

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE TRAGIC
COMEDIANS: A STUDY
IN A WELL-KNOWN
STORY. VOLUME 3

George Meredith

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in a Well-known Story. Volume 3**

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CHAPTER XII

She ran out to the shade of the garden walls to be by herself and in the air, and she read; and instantly her own letter to the baroness crashed sentence upon sentence, in retort, springing up with the combative instinct of a beast, to make discord of the stuff she read, and deride it. Twice she went over the lines with this defensive accompaniment; then they laid octopus-limbs on her. The writing struck chill as a glacier cave. Oh, what an answer to that letter of fervid respectfulness, of innocent supplication for maternal affection, for some degree of benignant friendship!

The baroness coldly stated, that she had arrived in the city to do her best in assisting to arrange matters which had come to a most unfortunate and impracticable pass. She alluded to her established friendship for Alvan, but it was chiefly in the interests of Clotilde that the latter was requested to perceive the necessity for bringing her relations with Dr. Alvan to an end in the discreetest manner now possible to the circumstances. This, the baroness pursued, could only be done by her intervention, and her friendship for Dr. Alvan had caused her to undertake the little agreeable office. For which purpose, promising her an exemption from anything in the nature of tragedy scenes, the baroness desired Clotilde to call on her the following day between certain specified hours of the afternoon.

That was all.

The girl in her letter to the baroness had constrained herself to write, and therefore to think, in so beautiful a spirit of ignorant innocence, that the vileness of an answer thus brutally throwing off the mask of personal disinterestedness appeared to her both an abominable piece of cynicism on the part of a scandalous old woman, and an insulting rejection of the cover of decency proposed to the creature by a daisy-minded maiden.

She scribbled a single line in receipt of the letter and signed her initials.

'The woman is hateful!' she said to her father; she was ready to agree with him about the woman and Alvan. She was ashamed to have hoped anything of the woman, and stamped down her disappointment under a vehement indignation, that disfigured the man as well. He had put the matter into the hands of this most detestable of women, to settle it as she might think best! He and she!—the miserable old thing with her ancient arts and cajoleries had lured him back! She had him fast again, in spite of—for who could tell? perhaps by reason of her dirty habits: she smoked dragoon cigars! All day she was emitting tobacco-smoke; it was notorious, Clotilde had not to learn it from her father; but now she saw the filthy rag that standard of female independence was—that petticoated Unfeminine, fouler than masculine! Alvan preferred the lichen-draped tree to the sunny flower, it was evident, for never a letter from Alvan had come to her. She thought in wrath, nothing but the thoughts of wrath, and ran her wits through every reasonable reflection like a lighted brand that flings its colour, if not fire, upon surrounding images. Contempt of the square-jawed withered woman was too great for Clotilde to have a sensation of her driving jealousy until painful glimpses of the man made jealousy so sharp that she flew for refuge to contempt of the pair. That beldam had him back: she had him fast. Oh! let her keep him! Was he to be regretted who could make that choice?

Her father did not let the occasion slip to speak insistingly as the world opined of Alvan and his baroness. He forced her to swallow the calumny, and draw away with her family against herself through strong disgust.

Out of a state of fire Clotilde passed into solid frigidity. She had neither a throb nor a passion. Wishing seemed to her senseless as life was. She could hear without a thrill of her frame that Alvan was in the city, without a question whether it was true. He had not written, and he had handed her over to the baroness! She did not ask herself how it was that she had no letter from him, being afraid to think about it, because, if a letter had been withheld by her father, it was a part of her whipping; if none had been written, there was nothing to hope for. Her recent humiliation condemned him by the voice of her sufferings for his failure to be giant, eagle, angel, or any of the prodigious things he had taught her to expect; and as he had thus deceived her, the glorious lover she had imaged in her mind was put aside with some of the angry disdain she bestowed upon the woman by whom she had been wounded. He ceased to be a visioned Alvan, and became an obscurity; her principal sentiment in relation to him was, that he threatened her peace. But for him she would never have been taught to hate her parents; she would have enjoyed the quiet domestic evenings with her people, when Marko sang, and her sisters knitted, and the betrothed sister wore a look very enviable in the abstract; she would be seeing a future instead of a black iron gate! But for him she certainly would never have had, that letter from the baroness!

On the morning after the information of Alvan's return, her father, who deserved credit as a tactician, came to her to say that Alvan had sent to demand his letters and presents. The demand was unlike what her stunned heart recollected of Alvan; but a hint that the baroness was behind it, and that a refusal would bring the baroness down on her with another piece of insolence, was effective. She dealt out the letters, arranged the presents, made up the books, pamphlets, trinkets, amulet coins, lock of black hair, and worn post-marked paper addressed in his hand to Clotilde von Rudiger, carefully; and half as souvenir, half with the forlorn yearning of the look of lovers when they break asunder—or of one of them—she signed inside the packet not 'Clotilde,' but the gentlest title he had bestowed on her, trusting to the pathos of the word 'child' to tell him that she was enforced and still true, if he should be interested in knowing it. Weak souls are much moved by having the pathos on their side. They are consoled too.

Time passed, whole days: the tender reminder had no effect on him! It had been her last appeal: she reflected that she had really felt when he had not been feeling at all: and this marks a division.

She was next requested to write a letter to Alvan, signifying his release by the notification of her engagement to Prince Marko. She was personally to deliver it to a gentleman who was of neither party, and who would give her a letter from Alvan in exchange, which, while assuring the gentleman she was acting with perfect freedom, she was to be under her oath not to read, and dutifully to hand to Marko, her betrothed. Her father assumed the fact of her renewed engagement to the prince, as her whole family did; strangely, she thought: it struck her as a fatality. He said that Alvan was working him great mischief, doing him deadly injury in his position, and for no just reason, inasmuch as he—a bold, bad man striving to ruin the family on a point of pride—had declared that he simply considered himself bound in honour to her, only a little doubtful of her independent action at present; and a release of him, accompanied by her plain statement of her being under no compulsion, voluntarily the betrothed of another, would solve the difficulty. A certain old woman, it seemed, was anxious to have him formally released.

With the usual dose for such a patient, of cajoleries and threats, the General begged her to comply, pulling the hands he squeezed in a way to strongly emphasize his affectionate entreaty.

She went straight to Marko, consenting that he should have Alvan's letter unopened (she cared not to read it, she said), on his promise to give it up to her within a stated period. There was a kind of prohibited pleasure, sweet acid, catching discord, in the idea of this lover's keeping the forbidden thing she could ask for when she was curious about the other, which at present she was not; dead rather; anxious to please her parents, and determined to be no rival of the baroness. Marko promised it readily, adding: 'Only let the storm roll over, that we may have more liberty, and I myself, when we two are free, will lead you to Alvan, and leave it to you to choose between us. Your happiness, beloved,

is my sole thought. Submit for the moment.' He spoke sweetly, with his dearest look, touching her luxurious nature with a belief that she could love him; untroubled by another, she could love and be true to him: her maternal inner nature yearned to the frailbodied youth.

She made a comparison in her mind of Alvan's love and Marko's, and of the lives of the two men. There was no grisly baroness attached to the prince's life.

She wrote the letter to Alvan, feeling in the words that said she was plighted to Prince Marko, that she said, and clearly said, the baroness is now relieved of a rival, and may take you! She felt it so acutely as to feel that she said nothing else.

Severances are accomplished within the heart stroke by stroke; within the craven's heart each new step resulting from a blow is temporarily an absolute severance. Her letter to Alvan written, she thought not tenderly of him but of the prince, who had always loved a young woman, and was unhampered by an old one. The composition of the letter, and the sense that the thing was done, made her stony to Alvan.

On the introduction of Colonel von Tresten, whose name she knew, but was dull to it, she delivered him her letter with unaffected composure, received from him Alvan's in exchange, left the room as if to read it, and after giving it unopened to Marko, composedly reappeared before the colonel to state, that the letter could make no difference, and all was to be as she had written it.

The colonel bowed stiffly.

It would have comforted her to have been allowed to say: 'I cease to be the rival of that execrable harridan!'

The delivery of so formidable a cat-screach not being possible, she stood in an attitude of mild resignation, revolving thoughts of her father's praises of his noble daughter, her mother's kiss, the caresses of her sisters, and the dark bright eyes of Marko, the peace of the domestic circle. This was her happiness! And still there was time, still hope for Alvan to descend and cut the knot. She conceived it slowly, with some flush of the brain like a remainder of fever, but no throbs of her pulses. She had been swayed to act against him by tales which in her heart she did not credit exactly, therefore did not take within herself, though she let them influence her by the goad of her fears and angers; and these she could conjure up at will for the defence of her conduct, aware of their shallowness, and all the while trusting him to come in the end and hear her reproaches for his delay. He seemed to her now to have the character of a storm outside a household wrapped in comfortable monotony. Her natural spiritedness detested the monotony, her craven soul fawned for the comfort. After her many recent whippings the comfort was immensely desirable, but a glance at the monotony gave it the look of a burial, and standing in her attitude of resignation under Colonel von Tresten's hard military stare she could have shrieked for Alvan to come, knowing that she would have cowered and trembled at the scene following his appearance. Yet she would have gone to him; without any doubt his presence and the sense of his greater power declared by his coming would have lifted her over to him. The part of her nature adoring storminess wanted only a present champion to outweigh the other part which cuddled security. Colonel von Tresten, however, was very far from offering himself in such a shape to a girl that had jilted the friend he loved, insulted the woman he esteemed; and he stood there like a figure of soldierly complacency in marble. Her pencilled acknowledgement of the baroness's letter, and her reply to it almost as much, was construed as an intended insult to that lady, whose champion Tresten was. He had departed before Clotilde heard a step.

Immediately thereupon it came: to her mind that Tresten was one of Alvan's bosom friends. How, then, could he be of neither party? And her father spoke of him as an upright rational man, who, although, strangely enough, he entertained, as it appeared, something like a profound reverence for the baroness, could see and confess the downright impossibility of the marriage Alvan proposed. Tresten, her father said, talked of his friend Alvan as wild and eccentric, but now becoming convinced that such a family as hers could never tolerate him— considering his age, his birth, his blood, his habits, his politics, his private entanglements and moral reputation, it was partly hinted.

She shuddered at this false Tresten. He and the professor might be strung together for examples of perfidy! His reverence of the baroness gave his cold blue eyes the iciness of her loathed letter. Alvan, she remembered, used to exalt him among the gallantest of the warriors dedicating their swords to freedom. The dedication of the sword, she felt sure, was an accident: he was a man of blood. And naturally, she must be hated by the man reverencing the baroness. If ever man had executioner stamped on his face, it was he! Like the professor, nay, like Alvan himself, he would not see that she was the victim of tyranny: none of her signs would they see. They judged of her by her inanimate frame in the hands of her torturers breaking her on the wheel. She called to mind a fancy that she had looked at Tresten out of her deadness earnestly for just one instant: more than an instant she could not, beneath her father's vigilant watch and into those repellant cold blue butcher eyes. Tresten might clearly have understood the fleeting look. What were her words! what her deeds!

The look was the truth revealed—her soul. It begged for life like an infant; and the man's face was an iron rock in reply! No wonder—he worshipped the baroness! So great was Clotilde's hatred of him that it overflowed the image of Alvan, who called him friend, and deputed him to act as friend. Such blindness, weakness, folly, on the part of one of Alvan's pretensions, incurred a shade of her contempt. She had not ever thought of him coldly: hitherto it would have seemed a sacrilege; but now she said definitely, the friend of Tresten cannot be the man I supposed him! and she ascribed her capacity for saying it, and for perceiving and adding up Alvan's faults of character, to the freezing she had taken from that most antipathetic person. She confessed to sensations of spite which would cause her to reject and spurn even his pleadings for Alvan, if they were imaginable as actual. Their not being imaginable allowed her to indulge her naughtiness harmlessly, for the gratification of the idea of wounding some one, though it were her lover, connected with this Tresten.

The letter of the baroness and the visit of the woman's admirer had vitiated Clotilde's blood. She was not only not mistress of her thoughts, she was undirected either in thinking or wishing by any desires, except that the people about her should caress and warm her, until, with no gaze backward, she could say good-bye to them, full of meaning as a good-bye to the covered grave, as unreluctantly as the swallow quits her eaves-nest in autumn: and they were to learn that they were chargeable with the sequel of the history. There would be a sequel, she was sure, if it came only to punish them for the cruelty which thwarted her timid anticipation of it by pressing on her natural instinct at all costs to bargain for an escape from pain, and making her simulate contentment to cheat her muffled wound and them.

CHAPTER XIII

His love meantime was the mission and the burden of Alvan, and he was not ashamed to speak of it and plead for it; and the pleading was not done troubadourishly, in soft flute-notes, as for easement of tuneful emotions beseeching sympathy. He was liker to a sturdy beggar demanding his crust, to support life, of corporations that can be talked into admitting the rights of man; and he villed close logical argumentation, on the basis of the laws, in defence of his most natural hunger, thunder in his breast and bright new heavenly morning alternating or clashing while the electric wires and post smote him with evil tidings of Clotilde, and the success of his efforts caught her back to him. Daily many times he reached to her and lost her, had her in his arms and his arms withered with emptiness. The ground he won quaked under him. All the evidence opposed it, but he was in action, and his reason swore that he had her fast. He had seen and felt his power over her; his reason told him by what had been that it must be. Could he doubt? He battled for his reason. Doubt was an extinguishing wave, and he clung to his book of the Law, besieging Church and State with it, pointing to texts of the law which proved her free to choose her lord and husband for herself, expressing his passionate love by his precise interpretation of the law: and still with the cold sentience gaining on him, against the current of his tumultuous blood and his hurried intelligence, of her being actually what he had named her in moments of playful vision—slippery, a serpent, a winding hare; with the fear that she might slip from him, betray, deny him, deliver him to ridicule, after he had won his way to her over every barrier. During his proudest exaltations in success, when his eyes were sparkling, there was a wry twitch inward upon his heart of hearts.

But if she was a hare, he was a hunter, little inclining to the chase now for mere physical recreation. She had roused the sportsman's passion as well as the man's; he meant to hunt her down, and was not more scrupulous than our ancient hunters, who hunted for a meal and hunted to kill, with none of the later hesitations as to circumventing, trapping, snaring by devices, and the preservation of the animal's coat spotless. Let her be lured from her home, or plucked from her home, and if reluctant, disgraced, that she may be dependent utterly on the man stooping to pick her up! He was equal to the projecting of a scheme socially infamous, with such fanatical intensity did the thought of his losing the woman harass him, and the torrent of his passion burst restraint to get to her to enfold her—this in the same hour of the original wild monster's persistent and sober exposition of the texts of the law with the voice of a cultivated modern gentleman; and, let it be said, with a modern gentleman's design to wed a wife in honour. All means were to be tried. His eye burned on his prize, mindless of what she was dragged through, if there was resistance, or whether by the hair of her head or her skirts, or how she was obtained. His interpretation of the law was for the powers of earth, and other plans were to propitiate the powers under the earth, and certain distempered groanings wrenched from him at intervals he addressed (after they were out of him, reflectively) to the powers above, so that nothing of him should be lost which might get aid of anything mundane, infernal, or celestial.

Thus it is when Venus bites a veritable ancient male. She puts her venom in a magnificent beast, not a pathetic Phaedra. She does it rarely, for though to be loved by a bitten giant is one of the dreams of woman, the considerate Mother of Love knows how needful it is to protect the sentiment of the passion and save them from an exhibition of the fires of that dragon's breath. Do they not fly shrieking when they behold it? Barely are they able to read of it. Men, too, accustomed to minor doses of the goddess, which moderate, soften, counteract, instead of inflicting the malady, abhor and have no brotherhood with its turbulent victim.

It was justly matter for triumph, due to an extraordinary fervour of pleading upon a plain statement of the case, that Alvan should return from his foray bringing with him an emissary deputed by General von Rudiger's official chief to see that the young lady, so passionately pursued by the foremost of his time in political genius and oratory, was not subjected to parental tyranny, but stood

free to exercise her choice. Of the few who would ever have thought of attempting, a diminished number would have equalled that feat. Alvan was no vain boaster; he could gain the ears of grave men as well as mobs and women. The interview with Clotilde was therefore assured to him, and the distracting telegrams and letters forwarded to him by Tresten during his absence were consequently stabs already promising to heal. They were brutal stabs—her packet of his letters and presents on his table made them bleed afresh, and the odd scrawl of the couple of words on the paper set him wondering at the imbecile irony of her calling herself 'The child' in accompaniment to such an act, for it reminded him of his epithet for her, while it dealt him a tremendous blow; it seemed senselessly malign, perhaps flippant, as she could be, he knew. She could be anything weak and shallow when out of his hands; she had recently proved it still, in view of the interview, and on the tide of his labours to come to that wished end, he struck his breast to brave himself with a good hopeful spirit. 'Once mine!' he said.

Moreover, to the better account, Clotilde's English friend had sent him the lines addressed to her, in which the writer dwelt on her love of him with a whimper of the voice of love. That was previous to her perjury by little, by a day-eighteen hours. How lurid a satire was flung on events by the proximity of the dates! But the closeness of the time between this love-crooning and the denying of him pointed to a tyrannous intervention. One could detect it. Full surely the poor craven was being tyrannized and tutored to deny him! though she was a puss of the fields too, as the mounted sportsman was not unwilling to think.

Before visiting his Mentor, Alvan applied for an audience of General von Rudiger, who granted it at once to a man coming so well armed to claim the privilege. Tresten walked part of the way to the General's house with him, and then turned aside to visit the baroness.

Lucie, Baroness von Crefeldt, was one of those persons who, after a probationary term in the character of woman, have become men, but of whom offended man, amazed by the flowering up of that hard rough jaw from the tender blooming promise of a petticoat, finds it impossible to imagine they had once on a sweet Spring time the sex's gentleness and charm of aspect. Mistress Flanders, breeched and hatted like a man, pulling at the man's short pipe and heartily invoking frouzy deities, committing a whole sackful of unfeminine etcaetera, is an impenetrable wall to her maiden past; yet was there an opening day when nothing of us moustached her. She was a clear-faced girl and mother of young blushes before the years were at their work of transformation upon her countenance and behind her bosom. The years were rough artists: perhaps she was combative, and fought them for touching her ungallantly; and that perhaps was her first manly step. Baroness Lucie was of high birth, a wife openly maltreated, a woman of breeding, but with a man's head, capable of inspiring man-like friendships, and of entertaining them. She was radically-minded, strongly of the Radical profession of faith, and a correspondent of revolutionary chiefs; both the trusted adviser and devoted slave of him whose future glorious career she measured by his abilities. Rumour blew out a candle and left the wick to smoke in relation to their former intercourse. The Philistines revenged themselves on an old aristocratic Radical and a Jew demagogue with the weapon that scandal hands to virtue. They are virtuous or nothing, and they must show that they are so when they can; and best do they show it by publicly dishonouring the friendship of a man and a woman; for to be in error in malice does not hurt them, but they profoundly feel that they are fools if they are duped.

She was aware of the recent course of events; she had as she protested, nothing to accuse herself of, and she could hardly part her lips without a self-exculpation.

'It will fall on me!' she said to Tresten, in her emphatic tone. 'He will have his interview with the girl. He will subdue the girl. He will manacle himself in the chains he makes her wear. She will not miss her chance! I am the object of her detestation. I am the price paid for their reconciliation. She will seize her opportunity to vilipend me, and I shall be condemned by the kind of court-martial which hurries over the forms of a brial to sign the execution-warrant that makes it feel like justice. You will see. She cannot forgive me for not pretending to enter into her enthusiasm. She will make

him believe I conspired against her. Men in love are children with their mistresses—the greatest of them; their heads are under the woman's feet. What have I not done to aid him! At his instance, I went to the archbishop, to implore one of the princes of the Church for succour. I knelt to an ecclesiastic. I did a ludicrous and a shameful thing, knowing it in advance to be a barren farce. I obeyed his wish. The tale will be laughable. I obeyed him. I would not have it on my conscience that the commission of any deed ennomic, however unwonted, was refused by me to serve Alvan. You are my witness, Tresten, that for a young woman of common honesty I was ready to pack and march. Qualities of mind—mind! They were out of the question. He had a taste for a wife. If he had hit on a girl commonly honest, she might not have harmed him—the contrary; cut his talons. What is this girl? Exactly what one might be sure his appreciation, in woman-flesh, would lead him to fix on; a daughter of the Philistines, naturally, and precisely the one of all on earth likely to confound him after marriage as she has played fast and loose with him before it. He has never understood women—cannot read them. Could a girl like that keep a secret? She's a Cressida—a creature of every camp! Not an idea of the cause he is vowed to! not a sentiment in harmony with it! She is viler than any of those Berlin light o' loves on the eve of Jena. Stable as a Viennese dancing slut home from Mariazell! This is the girl-transparent to the whole world! But his heart is on her, and he must have her, I suppose; and I shall have to bear her impertinences, or sign my demission and cease to labour for the cause at least in conjunction with Alvan. And how other wise? He is the life of it, and I am doomed to uselessness.'

Tresten nodded a protesting assent.

'Not quite so bad,' he said, with the encouraging smile which could persuade a friend to put away bilious visions. 'Of the two, if you two are divisible, we could better dispense with him. She'll slip him, she's an eel. I have seen eels twine on a prong of the fork that prods them; but she's an actress, a slippery one through and through, with no real embrace in her, not even a common muscular contraction. Of every camp! as you say. She was not worth carrying off. I consented to try it to quiet him. He sets no bounds to his own devotion to friendship, and we must take pattern by him. It's a mad love.'

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