes. He'll do everything for his "Aminta," but he won't take her to Steignton. I'm told now she's won Lady de Culme. That Mrs. Lawrence Finchley has dropped the curtesy to her great-aunt and sworn to be a good girl, for a change, if Lady de Culme will do the chaperon, and force Lord Ormont's hand. My brother shrugs. There'll be a nice explosion one day soon. Presented? The Court won't have her. That I know for positive. If she's pushed forward, she'll be bitterly snubbed. It's on the heads of those women—silly women! I can't see the game Mrs. Lawrence Finchley's playing. She'd play for fun. If they'd come to me, I'd tell them I've proof she's not the Countess of Ormont: positive proof. You look? I have it. I hold something; and not before,—(he may take his Aminta to Steignton, he may let her be presented, she may wear his name publicly, I say he's laughing at them, snapping his fingers at them louder and louder the more they seem to be pushing him into a corner, until—I know my brother Rowsley!—and, poor dear fellow! a man like that, the best cavalry general England ever had:—they'll remember it when there comes a cry for a general from India: that's the way with the English; only their necessities teach them to be just!)—he to be reduced to be outmanoeuvring a swarm of women,—I tell them, not before my brother Rowsley comes to me for what he handed to my care and I keep safe for him, will I believe he has made or means to make his Aminta Countess of Ormont.'

They were at the steps of the house. Turning to Weyburn there, the inexhaustible Lady Charlotte remarked that their conversation had given her pleasure. Leo was hanging on to one of his hands the next minute. A small girl took the other. Philippa and Beatrice were banished damsels.



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Lady Charlotte's breath had withered the aspect of Aminta's fortunes. Weyburn could forgive her, for he was beginning to understand her. He could not pardon 'her brother Rowsley,' who loomed in his mind incomprehensible, and therefore black. Once he had thought the great General a great man. He now regarded him as a mere soldier, a soured veteran; socially as a masker and a trifler, virtually a callous angler playing his cleverly-hooked fish for pastime.

What could be the meaning of Lady Charlotte's 'that, man Morsfield, who boasts of your Lady Ormont, and does it unwhipped'?

Weyburn stopped his questioning, with the reflection that he had no right to recollect her words thus accurately. The words, however, stamped Morsfield's doings and sayings and postures in the presence of Aminta with significance. When the ladies were looking on at the fencers, Morsfield's perfect coxcombry had been noticeable. He knew the art of airing a fine figure. Mrs. Lawrence Finchley had spoken of it, and Aminta had acquiesced; in the gravely simple manner of women who may be thinking of it much more intently than the vivacious prattler. Aminta confessed to an admiration of masculine physical beauty; the picador, matador, of the Spanish ring called up an undisguised glow that English ladies show coldly when they condescend to let it be seen; as it were, a line or two of colour on the wintriest of skies. She might, after all, at heart be one of the leisured, jewelled, pretty-winged; the spending, never harvesting, world she claimed and sought to enter. And what a primitive world it was!—world of the glittering beast and the not too swiftly flying prey, the savage passions clothed in silk. Surely desire to belong to it writes us poor creatures. Mentally, she could hardly be maturer than the hero-worshipping girl in the procession of Miss Vincent's young seminarists. Probably so, but she carried magic. She was of the order of women who walk as the goddesses of old, bearing the gift divine. And, by the way, she had the step of the goddess. Weyburn repeated to himself the favourite familiar line expressive of the glorious walk, and accused Lord Ormont of being in cacophonous accord with the perpetual wrong of circumstance, he her possessor, the sole person of her sphere insensible to the magic she bore! So ran his thought.

The young man chose to conceive that he thought abstractedly. He was, in truth, often casting about for the chances of his meeting on some fortunate day the predestined schoolmaster's wife: a lady altogether praiseworthy for carrying principles of sound government instead of magic. Consequently, susceptible to woman's graces though he knew himself to be, Lady Ormont's share of them hung in the abstract for him. His hopes were bent on an early escape to Switzerland and his life's work.

Lady Charlotte mounted to ride to the battle daily. She talked of her brother Rowsley, and of 'Aminta,' and provoked an advocacy of the Countess of Ormont, and trampled the pleas and defences to dust, much in the same tone as on the first day; sometimes showing a peep of sweet humaneness, like the ripe berry of a bramble, and at others

rattling thunder at the wretch of a woman audacious enough to pretend to a part in her brother's title.

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Not that she had veneration for titles. She considered them a tinsel, and the devotee on his knee-caps to them a lump for a kick. Adding: 'Of course I stand for my class; and if we can't have a manlier people—and it 's not likely in a country treating my brother so badly—well, then, let things go on as they are.' But it was the pretension to a part in the name of Ormont which so violently offended the democratic aristocrat, and caused her to resent it as an assault on the family honour, by 'a woman springing up out of nothing'—a woman of no distinctive birth.

She was rational in her fashion; or Weyburn could at least see where and how the reason in her took a twist. The Rev. Mr. Hampton-Evey would not see it; he was, in charity to her ladyship, of a totally contrary opinion, he informed Weyburn. The laborious pastor and much-enduring Churchman met my lady's apologist as he was having a swing of the legs down the lanes before breakfast, and he fell upon a series of complaints, which were introduced by a declaration that 'he much feared' her ladyship would have a heavy legal bill to pay for taking the law into her hands up at Addicotes.

Her ladyship might, if she pleased, he said, encourage her domestics and her husband's tenants and farm-labourers to abandon the church for the chapel, and go, as she had done and threatened to do habitually, to the chapel herself; but to denounce the ritual of the Orthodox Church under the denomination of 'barbarous,' to say of the invoking supplications of the service, that they were—she had been heard to state it more or less publicly and repeatedly—suitable to abject ministers and throngs at the court of an Indian rajah, that he did not hesitate to term highly unbecoming in a lady of her station, subversive and unchristian. The personal burdens inflicted on him by her ladyship he prayed for patience to endure. He surprised Weyburn in speaking of Lady Charlotte as 'educated and accomplished.' She was rather more so than Weyburn knew, and more so than was common among the great ladies of her time.

Weyburn strongly advised the reverend gentleman on having it out with Lady Charlotte in a personal interview. He sketched the great lady's combative character on a foundation of benevolence, and stressed her tolerance for open dealing, and the advantage gained by personal dealings with her—after a mauling or two. His language and his illustrations touched an old-school chord in the Rev. Mr. Hampton-Evey, who hummed over the project, profoundly disrelishing the introductory portion.

'Do me the honour to call and see me to-morrow, after breakfast, before her ladyship starts for the fray on Addicote heights,' Weyburn said; 'and I will ask your permission to stand by you. Her bark is terrific, we know; and she can bite, but there's no venom.'

Finally, on a heave of his chest, Mr. Hampton-Evey consented to call, in the interests of peace.



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Weyburn had said it must be 'man to man with her, facing her and taking steps'; and, although the prospect was unpleasant to repulsiveness, it was a cheerful alternative beside Mr. Hampton-Evey's experiences and anticipations of the malignant black power her ladyship could be when she was not faced.

'Let the man come,' said Lady Charlotte. Her shoulders intimated readiness for him.

She told Weyburn he might be present—insisted to have him present. During the day Weyburn managed to slide in observations on the favourable reports of Mr. Hampton-Evey's work among the poor—emollient doses that irritated her to fret and paw, as at a checking of her onset.

In the afternoon the last disputed tree on the Addicotes' ridge was felled and laid on Olmer ground. Riding with Weyburn and the joyful Leo, she encountered Mr. Eglett and called out the news. He remarked, in the tone of philosophy proper to a placable country gentleman obedient to government on foreign affairs: 'Now for the next act. But no more horseback now, mind!'

She muttered of not recollecting a promise. He repeated the interdict. Weyburn could fancy seeing her lips form words of how she hated old age.

He had been four days at Olmer, always facing her, 'man to man,' in the matter of Lady Ormont, not making way at all, but holding firm, and winning respectful treatment. They sat alone in her private room, where, without prelude, she discharged a fiery squib at impudent hussies caught up to the saddle-bow of a hero for just a canter, and pretending to a permanent seat beside him.

'You have only to see Lady Ormont; you will admit the justice of her claim, my lady,' said he; and as evidently he wanted a fight, she let him have it.

'You try to provoke me; you take liberties. You may call the woman Aminta, I've told you; you insult me when you call the woman by my family name.'

'Pardon me, my lady: I have no right to call Lady Ormont Aminta.'

'You've never done so, eh? Say!'

She had him at the edge of the precipice. He escaped by saying, 'Her Christian name was asked the other day, and I mentioned it. She is addressed by me as Lady Ormont.'

'And by her groom and her footman. They all do; it's the indemnity to that class of young woman. Her linendraper is Lady-Ormonting as you do. I took you for a gentleman. Let me hear you give her that title again, you shall hear her true one, that the world fits her with, from me.'



The time was near the half-hour bell before dinner, the situation between them that of the fall of the breath to fetch words electrical. She left it to him to begin the fight, and was not sorry that she had pricked him for it.

A footman entered the room, bearer of a missive for Mr. Weyburn. Lord Ormont's groom had brought it from London.

'Send in the man,' said Lady Charlotte.



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Weyburn read

'The Countess of Ormont begs Mr. Weyburn to return instantly. There has been an accident in his home. It may not be very serious. An arm—a shock to the system from a fall. Messenger informs her, fear of internal hemorrhage. Best doctors in attendance.'

He handed Lady Charlotte the letter. She humped at the first line, flashed across the remainder, and in a lowered voice asked—

'Sister in the house?'

'My mother,' Weyburn said.

The groom appeared. He knew nothing. The Countess had given him orders to spare no expense on the road to Olmer, without a minute's delay. He had ridden and driven.

He looked worn. Lady Charlotte rang the bell for her butler. To him she said—

'See that this man has a good feed of meat, any pastry you have, and a bottle of port wine. He has earned a pipe of tobacco; make up a bed for him. Despatch at once any one of the stable-boys to Loughton—the Dolphin. Mr. Leeman there will have a chariot, fly, gig, anything, ready-horsed in three hours from now. See Empson yourself; he will put my stepper Mab to the light trap; no delay. Have his feed at Loughton. Tell Mrs. Maples to send up now, here, a tray, whatever she has, within five minutes—not later. A bottle of the Peace of Amiens Chambertin— Mr. Eglett's. You understand. Mrs. Maples will pack a basket for the journey; she will judge. Add a bottle of the Waterloo Bordeaux. Wait: a dozen of Mr. Eglett's cigars. Brisk with all the orders. Go.'

She turned to Weyburn. 'You pack your portmanteau faster than a servant will do it.'

He ran up-stairs.

She was beside the tray to welcome and inspirit his eating, and she performed the busy butler's duty in pouring out wine for him. It was a toned old Burgundy, happy in the year of its birth, the grandest of instruments to roll the gambol-march of the Dionysiaca through the blood of this frame and sound it to the spirit. She spoke no word of his cause for departure. He drank, and he felt what earth can do to cheer one of her stricken children and strengthen the beat of a heart with a dread like a shot in it.

She, while he flew supporting the body of his most beloved to the sun of Life in brighter hope, reckoned the stages of his journey.

'Leeman at Loughton will post you through the night to Mersley. Wherever you bait, it is made known that you come from Olmer, and are one of us. That passes you on up to London. Where can Lord Ormont be now?'



'In Paris.'

'Still in Paris? He leaves her. She did well to send as she did. You will not pay for the posting along the road.'

'I will pay for myself—I have a 'purse,' Weyburn said; and continued, 'Oh, my lady; there is Mr. Hampton-Evey to-morrow morning: I promised to stand by him.'



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'I'll explain,' said Lady Charlotte. 'He shall not miss you. If he strips the parson and comes as a man and a servant of the poor, he has nothing to fear. You've done? The night before my brother Rowsley's first duel I sat with him at supper and poured his wine out, and knew what was going to happen, didn't say a word. No use in talking about feelings. Besides, death is only the other side of the ditch, and one or other of us must go foremost. Now then, good-bye. Empson's waiting by this time. Mr. Eglett and Leo shall hear the excuses from me. Think of anything you may want, while I count ten.'

She held his hand. He wanted her to be friendly to Lady Ormont, but could not vex her at the last moment, touched as he was by her practical kindness.

She pressed his hand and let it go.

CHAPTER XIV

OLD LOVERS NEW FRIENDS

The cottage inhabited by Weyburn's mother was on the southern hills over London. He reached it late in the afternoon. His mother's old servant, Martha, spied the roadway at the gate of the small square of garden. Her steady look without welcome told him the scene he would meet beyond the door, and was the dead in her eyes. He dropped from no height; he stood on a level with the blow. His apprehensions on the road had lowered him to meet it.

'Too late, Martha?'

'She's in heaven, my dear.'

'She is lying alone?'

'The London doctor left half an hour back. She's gone. Slipped, and fell, coming from her room, all the way down. She prayed for grace to see her son. She 'll watch over him, be sure. You 'll not find it lone and cold. A lady sits with it—Lady Ormont, they call her—a very kind lady. My mistress liked her voice. Ever since news of the accident, up to ten at night; and never eats or drinks more than a poor tiny bit of bread-and-butter, with a teacup.'

'Weyburn went up-stairs.

Aminta sat close to the bedside in a darkened room. They greeted silently. He saw the white shell of the life that had flown; he took his mother's hand and kissed it, and knelt, clasping it.



Fear of disturbing his prayer kept Aminta seated. Death was a stranger to him. The still warm, half-cold, nerveless hand smote the fact of things as they were through the prayer for things as we would have them. The vitality of his prayer was the sole light he had. It drew sustainment from the dead hand in his grasp, and cowered down to the earth claiming all we touch. He tried to summon vision of a soaring spirituality; he could not; his understanding and senses were too stricken. He prayed on. His prayer was as a little fountain, not rising high out of earth, and in the clutch of death; but its being it had from death, his love gave it food.



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Prayer is power within us to communicate with the desired beyond our thirsts. The goodness of the dear good mother gone was in him for assurance of a breast of goodness to receive her, whatever the nature of the eternal secret may be. The good life gone lives on in the mind; the bad has but a life in the body, and that not lasting,—it extends, dispreads, it worms away, it perishes. Need we more to bid the mind perceive through obstructive flesh the God who reigns, a devil vanquished? Be certain that it is the pure mind we set to perceive. The God discerned in thought is another than he of the senses. And let the prayer be as a little fountain. Rising on a spout, from dread of the hollow below, the prayer may be prolonged in words begetting words, and have a pulse of fervour: the spirit of it has fallen after the first jet. That is the delirious energy of our craving, which has no life in our souls. We do not get to any heaven by renouncing the Mother we spring from; and when there is an eternal secret for us, it is befitted to believe that Earth knows, to keep near her, even in our utmost aspirations.

Weyburn still knelt. He was warned to quit the formal posture of an exhausted act by the thought, that he had come to reflect upon how he might be useful to his boys in a like calamity.

Having risen, he became aware, that for some time of his kneeling Aminta's hand had been on his head, and they had raised their souls in unison. It was a soul's link. They gazed together on the calm, rapt features. They passed from the room.

'I cannot thank you,' he said.

'Oh no; I have the reason for gratitude,' said she. 'I have learnt to know and love her, and hope I may imitate when my time is near.'

“She..... at the last?”

'Peacefully; no pain. The breath had not left her very long before you came.'

'I said I cannot; but I must—'

'Do not.'

'Not in speech, then.'

They went into the tasteful little sitting-room below, where the stillness closed upon them as a consciousness of loss.

'You have comforted her each day,' he said.

'It has been my one happiness.'



'I could not wish for better than for her to have known you.'

'Say that for me. I have gained. She left her last words for you with me. They were love, love . . . pride in her son: thanks to God for having been thought worthy to give him birth.'

'She was one of the noble women of earth.'

'She was your mother. Let me not speak any more. I think I will now go. I am rarely given to these—'

The big drops were falling.

'You have not ordered your carriage?'

'It brings me here. I find my way home.'

'Alone?'

'I like the independence.'

'At night, too!'

'Nothing harmed me. Now it is daylight. A letter arrived for you from High Brent this morning. I forgot to bring it. Yesterday two of your pupils called here. Martha saw them.'

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Her naming of the old servant familiarly melted him. 'You will not bear to hear praise or thanks.'

'If I deserved them. I should like you to call on Dr. Buxton; he will tell you more than we can. He drove with me the first day, after I had sent you the local doctor's report. I had it from the messenger, his assistant.'

Weyburn knew Dr. Buxton's address. He begged her to stay and take some nourishment; ventured a remark on her wasted look.

'It is poor fare in cottages.'

'I have been feeding on better than bread and meat,' she said.' I should have eaten if I had felt appetite. My looks will recover, such as they are. I hope I have grown out of them; they are a large part of the bondage of women. You would like to see me safe into some conveyance. Go up-stairs for a few minutes; I will wait here.'

He obeyed her. Passing from the living to the dead, from the dead to the living, they were united in his heart.

Her brevity of tone, and her speech, so practical upon a point of need, under a crisis of distress, reminded him of Lady Charlotte at the time of the groom's arrival with her letter.

Aminta was in no hurry to drive. She liked walking and looking down on London, she said.

'My friend and schoolmate, Selina Collett, comes to me at Whitsuntide. We have taken a house on the Upper Thames, above Marlow. You will come and see us, if you can be persuaded to leave your boys. We have a boathouse, and a bathing-plank for divers. The stream is quiet there between rich meadows. It seems to flow as if it thought. I am not poetical; I tell you only my impression. You shall be a great deal by yourself, as men prefer to be.'

'As men are forced to be—I beg!' said he. 'Division is against my theories.'

'We might help, if we understood one another, I have often fancied. I know something of your theories. I should much like to hear you some day on the scheme of the school in Switzerland, and also on the schoolmaster's profession. She whom we have lost was full of it, and spoke of it to me as much as her weakness would permit. The subject seemed to give her strength.'

'She has always encouraged me,' said Weyburn.' I have lost her, but I shall feel that she is not absent. She had ideas of her own about men and women.'



'Some she mentioned.'

'And about marriage?'

'That too.'

Aminta shook herself out of a sudden stupor.

'Her mind was very clear up to the last hour upon all the subjects interesting her son. She at one time regretted his not being a soldier, for the sake of his father's memory. Then she learned to think he could do more for the world as the schoolmaster. She said you can persuade.'

'We had our talks. She would have the reason, if she was to be won. I like no other kind of persuasion.'

'I long to talk over the future school with you. That is, to hear your plans.'



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They were at the foot of the hill, in view of an inn announcing livery stables. She wished to walk the whole distance. He shook his head.

The fly was ready for her soon, and he begged to see her safe home. She refused, after taking her seat, but said: 'At any other time. We are old friends. You will really go through the ceremony of consulting me about the school?'

He replied: 'I am honoured.'

'Ah, not to me,' said Aminta. 'We will be the friends we—You will not be formal with me?—not from this day?'

She put out her hand. He took it gently. The dead who had drawn them together withheld a pressure. Holding the hand, he said: 'I shall crave leave of absence for some days.'

'I shall see you on the day,' said she. 'If it is your desire: I will send word.'

'We both mourn at heart. We should be in company. Adieu.'

Their hands fell apart. They looked. The old school time was in each mind. They saw it as a shore-bank in grey outline across morning mist. Years were between; and there was a division of circumstance, more repelling than an abyss or the rush of deep wild waters.

Neither of them had regrets. Under their cloud, and with the grief they shared, they were as happy as two could be in recovering one another as friends.

On the day of the funeral Aminta drove to the spot where they had parted—she walked to the churchyard.

She followed the coffin to its gravel-heap, wishing neither to see nor be seen, only that she might be so far attached to the remains of the dead; and the sense of blessedness she had in her bowed simplicity of feeling was as if the sainted dead had cleansed and anointed her.

When the sods had been cast on, the last word spoken, she walked her way back, happy in being alone, unnoticed. She was grateful to the chief mourner for letting her go as she had come. That helped her to her sense of purification, the haven out of the passions, hardly less quiet than the repose into which the dear dead woman, his mother, had entered.

London lay beneath her. The might of the great hive hummed at the verge of her haven of peace without disturbing. There she had been what none had known of her: an ambitious girl, modest merely for lack of intrepidity; paralyzed by her masterful lord;



aiming her highest at a gilt weathercock; and a disappointed creature, her breast a home of serpents; never herself. She thought and hoped she was herself now. Alarm lest this might be another of her moods, victim of moods as she had latterly been, was a shadow armed with a dart playing round her to find the weak spot. It sprang from her acknowledged weakness of nature; and she cast about for how to keep it outside her and lean on a true though a small internal support. She struck at her desires, to sound them.



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They were yesterday for love; partly for distinction, for a woman having beauty to shine in the sphere of beauty; but chiefly to love and be loved, therefore to live. She had yesterday read letters of a man who broke a music from the word—about as much music as there is in a tuning—fork, yet it rang and lingered; and he was not the magical musician. Now those letters were as dust of the road. The sphere of beauty was a glass lamp-globe for delirious moths. She had changed. Belief in the real change gave her full view of the compliant coward she had been.

Her heart assured her she had natural courage. She felt that it could be stubborn to resist a softness. Now she cared no more for the hackneyed musical word; friendship was her desire. If it is not life's poetry, it is a credible prose; a land of low undulations instead of Alps; beyond the terrors and the deceptions. And she could trust her friend: he who was a singular constancy. His mother had told her of his preserving letters of a girl he loved when at school; and of his journeys to an empty house at Dover. That was past; but, as the boy, so the man would be in sincerity of feeling trustworthy to the uttermost.

She mused on the friend. He was brave. She had seen how he took his blow, and sorrow as a sister, conquering emotion. It was not to be expected of him by one who knew him when at school. Had he faults? He must have faults. She, curiously, could see none. After consenting to his career as a schoolmaster, and seeing nothing ludicrous in it, she endowed him with the young school-hero's reputation, beheld him with the eyes of the girl who had loved him—and burnt his old letters!—bitterly regretted that she burnt his letters!—and who had applauded his contempt of ushers and master opposing his individual will and the thing he thought it right to do.

Musing thus, she turned a corner, on a sudden, in her mind, and ran against a mirror, wherein a small figure running up to meet her, grew large and nodded, with the laugh and eyes of Brownie. So little had she changed! The steadfast experienced woman rebuked that volatile, and some might say, faithless girl. But the girl had her answer: she declared they were one and the same, affirmed that the years between were a bad night's dream, that her heart had been faithful, that he who conjures visions of romance in a young girl's bosom must always have her heart, as a crisis will reveal it to her. She had the volubility of the mettled Brownie of old, and was lectured. When she insisted on shouting 'Matey! Matey!' she was angrily spurned and silenced.

Aminta ceased to recline in her carriage. An idea that an indolent posture fostered vapourish meditations, counselled her sitting rigidly upright and interestedly observing the cottages and merry gutter-children along the squat straight streets of a London suburb. Her dominant ultimate thought was, 'I, too, can work!' Like her courage, the plea of a capacity to work appealed for confirmation to the belief which exists without demonstrated example; and as she refrained from probing to the inner sources of that mental outcry, it was allowed to stand and remain among the convictions we store—wherewith to shape our destinies.



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Childishly indeed, quite witlessly, she fell into a trick of repeating the name of Matthew Weyburn in her breast and on her lips, after the manner of Isabella Lawrence Finchley, when she had inquired for his Christian name, and went on murmuring it, as if sucking a new bonbon, with the remark: 'It sounds nice, it suits the mouth.' Little Selina Collett had told, Aminta remembered, how those funny boys at Cuper's could not at first get the name 'Aminta' to suit the mouth, but went about making hideous faces in uttering it. She smiled at the recollection, and thought, up to a movement of her lips, one is not tempted to do that in saying Matthew Weyburn!

CHAPTER XV

SHOWING A SECRET FISHED WITHOUT ANGLING

That great couchant dragon of the devouring jaws and the withering breath, known as our London world, was in expectation of an excitement above yawns on the subject of a beautiful Lady Doubtful proposing herself, through a group of infatuated influential friends, to a decorous Court, as one among the ladies acceptable. The popular version of it sharpened the sauce by mingling romance and cynicism very happily; for the numerous cooks, when out of the kitchen, will furnish a piquant dish. Thus, a jewel-eyed girl of half English origin (a wounded British officer is amiably nursed in a castle near the famous Peninsula battlefield, *etc.*), running wild down the streets of Seville, is picked up by Lord Ormont, made to discard her tambourine, brought over to our shores, and allowed the decoration of his name, without the legitimate adornment of his title. Discontented with her position after a time, she now pushes boldly to claim the place which will be most effective in serving her as a bath. She has, by general consent, beauty; she must, seeing that she counts influential friends, have witchery. Those who have seen her riding and driving beside her lord, speak of Andalusian grace, Oriental lustre, fit qualification for the fair slave of a notoriously susceptible old warrior.

She won a party in the widening gossip world; and enough of a party in the regent world to make a stream. Pretending to be the actual Countess of Ormont, though not publicly acknowledged as his countess by the earl, she had on her side the strenuous few who knew and liked her, some who were pleased compassionately to patronize, all idle admirers of a shadowed beautiful woman at bay, the devotees of any beauty in distress, and such as had seen, such as imagined they had seen, such as could paint a mental picture of a lady of imposing stature, persuasive appearance, pathetic history, and pronounce her to be unjustly treated, with a general belief that she was visible and breathing. She had the ready enthusiasts, the responsive sentimentalists, and an honest active minor number, of whom not every one could be declared perfectly unspotted in public estimation, however innocent under verdict of the courts of law.



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Against her was the livid cloud-bank over a flowery field, that has not yet spoken audible thunder: the terrible aggregate social woman, of man's creation, hated by him, dreaded, scorned, satirized, and nevertheless, upheld, esteemed, applauded: a mark of civilization, on to which our human society must hold as long as we have nothing humaner. She exhibits virtue, with face of waxen angel, with paw of desert beast, and blood of victims on it. Her fold is a genial climate and the material pleasures for the world's sheepy: worshipping herself, she claims the sanctification of a performed religion. She is gentle when unassailed, going her way serenely, with her malady in the blood. When the skin bears witness to it, she swallows an apothecary, and there is a short convulsion. She is refreshed by cutting off diseased inferior members: the superior betraying foul symptoms, she covers up and retains; rationally, too, for they minister to her present existence, and she lives all in the present. Her subjects are the mixed Subservient; among her rebellious are earth's advanced, who have cold a morning on their foreheads, and these would not dethrone her, they would but shame and purify by other methods than the druggist. She loves nothing. Undoubtedly, she dislikes the vicious. On that merit she subsists.

The vexatious thing in speaking of her is, that she compels to the use of the rhetorician's brass instrument. As she is one of the Powers giving life and death, one may be excused. This tremendous queen of the congregation has brought discredit on her sex for the scourge laid on quivering female flesh, and for the flippant indifference shown to misery and to fine distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad; and particularly for the indiscriminating hardness upon the starved of women. We forget her having been conceived in the fear of men, shaped to gratify them. She is their fiction of the state they would fain beguile themselves to suppose her sex has reached, for their benefit; where she may be queen of it in a corner, certain of a loyal support, if she will only give men her half-the-world's assistance to uplift the fabric comfortable to them; together with assurance of paternity, case of mind in absence, exclusive possession, enormous and minutest, *etc.*; not by any means omitting a regimental orderliness, from which men are privately exempt, because they are men, or because they are grown boys—the brisker at lessons after a vacation or a truancy, says the fiction.

In those days the world had oscillated, under higher leading than its royal laxity, to rigidity. Tiny peccadilloes were no longer matter of jest, and the sinner exposed stood 'sola' to receive the brand. A beautiful Lady Doubtful needed her husband's countenance if she was to take one of the permanent steps in public places. The party of Lady Charlotte Eglett called on the livid cloud-bank aforesaid to discharge celestial bolts

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and sulphur oil on the head of an impudent, underbred, ambitious young slut, whose arts had bewitched a distinguished nobleman not young in years at least, and ensnared the remainder wits of some principal ancient ladies of the land. Professional Puritans, born conservatives, malicious tattlers, made up a goodly tail to Lady Charlotte's party. The epithet 'unbred' was accredited upon the quoted sayings and doings of the pretentious young person's aunt, repeated abroad by noblemen and gentlemen present when she committed herself; and the same were absurd. They carried a laugh, and so they lived and circulated. Lord Ormont submitted to the infliction of that horrid female in his household! It was no wonder he stopped short of allying himself with the family.

Nor was it a wonder that the naturally enamoured old warrior or invalided Mars (for she had the gift of beauty) should deem it prudent to be out of England when she and her crazy friends determined on the audacious move. Or put it the other way—for it is just as confounding right side or left—she and her friends take advantage of his absence to make the clever push for an establishment, and socially force him to legalize their union on his return. The deeds of the preceding reign had bequeathed a sort of legendary credence to the wildest tales gossip could invent under a demurrer.

But there was the fact, the earl was away. Lady Charlotte's party buzzed everywhere. Her ladyship had come to town to head it. Her ladyship laid trains of powder from dinner-parties, balls, routs, park-processions, into the Lord Chamberlain's ear, and fired and exploded them, deafening the grand official. Do you consider that virulent Pagan Goddesses and the flying torch-furies are extinct? Error of Christians! We have relinquished the old names and have no new ones for them; but they are here, inextinguishable, threading the day and night air with their dire squib-trail, if we would but see. Hissing they go, and we do not hear. We feel the effects.

Upon the counsel of Mrs. Lawrence, Aminta sent a letter to Lord Ormont at his hotel in Paris, informing him of the position of affairs. He had delayed his return, and there had been none of his brief communications.

She wrote, as she knew, as she felt, coldly. She was guided by others, and her name was up before the world, owing to some half-remembered impulsion of past wishes, but her heart was numbed; she was not a woman to have a wish without a beat of the heart in it. For her name she had a feeling, to be likened rather to the losing gambler's contemplation of a big stake he has flung, and sees it gone while fortune is undecided; and he catches at a philosophy nothing other than his hug of a modest little background pleasure, that he has always preferred to this accursed bad habit of gambling with the luck against him. Reckless in the cast, she was reckless of success.

Her letter was unanswered.



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Then, and day by day more strongly, she felt for her name. She put a false heart into it. She called herself to her hearing the Countess of Ormont, and deigned to consult the most foolish friend she could have chosen—her aunt; and even listened to her advice, that she should run about knocking at all the doors open to her, and state her case against the earl. It seemed the course to take, the moment for taking it. Was she not asked if she could now at last show she had pride? Her pride ran stinging through her veins, like a band of freed prisoners who head the rout to fire a city. She charged her lord with having designedly—oh! cunningly indeed left her to be the prey of her enemies at the hour when he knew it behoved him to be her great defender. There had been no disguise of the things in progress: they had been spoken of allusively, quite comprehensibly, after the fashion common with two entertaining a secret semi-hostility on a particular subject; one of them being the creature that blushes and is educated to be delicate, reserved, and timorous. He was not ignorant, and he had left her, and he would not reply to her letter!

So fell was her mood, that an endeavour to conjure up the scene of her sitting beside the death-bed of Matthew Weyburn's mother, failed to sober and smooth it, holy though that time was. The false heart she had put into the pride of her name was powerfuller than the heart in her bosom. But to what end had the true heart counselled her of late? It had been a home of humours and languors, an impotent insurgent, the sapper of her character; and as we see in certain disorderly States a curative incendiarism usurp the functions of the sluggish citizen, and the work of re-establishment done by destruction, in peril of a total extinction, Aminta's feverish anger on behalf of her name went a stretch to vivify and give her dulled character a novel edge. She said good-bye to cowardice. 'I have no husband to defend me—I must do it for myself.' The peril of a too complete exercise of independence was just intimated to her perceptions. On whom the blame? And let the motively guilty go mourn over consequences! That Institution of Marriage was eyed. Is it not a halting step to happiness? It is the step of a cripple,—and one leg or the other poses for the feebler sex,—small is the matter which! And is happiness our cry? Our cry is rather for circumstance and occasion to use our functions, and the conditions are denied to women by Marriage—denied to the luckless of women, who are many, very many: denied to Aminta, calling herself Countess of Ormont, for one, denied to Mrs. Lawrence Finchley for another, and in a base bad manner. She had defended her good name triumphantly, only to enslave herself for life or snatch at the liberty which besmirches.



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Reviewing Mrs. Lawrence, Aminta's real heart pressed forward at the beat, in tender pity of the woman for whom a yielding to love was to sin; and unwomanly is the woman who does not love: men will say it. Aminta found herself phrasing. 'Why was she unable to love her husband?—he is not old.' She hurried in flight from the remark to confidences imparted by other ladies, showing strange veins in an earthy world; after which, her mind was bent to rebuke Mrs. Pagnell for the silly soul's perpetual allusions to Lord Ormont's age. She did not think of his age. But she was vividly thinking that she was young. Young, married, loveless, cramped in her energies, publicly dishonoured—a Lady Doubtful, courting one friend whom she liked among women, one friend whom she respected among men; that was the sketch of her.

That was in truth the outline, as much as Aminta dared sketch of herself without dragging her down lower than her trained instinct would bear to look. Our civilization shuns nature; and most shuns it in the most artificially civilized, to suit the market. They, however, are always close to their mother nature, beneath their second nature's mask of custom; and Aminta's unconscious concluding touch to the sketch: 'My husband might have helped me to a footing in Society,' would complete it as a coloured picture, if writ in tones.

She said it, and for the footing in Society she had lost her taste.

Mrs. Lawrence brought the final word from high quarters: that the application must be deferred until Lord Ormont returned to town. It was known before, that such would be the decision. She had it from the eminent official himself, and she kicked about the room, setting her pretty mouth and nose to pout and sniff, exactly like a boy whose chum has been mishandled by a bully.

'Your dear good man is too much for us. I thought we should drive him. 'C'est un ruse homme de guerre.' I like him, but I could slap him. He stops the way. Upon my word, he seems tolerably careless of his treasure. Does he suppose Mrs. Paggy is a protection? Do you know she's devoted to that man Morsfield? He listens to her stories. To judge by what he shouts aloud, he intends carrying you off the first opportunity, divorcing, and installing you in Cobeck Hall. All he fears is, that your lord won't divorce. You should have seen him the other day; he marched up and down the room, smacking his head and crying out: "Legal measures or any weapons her husband pleases!" For he has come to believe that the lady would have been off with him long before, if her lord had no claim to the marital title. "It 's that husband I can't get over! that husband!" He reminded me, to the life, of Lawrence Finchley with a headache the morning after a supper, striding, with his hand on the shining middle of his head: "It's that Welsh rabbit! that Welsh rabbit!" He has a poor digestion, and he will eat cheese. The Welsh rabbit chased him into his bed. But listen to me, dear, about your Morsfield. I told you he was dangerous.'



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'He is not my Morsfield,' said Aminta.

'Beware of his having a tool in Paggy. He boasts of letters.'

'Mine? Two: and written to request him to cease writing to me.'

'He stops at nothing. And, oh, my Simplicity! don't you see you gave him a step in begging him to retire? Morsfield has lived a good deal among our neighbours, who expound the physiology of women. He anatomizes us; pulls us to pieces, puts us together, and then animates us with a breath of his "passion"—sincere upon every occasion, I don't doubt. He spared me, although he saw I was engaged. Perhaps it was because I 'm of no definite colour. Or he thought I was not a receptacle for "passion." And quite true,—Adder, the dear good fellow, has none. Or where should we be? On a Swiss Alp, in a chalet, he shooting chamois, and I milking cows, with 'ah-ahio, ah-ahio,' all day long, and a quarrel at night over curds and whey. Well, and that 's a better old pensioner's limp to his end for "passion" than the foreign hotel bell rung mightily, and one of the two discovered with a dagger in the breast, and the other a don't-look lying on the pavement under the window. Yes, and that's better than "passion" splitting and dispersing upon new adventures, from habit, with two sparks remaining of the fire.'

Aminta took Mrs. Lawrence's hands. 'Is it a lecture?'

She was kissed. 'Frothy gabble. I'm really near to "passion" when I embrace you. You're the only one I could run away with; live with all alone, I believe. I wonder men can see you while that silly lord of yours is absent, and not begin Morsfielding. They're virtuous if they resist. Paggy tells the world . . . well?' Aminta had reddened.

'What does my aunt tell the world?'

Mrs. Lawrence laid her smoothing hand absently on a frill of lace fichu above a sternly disciplined bosom at half-heave. 'I think I can judge now that you're not much hurt by this wretched business of the presentation. The little service I could do was a moral lesson to me on the subject of deuce-may-care antecedents. My brother Tom, too, was always playing truant, as a boy. It 's in the blood.'

She seemed to be teasing, and Aminta cried: 'My aunt! Let me hear. She tells the world—?'

'Paggy? ah, yes. Only that she says the countess has an exalted opinion of Mr. Secretary's handwriting—as witnessed by his fair copy of the Memoirs, of course.'

'Poor woman! How can she talk such foolishness! I guessed it.'

'You wear a dark red rose when you're guessing, 'ma mie,'—French for, my Aminta.'



'But consider, Isabella, Mr. Weyburn has just had the heaviest of losses. My aunt should spare mention of him.'

'Matthew Weyburn! we both like the name.' Mrs. Lawrence touched at her friend and gazed. 'I've seen it on certain evenings—crimson over an olive sky. What it forebodes, I can't imagine; but it's the end of a lovely day. They say it threatens rain, if it begins one. It's an ominous herald.'



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'You make me,' said Aminta. 'I must redden if you keep looking at me so closely.'

'Now frown one little bit, please. I love to see you. I love to see a secret disclose itself ingenuously.'

'But what secret, my dear?' cried Aminta's defence of her innocence; and she gave a short frown.

'Have no fear. Mr. Secretary is not the man to be Morsfielding. And he can enjoy his repast; a very good sign. But is he remaining long?'

'He is going soon, I hear.'

'He's a good boy. I could have taken to him myself, and not dreaded a worrying. There 's this difference between you and me, though, my Aminta; one of us has the fireplace prepared for what's-his-name— "passion." Kiss me. How could you fancy you were going to have a woman for your friend and keep hidden from her any one of the secrets that blush! and with Paggy to aid! I am sure it means very little. Admiration for good handwriting is—' a smile broke the sentence.

'You're astray, Isabella.'

'Not I, dear, I'm too fond of you.'

'You read what is not.'

'What is not yet written, you mean.'

'What never could be written.'

'I read what is in the blood, and comes out to me when I look. That lord of yours should take to study you as I have done ever since I fell in love with you. He 's not counselling himself well in keeping away.'

'Now you speak wisely,' said Aminta.

'Not a particle more wisely. And the reason is close at hand—see. You are young, you attract—how could it be otherwise?—and you have "passion" sleeping, and likely to wake with a spring whether roused or not. In my observation good-man t'other fellow—the poet's friend—is never long absent when the time is ripe—at least, not in places where we gather together. Well, one is a buckler against the other: I don't say with lovely Amy May,—with an honourable woman. But Aminta can smell powder and grow more mettlesome. Who can look at you and be blind to passion sleeping! The sight of you makes me dream of it—me, a woman, cool as a wine-cellar or a well. So there's to help you to know yourself and be on your guard. I know I'm not deceived, because I've



fallen in love with you, and no love can be without jealousy, so I have the needle in my breast, that points at any one who holds a bit of you. Kind of sympathetic needle to the magnet behind anything. You'll know it, if you don't now. I should have felt the thing without the aid of Paggy. So, then, imagine all my nonsense unsaid, and squeeze a drop or two of 'sirop de bon conseil' out of it, as if it were your own wise meditations.' The rest of Mrs. Lawrence's discourse was a swallow's wing skimming the city stream. She departed, and Aminta was left to beat at her heart and ask whether it had a secret.

But if there was one, the secret was out, and must have another name. It had been a secret for her until she heard her friend speak those pin-points that pricked her heart, and sent the blood coursing over her face, like a betrayal, so like as to resemble a burning confession.



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But if this confessed the truth, she was the insanest of women. No woman could be surer that she had her wits. She had come to see things, previously mysteries, with surprising clearness. As, for example, that passion was part of her nature; therefore her very life, lying tranced. She certainly could not love without passion such an abandonment was the sole justification of love in a woman standing where she stood. And now for the first time she saw her exact position before the world; and she saw some way into her lord: saw that he nursed a wound, extracted balm from anything enabling him to show the world how he despised it, and undesigningly immolated her for the petty gratification.

It could not, in consequence, be the truth. To bear what she had borne she must be a passionless woman; and she was glad of her present safety in thinking it. Once it was absolutely true. She swam away to the golden-circled Island of Once; landed, and dwelt there solitarily and blissfully, looking forward to Sunday's walk round the park, looking back on it. Proudly she could tell herself that her dreams of the Prince of the island had not been illusions as far as he was concerned; for he had a great soul. He did not aim at a tawdry glory. He was a loss to our army—no loss to his country or the world. A woman might clasp her feeling of pride in having foreseen distinction for him; and a little, too, in distinguishing now the true individual distinction from the feathered uniform vulgar. Where the girl's dreams had proved illusions, she beheld in a title and luxuries, in a loveless marriage.

That was perilous ground. Still it taught her to see that the substantial is the dust; and passion not being active, she could reflect. After a series of penetrative flashes, flattering to her intelligence the more startling they were, reflection was exhausted. She sank on her nature's desire to join or witness agonistic incidents, shocks, wrestlings, the adventures which are brilliant air to sanguine energies. Imagination shot tap, and whirled the circle of a succession of them; and she had a companion and leader, unfeatured, reverently obeyed, accepted as not to be known, not to be guessed at, in the deepest hooded inmost of her being speechlessly divined.

The sudden result of Aminta's turmoil was a determination that she must look on Steignton. And what was to be gained by that? She had no idea. And how had she stopped her imaginative flight with the thought of looking on Steignton? All she could tell was, that it would close a volume. She could not say why the volume must be closed.

Her orders for the journey down to Steignton were prompt. Mrs. Pagnell had an engagement at the house of Lady Staines for the next day to meet titles and celebrities, and it precluded her comprehension of the project. She begged to have the journey postponed. She had pledged her word, she said.



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'To Mr. Morsfield?' said Aminta.

Her aunt was astounded.

'I did tell him we should be there, my dear.' 'He appears to have a pleasure in meeting you.' 'He is one of the real gentlemen of the land.'

'You correspond with him?'

'I may not be the only one.'

'Foolish aunty! How can you speak to me in that senseless way?' cried Aminta. 'You know the schemer he is, and that I have no protection from his advances unless I run the risk of bloodshed.'

'My dear Aminta, whenever I go into society, and he is present, I know I shall not be laughed at, or fall into that pit of one of their dead silences, worse for me to bear than titters and faces. It is their way of letting one feel they are of birth above us. Mr. Morsfield—purer blood than many of their highest titles—is always polite, always deferential; he helps me to feel I am not quite out of my element in the sphere I prefer. We shall be travelling alone?'

'Have you any fear?'

'Not if nothing happens. Might we not ask that Mr. Weyburn?'

'He has much work to do. He will not long be here. He is absent to-day.'

Mrs. Pagnell remarked: 'I must say he earns his money easily.'

Aminta had softened herself with the allusion to the shortness of his time with them. Her aunt's coarse hint, and the thought of his loss, and the banishment it would be to her all the way to Steignton, checked a sharp retort she could have uttered, but made it necessary to hide her eyes from sight. She went to her bedroom, and flung herself on the bed. Even so little as an unspoken defence of him shook her to floods of tears.

CHAPTER XVI

ALONG TWO ROADS TO STEIGNTON

Unaccountable resolutions, if impromptu and springing from the female breast, are popularly taken for caprices; and even when they divert the current of a history, and all the more when they are very small matters producing a memorable crisis. In this way



does a lazy world consign discussion to silence with the cynical closure. Man's hoary shrug at a whimsy sex is the reading of his enigma still.

But ask if she has the ordinary pumping heart in that riddle of a breast: and then, as the organ cannot avoid pursuit, we may get hold of it, and succeed in spelling out that she is consequent, in her fashion. She is a creature of the apparent moods and shifts and tempers only because she is kept in narrow confines, resembling, if you like, a wild cat caged. Aminta's journey down to Steignton turned the course of other fortunes besides her own; and she disdained the minor adventure it was, while dreaming it important; and she determined eagerly on going, without wanting to go; and it was neither from a sense of duty nor in a spirit of contrariety that she went. Nevertheless, with her heart in hand, her movements are traceably as rational as a soldier's before the enemy or a trader's matching his customer.



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The wish to look on Steignton had been spoken or sighed for during long years between Aminta and her aunt, until finally shame and anger clinched the subject. To look on Steignton for once was now Aminta's phrasing of her sudden resolve; it appeared as a holiday relief from recent worries, and it was an expedition with an aim, though she had but the coldest curiosity to see the place, and felt alien to it. Yet the thought, never to have seen Steignton! roused phantoms of dead wishes to drive the strange engine she was, faster than the living would have done. Her reason for haste was rationally founded on the suddenness of her resolve, which, seeing that she could not say she desired to go, seemed to come of an external admonition; and it counselled quick movements, lest her inspired obedience to the prompting should as abruptly breathe itself out. 'And in that case I shall never have seen Steignton at all,' she said, with perfect calmness, and did not attempt to sound her meaning.

She did know that she was a magazine of a great storage of powder. It banked inoffensively dry. She had forgiven her lord, owning the real nobleman he was in courtesy to women, whom his inherited ideas of them so quaintly minimized and reduced to pretty insect or tricky reptile. They, too, had the choice of being ultimately the one or the other in fact; the latter most likely.

If, however, she had forgiven her lord, the shattering of their union was the cost of forgiveness. In letting him stand high, as the lofty man she had originally worshipped, she separated herself from him, to feel that the humble she was of a different element, as a running water at a mountain's base. They are one in the landscape; they are far from one in reality. Aminta's pride of being chafed at the yoke of marriage.

Her aunt was directed to prepare for a start at an early hour the next morning. Mrs. Pagnell wrote at her desk, and fussed, and ordered the posting chariot, and bewailed herself submissively; for it was the Countess of Ormont speaking when Aminta delivered commands, and the only grievance she dared to mutter was 'the unexpectedness.' Her letters having been despatched, she was amazed in the late evening to hear Aminta give the footman orders for the chariot to be ready at the door an hour earlier than the hour previously appointed. She remonstrated. Aminta simply observed that it would cause less inconvenience to all parties. A suspicion of her aunt's proceedings was confirmed by the good woman's flustered state. She refrained from smiling.

She would have mustered courage to invite Matthew Weyburn as her escort, if he had been at hand. He was attending to his affairs with lawyers— mainly with his friend Mr. Abner. She studied map and gazetteer till late into the night. Giving her orders to the postillion on the pavement in the morning, she named a South-westerly direction out of London, and after entering the chariot, she received a case from one of the footmen.



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'What is that, my dear?' said Mrs. Pagnell.

Aminta unlocked and laid it open. A pair of pistols met Mrs. Pagnell's gaze.

'We shan't be in need of those things?' the lady said anxiously.

'One never knows, on the road, aunt.'

'Loaded? You wouldn't hesitate to fire; I'm sure.'

'At Mr. Morsfield himself, if he attempted to stop me.'

Mrs. Pagnell withdrew into her astonishment, and presently asked, in a tone of some indignation: 'Why did you mention Mr. Morsfield, Aminta?'

'Did you not write to him yesterday afternoon, aunt?'

'You read the addresses on my letters!'

'Did you not supply him with our proposed route and the time for starting?'

'Pistols!' exclaimed Mrs. Pagnell. 'One would fancy you think we are in the middle of the last century. Mr. Morsfield is a gentleman, not a highwayman.'

'He gives the impression of his being a madman.'

'The real madman is your wedded husband, Aminta, if wedding it was!'

It was too surely so, in Aminta's mind. She tried, by looking out of the window, to forget her companion. The dullness of the roads and streets opening away to flat fields combined with the postillion's unvarying jog to sicken her thoughts over the exile from London she was undergoing, and the chance that Matthew Weyburn might call at a vacant house next day, to announce his term of service to the earl, whom he had said he much wanted to see. He said it in his sharp manner when there was decision behind it. Several times after contemplating the end of her journey, and not perceiving any spot of pleasure ahead, an emotion urged her to turn back; for the young are acutely reasoning when their breasts advise them to quit a road where no pleasure beckons.

Unlike Matthew Weyburn, the tiptoe sparkle of a happy mind did not leap from her at wayside scenes, a sweep of grass, distant hills, clouds in flight. She required, since she suffered, the positive of events or blessings to kindle her glow.

Matthew Weyburn might call at the house. Would he be disappointed? He had preserved her letters of the old school-days. She had burnt his. But she had not burnt the letters of Mr. Morsfield; and she cared nothing for that man. Assuredly she merited



the stigma branding women as crack-brained. Yet she was not one of the fools; she could govern a household, and she liked work, she had the capacity for devotedness. So, therefore, she was a woman perverted by her position, and she shook her bonds in revolt from marriage. Imagining a fall down some suddenly spied chasm of her nature, she had a sisterly feeling for the women named sinful. At the same time, reflecting that they are sinful only with the sinful, she knelt thankfully at the feet of the man who had saved her from such danger. Tears threatened. They were a poor atonement for the burning of his younger letters. But



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not he—she was the sufferer, and she whipped up a sensation of wincing at the flames they fell to, and at their void of existence, committing sentimental idiocies worthy of a lovesick girl, consciously to escape the ominous thought, which her woman's perception had sown in her, that he too chafed at a marriage no marriage: was true in fidelity, not true through infidelity, as she had come to be. The thought implied misery for both. She entered a black desolation, with the prayer that he might not be involved, for his own sake: partly also on behalf of the sustaining picture the young schoolmaster at his task, merry among his dear boys, to trim and point them body and mind for their business in the world, painted for her a weariful prospect of the life she must henceforth drag along.

Is a woman of the plain wits common to numbers ever deceived in her perception of a man's feelings for her? Let her first question herself whether she respects him. If she does not, her judgement will go easily astray, intuition and observation are equally at fault, she has no key; he has charmed her blood, that is all. But if she respects him, she cannot be deceived; respect is her embrace of a man's character. Aminta's vision was clear. She had therefore to juggle with the fact revealed, that she might keep her heart from rushing out; and the process was a disintegration of her feminine principle of docility under the world's decrees. At each pause of her mental activity she was hurled against the state of marriage. Compassion for her blameless fellow in misery brought a deluge to sweep away institutions and landmarks.

But supposing the blest worst to happen, what exchange had she to bestow? Her beauty? She was reputed beautiful. It had made a madman of one man; and in her poverty of endowments to be generous with, she hovered over Mr. Morsfield like a cruel vampire, for the certification that she had a much-prized gift to bestow upon his rival.

But supposing it: she would then be no longer in the shiny garden of the flowers of wealth; and how little does beauty weigh as all aid to an active worker in the serious fighting world! She would be a kind of potted rose-tree under his arm, of which he must eventually tire.

A very cold moment came, when it seemed that even the above supposition, in the case of a woman who has been married, is shameful to her, a sin against her lover, and should be obliterated under floods of scarlet. For, if she has pride, she withers to think of pushing the most noble of men upon his generosity. And, further, if he is not delicately scrupulous, is there not something wanting in him? The very cold wave passed, leaving the sentence: better dream of being plain friends.



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Mrs. Pagnell had been quietly chewing her cud of the sullens, as was the way with her after a snub. She now resumed her gossip of the naughty world she knelt to and expected to see some day stricken by a bolt from overhead; containing, as it did, such wicked members as that really indefensible brazen Mrs. Amy May, who was only the daughter of a half-pay naval captain, and that Marquis of Collestou, who would, they say, decorate her with his title to-morrow, if her husband were but somewhere else. She spread all sorts of report, about Mr. Morsfield, and he was honour itself in his reserve about her. 'Depend upon it, Aminta—he was not more than a boy then, and they say she aimed at her enfranchisement by plotting the collision, for his Yorkshire revenues are immense, and he is, you know, skilful in the use of arms, and Captain May has no resources whatever: penury! no one cares to speculate how they contrive! —but while that dreadful duelling—and my lord as bad as any in his day-exists, depend upon it, an unscrupulous good-looking woman has as many lives for her look of an eye or lift of a finger as a throned Ottoman Turk on his divan.'

Aminta wished to dream. She gave her aunt a second dose, and the lady relapsed again.

Power to dream had gone. She set herself to look at roadside things, cottage gardens, old housewives in doorways, gaffer goodman meeting his crony on the path, groups of boys and girls. She would take the girls, Matthew Weyburn the boys. She had lessons to give to girls, she had sympathy, pity, anticipation. That would be a life of happy service. It might be a fruitful trial of the system he proposed, to keep the boys and girls in company as much as possible, both at lessons and at games. His was the larger view. Her lord's view appeared similar to that of her aunt's 'throned Ottoman Turk on his divan.' Matthew Weyburn believed in the bettering of the world; Lord Ormont had no belief like it.

Presently Mrs. Pagnell returned to the charge, and once more she was nipped, and irritated to declare she had never known her niece's temper so provoking. Aminta was launching a dream of a lass she had seen in a field, near a white hawthorn, standing upright, her left arm aloft round the pole of a rake, the rim of her bonnet tipped on her forehead; an attitude of a rustic.

Britannia with helmet heeling at dignity. The girl's eyes hung to the passing chariot, without movement of her head. It was Aminta who looked back, and she saw the girl looking away. Among the superior dames and damsels she had seen, there was not one to match that figure for stately air, gallant ease, and splendour of pose. Matthew Weyburn would have admired the girl. Aminta did better than envy, she cast off the last vestiges of her bitter ambition to be a fine lady, and winged into the bosom of the girl, and not shyly said 'yes' to Matthew Weyburn, and to herself, deep in herself: 'A maid has no need to be shy.' Hardly



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blushing, she walks on into the new life beside him, and hears him say: 'I in my way, you in yours; we are equals, the stronger for being equals,' and she quite agrees, and she gives him the fuller heart for his not requiring her to be absorbed—she is the braver mate for him. Does not that read his meaning? Happiest of the girls of earth, she has divined it at once, from never having had the bitter ambition to be a slave, that she might wear rich tissues; and let herself be fettered, that she might loll in idleness; lose a soul to win a title; escape commonplace to discover it ghastlier under cloth of gold, and the animal crowned, adored, fattened, utterly served, in the class called by consent of human society the Upper.

Reason whispered a reminder of facts to her.

'But I am not the Countess of Ormont!' she said. She felt herself the girl, her sensations were so intensely simple.

Proceeding to an argument, that the earl did not regard her as the Countess of Ormont, or the ceremony at the British Embassy as one serious and binding, she pushed her reason too far: sweet delusion waned. She waited for some fresh scene to revive it.

Aminta sat unwittingly weaving her destiny.

While she was thus engaged, a carriage was rolling on the more westerly road down to Steignton. Seated in it were Lady Charlotte Eglett and Matthew Weyburn. They had met at Arthur Abner's office the previous day. She went there straight from Lord Ormont's house-agent and upholsterer, to have a queer bit of thunderous news confirmed, that her brother was down at Steignton, refurnishing the house, and not for letting. She was excited: she treated Arthur Abner's closed-volume reticence as a corroboration of the house-agent's report, and hearing Weyburn speak of his anxiety to see the earl immediately, in order to get release from his duties, proposed a seat in her carriage; for down Steignton way she meant to go, if only as excuse for a view of the old place. She kept asking what Lord Ormont wanted down at Steignton refurnishing the house, and not to let it! Her evasions of answers that, plain speculation would supply were quaint. 'He hasn't my feeling for Steignton. He could let it— I couldn't. Sacrilege to me to have a tenant in my old home where I was born. He's furnishing to raise his rent. His country won't give him anything to do, so he turns miser. That's my brother Rowsley's way of taking on old age.'

Her brother Rowsley might also be showing another sign of his calamitous condition. She said to Weyburn, in the carriage, that her brother Rowsley might like having his hair clipped by the Philistine woman; which is one of the ways of strong men to confess themselves ageing. 'Not,' said she, with her usual keen justness 'not that I've, a word against Delilah. I look upon her as a patriot; she dallied and she used the scissors on



behalf of her people. She wasn't bound to Samson in honour, —liked a strong man, probably enough. She proved she liked her country better. The Jews wrote the story of it, so there she stands for posterity to pelt her, poor wretch.'



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'A tolerably good analogy for the story of men and women generally,' said Weyburn.

'Ah, well, you've a right to talk; you don't run miauling about women. It's easy to be squashy on that subject. As for the Jews, I don't go by their history, but now they're down I don't side with the Philistines, or Christians. They're good citizens, and they've got Samson in the brain, too. That comes of persecution, a hard education. They beat the world by counting in the head. That's because they've learnt the value of fractions. Napoleon knew it in war, when he looked to the boots and great-coats of his men; those were his fractions. Lord Ormont thinks he had too hard-and-fast a system for the battle-field.'

'A greater strategist than tactician, my lady? It may be,' said Weyburn, smiling at her skips.

'Massing his cannon to make a big hole for his cavalry, my brother says; and weeding his infantry for the Imperial Guard he postponed the moment to use.'

'At Moskowa?'

'Waterloo. I believe Lord Ormont would—there! his country's lost him, and chose it. They'll have their day for repentance yet. What a rapture to have a thousand horsemen following you! I suppose there never was a man worthy of the name who roared to be a woman. I know I could have shrieked half my life through to have been born male. It's no matter now. When we come to this hateful old age, we meet: no, we're no sex then—we're dry sticks. I'll tell you: my Olmer doctor—that's an impudent fellow who rode by staring into my carriage. The window's down. He could see without pushing his hat in.'

Weyburn looked out after a man cantering on.

'A Mr. Morsfield,' he said. 'I thought it was he when I saw him go by. I've met him at the fencing-rooms. He's one of the violent fencers, good for making his point, if one funks an attack.'

'That man Morsfield, is it? I wonder what he's doing on the road here. He goes over London boasting—hum, nothing to me. But he'll find Lord Ormont's arm can protect a poor woman, whatever she is. He'd have had it before, only Lord Ormont shuns a scandal. I was telling you, my Olmer doctor forbade horse-riding, and my husband raised a noise like one of my turkeys on the wing; so I've given up the saddle, to quiet him. I guessed. I went yesterday morning to my London physician. He sounded me, pushed out his mouth and pulled down his nose, recommended avoidance of excitement. "Is it heart?" I said. He said it was heart. That was the best thing an old woman could hear. He said, when he saw I wasn't afraid, it was likely to be quick; no doctors, no nurses and daily bulletins for inquirers, but just the whites of the eyes, the



laying-out, the undertaker, and the family-vault. That's one reason why I want to see Steignton before the blow that may fall any day, whether my brother Rowsley's there or no. But that Olmer doctor of mine, Causitt, Peter Causitt, shall pay me for being a liar or else an ignoramus when I told him he was to tell me bluntly the nature of my disease.'

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A horseman, in whom they recognized Mr. Morsfield, passed, clattering on the road behind them.

'Some woman here about,' Lady Charlotte muttered. Weyburn saw him joined by a cavalier, and the two consulted and pointed whips right and left.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

As well ask (women) how a battle-field concerns them!
Boys who can appreciate brave deeds are capable of doing them
Careful not to smell of his office
Chose to conceive that he thought abstractedly
Consign discussion to silence with the cynical closure
Convictions we store—wherewith to shape our destinies
Death is only the other side of the ditch
Didn't say a word No use in talking about feelings
Enthusiast, when not lyrical, is perilously near to boring
He took small account of the operations of the feelings
Her duel with Time
Hopeless task of defending a woman from a woman
I hate old age It changes you so
Ignorance roaring behind a mask of sarcasm
Men bore the blame, though the women were rightly punished
Never nurse an injury, great or small
No love can be without jealousy
Old age is a prison wall between us and young people
Orderliness, from which men are privately exempt
People were virtuous in past days: they counted their sinners
Professional Puritans
Regularity of the grin of dentistry
That pit of one of their dead silences
The beat of a heart with a dread like a shot in it
The good life gone lives on in the mind
The shots hit us behind you
The spending, never harvesting, world
The terrible aggregate social woman
Venus of nature was melting into a Venus of art

[The End]

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