

MY LADY OF THE BREECHES
A HISTORY—WITH A VENGEANCE

BY
GEORGE RAFFALOVICH

MY LADY OF THE BREECHES

O THE FOOL

"WOULD you marry me, then?" the widow said.

"Yes, of course!" the man replied.

"You are a greater fool than I took you for."

"What do you mean?" he queried, vexed and puzzled. "Am I to take it that you had the intention—that you were prepared . . . ?"

"Go on."

"I don't know."

"I will be," she said, repressing a merry chuckle, "quite outspoken. I was prepared to . . . do nothing. Had you formulated some reasonable request . . . well, it might have ended otherwise. But marriage! Whom do you take me for?"

And the lady—she was dark-haired—whistled to her favourite monkey, a reddish animal, who bounded on her lap.

Lionel Tabard left them both, in their inspiring contrast; never unfrowning his well-shaped but delusive brow.

A few days later, he attempted to kiss the whimsical widow, who then horse-whipped him, meaning to teach him—not manners, but a-propos. Then she laughed. But he proved unintelligent, and never repeated his insult. Hence a nasty nickname from her lips.

I THE JUGGLER

"AND he well deserves it!"

"Oh! it must have been ripping. I do wish I had been there; . . . the horse-whip, and the monkey. He is such a silly fellow, poor 'cheval hongre!'"

"Ah, yes! the new nickname."

"Don't you think that it fits him?"

"Oh, yes."

The silent man of the party moved uneasily in his armchair. He was slow of cogitation.

"Like the waistcoat of the late Nessus fitted Hercules, eh, what?" he suggested.

"A fool!"

"Hercules?"

"No, Lionel . . . and, er . . . yes, Hercules also. Tabard reminds me of that Bible chap."

"Potiphar's Joseph!" the silent man exclaimed triumphantly.

"Wrong again, Bernard. I meant Mary's Joseph."

The silent man threw his cigar over the fender.

II LA PAGESSE

LIONEL TABARD had been horse-whipped by a woman; he had received—or taken—no compensation. This I attribute to his mother. One reads many tales, the paper thereof being damnably wasted; in most of these, mothers are all author-made angels—sweet, loving, kind, forbearing, forgiving creatures, who feel

the responsibility they undertook when they called upon a part of the spiritual world to come down among us. Of course, such mothers are the ideal mothers of a perfect human race, and the authors may consider themselves justified. Nevertheless, let us be true in this one history, and acknowledge the fact that some mothers are a thoroughly bad lot. They are mostly to be found among the well-to-do people, I suppose—and I do not wonder. When I see a mother smiling upon her grown-up son, I feel very sad. I remember my own parent . . .

There! I called this a history—with a vengeance. You have it. Now for a lesson in psychology.

Lionel's mother was queen and "regente" of bad parents. She was clever, but void of reasoning powers; inclined to religious mania, her immediate neighbourhood was crowded with foul larvae. In a legal and womanly manner she had despatched her first husband to the night of a Sanatorium and thence to an early grave. She had suffered badly at the hands of her second. This we may take as being the coarsest form of that automatic justice, which is dealt only to the coarsest natures. It had not, however, extirpated an iota of her fund of self-esteem and lust for authority. To the latter, Lionel had often fallen a victim. he was born bright and happy; the Houses had done well by him. His mother gradually turned him into a self-concentrated, self-conscious, frightened and deceitful youth. She had mentally emasculated him; and, in his fits of understanding, he cursed her with no mean-spirited lips. He never forgave her the death of his father, her lying, under-handed ways, especially her brutality. His was a noble hatred, utter, blood-thirsty, virulent, eternal.

After years of melancholy and the physical consequences thereof, Lionel Tabard found himself free from his tyrannical parent. He soon forgot her, and, as the Divine Blinkings passed by, his recollection became less and less distinct. he only remembered two facts. She had once, during his sleep, broken a bone of his nose with a poker, because he snored; and, at another time, she had broken in two a valuable riding-crop on his shoulder.

Her death pleased him. But his constitution was much weakened by boyish exertions and the physical feeling of emptiness and marrowlessness, the consequences of his shyness and lack of sportsmanship.

The first use he had to make of his freedom and of his fortune was to book a cabin on the first liner bound for New Zealand, where he was let to expect a total recovery.

III THE EMPRESS

LIONEL lived on a large estate, rode, hunted, played games, was made love to; discovered the joys of Nature, the pleasures kept in reserve for man by Isis, and the superiority of the numbers two and three over the unity. He found, to his surprise, that women could take interest in him. His shyness was apparent, but tempted them. In this eyes they met an eager hungry expression, a longing infinite for all things human, which tickled their desires. He seemed to be ever staring at an invisible goal. The goal was the Tree of the full knowledge. Lionel felt within himself a tenacious longing, a perpetual desire. His lack of physical courage as counterbalanced by his intellectual daring; he meant to collar the Angel, and to re-enter the Paradise of that first victim of womanhood, Adam of the bent shoulders, Adam of the foolish resignation to the self-preserving decree of the frightened divinities.

His errors of tactics were caused by the fact that he hoped to test the apple without the help of Woman. Often enough, Lionel Tabard unwittingly repelled the advances of many a feminine would-be initiator.

VI* THE LOVER

BUT he was not prompted by the wisdom of a Master; merely by cowardice and self-consciousness. He could not command love and desires; the angels of love and desires therefore dug a deep trap before his feet . . .

Tabard was sitting in the verandah. The men had gone to bed, the women also. He lighted his pipe, the use of which a life in open air had permitted his lungs to tolerate. He was thinking, pondering, medi-

* Alfred de Vigny: "Colère de Samson."

tating upon the most important matter in life, the personal one. He looked at his hands, white, well shaped, well kept, but the left retaining a stiffer and curved appearance. Lionel felt ashamed of himself. He took his watch in his hand and looked at the time of night. Twenty-one minutes past one o'clock—the day was marching towards its first duality. The door opened behind him, and the creaking wood caused him to jump up. The daughter of his host stood in her night-garments, a poem in pale green and white.

She said nothing; and he imitated the wisdom of her silence. His heart began a wild, unhealthy fandang; his temples ached; his legs shook under him. He felt himself paling; strange impulses prompted him to a return to ancestral savagery. Alas, he sadly lacked experience.

However, the woman had burned her vessels, and meant to help him.

"Lionel," she said, "I have come."

"I see," he managed to answer hoarsely, but the words in his throat seemed to feel like two huge hard lumps.

"Kiss me!"

Instinctively he stepped towards her and opened his arms. She fell heavily within their embrace. She hugged herself close against his breast and nestled on him, her eyes half-closed, her tongue and teeth searching blindly and savagely for his lips.

Contrary to his expectations, and more according to some of his past sensations and fears, Lionel Tabard felt more uneasiness than joy, more pain than pleasure. He congratulated himself upon the fact that the cool night had caused him to dress warmly, and that he had not trusted his body to the protection of the garment to which he owed his surname. As it was, the fierce Mænad was overcome by her passion ere she could have made him take a share in it.

Nevertheless, Woman often wins through sheer obstinacy, and Lionel allowed himself to be conquered. Gradually, as the relations between them grew with the force of habit, his disgust increased, while his condescension plunged him deeper into the pit. He longed to tear himself away, and gradually discovered that she had become a necessity to him. He lost pleasure in himself and found none in her; finally he played an old trick and caused a telegram to be sent, calling him away. He swore to return speedily—which he didn't.

He sailed back to Europe, found himself in London, where his first experience caused him to waver between eagerness and self-consciousness. At that time, he met with the adventure which I related. A young widow horse-whipped him. Lionel was still very far from his salvation.

IX THE HERMIT

HE went to seek it in the wilderness. A cottage green as a lizard, surrounded by flowers and trees, well furnished, well kept by a couple of servants, male and female, such was the chosen retreat. It proved very comfortable—and lonely.

He pursued his education, often troubled by horrid visions, when he saw himself the centre of a stage where men and women crowded above, around, and beneath him. They reminded him of the terrible prediction of the French poet, who showed the two sexes dying away, irrevocably parted,

La femme ayant Gomorrhe et l'homme ayant Sodome.*

All the Messalines and Circes of an impure sex were balancing before him their tempting, repulsive, holy and foul, loose or firm, twin breasts. Himself, cloven-hooped and curl-horned, had to flagellate his own flesh with iron chains, which failed to overcome the moral urtication, as had the repeated physical purgings of his early years. Narcissus, in a corner, pale and smiling, urged him to renewed efforts; Spirits, both incubi and succubæ, thrusting themselves upon him, ate him away. . .

But all these dreams gradually faded out. Lionel had become a translucent set of bones, with two big eyes heavily crowned. The time of his knowledge had come.

* Alfred de Vigny: "Colère de Samson."

XV THE DEVIL

I TRUST I said nothing that could lead the reader into the belief that the cottage was a lonely spot. Men and women lived in its almost immediate neighbourhood. Among others, Sir Anthony Lawthon and his daughters. I propose that we concern ourselves solely with the eldest of these, Mary Lawthon.

I hardly know how to describe her. She was a woman of six and twenty, most easy to understand, very simple and very complex, simple in her complexity, complex in her simplicity. To men she seemed a man, strong, healthy, a rough-rider, a ski-runner, a champion in many sports, who smoked her pipe and emptied her glass passing well. To women she seemed a woman, whose hands were ever ready for a soft caress, whose lips were full and red, whose skin was velvet.

As a whole, she was very manly in her life, speech and habit. She dressed often as a man; and, one day, riding by Lionel's cottage, she noticed the thin-armed youth whose eyes were big and haloed.

Their eyes met; she smiled, he trembled. Both were pleased. The next day rose and brought them again together. A formal introduction followed. Mary the male conquered Lionel the female. Thereafter, the "cheval hongre" lost his nickname. Nor did he give any widow the chance of horsewhipping him again.

XVIII THE MOON

THEY were very happy; he learnt the joy of health and the ineffable delectation of surrender; she the thrilling pain-pleasure of possession. Here, she, being the heroine of our tale, passes out of it.

They are very happy. Man and woman. The complete being. May their love last longer than the bee's!

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* Alfred de Vigny: "Colère de Samson."