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by George Meredith
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CHAPTER VI.

IN A MOOD OF LANGUOR

Up in Aminta's amber dressing-room; Mrs. Nargett Pagnell alluded sadly to the long month of separation, and begged her niece to let her have in plain words an exact statement of the present situation; adding, "Items will do." Thereupon she slipped into prattle and held the field.

She was the known, worthy, good, intolerable woman whom the burgess turns out for his world in regiments, that do and look and all but step alike;

and they mean well, and have conventional worships and material aspirations, and very peculiar occult refinements, with a blind head and a haphazard gleam of acuteness, impressive to acquaintances, convincing themselves that they impersonate sagacity. She had said this, done that; and it was, by proof, Providence consenting, the right thing. A niece, written down in her girlhood, because of her eyes and her striking air and excellent deportment, as mate for a nobleman, marries, him before she is out of her teens. "I said, She shall be a countess." A countess she is. Providence does not comply with our predictions in order to stultify us. Admitting the position of affairs for the moment as extraordinary, we are bound by what has happened to expect they will be conformable in the end. Temporarily warped, we should say of them.

She could point to the reason: it was Lord Ormont's blunt misunderstanding of her character. The burgess's daughter was refining to an appreciation of the exquisite so rapidly that she could criticize patricians. My lord had never forgiven her for correcting him in his pronunciation of her name by marriage. Singular indeed; but men, even great men, men of title, are so, some of them, whom you could least suspect of their being so. He would speak the "g" in Nargett, and he, declined--after a remonstrance he declined--to pass Pagnell under the cedilla. Lord Ormont spoke the name like a man hating it, or an English rustic: "Nargett Pagnell," instead, of the soft and elegant "Naryett Pagnell," the only true way of speaking it; and she had always taken that pronunciation of her name for a test of people's breeding. The expression of his lordship's countenance under correction was memorable. Naturally, in those honeymoon days, the young Countess of Ormont sided with her husband the earl; she declared that her aunt had never dreamed of the cedilla before the expedition to Spain. When, for example, Alfred Nargett Pagnell had a laughing remark, which Aminta in her childhood must have heard: "We rhyme with spaniel!"

That was the secret of Lord Ormont's prepossession against Aminta's aunt; and who can tell? perhaps of much of his behaviour to the beautiful young wife he at least admired, sincerely admired, though he caused her to hang her head--cast a cloud on the head so dear to him!

Otherwise there was no interpreting his lordship. To think of herself as personally disliked by a nobleman stupefied Mrs. Pagnell, from her just expectation of reciprocal dealings in high society; for she confessed herself a fly to a title. Where is the shame, if titles are created to attract? Elsewhere than in that upper circle, we may anticipate hard bargains; the widow of a solicitor had not to learn it. But when a distinguished member and ornament of the chosen seats above blew cold upon their gesticulatory devotee, and was besides ungrateful; she was more than commonly assured of his being, as she called him, "a sphinx." His behaviour to his legally wedded wife confirmed the charge.

She checked her flow to resume the question. "So, then, where are we now? He allows you liberally for pin-money in addition to your own small independent income. Satisfaction with that would warrant him to suppose his whole duty done by you."

"We are where we were, aunty; the month has made no change," said Aminta in languor.

"And you as patient as ever?"

"I am supposed to have everything a woman can require."

"Can he possibly think it? And I have to warn you, child, that lawyers are not so absolving as the world is with some of the ladies Lord Ormont allows you to call your friends. I have been hearing--it is not mere airy tales one hears from lawyers about cases in Courts of Law. Tighten your lips as you like; I say nothing to condemn or reflect on Mrs. Lawrence Finchley. I have had my eyes a little opened, that is all. Oh, I know my niece Aminta, when it's a friend to stand by; but our position--thanks to your inscrutable lord and master--demands of us the utmost scrupulousness, or it soon becomes a whirl and scandal flying about, and those lawyers picking up and putting together. I have had a difficulty to persuade them!... and my own niece! whom I saw married at the British Embassy in Madrid, as I take good care to tell everybody; for it was my doing; I am the responsible person! and by an English Protestant clergyman, to all appearance able to walk erect in and out of any of these excellent new Life Assurance offices they are starting for the benefit of widows and orphans, and deceased within six days of the ceremony--if ceremony one may call the hasty affair in those foreign places. My dear, the instant I heard it I had a presentiment, 'All has gone well up to now.' I remember murmuring the words. Then your letter, received in that smelly Barcelona: Lord Ormont was carrying you off to Granada--a dream of my infancy! It may not have been his manoeuvre, but it was the beginning of his manoeuvres."

Aminta shuddered. "And tra-la-la, and castanets, and my Cid! my Cid! and the Alhambra, the Sierra Nevada, and ay di me, Alhama; and Boabdil el Chico and el Zagal and Fray Antonio Agapida!" She flung out the rattle, yawning, with her arms up and her head back, in the posture of a woman wounded. One of her aunt's chance shots had traversed her breast, flashing at her the time, the scene, the husband, intensest sunniness on sword-edges of shade,--and now the wedded riddle; illusion dropping mask, romance in its anatomy, cold English mist. Ah, what a background is the present when we have the past to the fore! That filmy past is diaphanous on heaving ribs.

She smiled at the wide-eyed little gossip. "Don't speak of manoeuvres, dear aunt. And we'll leave Granada to the poets. I'm tired. Talk of our own people, on your side and my father's, and as much as you please of the Pagnell-Pagnells, they refresh me. Do they go on marrying?"

"Why, my child, how could they go on without it?"

Aminta pressed her hands at her eyelids. "Oh, me!" she sighed, feeling the tear come with a sting from checked laughter. "But there are marriages, aunty, that don't go on, though Protestant clergymen officiated. Leave them unnoticed, I have really nothing to tell."

"You have not heard anything of Lady Eglett?"

"Lady Charlotte Eglett? No syllable. Or wait--my lord's secretary was with her at Olmer; approved by her, I have to suppose."

"There, my dear, I say again I do dread that woman, if she can make a man like Lord Ormont afraid of her. And no doubt she is of our old aristocracy. And they tell me she is coarse in her conversation--like a man. Lawyers tell me she is never happy but in litigation. Years back, I am given to understand, she did not set so particularly good an example. Lawyers hear next to everything. I am told she lifted her horsewhip on a gentleman once, and then put her horse at him and rode him down. You will say, the sister of your husband. No; not to make my niece a countess, would I, if I had known the kind of family! Then one asks, Is she half as much afraid of him? In that case, no wonder they have given up meeting. Was formerly one of the Keepsake Beauties. Well, Lady Eglett, and Aminta, Countess of Ormont, will be in that Peerage, as they call it, let her only have her dues. My dear, I would--if I ever did--swear the woman is jealous."

"Of me, aunty!"

"I say more; I say again, it would be a good thing for somebody if somebody had his twitch of jealousy. Wives may be too meek. Cases and cases my poor Alfred read to me, where an ill-behaving man was brought to his senses by a clever little shuffle of the cards, and by the most innocent of wives. A kind of poison to him, of course; but there are poisons that cure. It might come into the courts; and the nearer the proofs the happier he in withdrawing from his charge and effecting a reconciliation. Short of guilt, of course. Men are so strange. Imagine now, if a handsome young woman were known to be admired rather more than enough by a good-looking gentleman near about her own age. Oh, I've no patience with, the man for causing us to think and scheme! Only there are men who won't be set right unless we do. My husband used to say, change is such a capital thing in life's jogtrot; that men find it refreshing if we now and then, reverse the order of our pillion-riding for them. A spiritless woman in a wife is what they bear least of all. Anything rather. Is Mr. Morsfield haunting Mrs. Lawrence Finchley's house as usual?"

Aminta's cheeks unrolled their deep damask rose at the abrupt intrusion of the name. "I meet him there."

"Lord Adderwood, Sir John Randeller; and the rest?"

"Two or three times a week."

"And the lady, wife of the captain, really a Lady Fair--Mrs.... month of May: so I have to get at it."

"She may be seen there."

"Really a contrast, when you two are together! As to reputation, there

is an exchange of colours. Those lawyers hold the keys of the great world, and a naughty world it is, I fear--with exceptions, who are the salt, but don't taste so much. I can't help enjoying the people at Mrs. Lawrence Finchley's. I like to feel I can amuse them, as they do me. One puzzles for what they say--in somebody's absence, I mean. They must take Lord Ormont for a perfect sphinx; unless they are so silly as to think they may despise him, or suppose him indifferent. Oh, that upper class! It's a garden, and we can't help pushing to enter it; and fair flowers, indeed, but serpents too, like the tropics. It tries us more than anything else in the world--well, just as good eating tries the constitution. He ought to know it and feel it, and give his wife all the protection of his name, instead of--not that he denies: I have brought him to that point; he cannot deny it with me. But not to present her--to shun the Court; not to introduce her to his family, to appear ashamed of her! My darling Aminta, a month of absence for reflection on your legally-wedded husband's conduct increases my astonishment. For usually men old enough to be the grandfathers of their wives--"

"Oh, pray, aunty, pray, pray!" Aminta cried, and her body writhed. "No more to-night. You mean well, I am sure. Let us wait. I shall sleep, perhaps, if I go to bed early. I dare say I am spiritless--not worth more than I get. I gave him the lead altogether; he keeps it. In everything else he is kind; I have all the luxuries--enough to loathe them. Kiss me and say good night."

Aminta made it imperative by rising. Her aunt stood up, kissed, and exclaimed, "I tell you you are a queenly creature, not to be treated as any puny trollop of a handmaid. And although he is a great nobleman, he is not to presume to behave any longer, my dear, as if your family had no claim on his consideration. My husband, Alfred Pagnell, would have laid that before him pretty quick. You are the child of the Farrells and the Solers, both old families; on your father's side you are linked with the oldest nobility in Europe. It flushes one to think of it! Your grandmother, marrying Captain Algernon Farrell, was the legitimate daughter of a Grandee of Spain; as I have told Lord Ormont often, and I defy him to equal that for a romantic marriage in the annals of his house, or boast of bluer blood. Again, the Solers--"

"We take the Solers for granted, aunty, good night."

"Commoners, if you like; but established since the Conquest. That is, we trace the pedigree. And to be treated, even by a great nobleman, as if we were stuff picked up out of the ditch! I declare, there are times when I sit and think and boil. Is it chivalrous, is it generous--is it, I say, decent--is it what Alfred would have called a fair fulfilment of a pact, for your wedded husband--? You may close my mouth! But he pretends to be chivalrous and generous, and he has won a queen any wealthy gentleman in England--I know of one, if not two--would be proud to have beside him in equal state; and what is he to her? He is an extinguisher. Or is it the very meanest miserliness, that he may keep you all to himself? There we are again! I say he is an unreadable sphinx."

Aminta had rung the bell for her maid. Mrs. Pagnell could be counted on for drawing in her tongue when the domestics were near.

A languor past delivery in sighs was on the young woman's breast. She could have heard without a regret that the heart was to cease beating. Had it been downright misery she would have looked about her with less of her exanimate glassiness. The unhappy have a form of life: until they are worn out, they feel keenly. She felt nothing. The blow to her pride of station and womanhood struck on numbed sensations. She could complain that the blow was not heavier.

A letter lying in her jewel-box called her to read it, for the chance of some slight stir. The contents were known. The signature of Adolphus Morsfield had a new meaning for her eyes, and dashed her at her husband in a spasm of revolt and wrath against the man exposing her to these letters, which a motion of her hand could turn to blood, and abstention from any sign maintained in a Satanic whisper, saying, "Here lies one way of solving the riddle." It was her husband who drove her to look that way.

The look was transient, and the wrath: she could not burn. A small portion of contempt lodged in her mind to shadow husbands precipitating women on their armoury for a taste of vengeance. Women can always be revenged--so speedily, so completely: they have but to dip. Husbands driving wives to taste their power execrate the creature for her fall deep downward. They are forgetful of causes.

Does it matter? Aminta's languor asked. The letter had not won a reply. Thought of the briefest of replies was a mountain of effort, and she moaned at her nervelessness in body and mind. To reply, to reproach the man, to be flame--an image of herself under the form she desired--gave her a momentary false energy, wherein the daring of the man, whose life was at a loss for the writing of this letter, hung lighted. She had therewith a sharp vision of his features, repellent in correctness, Greek in lines, with close eyes, hollow temples, pressed lips--a face indicating the man who can fling himself on a die. She had heard tales of women and the man. Some had loved him, report said. Here were words to say that he loved her. They might, poor man, be true. Otherwise she had never been loved.

Memory had of late been paying visits to a droopy plant in the golden summer drought on a gorgeous mid-sea island, and had taken her on board to refresh her with voyages, always bearing down full sail on a couple of blissful schools, abodes of bloom and briny vigour, sweet merriment, innocent longings, dreams the shyest, dreams the mightiest. At night before sleep, at morn before rising, often during day, and when vexed or when dispirited, she had issued her command for the voyage. Sheer refreshment followed, as is ever the case if our vessel carries no freight of hopes. There could be no hopes. It was forgotten that they had ever been seriously alive. But it carried an admiration. Now, an admiration may endure, and this one had been justified all round. The figure heroic, the splendid, active youth, hallowed Aminta's past. The past of a bitterly humiliated Aminta was a garden in the coming kiss of

sunset, with that godlike figure of young manhood to hallow it. There he stayed, perpetually assuring her of his triumphs to come.

She could have no further voyages. Ridicule convulsed her home of refuge. For the young soldier-hero, to be unhorsed by misfortune, was one thing; but the meanness of the ambition he had taken in exchange for the thirst of glory, accused his nature. He so certainly involved her in the burlesque of the transformation that she had to quench memory.

She was, therefore, having smothered a good part of herself, accountably languid--a condition alternating with fire in Aminta; and as Mr. Morsfield's letter supplied the absent element, her needy instinct pushed her to read his letter through. She had not yet done that with attention.

Whether a woman loves a man or not, he is her lover if he dare tell her he loves her, and is heard with attention. Aware that the sentences were poison, she summoned her constitutional antagonism to the mad step proposed, so far nullifying the virus as to make her shrink from the madness. Even then her soul cried out to her husband, Who drives me to read? or rather, to brood upon what she read. The brooding ensued, was the thirst of her malady. The best antidote she could hit on was the writer's face. Yet it expressed him, his fire and his courage--gifts she respected in him, found wanting in herself. Read by Lord Ormont, this letter would mean a deadly thing.

Aminta did her lord the justice to feel sure of him, that with her name bearing the superscription, it might be left on her table, and would not have him to peruse it. If he manoeuvred, it was never basely. Despite resentment, her deepest heart denied his being indifferent either to her honour or his own in relation to it. He would vindicate both at a stroke, for a sign. Nevertheless, he had been behaving cruelly. She charged on him the guilt of the small preludes, archeries, anglings, veilings, evasions, all done with the eyelids and the mute of the lips, or a skirmisher word or a fan's flourish, and which, intended to pique the husband rather than incite the lover, had led Mrs. Lawrence Finchley to murmur at her ear, in close assembly, without a distinct designation of Mr. Morsfield, "Dangerous man to play little games with!" It had brought upon her this letter of declaration, proposal, entreaty.

This letter was the man's life in her hands, and safe, of course. But surely it was a proof that the man loved her?

Aminta was in her five-and-twentieth year; when the woman who is uncertain of the having been loved, and she reputed beautiful, desirable, is impelled by a sombre necessity to muse on a declaration, and nibble at an idea of a test. If "a dangerous man to play little games with," he could scarcely be dangerous to a woman having no love for him at all. It meant merely that he would soon fall to writing letters like this, and he could not expect an answer to it. But her heart really thanked him, and wished the poor gentleman to take its dumb response as his reward, for being the one sole one who had loved her.

Aminta dwelt on "the one sole one." Lord Ormont's treatment had detached her from any belief in love on his part; and the schoolboy, now ambitions to become a schoolmaster, was behind the screen unlikely to be lifted again by a woman valuing her pride of youth, though he had--behold our deceptions!--the sympathetic face entirely absent from that of Mr. Adolphus Morsfield, whom the world would count quite as handsome--nay, it boasted him. He enjoyed the reputation of a killer of ladies. Women have odd tastes, Aminta thought, and examined the gentleman's handwriting. It pleased her better. She studied it till the conventional phrases took a fiery hue, and came at her with an invasive rush.

The letter was cast back into the box, locked up; there an end to it, or no interdiction of sleep.

Sleep was a triumph. Aminta's healthy frame rode her over petty agitations of a blood uninflamed, as lightly as she swam the troubled sea-waters her body gloried to cleave. She woke in the morning peaceful and mildly reflective, like one who walks across green meadows. Only by degrees, by glimpses, was she drawn to remember the trotting, cantering, galloping, leaping of an active heart during night. We cannot, men or woman, control the heart in sleep at night. There had been wild leapings. Night will lead an unsatisfied heart of a woman, by way of sleep, to scale black mountains, jump jagged chasms. Sleep is a horse that laughs at precipices and abysses. We bid women, moreover, be all heart. They are to cultivate their hearts, pay much heed to their hearts. The vast realm of feeling is open to these appointed keepers of the sanctuary household, who may be withering virgins, may be childless matrons, may be unhusbanded wives. Wandering in the vast realm which they are exhorted to call their own, for the additional attractiveness it gives them, an unsatisfied heart of woman will somewhat audaciously cross the borderland a single step into the public road of the vast realm of thinking. Once there, and but a single step on the road, she is a rebel against man's law for her sex. Nor is it urgent on her that she should think defiantly in order to feel herself the rebel. She may think submissively; with a heart (the enlarged, the scientifically plumped, the pasture of epicurean man), with her coveted heart in revolt, and from the mere act of thinking at all.

Aminta reviewed perforce, dead against her will, certain of the near-to-happiness ratings over-night. She thinned her lips, and her cheeks glowed. An arm, on the plea of rescuing, had been round her. The choice now offered her was, to yield to softness or to think. She took the latter step, the single step of an unaccustomed foot, which women educated simply to feet, will, upon extreme impulsion, take; and it held a candle in a windy darkness. She saw no Justice there. The sensational immensity touched sublime, short of that spirit of Justice required for the true sublime. And void of Justice; what a sunless place is any realm! Infants, the male and the female alike, first begin to know they feel when it is refused them. When they know they feel, they have begun to reflect. The void of Justice is a godless region. Women, to whom the solitary thought has come as a blown candle, illumining the fringes of their storm, ask themselves whether they are God's creatures or man's.

The question deals a sword-stroke of division between them and their human masters. Young women, animated by the passions their feeling bosoms of necessity breed, and under terror discover, do not distinguish an abstract justice from a concrete. They are of the tribe too long hereditarily enslaved to conceive an abstract. So it is with them, that their God is the God of the slave, as it is with all but the bravest of boys. He is a Thing to cry to, a Punisher, not much of a Supporter--the Biblical Hebrew's right reading of Nature, favouring man, yet prompt to confound him, and with woman for the instrument of vengeance. By such a maze the blindfolded, are brought round to see Justice on earth. If women can only believe in some soul of justice, they will feel they belong to God--of the two; and the peril for them then is, that they will set the one incomprehensible Power in opposition to the other, urging them unsatisfied natures to make secret appeal away from man and his laws altogether, at the cost of losing clear sight of the God who shines in thought. It is a manner whereby the desperately harried among these creatures of the petted heart arrive upon occasion at an agreeable, almost reposeful, contemplation of the reverse of God.

There is little pleasure to be on the lecture-rostrum for a narrator sensible to the pulses of his audience. Justice compels at times. In truth, there are times when the foggy obscurities of the preacher are by comparison broad daylight beside the whirling loose tissues of a woman unexplained. Aminta was one born to prize rectitude, to walk on the traced line uprightly; and while the dark rose overflowed the soft brown of her cheeks, under musings upon her unlicensed heart's doings overnight, she not only pleaded for woeful creatures of her sex burdened as she and erring, she weighed them in the scales with men, and put her heart where Justice pointed, sending men to kick aloft.

Her husband, the man-riddle: she was unable to rede or read him. Her will could not turn him; nor her tongue combat; nor was it granted her to pique the mailed veteran. Every poor innocent little bit of an art had been exhausted. Her title was Lady Ormont her condition actually slave. A luxuriously established slave, consorting with a singularly enfranchised set,--as, for instance, Mrs. Lawrence Finchley and Lord Adderwood; Sir John Randeller and Lady Staines; Mrs. May, Amy May, notorious wife of a fighting captain, the loneliest of blondes; and other ladies, other gentlemen, Mr. Morsfield in the list, paired or not yet paired: gossip raged. Aminta was of a disposition too generously cordial to let her be the rigorous critic of people with whom she was in touch. But her mind knew relief when she recollected that her humble little school-mate, Selina Collect, who had suffered on her behalf in old days, was coming up to her from the Suffolk coast on a visit for a week. However much a slave and an unloved woman, she could be a constant and protecting friend. Besides, Lord Ormont was gracious to little Selina. She thought of his remarks about the modest-minded girl after first seeing her. From that she struck upon a notion of reserves of humaneness being in him, if she might find the path to them: and thence, fortified by the repose her picture of little Selina's merit had bestowed, she sprang to the idea of valiancy, that she would woo him to listen to her, without inflicting a scene. He had been a listening lover, seeming lover, once, later than the Granada sunsets. The letter in her jewel-box

urged Aminta to clear her conscience by some means, for leaving it unburnt.

CHAPTER VII.

EXHIBITS EFFECTS OF A PRATTLER'S DOSES

The rules in Lord Ormont's household assisted to shelter him for some hours of the day from the lady who was like a blast of sirocco under his roof. He had his breakfast alone, as Lady Charlotte had it at Olmer; a dislike of a common table in the morning was a family trait with both. At ten o'clock the secretary arrived, and they were shut up together. At the luncheon table Aminta usually presided. If my lord dined at home, he had by that time established an equanimity rendering, his constant civility to Mrs. Pagnell less arduous. The presence of a woman of tongue, perpetually on the spring to gratify him and win him, was among the burdens he bore for his Aminta.

Mrs. Pagnell soon perceived that the secretary was in favour. My lord and this Mr. Weyburn had their pet themes of conversation, upon which the wary aunt of her niece did not gaze like the wintry sun with the distant smile her niece displayed over discussions concerning military biographies, Hannibal's use of his elephants and his Numidian horse, the Little St. Bernard, modern artillery, ancient slingers, English and Genoese bowmen, Napoleon's tactics, his command to the troopers to "give point," and English officers' neglect of sword exercise, and the "devil of a day" Old England is to have on a day to come. My lord connected our day of trial with India. Mrs. Pagnell assumed an air of studious interest; she struck in to give her niece a lead, that Lord Ormont might know his countess capable of joining the driest of subjects occupying exalted minds. Aminta did not follow her; and she was extricated gallantly by the gentlemen in turn.

The secretary behaved with a pretty civility. Aminta shook herself to think tolerantly of him when he, after listening to the suggestion, put interrogatively, that we should profit by Hannibal's example and train elephants to serve as a special army corps for the perfect security of our priceless Indian Empire, instanced the danger likely to result from their panic fear of cannon, and forbore to consult Lord Ormont's eye.

Mrs. Pagnell knew that she had put her foot into it; but women advised of being fools in what they say, are generally sustained by their sense of the excellent motive which impelled them. Even to the Countess of Ormont, she could have replied, "We might have given them a higher idea of us"--if, that meant, the Countess of Ormont had entered the field beside her, to the exclusion of a shrinking Aminta. She hinted as much subsequently, and Aminta's consciousness of the truth was touched. The young schoolmaster's company sat on her spirits, deadened her vocabulary. Her aunt spoke of passing the library door and hearing the two gentlemen loudly laughing. It seemed subserviency on the fallen young hero's part.

His tastes were low. He frequented the haunts of boxing men; her lord informed her of his having made, or of his making, matches to run or swim or walk certain distances against competitors or within a given time. He had also half a dozen boys or more in tow, whom he raced out of town on Sundays; a nucleus of the school he intended to form.

But will not Achilles become by comparison a common rushlight where was a blazing torch, if we see him clap a clown's cap on the head whose golden helm was fired by Pallas?

Nay, and let him look the hero still: all the more does he point finger on his meanness of nature.

Turning to another, it is another kind of shame that a woman feels, if she consents to an exchange of letters--shameful indeed, but not such a feeling of deadly sickness as comes with the humiliating view of an object of admiration degraded. Bad she may be; and she may be deceived, vilely treated, in either case. And what is a woman's pride but the staff and banner of her soul, beyond all gifts? He who wounds it cannot be forgiven--never!--he has killed the best of her. Aminta found herself sliding along into the sentiment, that the splendid idol of a girl's worship is, if she discover him in the lapse of years as an infinitesimally small one, responsible for the woman's possible reckless fit of giddiness. And she could see her nonsense; she could not correct it. Lines of the letters under signature of Adolphus were phosphorescent about her: they would recur; and she charged their doing so on the discovered meanness of the girl's idol. Her wicked memory was caused by his having plunged her low.

Mrs. Pagnell performed the offices of attention to Mr. Weyburn in lieu of the countess, who seemed to find it a task to sit at the luncheon table with him, when Lady Ormont was absent. "Just peeped in," she said as she entered the library, "to see if all was comfortable;" and gossip ensued, not devoid of object. She extracted an astonishingly smooth description of Lady Charlotte. Weyburn was brightness in speaking of the much-misunderstood lady. "She's one of the living women of the world."

"You are sure you don't mean one of the worldly women?" Mrs. Pagnell rejoiced.

"She has to be known to be liked," he owned.

"And you were, one hears, among the favoured?"

"I can scarcely pretend to that, ma'am."

"You were recommended."

"Lady Charlotte is devoted to her brother."

Mrs. Pagnell's bosom heaved. "How strange Lord Ormont is! One would suppose, with his indignation at the country for its treatment of him, admirers would be welcome. Oh dear, no! that is not the way. On board

the packet, on our voyage to Spain, my niece in her cabin, imploring mercy of Neptune, as they say, I heard of Lord Ormont among the passengers. I could hardly credit my ears. For I had been hearing of him from my niece ever since her return from a select establishment for the education of young ladies, not much more than a morning's drive out of London, though Dover was my residence. She had got a hero! It was Lord Ormont! Lord Ormont! all day: and when the behaviour of the country to him became notorious, Aminta--my niece the countess--she could hardly contain herself. A secret:--I promised her--it's not known to Lord Ormont himself:--a printed letter in a metropolitan paper, copied into the provincial papers, upholding him for one of the greatest of our patriot soldiers and the saviour of India, was the work of her hands. You would, I am sure, think it really well written. Meeting him on deck --the outline of the coast of Portugal for an introductory subject, our Peninsular battles and so forth--I spoke of her enthusiasm. The effect was, to cut off all communication between us. I had only to appear, Lord Ormont vanished. I said to myself, this is a character. However, the very mention of him to my niece, as one of the passengers on board--medicine, miraculous! She was up in half an hour, out pacing the deck before evening, hardly leaning on my arm, and the colour positively beginning to show on her cheeks again. He fled, of course. I had prepared her for his eccentricities. Next morning she was out by herself. In the afternoon Lord Ormont strode up to us his--military step--and most courteously requested the honour of an introduction. I had broken the ice at last; from that moment he was cordiality itself, until--I will not say, until he had called her his own--a few little misunderstandings!--not with his countess. You see, a resident aunt is translated mother-in-law by husbands; though I spare them pretty frequently; I go to friends, they travel. Here in London she must have a duenna. The marriage at Madrid, at the Embassy:--well, perhaps it was a step for us, for commoners, though we rank with the independent. Has her own little pin-money--an inheritance. Perhaps Lady Eglett gives the world her version. She may say, there was aiming at station. I reply, never was there a more whole-hearted love-match! Absolutely the girl's heart has been his from the period of her school-days. Oh! a little affair--she was persecuted by a boy at a neighbouring school. Her mistress wrote me word--a very determined Romeo young gentleman indeed--quite alarmed about him. In the bud! I carried her off on the spot, and snapped it effectually. Warned he meant to be desperate, I kept her away from my house at Dover four months, place to place; and I did well. I heard on my return, that a youth, answering to the schoolmistress's description of him, had been calling several times, the first two months and longer. You have me alluding to these little nonsensical nothings, because she seemed born to create violent attachments, even at that early day; and Lady Eglett--Lady Charlotte Eglett may hear; for there is no end to them, and impute them to her, when really!--can she be made responsible for eyes innocent of the mischief they appear destined to do? But I am disturbing you in your work."

"You are very good, ma'am," said the ghost of the determined young gentleman.

"A slight cold, have you?" Mrs. Pagnell asked solicitously.

"Dear me, no!" he gave answer with a cleared throat.

In charging him with more than he wanted to carry, she supplied him with particulars he had wanted to know; and now he asked himself what could be the gain of any amount of satisfied curiosity regarding a married Aminta. She slew my lord on board a packet-boat; she bears the arrows that slay. My lord married her where the first English chaplain was to be found; that is not wonderful either. British Embassy, Madrid! Weyburn believed the ceremony to have been performed there: at the same time, he could hear Lady Charlotte's voice repeating with her varied intonation Mrs. Pagnell's impressive utterances; and he could imagine how the somewhat silly duenna aunt, so penetrable in her transparent artifices, struck emphasis on the incredulity of people inclined to judge of the reported ceremony by Lord Ormont's behaviour to his captive.

How explain that strange matter? But can there be a gain in trying to sound it? Weyburn shuffled it away. Before the fit of passion seized him, he could turn his eager mind from anything which had not a perceptible point of gain, either for bodily strength or mental acquisition, or for money, too, now that the school was growing palpable as an infant in arms and agape for the breast. Thought of gain, and the bent to pursue it, is the shield of Athene over young men in the press of the seductions. He had to confess his having lost some bits of himself by reason of his meditations latterly; and that loss, if we let it continue a space, will show in cramp at the wrist, logs on the legs, a wheezy wind, for any fellow vowed to physical trials of strength and skill. It will show likewise in the brain beating broken wings-- inability to shoot a thought up out of the body for half a minute. And, good Lord! how quickly the tight-strong fellow crumbles, when once the fragmentary disintegration has begun! Weyburn cried out on a heart that bounded off at prodigal gallops, and had to be nipped with reminders of the place of good leader he was for taking among the young. Hang superexcellence! but we know those moanings over the troubles of a married woman; we know their sources, know their goal, or else we are the fiction-puppet or the Bedlamite; and she is a married woman, married at the British Embassy, Madrid, if you please! after a few weeks' acquaintance with her husband, who doubtless wrote his name intelligibly in the registrar's book, but does not prove himself much the hero when he drives a pen, even for so little as the signing of his name! He signed his name, apparently not more than partly pledging himself to the bond. Lord Ormont's autobiographical scraps combined with Lady Charlotte's hints and Mrs. Pagnell's communications, to provoke the secretary's literary contempt of his behaviour to his wife. However, the former might be mended, and he resumed the task.

It had the restorative effect of touching him to see his old hero in action; whereby he was brought about to a proper modesty, so that he really craved no more than for the mistress of this house to breathe the liberal air of a public acknowledgment of her rightful position. Things constituted by their buoyancy to float are remarkable for lively bobbings when they are cast upon the waters; and such was the case with Weyburn, until the agitation produced by Mrs. Pagnell left him free to sail away

in the society of the steadiest.

He decided that by not observing, not thinking, not feeling, about the circumstances of the household into which Fate had thrown him, he would best be able--probably it was the one way--to keep himself together; and his resolution being honest all round, he succeeded in it as long as he abstained from a very wakeful vigilance over simple eyesight. For if one is nervously on guard to not-see, the matter starts up winged, and enters us, and kindles the mind, and tingles through the blood; it has us as a foe. The art of blind vision requires not only practice, but an intimate knowledge of the arts of the traitor we carry within. Safest for him, after all, was to lay fast hold of the particularly unimportant person he was, both there and anywhere else. The Countess of Ormont's manner toward him was to be read as a standing index of the course he should follow; and he thanked her. He could not quite so sincerely thank her aunt. His ingratitude for the sickly dose she had administered to him sprang a doubt whether Lady Ormont now thanked her aunt on account of services performed at the British Embassy, Madrid.

Certain looks of those eyes recently, when in colloquy with my lord, removed the towering nobleman to a shadowed landscape.

Was it solely an effect of eyes commanding light, and having every shaft of the quiver of the rays at her disposal? Or was it a shot from a powerful individuality issuing out of bondage to some physical oppressor no longer master of the soul, in peril of the slipping away of the body? Her look on him was not hate: it was larger, more terribly divine. Those eyes had elsewhere once looked love: they had planted their object in a throbbing Eden. The man on whom they had looked shivered over the thought of it after years of blank division.

Rather than have those eyes to look on him their displacing unintentness, the man on whom they had once looked love would have chosen looks of wrath, the darts that kill--blest darts of the celestial Huntress, giving sweet sudden cessation of pain, in the one everlasting last flash of life with thought that the shot was hers. Oh for the 'ayava behea' of the Merciful in splendour!

These were the outcries of the man deciding simultaneously not to observe, not to think, not to feel, and husbanding calculations upon storage of gain for the future. Softness held the song below. It came of the fact that his enforced resolution, for the sake of sanity, drove his whole reflective mind backward upon his younger days, when an Evening and a Morning star in him greeted the bright Goddess Brownie or sang adieu, and adored beyond all golden beams the underworld whither she had sunk, where she was hidden.

Meanwhile, the worthy dame who had dosed him was out in her carriage, busy paying visits to distinguished ladies of the great world, with the best of excuses for an early call, which was gossip to impart, such as the Countess of Ormont had not yet thought of mentioning; and two or three of them were rather amusedly interested to hear that Lord Ormont had engaged a handsome young secretary, "under the patronage of Lady

Charlotte Eglett, devoted to sports of all kinds, immensely favoured by both." Gossip must often have been likened to the winged insect bearing pollen to the flowers; it fertilizes many a vacuous reverie. Those flowers of the upper garden are not, indeed, stationary and in need of the missionary buzzer, but if they have been in one place unmoved for one hour, they are open to take animation from their visitors. Aminta was pleasantly surprised next day by the receipt of a note from Mrs. Lawrence Finchley, begging to be invited to lunch if she came, as she had a purpose in the wish to meet my lord.

[NOTE: The remainder of 'Lord Ormont and His Aminta' is taken from an older edition which uses single rather than double quotation marks.
D.W.]

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. LAWRENCE FINCHLEY

My lord had one of his wilful likings for Isabella Lawrence Finchley, and he consented to the torture of an hour of Mrs. Nargett Pagnell in the middle of the day, just to taste the favourite he welcomed at home as he championed her abroad. The reasons were numerous and intimate why she pleased him. He liked the woman, enjoyed the cause for battle that she gave. Weyburn, on coming to the luncheon table, beheld a lady with the head of a comely boy, the manner, softened in delicate feminine, of a capital comrade. Her air of candour was her nature in her face; and it carried a guileless roguery, a placid daring, a supersensual naughtiness, a simplicity of repose amid the smoky reputation she created, that led one to think the vapour calumnious or the creature privileged. That young boy's look opened him at once; he had not to warm to her,--he flew. Ordinarily the sweetest ladies will make us pass through cold mist and cross a stile or two, or a broken bridge, before the formalities are cleared away to grant us rights of citizenship. She was like those frank lands where we have not to hand out a passport at the frontier and wait for dubious inspection of it.

She prevailed with cognizant men and with the frivolous. Women were capable of appreciating her, too: as Aminta did, despite some hinted qualifications addressed shyly to her husband. But these were the very matters exciting his particular esteem. He was of Lady Charlotte's mind, in her hot zeal against injustice done to the creatures she despised; and yet more than she applauded a woman who took up her idiot husband's challenge to defend her good name, and cleared it, right or wrong, and beat him down on his knees, and then started for her spell of the merry canter over turf: an example to the English of the punishment they get for their stupid Puritanic tyranny--sure to be followed by a national helter-skelter down-hill headlong. And Mrs. Lawrence was not one of the

corrupt, he argued; she concealed what it was decent to conceal, without pouting hypocritical pretences; she had merely dispensed with idle legal formalities, in the prettiest curvetting airy wanton way, to divorce the man who tried to divorce her, and 'whined to be forgiven when he found he couldn't. Adderwood was ready to marry her to-morrow, if the donkey husband would but go and bray his last. Half a dozen others were heads off on the same course to that goal.'

That was her champion's perusal of a lady candidly asserting her right to have breeched comrades, and paying for it in the advocacy which compromises. She was taken to be and she was used as a weapon wherewith to strike at our Pharisees. Women pushing out into the world for independence, bleed heavy payments all round.

The earl's double-edged defence of her was partly a vindication of another husband, who allowed his wife to call her friend; he was nevertheless assured of her not being corrupt, both by his personal knowledge of the lady, and his perception of her image in the bosom of his wife. She did no harm there, he knew well. Although he was not a man to put his trust in faces, as his young secretary inclined to do, Mrs. Lawrence's look of honest boy did count among the pleadings. And somewhat so might a government cruiser observe the intrusion of a white-sailed yacht in protected sea-waters, where licenced trawlers are at the haul.

Talk over the table coursed as fluently as might be, with Mrs. Pagnell for a boulder in the stream. Uninformed by malice, she led up to Lord Adderwood's name, and perhaps more designedly spoke of Mr. Morsfield, on whom her profound reading into the female heart of the class above her caused her to harp, as 'a real Antinous,' that the ladies might discuss him and Lord Ormont wax meditative.

Mrs. Lawrence pitied the patient gentleman, while asking him in her mind who was the author of the domestic burden he had to bear.

'It reminds me I have a mission,' she said. 'There's a fencing match down at a hall in the West, near the barracks; private and select: Soldier and Civilian; I forget who challenged--Civilian, one judges; Soldiers are the peaceful party. They want you to act "umpire," as they call it, on the military side, my dear lord; and you will?--I have given my word you will bring Lady Ormont. You will?--and not let me be confounded! Yes, and we shall make a party. I see consent. Aminta will enjoy the switch of steel. I love to see fencing. It rouses all that is diabolical in me.'

She sent a skimming look at the opposite.

'And I,' said he, much freshened.

'You fence?'

'Handle the foils.'

'If you must speak modestly! Are you in practice?'

'I spend an hour in Captain Chiallo's fencing rooms generally every evening before dinner. I heard there the first outlines of the match proposed. You are right; it was the civilian.'

'Mr. Morsfield, as I suspected.'

She smiled to herself, like one saying, Not badly managed, Mr. Morsfield!

'Italian school?' Lord Ormont inquired, with a screw of the eyelids.

'French, my lord.'

'The only school for teaching.'

'The simplest--has the most rational method. Italians are apt to be tricky. But they were masters once, and now and then they send out a fencer the French can't touch.'

'How would you account for it?'

'If I had to account for it, I should say, hotter blood, cool nerve, quick brain.'

'Hum. Where are we, then?'

'We don't shine with the small sword.'

'We had men neatly pinked for their slashings in the Peninsula.'

'We've had clever Irishmen.'

'Hot enough blood! This man Morsfield--have you crossed the foils with him?'

'Goes at it like a Spaniard; though Spaniards in Paris have been found wary enough.'

My lord hummed. 'Fellow looks as if he would easily lose his head over steel.'

'He can be dangerous.'

The word struck on something, and rang.

Mrs. Lawrence had a further murmur within her lips. Her travelling eye met Aminta's and passed it.

'But not dangerous, surely, if the breast is padded?' said Mrs. Pagnell.

'Oh no, oh no; not in that case!' Mrs. Lawrence ran out her voluble assent, and her eyelids blinked; her fair boy's face was mischief at

school under shadow of the master.

She said to Weyburn: 'Are you one in the list--to give our military a lesson? They want it.'

His answer was unheard by Aminta. She gathered from Mrs. Lawrence's pleased sparkle that he had been invited to stand in the list; and the strange, the absurd spectacle of a young schoolmaster taking the heroic attitude for attack and defence wrestled behind her eyes with a suddenly vivid first-of-May cricketing field, a scene of snowballs flying, the vision of a strenuous lighted figure scaling to noble young manhood. Isabella Lawrence's look at him spirited the bright past out of the wretched long-brown-coat shroud of the present, prompting her to grieve that some woman's hand had not smoothed a small tuft of hair, disorderly on his head a little above the left parting, because Isabella Lawrence Finchley could have no recollection of how it used to toss feathery--wild at his games.

My lord hummed again. 'I suspect we 're going to get a drubbing. This fellow here has had his French maitre d'armes. Show me your hand, sir.'

Weyburn smiled, and extended his right hand, saying: 'The wrist wants exercise.'

'Ha! square thumb, flesh full at the nails' ends; you were a bowler at cricket.'

'Now examine the palms, my lord; I judge by the lines on the palms,' Mrs. Pagnell remarked.

He nodded to her and rose.

Coffee had not been served, she reminded him; it was coming in, so down he sat a yard from the table; outwardly equable, inwardly cursing coffee; though he refused to finish a meal without his cup.

'I think the palms do betray something,' said Mrs. Lawrence; and Aminta said: 'Everything betrays.'

'No, my dear,' Mrs. Pagnell corrected her; 'the extremities betray, and we cannot read the centre. Is it not so, my lord?'

'It may be as you say, ma'am.'

She was disappointed in her scheme to induce a general examination of palms, and especially his sphinx lordship's.

Weyburn controlled the tongue she so frequently tickled to an elvish gavotte, but the humour on his face touched Mrs. Lawrence's to a subdued good-fellow roguishness, and he felt himself invited to chat with her on the walk for a reposeful ten minutes in Aminta's drawing-room.

Mrs. Pagnell, 'quite enjoying the company,' as she told her niece, was

dismayed to hear her niece tell her of a milliner's appointment, positive for three o'clock; and she had written it in her head 'p.m., four o'clock,' and she had mislaid or destroyed the milliner's note; and she still had designs upon his lordship's palms, things to read and hint around her off the lines. She departed.

Lord Ormont became genial; and there was no one present who did not marvel that he should continue to decree a state of circumstances more or less necessitating the infliction he groaned under. He was too lofty to be questioned, even by his favourites. Mrs. Lawrence conjured the ghost of Lady Charlotte for an answer: this being Lord Adderwood's idea. Weyburn let his thoughts go on fermenting. Pride froze a beginning stir in the bosom of Aminta.

Her lord could captivate a reluctant woman's bosom when he was genial. He melted her and made her call up her bitterest pride to perform its recent office. That might have failed; but it had support in a second letter received from the man accounted both by Mrs. Lawrence and by Mr. Weyburn 'dangerous'; and the thought of who it was that had precipitated her to 'play little games' for the sole sake of rousing him through jealousy to a sense of righteous duty, armed her desperately against him. She could exult in having read the second letter right through on receipt of it, and in remembering certain phrases; and notably in a reflection shot across her bewildered brain by one of the dangerous man's queer mad sentences: 'Be as iron as you like, I will strike you to heat'; and her thought: Is there assurance of safety in a perpetual defence?--all while she smiled on her genial lord, and signified agreement, with a smiting of wonderment at her heart, when he alluded to a panic shout of the country for defence, and said: 'Much crying of that kind weakens the power to defend when the real attack comes.' Was it true?

'But say what you propose?' she asked.

Lord Ormont proposed vigilance and drill; a small degree of self-sacrifice on the part of the population, and a look-out head in the War Department. He proposed to have a nation of stout-braced men laughing at the foreign bully or bandit, instead of being a pack of whimpering women; whom he likened to the randomly protestant geese of our country roadside, heads out a yard in a gabble of defence while they go backing.

So thereupon Aminta's notion of a resemblance in the mutual thought subsided; she relapsed on the cushioning sentiment that she was a woman. And--only a woman! he might exclaim, if it pleased him; though he would never be able to say she was one of the whimpering. She, too, had the choice to indulge in scorn of the superior man stone blind to proceedings intimately affecting him--if he cared! One might doubt it.

Mrs. Lawrence listened to him with a mind more disengaged, and a flitting disapproval of Aminta's unsympathetic ear, or reluctance to stimulate the devout attention a bruised warrior should have in his tent. She did not press on him the post of umpire. He consented--at her request, he said--to visit the show; but refused any official position that would, it was clearly enough implied, bring his name in any capacity whatever before

the country which had unpardonably maltreated him.

Feminine wits will be set working, when a point has been gained; and as Mrs. Lawrence could now say she had persuaded Lord Ormont to gratify her specially, she warmed to fancy she read him, and that she might have managed the wounded and angry giant. Her minor intelligence, caracoling unhampered by harassing emotions, rebuked Aminta's for not perceiving that to win him round to whatever a woman may desire, she must be with him, outstrip him even, along the line he chooses for himself; abuse the country, rail at the Government, ridicule the title of English Army, proscribe the name of India in his hearing. Little stings of jealousy are small insect bites, and do not pique a wounded giant hardly sensible of irritation under his huge, and as we assume for our purpose, justifiable wrath. We have to speculate which way does the giant incline to go? and turn him according to the indication.

Mrs. Lawrence was driven by her critic mood to think Aminta relied-- erroneously, after woman's old fashion--on the might of superb dark eyes after having been captured. It seemed to her worse than a beautiful woman's vanity, a childishness. But her boy's head held boy's brains; and Lord Ormont's praise of the splendid creature's nerve when she had to smell powder in Spain, and at bull-fights, and once at a wrecking of their carriage down a gully on the road over the Alpujarras, sent her away subdued, envious, happy to have kissed the cheek of the woman who could inspire it.

CHAPTER IX.

A FLASH OF THE BRUISED WARRIOR

The winning of Lord Ormont's consent to look on at the little bout of arms was counted an achievement; for even in his own rarefied upper circle, where the fervid sentiments are not allowed to be seen plunging, he had his troop of enthusiasts; and they were anxious that he should make an appearance in public, to take what consolation a misunderstood and injured man could get from evidence of the grateful esteem entertained for him by a party of his countrymen, who might reasonably expect at the same time to set eyes, at rather close quarters, on the wonderful dark beauty, supposed a Spaniard, occasionally beheld riding beside him. If it is possible to connect a woman with the devoutest of their anticipations, the sons of leisure up there will do it. But, in truth, an English world was having cause to ransack the dust-heaps for neglected men of mettle. Our intermittent ague, known as dread of invasion, was over the land. Twice down the columns of panic newspaper correspondence Lord Ormont saw his name cited, with the effect on him that such signs of national repentance approaching lodged a crabbed sourness in his consulting-room, whether of head or breast.

He was assailed by a gusty appeal from Lady Charlotte, bidding him seize the moment to proclaim his views while the secretary had a private

missive from her, wherein, between insistency and supplication, she directed him to bring the subject before my lord every day, and be sure to write out a fair copy of the epistle previous to the transmission of it. 'Capua' was mentioned; she brought in 'a siren,' too. Her brother was to be the soldier again--fling off silken bonds. The world might prate of his morality; now was the hour for showing his patriotism, casting aside his just anger, and backing his chief's opinion. 'A good chance to get their names together.' To her brother she declared that the columns of the leading journal were open to him--'in large type'; he was to take her word for it; he had only to 'dictate away,' quite at his ease, just as he talked at Olmer, and leave the bother of the scribe's business to his aide. 'Lose no time,' she concluded; 'the country wants your ideas; let us have your plan.'

The earl raised his shoulders, and kept his aide exclusively at the Memoirs. Weyburn, however, read out to him, with accentuation, foolish stuff in the recurrent correspondence of the daily sheets, and a complacent burgess article, meant to be a summary of the controversy and a recommendation to the country to bask in the sun of its wealth again.

'Ay, be the porker sow it's getting liker and liker to every year!' Lord Ormont exclaimed, and sprang on his feet. 'Take a pen. Shut up that box. We'll give 'em digestive biscuits for their weak stomachs. Invasion can't be done, they say! I tell the doddered asses Napoleon would have been over if Villeneuve had obeyed him to the letter. Villeneuve had a fit of paralysis, owing to the prestige of Nelson--that 's as it happened. And they swear at prestige, won't believe in it, because it's not fat bacon. I tell them, after Napoleon's first battles, prestige did half his work for him. It saved him at Essling from a plunge into the Danube; it saved him at Moskowa; it would have marched him half over England at his first jump on our shingle beach. But that squelch of fat citizens should be told--to the devil with them! will they ever learn? short of a second William!--there were eight-and-forty hours when the liberty of this country hung wavering in the balance with those Boulogne boats. Now look at Ulm and Austerlitz. Essling, Wagram; put the victors in those little affairs to front our awkward squads. The French could boast a regimental system, and chiefs who held them as the whist-player his hand of cards. Had we a better general than the Archduke Charles? or cavalry and artillery equal to the Hungarian? or drilled infantry numbering within eighty thousand of the Boulogne-Wimereux camps? We had nothing but the raw material of courage--pluck, and no science. Ask any boxing man what he thinks of the chances. The French might have sacrificed a fleet to land fifty thousand. Our fleet was our one chance. Any foreign General at the head of fifty thousand trained, picked troops would risk it, and cut an 'entrechat' for joy of the chance. We should have fought and bled and been marched over --a field of Anglo-Saxon stubble! and Nelson riding the Channel, undisputed lord of the waters. Heigh! by the Lord, this country would have been like a man free to rub his skin with his hand and a mortal disease in his blood. Are you ready? How anticipate a hostile march on the capital, is our business.'

Striding up and down the library, Lord Ormont dropped his wrath to

dictate the practical measures for defence--detesting the cat's-cry 'defence,' he said; but the foe would bring his old growlers, and we should have to season our handful of regulars and mob of levies, turn the mass into troops. With plenty of food, and blows daily, Englishmen soon get stomachs for the right way to play the game; bowl as well as bat; and the sooner they give up the idea of shamming sturdy on a stiff hind leg, the better for their chances. Only, it's a beastly thing to see that for their favourite attitude;--like some dog of a fellow weak in the fists, weaker in the midriff, at a fair, who cries, Come on, and prays his gods you won't. All for peace, the rascal boasts himself, and he beats his wife and kicks his curs at home. Is there any one to help him now, he vomits gold and honours on the man he yesterday treated as a felon. Ha!

Bull the bumpkin disposed of, my lord drew leisurely back from the foeman's landing-place, at the head of a body of serious Englishmen; teaching them to be manageable as chess-pieces, ready as bow-strings to let fly. Weyburn rejoiced to find himself transcribing crisp sentences, hard on the matter, without garnish of scorn. Kent, Sussex, Surrey, all the southern heights about London, round away to the south-western of the Hampshire heathland, were accurately mapped in the old warrior's brain. He knew his points of vantage by name; there were no references to gazetteer or atlas. A chain of forts and earthworks enables us to choose our ground, not for clinging to them, but for choice of time and place to give battle. If we have not been playing double-dyed traitor to ourselves, we have a preponderating field artillery; our yeomanry and volunteer horsemen are becoming a serviceable cavalry arm; our infantry prove that their heterogeneous composition can be welded to a handy mass, and can stand fire and return it, and not be beaten by an acknowledged defeat.

'That's English! yes, that's English! when they're at it,' my lord sang out.

'To know how to take a licking, that wins in the end,' cried Weyburn; his former enthusiasm for the hero mounting, enlightened by a reminiscence of the precept he had hammered on the boys at Cuper's.

'They fall well. Yes, the English fall like men,' said my lord, pardoning and embracing the cuffed nation. 'Bodies knocked over, hearts upright. That's example; we breed Ironsides out of a sight like that. If it weren't for a cursed feeble Government scraping 'conges' to the taxpayer--well, so many of our good fellows would not have to fall. That I say; for this thing is going to happen some day, mind you, sir! And I don't want to have puncheons and hogsheads of our English blood poured out merely to water the soil of a conquered country because English Governments are a craven lot, not daring risk of office by offending the taxpayer. But, on!'

Weyburn sent Lady Charlotte glowing words of the composition in progress.

They worked through a day, and a second day--talked of nothing else in the intervals. Explanatory answers were vouchsafed to Aminta's modest inquiries at Finch, as she pictured scenes of smoke, dust and blood from

the overpowering plain masculine lines they drew, terrible in bluntness. The third morning Lord Ormont had map and book to verify distances and attempt a scale of heights, take names of estates, farms, parishes, commons, patches of woodland. Weyburn wrote his fair copy on folio paper, seven-and-thirty pages. He read it aloud to the author on the afternoon of the fourth day, with the satisfaction in his voice that he felt. My lord listened and nodded. The plan for the defence of England's heart was a good plan.

He signed to have the manuscript handed to him. A fortified London secure of the Thames for abundant supplies, well able to breathe within earthworks extending along the southern hills, was clearly shown to stand the loss of two big battles on the Sussex weald or more East to North-east, if fortune willed it.

He rose from his chair, paced some steps, with bent head, came back thoughtfully, lifted the manuscript sheets for another examination. Then he stooped to the fire, spreading the edges unevenly, so that they caught flame. Weyburn spied at him. It was to all appearance the doing of a man who had intended it and brought it to the predetermined conclusion.

'About time for you to be off for your turn at Chiallo's,' our country's defender remarked, after tossing the last half-burnt lump under the grate and shovelling at it.

'I will go, my lord,' said Weyburn--and he was glad to go.

He went, calculated his term of service under Lord Ormont. He was young, not a philosopher. Waste of anything was abhorrent to a nature pointed at store of daily gain, if it were only the gain in a new or a freshened idea; and time lost, work lost, good counsel to the nation lost, represented horrid vacuity to him, and called up the counter demonstration of a dance down the halls of madness, for proof that we should, at least, have jolly motion of limbs there before Perdition struck the great gong. Ay, and we should be twirling with a fair form on the arm: woman and man; as it ought to be; twirling downward, true, but together. Such a companionship has a wisdom to raise it above the title of madness. Name it, heartily, pleasure; and in contempt of the moralist burgess, praise the dance of a woman and the man together high over a curmudgeonly humping solitariness, that won't forgive an injury, nurses rancour, smacks itself in the face, because it can't--to use the old schoolboy words--take a licking!

These were the huddled, drunken sensations and thoughts entertained by Weyburn, without his reflecting on the detachment from his old hero, of which they were the sign. He criticized impulsively, and fancied he did no more, and was not doing much though, in fact, criticism is the end of worship; the Brutus blow at that Imperial but mortal bosom.

The person criticized was manifest. Who was the woman he twirled with? She was unfeatured, undistinguished, one of the sex, or all the sex: the sex to be shunned as our deadly sapper of gain, unless we find the chosen

one to super-terrestrialize it and us, and trebly outdo our gift of our whole self for her.

She was indistinguishable, absolutely unknown; yet she murmured, or seemed to murmur--for there was no sound--a complaint of Lord Ormont. And she, or some soundless mouth of woman, said he was a splendid military hero, a chivalrous man, a man of inflexible honour; but had no understanding of how to treat a woman, or belief in her having equal life with him on earth.

She was put aside rather petulantly, and she took her seat out of the whirl with submission. Thinking she certainly was not Brownie, whom he would have known among a million, he tried to quit the hall, and he twirled afresh, necessarily not alone; it is the unpardonable offence both to the Graces and the Great Mother for man to valse alone. She twirled on his arm, uninvited; accepted, as in the course of nature; hugged, under dictate of the nature of the man steeled against her by the counting of gain, and going now at desperation's pace, by very means of those defensive locked steam-valves meant to preserve him from this madness,--for the words of the red-lipped mate, where there were no words, went through him like a music when the bow is over the viol, sweeping imagination, and they said her life was wasting.

Was not she a priceless manuscript cast to the flames? Her lord had been at some trouble to win her. Or his great fame and his shadowed fortunes had won her. He took her for his own, and he would not call her his own. He comported himself with absolute, with kindly deference to the lady whose more than vital spark he let the gossips puff at and blur. He praised her courage, visibly admired her person, admitted her in private to be his equal, degraded her in public. Could anything account for the behaviour of so manly and noble a gentleman?--Rhetoric made the attempt, and Weyburn gave up the windy business.

Discovering that his fair partner of the wasting life was--he struggled to quench the revelation--Aminta, he stopped the dance. If there was no gain in whirling fancifully with one of the sex, a spin of a minute with her was downright bankruptcy.

He was young, full of blood; his heart led him away from the door Lord Ormont had exposed; at which a little patient unemotional watchfulness might have intimated to him something besides the simple source of the old hero's complex chapter of conduct. As it was, Weyburn did see the rancour of a raw wound in operation. But he moralized and disapproved; telling himself, truly enough, that so it would not have been with him; instead of sounding at my lord's character, and his condition of the unjustly neglected great soldier, for the purpose of asking how that raw wound would affect an injured veteran, who compressed, almost repressed, the roar of Achilles, though his military bright name was to him his Briseis.

CHAPTER X

A SHORT PASSAGE IN THE GAME PLAYED BY TWO

Politest of men in the domestic circle and everywhere among women, Lord Ormont was annoyed to find himself often gruffish behind the tie of his cravat. Indeed, the temper of our eminently serene will feel the strain of a doldrum-dulness that is goaded to activity by a nettle. The forbearance he carried farther than most could do was tempted to kick, under pressure of Mrs. Nargett Pagnell. Without much blaming Aminta, on whose behalf he submitted to it, and whose resolution to fix in England had brought it to this crisis, he magnanimously proposed to the Fair Enemy he forced her to be, and liked to picture her as being, a month in Paris.

Aminta declined it for herself; after six or more years of travelling, she wished to settle, and know her country, she said: a repetition remark, wide of the point, and indicative to the game of Pull she was again playing beneath her smooth visage, unaware that she had the wariest of partners at the game.

'But go you--do, I beg,' she entreated. 'It will give you new impressions; and I cannot bear to tie you down here.'

'How you can consent to be tied down here, is the wonder to me!' said he. 'When we travelled through the year, just visited England and were off again, we were driving on our own road. Vienna in April and May--what do you say? You like the reviews there, and the dances, concerts, Zigeuner bands, military Bohemian bands. Or Egypt to-morrow, if you like--though you can't be permitted to swim in the Nile, as you wanted. Come, Xarifa, speak it. I go to exile without you. Say you come.'

She smiled firmly. The name of her honeymoon days was not a cajolery to her.

His name had been that of the Christian Romancero Knight Durandarte, and she gave it to him, to be on the proper level with him, while she still declined.

'Well, but just a month in Paris! There's nothing doing here. And we both like the French theatre.'

'London will soon be filling.'

'Well, but--' He stopped; for the filling of London did really concern her, in the game of Pull she was covertly playing with him. 'You seem to have caught the fever of this London; . . . no bands . . . no reviews . . . Low comedy acting.' He muttered his objections to London.

'The society of people speaking one's own tongue, add that,' she ventured to say.

'You know you are ten times more Spanish than English. Moorish, if you like.'

'The slave of the gallant Christian Knight, converted, baptized, and blissful. Oh, I know. But now we are settled in England, I have a wish to study English society.'

'Disappointing, I assure you;--dinner heavy, dancing boorish, intrigue a blind-man's-buff. We've been over it all before !'

'We have.'

'Admired, I dare say. You won't be understood.'

'I like my countrymen.'

'The women have good looks--of the ungarnished kind. The men are louts.'

'They are brave.'

'You're to see their fencing. You'll own a little goes a long way.'

'I think it will amuse me.'

'So I thought when I gave the nod to Isabella your friend.'

'You like her?'

'You, too.'

'One fancies she would make an encouraging second in a duel.'

'I will remember . . . when I call you out.'

'Oh, my dear lord, you have dozens to choose from leave me my one if we are to enter the lists.'

'We are, it seems; unless you consent to take the run to Paris. You are to say Tom or Rowsley.'

'The former, I can never feel at home in saying; Rowsley is Lady Charlotte's name for you.'

The name of Lady Charlotte was an invitation to the conflict between them. He passed it, and said 'Durandarte runs a mile on the mouth, and the Coriolanus of their newspapers helps a stage-player to make lantern jaws. Neither of them comes well from the lips of my girl. After seven years she should have hit on a nickname, of none of the Christian suit. I am not "at home" either with "my lord." However, you send me off to Paris alone; and you'll be alone and dull here in this London. Incomprehensible to me why!'

'We are both wondering?' said Aminta.

'You 're handsomer than when I met you first--by heaven you are!'

She flushed her dark brown-red late-sunset. 'Brunes are exceptional in England.'

'Thousands admiring you, of course! I know, my love, I have a jewel.'

She asked him: 'What are jewels for?' and he replied, 'To excite cupidity.'

'When they 're shut in a box?'

'Ware burglars! But this one is not shut up. She shuts herself up. And up go her shoulders! Decide to be out of it, and come to Paris for some life for a month. No? It's positive? When do you expect your little school friend?'

'After Easter. Aunt will be away.'

'Your little friend likes the country. I'll go to my house agents. If there 's a country house open on the upper Thames, you can have swimming, boating, botanizing . . .'

He saw her throat swallow. But as he was offering agreeable things he chose to not understand how he was to be compassionate.

'Steignton?' she said, and did her cause no good by saying it feebly.

His look of a bygone awake-in-sleep old look, drearily known to her, was like a strip of sunlight on a fortress wall. It signified, Is the poor soul pushing me back to that again?

She compelled herself to say: 'Your tenant there?'

'Matter of business . . . me and my tenant,' he remarked. 'The man pays punctually.'

'The lease has expired.'

'Not quite. You are misinformed.'

'At Easter.'

'Ah! Question of renewing.'

'You were fond of the place.'

'I was fond of the place? Thank Blazes, I'm not what I was!' He paced about. 'There's not a corner of the place that doesn't screw an eye at me, because I had a dream there. La gloire!'

The rest he muttered. 'These English!' was heard. Aminta said: 'Am I

never to see Steignton?’

Lord Ormont invoked the Powers. He could not really give answer to this female talk of the eternities.

‘Beaten I can never be,’ he said, with instinctive indulgence to the greater creature. ‘But down there at Steignton, I should be haunted by a young donkey swearing himself the fellow I grew up out of. No doubt of that. I don’t like him the better for it. Steignton grimaces at a cavalry officer fool enough at his own risks and penalties to help save India for the English. Maunderers! You can’t tell--they don’t know themselves--what they mean. Except that they’re ready to take anything you hand ‘em, and then pipe to your swinging. I served them well--and at my age, in full activity, they condemn me to sit and gape!’

He stopped his pacing and gazed on the glass of the window.

‘Would you wish me not to be present at this fencing?’ said Aminta.

‘Dear me! by all means, go, my love,’ he replied.

Any step his Fair Enemy won in the secret game Pull between them, she was undisputedly to keep.

She suggested: ‘It might lead to unpleasantness.’

‘Of what sort?’

‘You ask?’

He emphasized: ‘Have you forgotten? Something happened after that last ball at Challis’s Rooms. Their women as well as their men must be careful not to cross me.’

Aminta had confused notions of her being planted in hostile territory, and torn and knitted, trumpeted to the world as mended, but not honourably mended in a way to stop corridor scandal. The ball at Challis’s Rooms had been one of her steps won: it had necessitated a requirement for the lion in her lord to exhibit himself, and she had gained nothing with Society by the step, owing to her poor performance of the lion’s mate. She had, in other words, shunned the countenance of some scattered people pityingly ready to support her against the deadly passive party known to be Lady Charlotte’s.

She let her lord go; thinking that once more had she striven and gained nothing: which was true of all their direct engagements. And she had failed because of her being only a woman! Mr. Morsfield was foolishly wrong in declaring that she, as a woman, had reserves of strength. He was perhaps of Lady Charlotte’s mind with regard to the existence of a Countess of Ormont, or he would know her to be incredibly cowardly. Cowardly under the boast of pride, too; well, then, say, if you like, a woman!

Yet this mere shallow woman would not hesitate to meet the terrible Lady Charlotte at any instant, on any terms: and what are we to think of a soldier, hero, lion, dreading to tell her to her face that the persecuted woman is his wife!

'Am I a woman they can be ashamed of?' she asked, and did not seek the answer at her mirror. She was in her bedroom, and she put out a hand to her jewel-box, fingered it, found it locked, and abandoned her idle project. A gentleman was 'dangerous.' She had not found him so. He had the reputation, perhaps, because he was earnest. Not so very many men are earnest. She called to recollection how ludicrously practical he was in the thick of his passion. His third letter (addressed to the Countess of Ormont--whom he manifestly did not or would not take to be the veritable Countess--and there was much to plead for his error), or was it his fourth?--the letters were a tropical hail-storm: third or fourth, he broke off a streaked thunderpeal, to capitulate his worldly possessions, give the names and degrees of kinship of his relatives, the exact amount of the rent-roll of his Yorkshire estates, of his funded property.

Silly man! but not contemptible. He proposed everything in honour, from his view of it.

Whether in his third, fourth, or fifth letter. . . . How many had come? She drew the key from her purse, and opened a drawer. The key of the jewel-box was applied to the lock.

Mr. Morsfield had sent her six flaming letters. He not only took no precautions, he boasted that he hailed the consequences of discovery. Six!

She lifted a pen: it had to be done.

He was briefly informed that he disturbed her peace. She begged he would abstain from any further writing to her.

The severity was in the brevity. The contrast of her style and his appeared harsh. But it belonged to the position.

Having with one dash of the pen scribbled her three lines, she slipped the letter into her pocket. That was done, and it had to be done; it ought to have been done before. How simple it was when one contemplated it as actually done! Aminta made the motion of a hand along the paper, just a flourish. Soon after, her head dropped back on the chair, and her eyes shut, she took in breath through parted lips. The brief lines of writing had cut away a lump of her vitality.

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRETARY TAKEN AS AN ANTIDOTE

Dusty wayfarers along a white high-road who know of a bubbling little spring across a stile, on the woodland borders of deep grass, are hailed to sit aside it awhile: and Aminta's feverishness was cooled by now and then a quiet conversation with the secretary ambitious to become a school-master. Lady Charlotte liked him, so did her lord; Mrs. Lawrence had chatted with him freshly, as it was refreshing to recollect; nobody thought him a stunted growth.

In Aminta's realized recollections, amid the existing troubles of her mind, the charge against him grew paler, and she could no longer quite think that the young hero transformed into a Mr. Cuper had deceived her, though he had done it--much as if she had assisted at the planting and watched aforesaid the promise of a noble tree, to find it, after an interval of years, pollarded--a short trunk shooting out a shock of small, slim, stiff branches; dwarfed and disgraced; serviceable perhaps; not ludicrous or ugly, certainly, taking it for a pollard. And he was a cool well-spring to talk with. He, supposed once to be a passionate nature, scorned passion as a madness; he smiled in his merciful executioner's way at the high society, of which her aim was to pass for one among the butterflies or dragonflies; he had lost his patriotism; he labelled our English classes the skimmers, the gorgers, the grubbers, and stigmatized them with a friendly air; and uttered words of tolerance only for farmers and surgeons and schoolmasters. But that was quite incidental in the humorous run of his talk, diverting to hear while it lasted. He had, of course, a right to his ideas.

No longer concerned in contesting them, she drank at the water of this plain earth-well, and hoped she preferred it to fiery draughts, though it was flattish, or, say, flavourless. In the other there was excess of flavour--or, no, spice it had to be called. The young schoolmaster's world seemed a sunless place, the world of traders bargaining for gain, without a glimmer of the rich generosity to venture life, give it, dare all for native land--or for the one beloved. Love pressed its claim on heroic generosity, and instantly it suffused her, as an earth under flush of sky. The one beloved! She had not known love; she was in her five-and-twentieth year, and love was not only unknown to her, it was shut away from her by the lock of a key that opened on no estimable worldly advantage in exchange, but opened on a dreary, clouded round, such as she had used to fancy it must be to the beautiful creamy circus-horse of the tossing mane and flowing tail and superb step. She was admired; she was just as much doomed to a round of paces, denied the glorious fling afield, her nature's food. Hitherto she would have been shamefaced as a boy in forming the word 'love': now, believing it denied to her for good and all--for ever and ever--her bosom held and uttered the word. She saw the word, the nothing but the word that it was, and she envisaged it, for the purpose of saying adieu to it--good-bye even to the poor empty word.

This condition was attributable to a gentleman's wild rageing with the word, into which he had not infused the mystic spirit. He poured hot wine and spiced. If not the spirit of love, it was really the passion of the man. Her tremors now and again in the reading of his later letters humiliated her, in the knowledge that they came of no response to him,

but from the temporary base acquiescence; which is, with women, a terrible perception of the gulf of their unsatisfied nature.

The secretary, cheerful at his work, was found for just the opening of a door. Sometimes she hesitated--to disturb him, she said to herself,--and went up-stairs or out visiting. He protested that he could work on and talk too. She was able to amuse her lord with some of his ideas. He had a stock of them, all his own.

Ideas, new-born and naked original ideas, are acceptable at no time to the humanity they visit to help uplift, it from the state of beast. In the England of that, period original or unknown ideas were a smoking brimstone to the nose, dread Arabian afrites, invisible in the air, jumping out of vases, armed for the slaughter of the venerable and the cherished, the ivy-clad and celestially haloed. They carried the dishevelled Maenad's torch. A step with them, and we were on the Phlegethon waters of the French Revolution. For a publication of simple ideas men were seized, tried at law, mulcted, imprisoned, and not pardoned after the term of punishment; their names were branded: the horned elect butted at them; he who alluded to them offered them up, wittingly or not, to be damned in the nose of the public for an execrable brimstone stench.

Lord Ormont broke through his shouts or grunts at Aminta's report of the secretary's ideas on various topics, particularly the proposal that the lords of the land should head the land in a revolutionary effort to make law of his crazy, top-heavy notions, with a self-satisfied ejaculation: 'He has not favoured me with any of these puffballs of his.'

The deduction was, that the author sagaciously considered them adapted for the ear of a woman; they were womanish--i.e. flighty, gossamer. To the host of males, all ideas are female until they are made facts.

This idea, proposing it to our aristocracy to take up his other ideas, or reject them on pain of the forfeiture of their caste and headship with the generations to follow, and a total displacing of them in history by certain notorious, frowzy, scrubby pamphleteers and publishers, Lord Ormont thought amazingly comical. English nobles heading the weavers, cobblers, and barbers of England! He laughed, but he said, 'Charlotte would listen to that.'

The dread, high-sitting Lady Charlotte was, in his lofty thinking, a woman, and would therefore listen to nonsense, if it happened to strike a particular set of bells hanging in her cranium. She patronized blasphemous and traitorous law-breakers, just to keep up the pluck of the people, not with a notion of maintaining our English aristocracy eminent in history.

Lady Charlotte, however, would be the foremost to swoop down on the secretary's ideas about the education of women.

On that subject, Aminta said she did not know what to think.

Now, if a man states the matter he thinks, and a woman does but listen, whether inclining to agree or not, a perceptible stamp is left on soft wax. Lord Ormont told her so, with cavalier kindness.

She confessed 'she did not know what to think,' when the secretary proposed the education and collocation of boys and girls in one group, never separated, declaring it the only way for them to learn to know and to respect one another. They were to learn together, play together, have matches together, as a scheme for stopping the mischief between them.

'But, my dear girl, don't you see, the devilry was intended by Nature. Life would be the coldest of dishes without it.' And as for mixing the breeched and petticoated in those young days--'I can't enter into it,' my lord considerably said. 'All I can tell you is, I know boys.'

Aminta persisted in looking thoughtful. 'Things are bad, as they are now,' she said.

'Always were--always will be. They were intended to be, if we are to call them bad. Botched mendings will only make them worse.'

'Which side suffers?'

'Both; and both like it. One side must be beaten at any game. It's off and on, pretty equal--except in the sets where one side wears thick boots. Is this fellow for starting a mixed sexes school? Funny mothers!'

'I suppose--' Aminta said, and checked the supposition. 'The mothers would not leave their girls unless they were confident . . . ?'

'There's to be a female head of the female department? He reckons on finding a woman as big a fool as himself? A fair bit of reckoning enough. He's clever at the pen. He doesn't bother me with his ideas; now and then I 've caught a sound of his bee buzzing.'

The secretary was left undisturbed at his labours for several days.

He would have been gladdened by a brighter look of her eyes at her next coming. They were introspective and beamless. She had an odd leaning to the talk upon Cuper's boys. He was puzzled by what he might have classed, in any other woman, as a want of delicacy, when she recurred to incidents which were red patches of the school time, and had clearly lost their glow for her.

A letter once written by him, in his early days at Cuper's, addressed to J. Masner, containing a provocation to fight with any weapons, and signed, 'Your Antagonist,' had been read out to the whole school, under strong denunciation of the immorality, the unchristian-like conduct of the writer, by Mr. Cuper; creating a sensation that had travelled to Miss Vincent's establishment, where some of the naughtiest of the girls had taken part with the audacious challenger, dreadful though the contemplation of a possible duel so close to them was. And then the

girls heard that the anonymous 'Your Antagonist,' on being cited to proclaim himself in public assembly of school-mates and masters, had jumped on his legs and into the name of--one who was previously thought by Miss Vincent's good girls incapable of the 'appalling wickedness,' as Mr. Cuper called it, of signing 'Your Antagonist' to a Christian school-fellow, having the design to provoke a breach of the law of the land and shed Christian blood. Mr. Cuper delivered an impressive sermon from his desk to the standing up boarders and day-scholars alike, vilifying the infidel Greek word 'antagonist.'

'Do you remember the offender's name?' the Countess of Ormont said; and Weyburn said--

'Oh yes, I 've not forgotten the incident.'

Her eyes, wherein the dead time hung just above the underlids, lingered, as with the wish for him to name the name.

She said: 'I am curious to hear how you would treat a case of that sort. Would you preach to the boys?'

'Ten words at most. The right assumption is that both fellows were to blame. I fancy the proper way would be to appeal to the naughty girls for their opinion as to how the dispute should be decided.'

'You impose too much on them. And you are not speaking seriously.'

'Pardon me, I am. I should throw myself into the mind of a naughty girl--supposing none of these at hand--and I should let it be known that my eyes were shut to proceedings, always provided the weapons were not such as would cause a shock of alarm in female bosoms.'

'You would at your school allow it to be fought out?'

'Judging by the characters of the boys. If they had heads to understand, I would try them at their heads. Otherwise they are the better, they come round quicker to good blood, at their age--I speak of English boys--for a little hostile exercise of their fists. Well, for one thing, it teaches them the value of sparring.'

'I must imagine I am not one of the naughty sisterhood,--for I cannot think I should ever give consent to fighting of any description, unless for the very best of reasons,' said the countess.

His eyes were at the trick of the quarter-minute's poisoning. Her lids fluttered. 'Oh, I don't mean to say I was one of the good,' she added.

At the same time her enlivened memory made her conscious of a warning, that she might, as any woman might, so talk on of past days as to take, rather more than was required of the antidote she had come for.

The antidote was excellent; cooling, fortifying; 'quite a chalybeate,' her aunt would say, and she was thankful. Her heart rose on a quiet wave

of the thanks, and pitched down to a depth of uncounted fathoms. Aminta was unable to tell herself why.

Mrs. Lawrence Finchley had been announced. On her way to the drawing room Aminta's brain fell upon a series of dots, that wound along a track to the point where she accused herself of a repented coquetry--cause of the burning letters she was doomed to receive and could not stop without rousing her lion. She dotted backwards; there was no sign that she had been guilty of any weakness other than the almost--at least, in design--innocent first move, which had failed to touch Lord Ormont in the smallest degree. Never failure more absolute!

She was about to inquire of her bosom's oracle whether she greatly cared now. For an answer, her brain went dotting along from Mr. Cuper's school, and a boy named Abner there, and a boy named Matey Weyburn, who protected the little Jew-boy, up to Mr. Abner in London, who recommended him in due season to various acquaintances; among them to Lady Charlotte Eglett. Hence the introduction to Lord Ormont. How little extraordinary circumstances are, if only we trace them to the source!

But if only it had appeared marvellous, the throbbing woman might have seized on it, as a thing fateful, an intervention distinctly designed to waken the best in her, which was, after all, the strongest. Yea, she could hope and pray and believe it was the strongest.

She was listening to Isabella Lawrence Finchley, wishing she might have followed to some end the above line of her meditations.

Mrs. Lawrence was changed, much warmer, pressing to be more than merely friendly. Aminta twice gave her cheek for kisses. The secretary had spoken of Mrs. Lawrence as having the look of a handsome boy; and Aminta's view of her now underwent a change likewise. Compunction, together with a sisterly taste for the boyish fair one flying her sail independently, and gallantly braving the winds, induced her to kiss in return.

'You do like me a morsel?' said Mrs. Lawrence. 'I fell in love with you the last time I was here. I came to see Mr. Secretary--it's avowed; and I have been thinking of you ever since, of no one else. Oh yes, for a man; but you caught me. I've been hearing of him from Captain May. They fence at those rooms. And it's funny, Mr. Morsfield practises there, you know; and there was a time when the lovely innocent Amy, Queen of Blondes, held the seat of the Queen of Brunet. Ah, my dear, the infidelity of men doesn't count. They are affected by the changeing moons. As long as the captain is civil to him, we may be sure beautiful Amy has not complained. Her husband is the pistol she carries in her pocket, and she has fired him twice, with effect. Through love of you I have learnt the different opinion the world of the good has of her and of me; I thought we ran under a common brand. There are gradations. I went to throw myself at the feet of my great-aunt; good old great-aunt Lady de Culme, who is a power in the land. I let her suppose I came for myself, and she reproached me with Lord Adder. I confessed to him and ten others. She is a dear, she's ticklish, and at eighty-four she laughed!

She looked into my eyes and saw a field with never a man in it--just the shadow of a man. She admitted the ten cancelled the one, and exactly named to me, by comparison with the erring Amy, the sinner I am and must be, if I 'm to live. So, dear, the end of it is,' and Mrs. Lawrence put her fingers to a silken amber bow at Aminta's throat, and squared it and flattened it with dainty precision, speaking on under dropped eyelids, intent upon her work, 'Lady de Culme will be happy to welcome you whenever it shall suit the Countess of Ormont to accompany her disreputable friend. But what can I do, dear?' She raised her lids and looked beseechingly. 'I was born with this taste for the ways and games and style of men. I hope I don't get on badly with women; but if I 'm not allowed to indulge my natural taste, I kick the stable-boards and bite the manger.'

Aminta threw her arms round her, and they laughed their mutual peal.

Caressing her still, Aminta said: 'I don't know whether I embrace a boy.'

'That idea comes from a man!' said Mrs. Lawrence. It was admitted. The secretary was discussed.

Mrs. Lawrence remarked: 'Yes, I like talking with him; he's bright. You drove him out of me the day I saw him. Doesn't he give you the idea of a man who insists on capturing you and lets it be seen he doesn't care two snaps of a finger?'

Aminta petitioned on his behalf indifferently: 'He 's well bred.'

She was inattentive to Mrs. Lawrence's answer. The allusion of the Queen of Blondes had stung her in the unacknowledged regions where women discard themselves and are most sensitive.

'Decide on coming soon to Lady de Culme,' said Mrs. Lawrence. 'Now that her arms are open to you, she would like to have you in them. She is old--. You won't be rigorous? no standing on small punctilios?'

She would call, but she does not--h'm, it is M. le Comte that she does not choose to--h'm. But her arms are open to the countess. It ought to be a grand step. You may be assured that Lady Charlotte Eglett would not be taken into them. My great-aunt has a great-aunt's memory. The Ormonts are the only explanation--if it 's an apology--she can offer for the behaviour of the husband of the Countess of Ormont. You know I like him. I can't help liking a man who likes me. Is that the way with a boy, Mr. Secretary? I must have another talk with the gentleman, my dear. You are Aminta to me.'

'Always Aminta to you,' was the reply, tenderly given.

'But as for comprehending him, I'm as far off that as Lady de Culme, who hasn't the liking for him I have.'

'The earl?'' said Aminta, showing by her look that she was in the same position.

Mrs. Lawrence shrugged: 'I believe men and women marry in order that they should never be able to understand one another. The riddle's best read at a moderate distance. It 's what they call the golden mean; too close, too far, we're strangers. I begin to understand that husband of mine, now we're on bowing terms. Now, I must meet the earl to-morrow. You will arrange? His hand wants forcing. Upon my word, I don't believe it 's more.'

Mrs. Lawrence contrasted him in her mind with the husband she knew, and was invigorated by the thought that a placable impenetrable giant may often be more pliable in a woman's hands than an irascible dwarf--until, perchance, the latter has been soundly cuffed, and then he is docile to trot like a squire, as near your heels as he can get. She rejoiced to be working for the woman she had fallen in love with.

Aminta promised herself to show the friend a livelier affection at their next meeting.

A seventh letter, signed 'Adolphus,' came by post, was read and locked up in her jewel-box. They were all nigh destruction for a wavering minute or so. They were placed where they lay because the first of them had been laid there, the box being a strong one, under a patent key, and discovery would mean the terrible. They had not been destroyed because they had, or seemed to her to have, the language of passion. She could read them unmoved, and appease a wicked craving she owned to having, and reproached herself with having, for that language.

Was she not colour in the sight of men? Here was one, a mouthpiece of numbers, who vowed that homage was her due, and devotion, the pouring forth of the soul to her. What was the reproach if she read the stuff unmoved?

But peruse and reperuse it, and ask impressions to tell our deepest instinct of truthfulness whether language of this character can have been written to two women by one hand! Men are cunning. Can they catch a tone? Not that tone!

She, too, Mrs. Amy May, was colour in the sight of men. Yet it seemed that he could not have written so to the Queen of Blondes. And she, by repute, was as dangerous to slight as he to attract. Her indifference exonerated him. Besides, a Queen of Blondes would not draw the hearts out of men in England, as in Italy and in Spain. Aminta had got thus far when she found 'Queen of Brunet' expunged by a mist: she imagined hearing the secretary's laugh. She thought he was right to laugh at her. She retorted simply: 'These are feelings that are poetry.'

A man may know nothing about them, and be an excellent schoolmaster.

Suggestions touching the prudence of taking Mrs. Lawrence into her confidence, as regarded these troublesome letters of the man with the dart in his breast, were shuffled aside for various reasons: her modesty shrank; and a sense of honour toward the man forbade it. She would have

found it easier to do if she had conspired against her heart in doing it. And yet, cold-bloodedly to expose him and pluck the clothing from a passion--dear to think of only when it is profoundly secret--struck her as an extreme baseness, of which not even the woman who perused and reperused his letters could be guilty.

Her head rang with some of the lines, and she accused her head of the crime of childishness, seeing that her heart was not an accomplice. At the same time, her heart cried out violently against the business of a visit to Lady de Culme, and all the steps it involved. Justly she accused her heart of treason. Heart and head were severed. This, as she partly apprehended, is the state of the woman who is already on the slope of her nature's mine-shaft, dreading the rush downwards, powerless to break away from the light.

Letters perused and reperused, coming from a man never fervently noticed in person, conjure features one would wish to put beside the actual, to make sure that the fiery lines he writes are not practising a beguilement. Aminta had lost grasp of the semblance of the impassioned man. She just remembered enough of his eyes to think there might be healing in a sight of him.

Latterly she had refused to be exhibited to a tattling world as the great nobleman's conquest:--The 'Beautiful Lady Doubtful' of a report that had scorched her cars. Theatres, rides, pleasure-drives, even such houses as she saw standing open to her had been shunned. Now she asked the earl to ride in the park.

He complied, and sent to the stables immediately, just noted another of her veerings. The whimsy creatures we are matched to contrast with, shift as the very winds or feather-grasses in the wind. Possibly a fine day did it. Possibly, too, her not being requested to do it.

He was proud of her bearing on horseback. She rode well and looked well. A finer weapon wherewith to strike at a churlish world was never given into the hands of man. These English may see in her, if they like, that they and their laws and customs are defied. It does her no hurt, and it hits them a ringing buffet.

Among the cavaliers they passed was Mr. Morsfield. He rode by slowly. The earl stiffened his back in returning the salute. Both that and the gentleman were observed by Aminta.

'He sees to having good blood under him,' said the earl. 'I admired his mount,' she replied.

Interpreted by the fire of his writing, his features expressed character: insomuch that a woman could say of another woman, that she admired him and might reasonably do so. His gaze at her in the presence of her lord was audacious.

He had the defect of his virtue of courage. Yet a man indisputably possessing courage cannot but have an interesting face--though one may

continue saying, Pity that the eyes are not a little wider apart! He dresses tastefully; the best English style. A portrait by a master hand might hand him down to generations as an ancestor to be proud of. But with passion and with courage, and a bent for snatching at the lion's own, does he not look foredoomed to an early close? Her imagination called up a portrait of Elizabeth's Earl of Essex to set beside him; and without thinking that the two were fraternally alike, she sent him riding away with the face of the Earl of Essex and the shadow of the unhappy nobleman's grievous fortunes over his head.

But it is inexcuseable to let the mind be occupied recurrently by a man who has not moved the feelings, wicked though it be to have the feelings moved by him. Aminta rebuked her silly wits, and proceeded to speculate from an altitude, seeing the man's projects in a singularly definite minuteness, as if the crisis he invoked, the perils he braved, the mute participation he implored of her for the short space until their fate should be decided, were a story sharply cut on metal. Several times she surprised herself in an interesting pursuit of the story; abominably cold, abominably interested. She fell upon a review of small duties of the day, to get relief; and among them a device for spiriting away her aunt from the table where Mrs. Lawrence wished to meet Lord Ormont. It sprang up to her call like an imp of the burning pit. She saw it ingenious and of natural aspect. I must be a born intriguer! she said in her breast. That was hateful; but it seemed worse when she thought of a woman commanding the faculty and consenting to be duped and foiled. That might be termed despicable; but what if she had not any longer the wish to gain her way with her lord?

Those letters are acting like a kind of poison in me! her heart cried: and it was only her head that dwelt on the antidote.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

A woman, and would therefore listen to nonsense
And not be beaten by an acknowledged defeat
Botched mendings will only make them worse
Convincing themselves that they impersonate sagacity
I have all the luxuries--enough to loathe them
Lawyers hold the keys of the great world
Naked original ideas, are acceptable at no time
Not daring risk of office by offending the taxpayer
This female talk of the eternities
To know how to take a licking, that wins in the end
To males, all ideas are female until they are made facts
We cannot, men or woman, control the heart in sleep at night
Who cries, Come on, and prays his gods you won't

[The End]

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