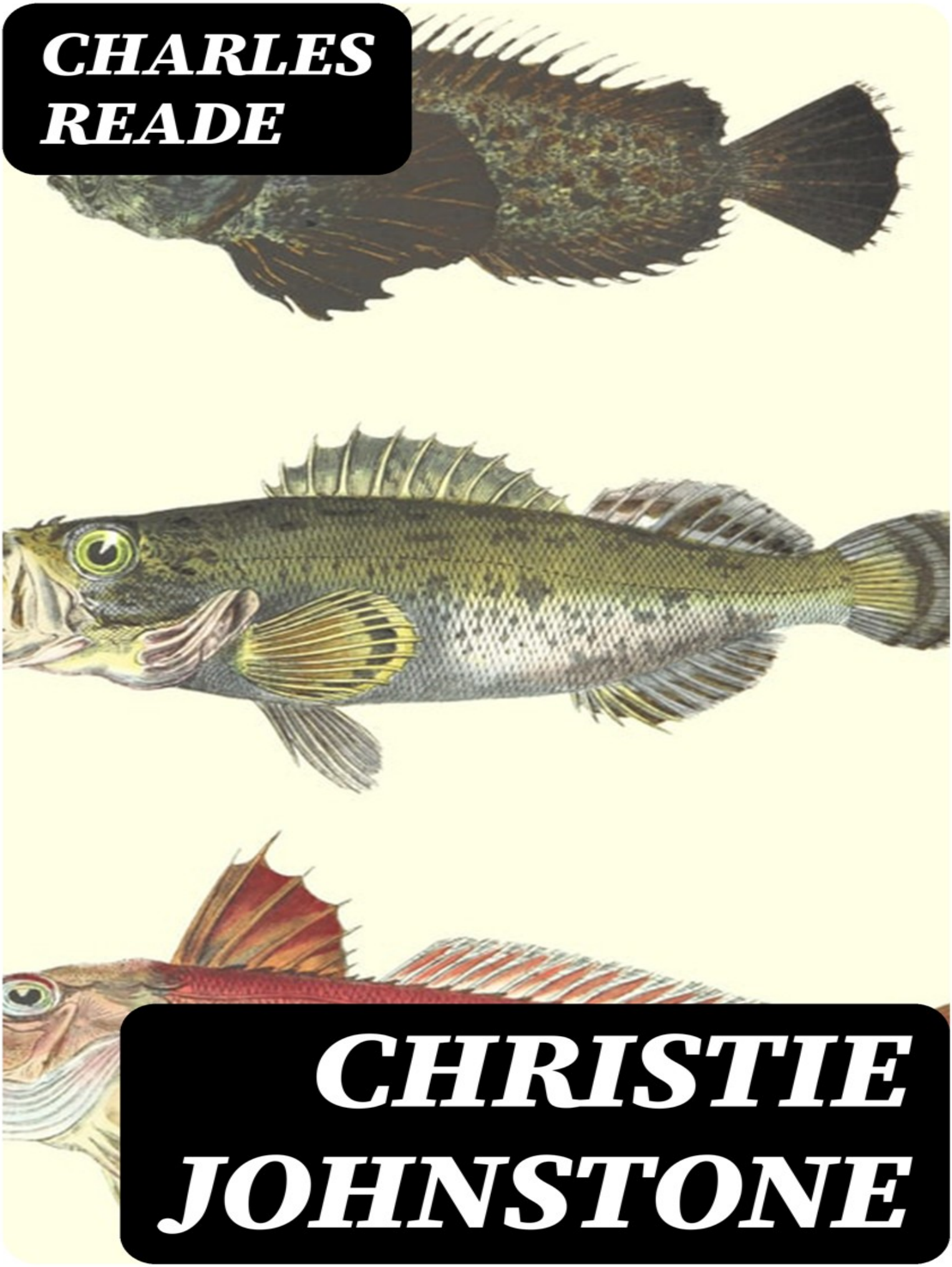
CHARLES READE



CHRISTIE JOHNSTONE

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Christie Johnstone

A Novel

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

Table of Contents

VISCOUNT IPSDEN, aged twenty-five, income eighteen thousand pounds per year, constitution equine, was unhappy! This might surprise some people; but there are certain blessings, the non-possession of which makes more people discontented than their possession renders happy.

Foremost among these are “Wealth and Rank.” Were I to add “Beauty” to the list, such men and women as go by fact, not by conjecture, would hardly contradict me.

The fortunate man is he who, born poor, or nobody, works gradually up to wealth and consideration, and, having got them, dies before he finds they were not worth so much trouble.

Lord Ipsden started with nothing to win; and naturally lived for amusement. Now nothing is so sure to cease to please as pleasure—to amuse, as amusement. Unfortunately for himself he could not at this period of his life warm to politics; so, having exhausted his London clique, he rolled through the cities of Europe in his carriage, and cruised its shores in his yacht. But he was not happy!

He was a man of taste, and sipped the arts and other knowledge, as he sauntered Europe round.

But he was not happy.

“What shall I do?” said *l'ennuye'.*

“Distinguish yourself,” said one.

“How?”

No immediate answer.

“Take a *prima donna* over,” said another.

Well, the man took a *prima donna* over, which scolded its maid from the Alps to Dover in the *lingua Toscana* without the *bocca Romana,* and sang in London without applause; because what goes down at La Scala does not generally go down at Il Teatro della Regina, Haymarket.

So then my lord strolled into Russia; there he drove a pair of horses, one of whom put his head down and did the work; the other pranced and capricoled alongside, all unconscious of the trace. He seemed happier than his working brother; but the biped whose career corresponded with this playful animal's was not happy!

At length an event occurred that promised to play an adagio upon Lord Ipsden 's mind. He fell in love with Lady Barbara Sinclair; and he had no sooner done this than he felt, as we are all apt to do on similar occasions, how wise a thing he had done!

Besides a lovely person, Lady Barbara Sinclair had a character that he saw would make him; and, in fact, Lady Barbara Sinclair was, to an inexperienced eye, the exact opposite of Lord Ipsden.

Her mental impulse was as plethoric as his was languid.

She was as enthusiastic as he was cool.

She took a warm interest in everything. She believed that government is a science, and one that goes with *copia verborum.*

She believed that, in England, government is administered, not by a set of men whose salaries range from eighty to five hundred pounds a year, and whose names are never heard, but by the First Lord of the Treasury, and other great men.

Hence she inferred, that it matters very much to all of us in whose hand is the rudder of that state vessel which goes down the wind of public opinion, without veering a point, let who will be at the helm.

She also cared very much who was the new bishop. Religion—if not religion, theology—would be affected thereby.

She was enthusiastic about poets; imagined their verse to be some sort of clew to their characters, and so on.

She had other theories, which will be indicated by and by; at present it is enough to say that her mind was young, healthy, somewhat original, full of fire and faith, and empty of experience.

Lord Ipsden loved her! it was easy to love her.

First, there was not, in the whole range of her mind and body, one grain of affectation of any sort.

She was always, in point of fact, under the influence of some male mind or other, generally some writer. What young woman is not, more or less, a mirror? But she never imitated or affected; she was always herself, by whomsoever colored.

Then she was beautiful and eloquent; much too high-bred to put a restraint upon her natural manner, she was often more *naive,* and even brusk, than your would-be aristocrats dare to be; but what a charming abruptness hers was!

I do not excel in descriptions, and yet I want to give you some carnal idea of a certain peculiarity and charm this lady possessed; permit me to call a sister art to my aid.

There has lately stepped upon the French stage a charming personage, whose manner is quite free from the affectation that soils nearly all French actresses—Mademoiselle Madeleine Brohan! When you see this young lady play Mademoiselle La Segli'ere, you see high-bred sensibility personified, and you see something like Lady Barbara Sinclair.

She was a connection of Lord Ipsden's, but they had not met for two years, when they encountered each other in Paris just before the commencement of this “Dramatic Story,” “Novel” by courtesy.

The month he spent in Paris, near her, was a bright month to Lord Ipsden. A bystander would not have gathered, from his manner, that he was warmly in love with this lady; but, for all that, his lordship was gradually uncoiling himself, and gracefully, quietly basking in the rays of Barbara Sinclair.

He was also just beginning to take an interest in subjects of the day—ministries, flat paintings, controversial novels, Cromwell's spotless integrity, etc.—why not? They interested her.

Suddenly the lady and her family returned to England. Lord Ipsden, who was going to Rome, came to England instead.

She had not been five days in London, before she made her preparations to spend six months in Perthshire.

This brought matters to a climax.

Lord Ipsden proposed in form.

Lady Barbara was surprised; she had not viewed his graceful attentions in that light at all. However, she

answered by letter his proposal which had been made by letter.

After a few of those courteous words a lady always bestows on a gentleman who has offered her the highest compliment any man has it in his power to offer any woman, she came to the point in the following characteristic manner:

“The man I marry must have two things, virtues and vices—you have neither. You do nothing, and never will do anything but sketch and hum tunes, and dance and dangle. Forget this folly the day after to-morrow, my dear Ipsden, and, if I may ask a favor of one to whom I refuse that which would not be a kindness, be still good friends with her who will always be

“Your affectionate *Cousin,*

“BARBARA SINCLAIR.”

Soon after this effusion she vanished into Perthshire, leaving her cousin stunned by a blow which she thought would be only a scratch to one of his character.

Lord Ipsden relapsed into greater listlessness than before he had cherished these crushed hopes. The world now became really dark and blank to him. He was too languid to go anywhere or do anything; a republican might have compared the settled expression of his handsome, hopeless face with that of most day-laborers of the same age, and moderated his envy of the rich and titled.

At last he became so pale as well as languid that Mr. Saunders interfered.

Saunders was a model valet and factotum; who had been with his master ever since he left Eton, and had made

himself necessary to him in their journeys.

The said Saunders was really an invaluable servant, and, with a world of obsequiousness, contrived to have his own way on most occasions. He had, I believe, only one great weakness, that of imagining a beau-ideal of aristocracy and then outdoing it in the person of John Saunders.

Now this Saunders was human, and could not be eight years with this young gentleman and not take some little interest in him. He was flunky, and took a great interest in him, as stepping-stone to his own greatness. So when he saw him turning pale and thin, and reading one letter fifty times, he speculated and inquired what was the matter. He brought the intellect of Mr. Saunders to bear on the question at the following angle:

“Now, if I was a young lord with 20,000 pounds a year, and all the world at my feet, what would make me in this way? Why, the liver! Nothing else.

“And that is what is wrong with him, you may depend.”

This conclusion arrived at, Mr. Saunders coolly wrote his convictions to Dr. Aberford, and desired that gentleman's immediate attention to the case. An hour or two later, he glided into his lord's room, not without some secret trepidation, no trace of which appeared on his face. He pulled a long histrionic countenance. “My lord,” said he, in soft, melancholy tones, “your lordship's melancholy state of health gives me great anxiety; and, with many apologies to your lordship, the doctor is sent for, my lord.”

“Why, Saunders, you are mad; there is nothing the matter with me.”

“I beg your lordship's pardon, your lordship is very ill, and Dr. Aberford sent for.”

“You may go, Saunders.”

“Yes, my lord. I couldn't help it; I've outstepped my duty, my lord, but I could not stand quiet and see your lordship dying by inches.” Here Mr. S. put a cambric handkerchief artistically to his eyes, and glided out, having disarmed censure.

Lord Ipsden fell into a reverie.

“Is my mind or my body disordered? Dr. Aberford!—absurd!—Saunders is getting too pragmatical. The doctor shall prescribe for him instead of me; by Jove, that would serve him right.” And my lord faintly chuckled. “No! this is what I am ill of”—and he read the fatal note again. “I do nothing!—cruel, unjust,” sighed he. “I could have done, would have done, anything to please her. Do nothing! nobody does anything now—things don't come in your way to be done as they used centuries ago, or we should do them just the same; it is their fault, not ours,” argued his lordship, somewhat confusedly; then, leaning his brow upon the sofa, he wished to die. For, at that dark moment life seemed to this fortunate man an aching void; a weary, stale, flat, unprofitable tale; a faded flower; a ball-room after daylight has crept in, and music, motion and beauty are fled away.

“Dr. Aberford, my lord.”

This announcement, made by Mr. Saunders, checked his lordship's reverie.

“Insults everybody, does he not, Saunders?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Saunders, monotonously.

“Perhaps he will me; that might amuse me,” said the other.

A moment later the doctor bowled into the apartment, tugging at his gloves, as he ran.

The contrast between him and our poor rich friend is almost beyond human language.

Here lay on a sofa Ipsden, one of the most distinguished young gentlemen in Europe; a creature incapable, by nature, of a rugged tone or a coarse gesture; a being without the slightest apparent pretension, but refined beyond the wildest dream of dandies. To him, enter Aberford, perspiring and shouting. He was one of those globules of human quicksilver one sees now and then for two seconds; they are, in fact, two globules; their head is one, invariably bald, round, and glittering; the body is another in activity and shape, *totus teres atque rotundus;* and in fifty years they live five centuries. *Horum Rex Aberford*—of these our doctor was the chief. He had hardly torn off one glove, and rolled as far as the third flower from the door on his lordship's carpet, before he shouted:

“This is my patient, lolloping in pursuit of health. Your hand,” added he. For he was at the sofa long before his lordship could glide off it.

“Tongue. Pulse is good. Breathe in my face.”

“Breathe in your face, sir! how can I do that?” (with an air of mild doubt.)

“By first inhaling, and then exhaling in the direction required, or how can I make acquaintance with your bowels?”

“My bowels?”

“The abdomen, and the greater and lesser intestines. Well, never mind, I can get at them another way; give your heart a slap, so. That's your liver. And that's your diaphragm.”

His lordship having found the required spot (some people that I know could not) and slapped it, the Aberford made a circular spring and listened eagerly at his shoulder-blade; the result of this scientific pantomime seemed to be satisfactory, for he exclaimed, not to say bawled:

“Halo! here is a viscount as sound as a roach! Now, young gentleman,” added he, “your organs are superb, yet you are really out of sorts; it follows you have the maladies of idle minds, love, perhaps, among the rest; you blush, a diagnostic of that disorder; make your mind easy, cutaneous disorders, such as love, etc., shall never kill a patient of mine with a stomach like yours. So, now to cure you!” And away went the spherical doctor, with his hands behind him, not up and down the room, but slanting and tacking, like a knight on a chess-board. He had not made many steps before, turning his upper globule, without affecting his lower, he hurled back, in a cold business-like tone, the following interrogatory:

“What are your vices?”

“Saunders,” inquired the patient, “which are my vices?”

“M'lord, lordship hasn't any vices,” replied Saunders, with dull, matter-of-fact solemnity.

“Lady Barbara makes the same complaint,” thought Lord Ipsden.

“It seems I have not any vices, Dr. Aberford,” said he, demurely.

“That is bad; nothing to get hold of. What interests you, then?”

“I don't remember.”

“What amuses you?”

“I forget.”

“What! no winning horse to gallop away your rents?”

“No, sir!”

“No opera girl to run her foot and ankle through your purse?”

“No, sir! and I think their ankles are not what they were.”

“Stuff! just the same, from their ankles up to their ears, and down again to their morals; it is your eyes that are sunk deeper into your head. Hum! no horses, no vices, no dancers, no yacht; you confound one's notions of nobility, and I ought to know them, for I have to patch them all up a bit just before they go to the deuce.”

“But I have, Doctor Aberford.”

“What!”

“A yacht! and a clipper she is, too.”

“Ah!—(Now I've got him.)”

“In the Bay of Biscay she lay half a point nearer the wind than Lord Heavyjib.”

“Oh! bother Lord Heavyjib, and his Bay of Biscay.”

“With all my heart, they have often bothered me.”

“Send her round to Granton Pier, in the Firth of Forth.”

“I will, sir.”

“And write down this prescription.” And away he walked again, thinking the prescription.

“Saunders,” appealed his master.

“Saunders be hanged.”

“Sir!” said Saunders, with dignity, “I thank you.”

“Don't thank me, thank your own deserts,” replied the modern Chesterfield. “Oblige me by writing it yourself, my lord, it is all the bodily exercise you will have had to-day, no doubt.”

The young viscount bowed, seated himself at a desk, and wrote from dictation:

“DR. ABERFORD'S PRESCRIPTION.”

“Make acquaintance with all the people of low estate who have time to be bothered with you; learn their ways, their minds, and, above all, their troubles.”

“Won't all this bore me?” suggested the writer.

“You will see. Relieve one fellow-creature every day, and let Mr. Saunders book the circumstances.”

“I shall like this part,” said the patient, laying down his pen. “How clever of you to think of such things; may not I do two sometimes?”

“Certainly not; one pill per day. Write, Fish the herring! (that beats deer-stalking.) Run your nose into adventures at sea; live on tenpence, and earn it. Is it down?”

“Yes, it is down, but Saunders would have written it better.”

“If he hadn't he ought to be hanged,” said the Aberford, inspecting the work. “I'm off, where's my hat? oh, there; where's my money? oh, here. Now look here, follow my prescription, and You will soon have Mens sana in corpore sano; And not care whether the girls say yes or say no; neglect it, and—my gloves; oh, in my pocket—you will be *blase''* and *ennuye',* and (an English participle, that means something as bad); God bless you!”

And out he scuttled, glided after by Saunders, for whom he opened and shut the street door.

Never was a greater effect produced by a doctor's visit; patient and physician were made for each other. Dr. Aberford was the specific for Lord Ipsden. He came to him like a shower to a fainting strawberry.

Saunders, on his return, found his lord pacing the apartment.

“Saunders,” said he, smartly, “send down to Gravesend and order the yacht to this place—what is it?”

“Granton Pier. Yes, my lord.”

“And, Saunders, take clothes, and books, and violins, and telescopes, and things—and me—to Euston Square, in an hour.”

“Impossible,' my lord,” cried Saunders, in dismay. “And there is no train for hours.”

His master replied with a hundred-pound note, and a quiet, but wickedish look; and the prince of gentlemen's gentleman had all the required items with him, in a special train, within the specified time, and away they flashed, northward.

CHAPTER II.

Table of Contents

IT is said that opposite characters make a union happiest; and perhaps Lord Ipsden, diffident of himself, felt the value to him of a creature so different as Lady Barbara Sinclair; but the lady, for her part, was not so diffident of herself, nor was she in search of her opposite. On the contrary, she was waiting patiently to find just such a man as she was, or fancied herself, a woman.

Accustomed to measure men by their characters alone, and to treat with sublime contempt the accidents of birth and fortune, she had been a little staggered by the assurance of this butterfly that had proposed to settle upon her hand—for life.

In a word, the beautiful writer of the fatal note was honestly romantic, according to the romance of 1848, and of good society; of course she was not affected by hair tumbling back or plastered down forward, and a rolling eye went no further with her than a squinting one.

Her romance was stern, not sickly. She was on the lookout for iron virtues; she had sworn to be wooed with great deeds, or never won; on this subject she had thought much, though not enough to ask herself whether great deeds are always to be got at, however disposed a lover may be.

No matter; she kept herself in reserve for some earnest man, who was not to come flattering and fooling to her, but look another way and do exploits.

She liked Lord Ipsden, her cousin once removed, but despised him for being agreeable, handsome, clever, and nobody.

She was also a little bitten with what she and others called the Middle Ages, in fact with that picture of them which Grub Street, imposing on the simplicity of youth, had got up for sale by arraying painted glass, gilt rags, and fancy, against fact.

With these vague and sketchy notices we are compelled to part, for the present, with Lady Barbara. But it serves her right; she has gone to establish her court in Perthshire, and left her rejected lover on our hands.

Journeys of a few hundred miles are no longer described.

You exchange a dead chair for a living chair, Saunders puts in your hand a new tale like this; you mourn the superstition of booksellers, which still inflicts uncut leaves upon humanity, though tailors do not send home coats with the sleeves stitched up, nor chambermaids put travelers into apple-pie beds as well as damp sheets. You rend and read, and are at Edinburgh, fatigued more or less, but not by the journey.

Lord Ipsden was, therefore, soon installed by the Firth side, full of the Aberford.

The young nobleman not only venerated the doctor's sagacity, but half admired his brusquerie and bustle; things of which he was himself never guilty.

As for the prescription, that was a Delphic Oracle. Worlds could not have tempted him to deviate from a letter in it.

He waited with impatience for the yacht; and, meantime, it struck him that the first part of the prescription could be

attacked at once.

It was the afternoon of the day succeeding his arrival. The Fifeshire hills, seen across the Firth from his windows, were beginning to take their charming violet tinge, a light breeze ruffled the blue water into a sparkling smile, the shore was tranquil, and the sea full of noiseless life, with the craft of all sizes gliding and dancing and courtesying on their trackless roads.

The air was tepid, pure and sweet as heaven; this bright afternoon, Nature had grudged nothing that could give fresh life and hope to such dwellers in dust and smoke and vice as were there to look awhile on her clean face and drink her honeyed breath.

This young gentleman was not insensible to the beauty of the scene. He was a little lazy by nature, and made lazier by the misfortune of wealth, but he had sensibilities; he was an artist of great natural talent; had he only been without a penny, how he would have handled the brush! And then he was a mighty sailor; if he had sailed for biscuit a few years, how he would have handled a ship!

As he was, he had the eye of a hawk for Nature's beauties, and the sea always came back to him like a friend after an absence.

This scene, then, curled round his heart a little, and he felt the good physician was wiser than the tribe that go by that name, and strive to build health on the sandy foundation of drugs.

“Saunders! do you know what Dr. Aberford means by the lower classes?”

“Perfectly, my lord.”

“Are there any about here?”

“I am sorry to say they are everywhere, my lord.”

“Get me some”—*(cigarette).*

Out went Saunders, with his usual graceful *empressement,* but an internal shrug of his shoulders.

He was absent an hour and a half; he then returned with a double expression on his face—pride at his success in diving to the very bottom of society, and contempt of what he had fished up thence.

He approached his lord mysteriously, and said, *sotto voce,* but impressively, “This is low enough, my lord.” Then glided back, and ushered in, with polite disdain, two lovelier women than he had ever opened a door to in the whole course of his perfumed existence.

On their heads they wore caps of Dutch or Flemish origin, with a broad lace border, stiffened and arched over the forehead, about three inches high, leaving the brow and cheeks unencumbered.

They had cotton jackets, bright red and yellow, mixed in patterns, confined at the waist by the apron-strings, but bobtailed below the waist; short woolen petticoats, with broad vertical stripes, red and white, most vivid in color; white worsted stockings, and neat, though high-quartered shoes. Under their jackets they wore a thick spotted cotton handkerchief, about one inch of which was visible round the lower part of the throat. Of their petticoats, the outer one was kilted, or gathered up toward the front, and the second, of the same color, hung in the usual way.

Of these young women, one had an olive complexion, with the red blood mantling under it, and black hair, and

glorious black eyebrows.

The other was fair, with a massive but shapely throat, as white as milk; glossy brown hair, the loose threads of which glittered like gold, and a blue eye, which, being contrasted with dark eyebrows and lashes, took the luminous effect peculiar to that rare beauty.

Their short petticoats revealed a neat ankle, and a leg with a noble swell; for Nature, when she is in earnest, builds beauty on the ideas of ancient sculptors and poets, not of modern poetasters, who, with their airy-like sylphs and their smoke-like verses, fight for want of flesh in woman and want of fact in poetry as parallel beauties.

They are, my lads.—*Continuez!*

These women had a grand corporeal trait; they had never known a corset! so they were straight as javelins; they could lift their hands above their heads!—actually! Their supple persons moved as Nature intended; every gesture was ease, grace and freedom.

What with their own radiance, and the snowy cleanliness and brightness of their costume, they came like meteors into the apartment.

Lord Ipsden, rising gently from his seat, with the same quiet politeness with which he would have received two princes of the blood, said, “How do you do?” and smiled a welcome.

“Fine! hoow's yoursel?” answered the dark lass, whose name was Jean Carnie, and whose voice was not so sweet as her face.

“What'n lord are ye?” continued she; “are you a juke? I wad like fine to hae a crack wi' a juke.”