A Modern Lover — Volume 1 Chapter 8

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CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE COUNTRY.

Claremont House was in Sussex, and from the terrace in front of the house you could see the sea.

At the station a footman, in the majesty of a grey livery, asked Lewis if he were Mr. Seymour.

On being answered in the affirmative, he went to look after the luggage, and in a quarter of an hour after, from the cosy cushions of a brougham, Lewis saw the lodge-keeper open a large white gate, and the carriage entered the avenue. It ran in an absolutely straight line through thin beech trees, and on both sides rolled great seas of green pasture land.

During the whole journey down Lewis had played with his dreams like a child with a box full of new toys; delighted, he had examined one after the other, and then laid them aside timidly, as if afraid they would break; but now, sitting in the brougham, where so often her skirts had rustled, the intoxicating odour of his future life rose to his head like the perfume of a flower crushed and smelt in the hollow of the hand.

After passing a bridge, the avenue took a turn, and for some distance skirted along the river. The trees were here large, and a group of tall elms, growing on a swampy island, extended their huge masculine arms as if to embrace the feminine foliage of the beeches that coquettishly leaned towards them.

Under this natural archway the carriage turned and rapidly approached the house, which stood at the end of an emerald coloured terrace. It was a long, narrow, grey building, pierced with innumerable windows, and the blue slates melted into the deep green foliage of the silver firs, which were the pride of the domain.

The original house had been destroyed a century ago by fire; the present building had been fashioned out of the stables, which accounted for the pigeon hole appearance it presented.

On the left, the terrace was bounded by a high wall entirely concealed by laurels, which, growing from a distance of fifty feet, formed an immense sloping bank. On the right, facing the sea, there was a huge flight of steps leading to the second terrace, under which the river rippled round the laurel-covered islands down to the sea, which lay motionless and dim in the far distance.

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The beauty of the landscape was exceeding, and the day died amorously. A crimson sun sank slowly out of a rose sky into a grey sea, and out of the blue heights of the heavens there fell the sweet satiety that marks the end of an August day. Trembling floods of violet shadow heaved and rolled up from the distant strand along the hill sides, and the two ladies who were leaning on the balustrade watching the sun setting, came out black in the soft dissolution of light.

The carriage drew up at the hall door; a small, unpretending entrance, unapproached by steps, and opening into a passage rather than a hall. The footman took down Lewis' portmanteau, and the butler unpacked it for him, putting his morning suits, shirts, collars and pocket handkerchiefs away in a large mahogany wardrobe, and laying out his evening clothes with wonderful precision on the clear curtained iron bed. While he did so, Lewis sat at the window and watched. The ladies were walking across the solitary terrace towards the house. The evening had grown chilly, and they had drawn their shawls more tightly round their shoulders. Lewis recognised one as Mrs. Bentham, and he thought she looked up once at his window.

Then the servant brought him some hot water, and told him that dinner would be ready in half an hour. Lewis could not realise his position, and as he dressed for dinner his thoughts evaporated, and he was conscious of nothing but a clinging sensation of pleasure, of expectant happiness.

He dried, powdered, and scented himself with care, and, full of misgiving, tried on the dress clothes. The trousers he thought too wide, the waistcoat seemed to him vulgar, but he could only hope that no one would suspect they were ready made. It was a long time since he had enjoyed the comfort of nice fresh clothes, and it was with an exquisite sense of real delight that he drew on his silk socks, tied his white neck-tie, and brushed, standing before the tall glass, his rich brown hair.

At last he got dressed, and the footman showed him into the drawing-room. There he found Mrs. Bentham, who received him with a large white smile, and introduced him to Mrs. Thorpe, her cousin. Mrs. Thorpe bowed and continued to knit in the chimney corner. Lewis was more than timid, he was positively frightened, and his new clothes made him feel very awkward.

But Mrs. Bentham thought he looked divinely handsome, and she remembered how wretchedly poor he looked when she met him at Mr. Carver's shop.

At last dinner was announced, and Mrs. Bentham asked him to take in Mrs. Thorpe. He did it very stupidly, scarcely knowing if he had to offer her his hand or his arm; the women exchanged looks; one was of annoyance, the other of reproof. Dinner went by in a slow and irritating manner; everybody was ill at ease. Lewis, who had never been anywhere except to a few luncheon parties in Essex, was so preoccupied thinking how he should eat and act, that he could not say a word. He was conscious that Mrs. Thorpe was watching him, and he fancied that she would make use of any little slip to his disadvantage; consequently he did not take the bread out of his napkin until he had seen Mrs. Bentham take hers, and during the whole meal he ate and drank after first observing one of the ladies.

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But he was wrong in supposing that Mrs. Thorpe was his enemy. The old lady was merely a little alarmed at what she could not consider other than excessively eccentric behaviour. Mrs. Bentham had told her how anxious Mr. Vicome was to have the decorations finished; but this failed to strike Mrs. Thorpe as a very valid reason for picking up a young man, and bringing him down to stay with them. If it were really necessary to have all these paintings done, and on that matter she did not venture an opinion, she thought it should have been put into the hands of a respectable firm, who would see that it was done properly. But with regard to Mr. Vicome's eagerness in the matter, it was preposterous. "What did the poor old gentleman want with decorations?" she asked, pityingly. "He could not even come and see them when they were done," and now, all she hoped was, that the country people would not misinterpret Mrs. Bentham's motives, and that this young man's good looks, which were startling, would not create any scandal. Such were Mrs. Thorpe's opinions, and she had expressed them in a no less explicit way, when her cousin told her all she could tell her, which was very little, of the young man she was expecting from London.

The old lady belonged to a long past time, and could neither feel nor understand anything of the fashions of to-day. For over thirty years she had lived in a little country house, mourning the loss of a husband she had loved devotedly, and her grief had known no change until it was doubled by the loss of her only son. Her life had been made up of two great loves and two great griefs; of all other passions and desires she knew as little as a child; and the falseness of fashionable life was so repugnant to her nature that she only remained with Mrs. Bentham because she had undertaken to do so — because she felt her presence was necessary.

When the ladies rose from the table, Lewis scarcely knew how to act; he had heard that gentlemen stopped behind, but did not know if the rule applied when there was but one.

Mrs. Bentham divined his embarrassment, and asked him to follow them into the drawing-room, unless he wished to smoke. He did, but was delighted to say he didn't, for he dreaded the eye of the butler, knowing that that functionary would read him like a book.

All three went into the drawing-room. Mrs. Thorpe sat silently down in her wickerwork chair behind a Japanese screen, which protected her from the draught, and Lewis, with that feminine tact which was part of his nature, endeavoured to talk to her. At first she tried to resist his advances, and answered him in short phrases. From a little distance, Mrs. Bentham watched the comedy.

Mrs. Thorpe was dressed entirely in black cachemire, which fell loosely about her spare figure. She wore a white cap, under which appeared some thin white hair, suggestive of baldness. The arms were long and bony, and the brown hands were contracted and crooked from her incessant knitting, in fact, they seemed like a knitting machine perpetually in motion; it was the exception to see them still.

As she took from time to time a needle out of her cap, she would look from Lewis to her cousin, and then her eyes would return to her stocking. But at last her curiosity to know who Lewis was

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tempted her out of her silence, and as an opportunity presented itself, she asked him some questions about his early life.

Lewis knew well it would be dangerous to tell lies, so he gave only a pleasant version of the truth. He told her about the straits his father's improvidence had reduced them to, and how he had lived all alone with his mother till she died; how his uncle had failed at the same time, and how he, Lewis, an orphan, had found himself obliged to face the world with three hundred and fifty pounds.

The picture he gave of how he had lived all alone with his mother recalled to Mrs. Thorpe her son's childhood and early manhood, and her eyes filled with tears of pity for Lewis' loneliness.

Mrs. Bentham listened to the sad story dreamily, only interrupting it to ask a question from time to time. Her attitude gradually grew more abandoned, and the intervals of her silence became longer as she let her thoughts drift through the melancholy land of reverie. Her life had not been a successful one. She had married a man whose vices had so horrified and frightened her that in the third year she asked for a separation. She might have had a divorce, for her husband had on more than one occasion used violence towards her, but as she never expected to wish to marry again, and as separation was more favourably viewed by society at large, she had accepted the equivocal position of living apart from her husband. This necessitated a companion, and after some difficulty, she persuaded Mrs. Thorpe to leave her home in the north of England, and come and live with her.

Then, believing that she was asked to share, not relinquish, the quietude she cherished, Mrs. Thorpe had consented to come and live with her heart-broken cousin.

But it is only age that can enjoy solitude; youth can but coquette with it, and as the memories of her past life faded, Mrs. Bentham commenced to weary of the retirement. She was grateful to her cousin for the sacrifice she had made in coming to live with her, but she had not found in her the moral support she had hoped for, which she needed in her moments of lassitude; and her days were barren for want of appreciative sympathy. These inward desires to return to society were hastened by outward events. Her father, two years after the court had granted her separation, had given her over the control of the Claremont House property, and on her uncle's death, which occurred about the same time, she had inherited five thousand a year, strictly tied up, and independent of her husband's control. She was, therefore, a rich woman, whose life's duty seemed to be simply to abandon herself to the current of fashionable life; to interest herself as well as she could in small flirtations, still-born loves, and meaningless smiles, and causeless dislikes. She had striven to do so, like many another, because there was nothing else; but year after year she grew more wearied of this eternal chase not even after pleasure, but merely amusement. Instinctively she longed for a large sweet affection wherein she could plunge her whole soul, as the trout on the warm grass longs for the cool stream that ripples in sight.

Lewis continued to tell of how he arrived in London; he drew a graphic picture of the work he had done, and hinted of the misery he had endured. Mrs. Thorpe had stopped knitting, her

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hands had fallen on her knees, and she looked at him, blankly, quite carried away by his eloquence.

Lewis talked well, like all whom nature destines to be amateurs, or, in other words, the proclaimers of an artistic truth. He could explain, formulate, and theorise, far better than he could execute; what talent he had was more of an appreciative than a creative one. The artist, like the mother, has to undergo the throes and labour of childbearing for him, long months of solitude and suffering; whilst the amateur, like the father, unweighed by a struggling infant in the womb, is free to explain and criticise at ease.

Lewis drew an interesting picture of modern London, seething in the heat of a new artistic movement, and awakening in the aurora light of a new period of renaissance; and elated, he ventured to prophecy the success that awaited him who could formularise the cravings of this new generation. There was nothing definite in what he said, but suggestiveness is a far more seductive quality than mere precision, and Mrs. Bentham, whose artistic studies just enabled her to understand him, thought she had never heard anyone speak so beautifully.

We have all a spectre thought, a thought that peeps and mocks at us from behind the happiest moment. Mrs. Bentham's spectre thought was that she was wasting her life; therefore, it is not extraordinary that she felt an immense desire rise up in her mind to protect, to help, to watch and to guide him towards that success of which he spoke so eloquently; it would be part of herself, part of her work, and she would not have lived in vain. She did not reflect that she was a young and handsome woman, that even if she could content herself with this quasi maternal feeling, he, who was only ten or eleven years her junior, would not accept what must seem to him either too much or too little.

Mrs. Thorpe, who had understood little of the art conversation, returned with interest to the story of his early life, and asked him to tell her more about his mother.

The room they were sitting in was both long and narrow. There were three windows, two of which looked out on the wide, grey and laurel-surrounded sweep; the third faced the sea. In the choice and arrangement of the furniture the influence of the artistic movement, known afterwards as the aesthetic, was just visible. The heavy red curtains still remained, but between the windows there were some exquisite renaissance cabinets; on each side of the fire-place stood two Japanese vases of fantastical design, and from the middle of the ceiling, over a vulgar divan, hung a beautiful Louis XVI. chandelier.

Mrs. Bentham was too much oppressed with her thoughts to listen very attentively to the details of the story which she already knew in outline, so she let them talk as they would. The room was very still, and the light of the reading lamp did not touch the gold frames of the innumerable pictures which lined the walls. It fell principally on her arm, which was raised to her head, reflecting it deep in the mirror-like surface of an ebony table; the hand was in half-tint, the face was lost in shadow, but delicately modelled by wandering reflected lights. Outside, the moon

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gleamed with a graveyard whiteness on the level sward, and every now and then the curtains blew out, filled with a rose-imperfumed breeze.

As Mrs. Bentham lay back thinking, possessed by dreams which held her powerless and inert, the soft persuasiveness of the shadow had wrapped itself around her, and all that it had of undecided sadness, discreet voluptuousness and unacknowledged hope, penetrated and bathed her in a kind of morbid languor.

She thought of her childhood, of the time when she used to cry for loneliness as she played with her toys in the solitary echoing stone passages. And she considered the difference it must make in a girl's existence to have a mother to see, to love, to confide in. She recalled a hundred details of her early life; her governesses, her aunt's reprimands, and how she used to appeal to her father in the melancholy room where he sat in his wheel-chair. Then her thoughts drifted, and she passed on to the time when she was taken to her first ball, and she remembered how different it had been to what she had expected. They had few friends; their relations were all old people, at whose dinner-parties her blue frocks and bright smiles had often seemed strangely out of place, and it was at one of these dismal soirees that she had met Mr. Bentham. She now remembered bitterly how he had fascinated her; how she had mistaken him for all that was noble and brilliant, and how, at last, she had married him, dreaming a girl's gay dream of life-long purity and love. Then her thoughts turned from the hideous memory of her married life, darkened with wrecked hopes and sullied illusions, towards the years since she had been separated from her husband; and they passed before her, a dream of conventionalities seen through a haze of vapid sentiment and much squandered emotion. Not one had brought the fulfilment of a hope, the assuagement of a single desire. But, as she stared into the rich shadows which struggled for mastery with the moonlight, she felt herself falling into a delicious torpor; and dreams of what might have been floated softly through her life's gloom. An immense temptation seemed to float about the purple gloaming; a thousand little wishes passed through her mind; but, as she tried to define them, disappeared into the darkness, until the sound of Lewis' voice addressing her broke the current of her thoughts. Seeing that he had completed the conquest of Mrs. Thorpe, he turned to Mrs. Bentham, and tried to speak to her of indifferent things. But the conversation flagged, and became painful.

Ill at ease, Mrs. Bentham went to the piano; the music of Faust lay on the stand. Feverishly and rapidly she played the waltz, passing from piece to piece till she came to the page's song. Then, seeking an interruption, irritated to a last degree by the suggestive vagueness of the music, she asked Lewis if he sang. He had a light tenor voice, and, breathing the perfume of hair and neck, he sang song after song, until the Dresden clock, amid its porcelain flowers, struck half past ten, and Mrs. Thorpe put away her knitting.

Mrs. Bentham had, of course, to accompany her cousin; but, when she bade Lewis goodnight, interlocked, their fingers lingered idly, as she told him that breakfast would be at nine, and that afterwards she would show him the studio, and explain her intentions as regards the decorations.

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Then both women went up to their rooms to tell each other what they thought, or part of what they thought, of the young painter.

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