

BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER

By
GEORGE MEREDITH

With an Introduction by
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Beauchamp's Career ran in condensed form as a serial in the 'Fortnightly Review' from August 1874 to December 1875. In book form it was first published in three volumes at the end of 1875 (post-dated 1876). In The World's Classics it was first published in 1950.

INTRODUCTION

THE novel now claiming the attention of the reader as one of the World's Classics began to appear, in a contracted form, in the *Fortnightly Review*, August 1874: by political reckoning, that is to say, soon after the fall of Gladstone's first administration and the return of the Conservatives from their long exile. Looking below the surface of that time we are aware of a certain fermentation, a resurgent radicalism, not to say republicanism, working in the depths, and threatening the stability of more than one ancient institution. Some things are best not talked about, and there was too much talk about the Crown. Little of it found its way into any print that is remembered, or need be searched for. But it was there; and whether it would grow louder, rising to the note of revolution, or die away because no one was listening, was one of those things which contemporaries, who have to read history as it happens, and not when it is all over, could only wonder, and wait and see. And then came Disraeli and the Congress of Berlin: and then came Gladstone and Ireland; and then came the Jubilee; and we forgot that we had ever, even as a fireside speculation, debated the good and evil of Monarchy, and how the passage to a Republic could best be effected.

But it was a time of speculation, dominated, in the main, by two conceptions, which are best remembered by two names, Carlyle and Darwin. Beauchamp was about fifteen when he found *Heroes and Hero Worship* in the bookseller's shop at Malta: Meredith was about fifteen when *Past and Present* appeared, followed two years later by *Cromwell*. And I do not think the effect of Carlyle on the nerves of his first readers has ever been so fully and truthfully conveyed as Meredith conveys it in his second chapter:

. . . His favourite author was one writing of *Heroes*, in . . . a style resembling either early architecture or utter dilapidation, so loose and rough it seemed; a wind-in-the-orchard style, that tumbled down here and there an appreciable fruit with uncouth bluster; sentences without commencements running

to abrupt endings and smoke, like waves against a sea-wall, learned dictionary words giving a hand to street-slang, and accents falling on them haphazard, like slant rays from driving clouds; all the pages in a breeze, the whole book producing a kind of electrical agitation in the mind and the joints.

There is evidence enough from contemporaries that that is how Carlyle's books, at a first reading, felt; and, when the electric agitation had subsided, what remained was a wonderful, if illusory, clarification of the historic manifold, and a wonderful, if short-lived, incitement to choose one's part quickly and play it manfully. And this within a fabric perpetually dissolving and renewing; dissolving, sometimes in blood and fire, when institutions that have served their purpose are to be destroyed; and renewing under the direction of the Seer and the impulse of the Hero.

In such a cosmorama, the question whether the English monarchy was one of the institutions needing to be destroyed or not, was really of no great significance. The future of the English aristocracy was of much greater consequence. And here the other surge of doctrine comes flooding in, like a tributary more powerful than the mainstream, and gathering its waters from a vaster field of observation. Viewed from the new standpoint, contemplated in the new light, of Evolution, how do the species which compose Society and the State present themselves to the studious eye? In particular, that species which might be thought to be the master-birth of selective breeding? Self-selective, in a way, because the species can be broken down into families, and it is the family discipline, its standards and its taboos, that creates the type by which the species is recognized. Cecilia Halkett is 'the ideal English lady'. Rightly mated, she will be the mother of her kind. The species to which she and her wooers belong will be continued—so long as England has need of it. And how long will that be? And what comes after? Cataclysm, Shrapnel and Beauchamp think: and the one word, Capital, dropped by the doctor, warns us that the Cataclysm may be of a kind that Radicals had not foreseen.

But, to descend to particulars, and shorten the view to 1874, if ever England grows tired of its gentry, and the exciting but superficial antagonisms of Whig and Tory, Liberal and Radical, which seem after all to leave things very much as they were: if the moat which encircles the Insiders and keeps the Outsiders at bay is crossed or filled, what will the Outsiders make of their victory? Reduce the Navy estimates: amend the Game Laws: do something, not clearly defined, about the Land and the Church, about Tenants' Improvements and Bishops' Stipends? That is what Manchester means in the circle where Beauchamp grows up, and in retrospect it does not seem very terrifying. But an occasional scare is part of the game, and serves to keep the sentinels alert. Nothing, said the Great Juggler once, is more agreeable than a panic, especially when you have no real expectation that what you apprehend will happen. And beneath the occasional flutter—a French invasion, a Battle of Dorking, a best-selling pamphlet on The Coming K——g, an uproar over the Civil List—there is the common mind of England, fat, stable, motionless, oozing with prosperity. Or at least that is how it will appear to the impassioned Radical, nurtured on the Beloved Incomprehensible. And, when the Radical himself is of the aristocracy, some of the types thrown up by selective breeding will affect him, individually, with a sense of personal, family, shame. If Cecilia Halkett is the ideal English lady, her near-to-namesake Cecil Baskett might serve for the complete English cad.

“‘Surely [said Rosamund] we may expect Captain Beauchamp to consult his family about so serious a step as this he is taking’”, in standing for Bevisham, to wit. “‘Why should he?’” asks Dr. Shrapnel, and he answers his own question in a flood of familiar rhetoric. “‘Sound the conscience and sink the family! . . . The family view of a man’s fit conduct is the weak point of the country. It is no other view than, ‘Better thy condition for our sakes’. Ha! In this way we breed sheep, fatten oxen: men are dying off.’” Or, in other words, this selective breeding is not producing what we need because the

stock itself is not of the fine quality we imagine, or pretend. The discipline of standards and taboos is impoverishing the material out of which a true governing class might be evolved. The ruling families may throw up a Beauchamp, now and then: one Beauchamp to a score of Cecils and Palmets. And what will they make of him? What the electors of Bevisham will make of him we see. But imagine a Parliament of Beauchamps! Of our Best and Wisest, after the fashion of Carlyle!

Conceive, for the fleeting instants permitted to such insufferable flights of fancy, our picked men ruling! So despotic an oligarchy as would be there, is not a happy subject of contemplation. It is not too much to say that a domination of the intellect in England would at once and entirely alter the face of the country. We should be governed by the head with a vengeance: all the rest of the country being base members indeed; Spartans—helots. Criticism, now so helpful to us, would wither to the root: fun would die out of Parliament, and outside of it: we could never laugh at our masters, or command them: and that good old-fashioned shouldering of separate interests . . . would be transformed to a painful orderliness. . . . None, if there were no shouldering and hustling, could tell whether actually the fittest survived. . . .

And consider the freezing isolation of a body of our quintessential elect, seeing below them none to resemble them! Do you not hear in imagination the land's regrets for that amiable nobility whose pretensions were comically built on birth, acres, tailoring, style, and an air?

Survival of the Fittest—from Malthus and Darwin the phrase, the idea, has worked itself into the common thought and common speech of the time: in *The Egoist* it will be heard again with louder emphasis. And with it comes the notion of race, and the improvement of the race, by the transmission of a life more and more at harmony with itself, and more and more sovereign over circumstance. But what is the transmission of life if not the consummation of a love-story—the immemorial theme of romance, in poetry or prose? Of romance—and of comedy also perhaps?

A famous journalist of the last generation declared that Meredith understood politics better than any other

Victorian novelist. *Beauchamp's Career* is best read, and best understood, as a political study, with three, if not four, love stories weaving themselves in and out of the central theme, the Southampton election of 1868 when Meredith's friend, Commander Maxse, stood as a Radical and was beaten. The titles of his political pamphlets are enough to show his quality, and to explain his unsuccess as a politician: they begin in 1868 with an address to a Farmers' Club on the Education of the Agricultural Poor, and pass by way of Electoral Reform and Women's Suffrage (which he opposed) to 'Judas! a Political Tract dedicated to the Intelligent Elector' in 1894. The portraiture is unconcealed: Maxse's wife was also a Cecilia: and the Fitzhardinge family to which his mother belonged were associated with Claims, and a Case, not very remotely suggestive of that sublime adventurer Harry Richmond's father. Meredith did not learn his politics from Maxse, but the experiences they shared in the Southampton canvass gave him an insight into the nature of the political animal, whether candidate or elector, which would make *Beauchamp's Career*, even if it were nothing else, a document—and a most far-sighted document—for the political history of its time. Apart from the disastrous intervention of the French Marquess, Beauchamp, one feels, could not have carried the seat, and Meredith shows us why. He is at once in front of his time and behind it. He can stand up to his Tory kinsfolk. But he cannot subdue himself to the other discipline, of party. And indeed, at the election of 1874, in more than a score of constituencies, Liberals of different shades opposed each other and gave the seat away to the better-drilled Conservatives.

Condemned to unsuccess as a candidate, what will Beauchamp's future be as a wooer? How will the love stories shape themselves? What is the best we can wish for a hero so attractive, so provocative, so unexpected? And the answer surely is—Cecilia. Tuckham really is not good enough for 'the ideal English lady', romantically conceived, Cecilia riding on the downs, Cecilia on the deck of the *Esperanza*. But he carries the mark of success

upon him—the mark of the Cabinet, one might almost say. ‘My aim for my country is to have the land respected. For that purpose we must have power; for power, wealth: for wealth, industry: for industry, internal peace: therefore no agitation, no artificial divisions.’ Tuckham speaks programmes. And for the other side? ‘Really, in this country Republicans are fighting with the shadow of an old hat and a cock-horse. I have a reverence for constituted authority: I speak of what those fellows are contending for.’ And for Cecilia—‘You or no woman.’ Tuckham stabilizes the story. Without tailoring or style, he is, we feel, the man of his day. Beauchamp, burnt out by his early passion for Renée, is not made to be the father of a modern stock, or the hero of a modern revolution. Deep down, for all her shrinking, Cecilia knows that Tuckham is her mate. Beauchamp is not in harmony with the world or with himself, and it is a broken, a finished, man whom circumstance, taking control, drops in the muddy tides of the Ottley river. But in his last moments he might have said ‘I am dying for the People.’

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CHAPTER I

The Champion of His Country

WHEN young Nevil Beauchamp was throwing off his midshipman's jacket for a holiday in the garb of peace, we had across Channel a host of dreadful military officers flashing swords at us for some critical observations of ours upon their sovereign, threatening Afric's fires and savagery. The case occurred in old days now and again, sometimes, upon imagined provocation, more furiously than at others. We were unarmed, and the spectacle was distressing. We had done nothing except to speak our minds according to the habit of the free, and such an explosion appeared as irrational and excessive as that of a powder-magazine in reply to nothing more than the light of a spark. It was known that a valorous General of the Algerian wars proposed to make a clean march to the capital of the British empire at the head of ten thousand men; which seems a small quantity to think much about, but they wore wide red breeches blown out by Fame, big as her cheeks, and a ten thousand of that sort would never think of retreating. Their spectral advance on quaking London through Kentish hop-gardens, Sussex corn-fields, or by the pleasant hills of Surrey, after a gymnastic leap over the riband of salt water, haunted many pillows. And now those horrid shouts of the legions of Caesar, crying to the inheritor of an invading name to lead them against us, as the origin of his title had led the army of Gaul of old gloriously, scared sweet sleep. We saw them in imagination lining the opposite shore; eagle and standard-bearers, and *gallifers*, brandishing their fowls and their banners in a manner to frighten the decorum of the universe. Where were our men?

The returns of the census of our population were oppressively satisfactory, and so was the condition of our youth. We could row and ride and fish and shoot, and breed largely: we were athletes with a fine history and

a full purse: we had first-rate sporting guns, unrivalled park-hacks and hunters, promising babies to carry on the renown of England to the next generation, and a wonderful Press, and a Constitution the highest reach of practical human sagacity. But where were our armed men? where our great artillery? where our proved captains, to resist a sudden sharp trial of the national mettle? Where was the first line of England's defence, her navy? These were questions, and Ministers were called upon to answer them. The Press answered them boldly, with the appalling statement that we had no navy and no army. At the most we could muster a few old ships, a couple of experimental vessels of war, and twenty-five thousand soldiers indifferently weaponed.

We were in fact as naked to the Imperial foe as the merely painted Britons.

This being apprehended, by the aid of our own shortness of figures and the agitated images of the red-breeched only waiting the signal to jump and be at us, there ensued a curious exhibition that would be termed, in simple language, writing to the newspapers, for it took the outward form of letters: in reality, it was the deliberate saddling of our ancient nightmare of Invasion, putting the postillion on her, and trotting her along the high-road with a winding horn to rouse old Panic. Panic we will, for the sake of convenience, assume to be of the feminine gender and a spinster, though properly she should be classed with the large mixed race of mental and moral neuters which are the bulk of comfortable nations. She turned in her bed at first like the sluggard of the venerable hymnist: but once fairly awakened, she directed a stare toward the terrific foreign contortionists, and became in an instant all stormy nightcap and fingers starving for the bell-rope. Forthwith she burst into a series of shrieks, howls, and high piercing notes that caused even the parliamentary Opposition, in the heat of an assault on a parsimonious Government, to abandon its temporary advantage and be still awhile. Yet she likewise performed her part with a certain deliberation and method, as if aware that it was a part she had to play

in the composition of a singular people. She did a little mischief by dropping on the stock-markets; in other respects she was harmless, and, inasmuch as she established a subject for conversation, useful.

Then, lest she should have been taken too seriously, the Press, which had kindled, proceeded to extinguish her with the formidable engines called leading articles, which fling fire or water, as the occasion may require. It turned out that we had ships ready for launching, and certain regiments coming home from India; hedges we had, and a spirited body of yeomanry; and we had pluck and patriotism, the father and mother of volunteers innumerable. Things were not so bad.

Panic, however, sent up a plaintive whine. What country had anything like our treasures to defend?—countless riches, beautiful women, an inviolate soil! True, and it must be done. Ministers were authoritatively summoned to set to work immediately. They replied that they had been at work all the time, and were at work now. They could assure the country that, though they flourished no trumpets, they positively guaranteed the safety of our virgins and coffers.

Then the people, rather ashamed, abused the Press for unreasonably disturbing them. The Press attacked old Panic and stripped her naked. Panic, with a desolate scream, arraigned the parliamentary Opposition for having inflated her to serve base party purposes. The Opposition challenged the allegations of Government, pointed to the trimness of army and navy during its term of office, and proclaimed itself watch-dog of the country, which is at all events an office of a kind. Here-upon the ambassador of yonder ireful soldiery let fall a word, saying, by the faith of his Master, there was no necessity for watch-dogs to bark; an ardent and a reverent army had but fancied its beloved chosen Chief insulted; the Chief and chosen held them in; he, despite obloquy, discerned our merits and esteemed us.

So, then, Panic, or what remained of her, was put to bed again. The Opposition retired into its kennel growling. The People coughed like a man of two minds,

doubting whether he has been divinely inspired or has cut a ridiculous figure. The Press interpreted the cough as a warning to Government; and Government launched a big ship with hurrahs, and ordered the recruiting-sergeant to be seen conspicuously.

And thus we obtained a moderate reinforcement of our arms.

It was not arrived at by connivance all round, though there was a look of it. Certainly it did not come of accident, though there was a look of that as well. Nor do we explain much of the secret by attributing it to the working of a complex machinery. The housewife's remedy of a good shaking for the invalid who will not arise and dance away his gout, partly illustrates the action of the Press upon the country: and perhaps the country shaken may suffer a comparison with the family chariot of the last century, built in a previous one, commodious, furnished agreeably, being all that the inside occupants could require of a conveyance, until the report of horsemen crossing the heath at a gallop sets it dishonourably creaking and complaining in rapid motion, and the squire curses his miserly purse that would not hire a guard, and his dame says, I told you so!—Fool-hardy man, to suppose, because we have constables in the streets of big cities, we have dismissed the highwayman to limbo. And here he is, and he will cost you fifty times the sum you would have laid out to keep him at a mile's respectful distance! But see, the wretch is bowing: he smiles at our carriage, and tells the coachman that he remembers he has been our guest, and really thinks we need not go so fast. He leaves word for you, sir, on your peril to denounce him on another occasion from the magisterial Bench, for that albeit he is a gentleman of the road, he has a mission to right society, and succeeds legitimately to that bold Good Robin Hood who fed the poor.—Fresh from this polite encounter, the squire vows money for his personal protection: and he determines to speak his opinion of Sherwood's latest captain as loudly as ever. That he will, I do not say. It might involve a large sum per annum.

Similes are very well in their way. None can be sufficient in this case without levelling a finger at the taxpayer—nay, directly mentioning him. He is the key of our ingenuity. He pays his dues; he will not pay the additional penny or two wanted of him, that we may be a step or two ahead of the day we live in, unless he is frightened. But scarcely anything less than the wild alarum of a tocsin will frighten him. Consequently the tocsin has to be sounded; and the effect is woeful past measure: his hugging of his army, his kneeling on the shore to his navy, his implorations of his yeomanry and his hedges, are sad to note. His bursts of pot-valiancy (the male side of the maiden Panic within his bosom) are awful to his friends. Particular care must be taken after he has begun to cool and calculate his chances of security, that he do not gather to him a curtain of volunteers and go to sleep again behind them; for they cost little in proportion to the much they pretend to be to him. Patriotic taxpayers doubtless exist: prophetic ones, provident ones, do not. At least we show that we are wanting in them. The taxpayer of a free land taxes himself, and his disinclination for the bitter task, save under circumstances of screaming urgency—as when the night-gear and bed-linen of old convulsed Panic are like the churned Channel sea in the track of two hundred hostile steamboats, let me say—is of the kind the gentle schoolboy feels when death or an expedition has relieved him of his tyrant, and he is entreated notwithstanding to go to his books.

Will you not own that the working of the system for scaring him and bleeding is very ingenious? But whether the ingenuity comes of native sagacity, as it is averred by some, or whether it shows an instinct labouring to supply the deficiencies of stupidity, according to others, I cannot express an opinion. I give you the position of the country undisturbed by any moralizings of mine. The youth I introduce to you will rarely let us escape from it; for the reason that he was born with so extreme and passionate a love for his country, that he thought all things else of mean importance in comparison: and our union is one in which, following the counsel of

a sage and seer, I must try to paint for you what is, not that which I imagine. This day, this hour, this life, and even politics, the centre and throbbing heart of it (enough, when unburlesqued, to blow the down off the gossamer-stump of fiction at a single breath, I have heard tell), must be treated of: men, and the ideas of men, which are—it is policy to be emphatic upon truisms—are actually the motives of men in a greater degree than their appetites: these are my theme; and may it be my fortune to keep them at blood-heat, and myself calm as a statue of Memnon in prostrate Egypt! He sits there waiting for the sunlight; I here, and readier to be musical than you think. I can at any rate be impartial; and do but fix your eyes on the sunlight striking him and swallowing the day in rounding him, and you have an image of the passive receptivity of shine and shade I hold it good to aim at, if at the same time I may keep my characters at blood-heat. I shoot my arrows at a mark that is pretty certain to return them to me. And as to perfect success, I should be like the panic-stricken shopkeepers in my alarm at it; for I should believe that genii of the air fly above our tree-tops between us and the incognizable spheres, catching those ambitious shafts they deem it a promise of fun to play pranks with.

Young Mr. Beauchamp at that period of the panic had not the slightest feeling for the tax-payer. He was therefore unable to penetrate the mystery of our round-about way of enlivening him. He pored over the journals in perplexity, and talked of his indignation nightly to his pretty partners at balls, who knew not they were lesser Andromedas of his dear Andromeda country, but danced and chatted and were gay, and said they were sure he would defend them. The men he addressed were civil. They listened to him, sometimes with smiles and sometimes with laughter, but approvingly, liking the lad's quick spirit. They were accustomed to the machinery employed to give our land a shudder and to soothe it, and generally remarked that it meant nothing. His uncle Everard, and his uncle's friend Stukely Culbrett,