DAME THE FIFTH--THE LADY ICENWAY

By the Churchwarden

In the reign of His Most Excellent Majesty King George the Third, Defender of the Faith and of the American Colonies, there lived in 'a faire maner-place' (so Leland called it in his day, as I have been told), in one o' the greenest bits of woodland between Bristol and the city of Exonbury, a young lady who resembled some aforesaid ones in having many talents and exceeding great beauty. With these gifts she combined a somewhat imperious temper and arbitrary mind, though her experience of the world was not actually so large as her conclusive manner would have led the stranger to suppose. Being an orphan, she resided with her uncle, who, though he was fairly considerate as to her welfare, left her pretty much to herself.

Now it chanced that when this lovely young lady was about nineteen, she (being a fearless horsewoman) was riding, with only a young lad as an attendant, in one o' the woods near her uncle's house, and, in trotting along, her horse stumbled over the root of a felled tree. She slipped to the ground, not seriously hurt, and was assisted home by a gentleman who came in view at the moment of her mishap. It turned out that this gentleman, a total stranger to her, was on a visit at the house of a neighbouring landowner. He was of Dutch extraction, and occasionally came to England on business or pleasure from his plantations in Guiana, on the north coast of South America, where he usually resided.

On this account he was naturally but little known in Wessex, and was but a slight acquaintance of the gentleman at whose mansion he was a guest. However, the friendship between him and the Heymeres--as the uncle and niece were named--warmed and warmed by degrees, there being but few folk o' note in the vicinity at that time, which made a newcomer, if he were at all sociable and of good credit, always sure of a welcome. A tender feeling (as it is called by the romantic) sprang up between the two young people, which ripened into intimacy. Anderling, the foreign gentleman, was of an amorous temperament; and, though he endeavoured to conceal his

feeling, it could be seen that Miss Maria Heymere had impressed him rather more deeply than would be represented by a scratch upon a stone. He seemed absolutely unable to free himself from her fascination; and his inability to do so, much as he tried--evidently thinking he had not the ghost of a chance with her--gave her the pleasure of power; though she more than sympathized when she overheard him heaving his deep drawn sighs--privately to himself, as he supposed.

After prolonging his visit by every conceivable excuse in his power, he summoned courage, and offered her his hand and his heart. Being in no way disinclined to him, though not so fervid as he, and her uncle making no objection to the match, she consented to share his fate, for better or otherwise, in the distant colony where, as he assured her, his rice, and coffee, and maize, and timber, produced him ample means--a statement which was borne out by his friend, her uncle's neighbour. In short, a

day for their marriage was fixed, earlier in the engagement than is usual or desirable between comparative strangers, by reason of the necessity he was under of returning to look after his properties.

The wedding took place, and Maria left her uncle's mansion with her husband, going in the first place to London, and about a fortnight after sailing with him across the great ocean for their distant home--which, however, he assured her, should not be her home for long, it being his intention to dispose of his interests in this part of the world as soon as the war was over, and he could do so advantageously; when they could come to Europe, and reside in some favourite capital.

As they advanced on the voyage she observed that he grew more and more constrained; and, by the time they had crossed the Line, he was quite depressed, just as he had been before proposing to her. A day or two before landing at Paramaribo, he embraced her in a very tearful and passionate manner, and said he wished to make a confession. It had been his misfortune, he said, to marry at Quebec in early life a woman whose reputation proved to be in every way bad and scandalous. The discovery had nearly killed him; but he had ultimately separated from her, and had never seen her since. He had hoped and prayed she might be dead; but recently in London, when they were starting on this journey, he had discovered that she was still alive. At first he had decided to keep this dark intelligence from her beloved ears; but he had felt that he could not do it. All he hoped was that such a condition of things would make no difference in her feelings for him, as it need make no difference

in the course of their lives.

Thereupon the spirit of this proud and masterful lady showed itself in violent turmoil, like the raging of a nor'-west thunderstorm--as well it might, God knows. But she was of too stout a nature to be broken down by his revelation, as many ladies of my acquaintance would have been--so far from home, and right under the Line in the blaze o' the sun. Of the two, indeed, he was the more wretched and shattered in spirit, for he loved her deeply, and (there being a foreign twist in his make) had been tempted to this crime by her exceeding beauty, against which he had struggled day and night, till he had no further resistance left in him. It was she who came first to a decision as to what should be done--whether a wise one I do not attempt to judge.

'I put it to you,' says she, when many useless self-reproaches and protestations on his part had been uttered--'I put it to you whether, if any manliness is left in you, you ought not to do exactly what I consider the best thing for me in this strait to which you have reduced me?'

He promised to do anything in the whole world. She then requested him to allow her to return, and announce him as having died of malignant ague immediately on their arrival at Paramaribo; that she should consequently appear in weeds as his widow in her native place; and that he would never molest her, or come again to that part of the world during the whole course of his life--a good reason for which would be that the legal consequences might be serious.

He readily acquiesced in this, as he would have acquiesced in anything for the restitution of one he adored so deeply--even to the yielding of life itself. To put her in an immediate state of independence he gave her, in bonds and jewels, a considerable sum (for his worldly means had been in no way exaggerated); and by the next ship she sailed again for England, having travelled no farther than to Paramaribo. At parting he declared it to be his intention to turn all his landed possessions into personal property, and to be a wanderer on the face of the earth in remorse for his conduct towards her.

Maria duly arrived in England, and immediately on landing apprised her uncle of her return, duly appearing at his house in the garb of a widow. She was commiserated by all the neighbours as soon as her story was told; but only to her uncle did she reveal the real state of affairs, and her reason for concealing it. For, though she had been innocent of wrong, Maria's pride was of that grain which could not brook the least appearance of having been fooled, or deluded, or nonplussed in her worldly aims.

For some time she led a quiet life with her relative, and in due course a son was born to her. She was much respected for her dignity and reserve, and the portable wealth which her temporary husband had made over to her enabled her to live in comfort in a wing of the mansion, without assistance from her uncle at all. But, knowing that she was not what she seemed to be, her life was an uneasy one, and she often said to herself:

'Suppose his continued existence should become known here, and people should discern the pride of my motive in hiding my humiliation? It would be worse than if I had been frank at first, which I should have been but for the credit of this child.'

Such grave reflections as these occupied her with increasing force; and during their continuance she encountered a worthy man of noble birth and title--Lord Icenway his name--whose seat was beyond Wintoncester, quite at t'other end of Wessex. He being anxious to pay his addresses to her, Maria willingly accepted them, though he was a plain man, older than herself; for she discerned in a re-marriage a method of fortifying her position against mortifying discoveries. In a few months their union took place, and Maria lifted her head as Lady Icenway, and left with her husband and child for his home as aforesaid, where she was quite unknown.

A justification, or a condemnation, of her step (according as you view it) was seen when, not long after, she received a note from her former husband Anderling. It was a hasty and tender epistle, and perhaps it was fortunate that it arrived during the temporary absence of Lord Icenway. His worthless wife, said Anderling, had just died in Quebec; he had gone there to ascertain particulars, and had seen the unfortunate woman buried. He now was hastening to England to repair the wrong he had done his Maria. He asked her to meet him at Southampton, his port of arrival; which she need be in no fear of doing, as he had changed his name, and was almost absolutely unknown in Europe. He would remarry her

immediately, and live with her in any part of the Continent, as they had originally intended, where, for the great love he still bore her, he would devote himself to her service for the rest of his days.

Lady Icenway, self-possessed as it was her nature to be, was yet much disturbed at this news, and set off to meet him, unattended, as soon as she heard that the ship was in sight. As soon as they stood face to face she found that she still possessed all her old influence over him, though his power to fascinate her had quite departed. In his sorrow for his offence against her, he had become a man of strict religious habits, self-denying as a lenten saint, though formerly he had been a free and joyous liver. Having first got him to swear to make her any amends she should choose (which he was imagining must be by a true marriage), she informed him that she had already wedded another husband, an excellent man of ancient family and possessions, who had given her a title, in which she much rejoiced.

At this the countenance of the poor foreign gentleman became cold as clay, and his heart withered within him; for as it had been her beauty and bearing which had led him to sin to obtain her, so, now that her beauty was in fuller bloom, and her manner more haughty by her success, did he feel her fascination to be almost more than he could bear. Nevertheless, having sworn his word, he undertook to obey her commands, which were simply a renewal of her old request--that he would depart for some foreign country, and never reveal his existence to her friends, or husband, or any person in England; never trouble her more, seeing how

great a harm it would do her in the high position which she at present occupied.

He bowed his head. 'And the child--our child?' he said.

'He is well,' says she. 'Quite well.'

With this the unhappy gentleman departed, much sadder in his heart than on his voyage to England; for it had never occurred to him that a woman who rated her honour so highly as Maria had done, and who was the mother of a child of his, would have adopted such means as this for the restoration of that honour, and at so surprisingly early a date. He had fully calculated on making her his wife in law and truth, and of living in cheerful unity with her and his offspring, for whom he felt a deep and growing tenderness, though he had never once seen the child.

The lady returned to her mansion beyond Wintoncester, and told nothing of the interview to her noble husband, who had fortunately gone that day to do a little cocking and ratting out by Weydon Priors, and knew nothing of her movements. She had dismissed her poor Anderling peremptorily enough;
yet she would often after this look in the face of the child of her so-called widowhood, to discover what and how many traits of his father were to be seen in his lineaments. For this she had ample opportunity during the following autumn and winter months, her husband being a matter-of-fact nobleman, who spent the greater part of his time in field-sports and

agriculture.

One winter day, when he had started for a meet of the hounds a long way from the house--it being his custom to hunt three or four times a week at this season of the year--she had walked into the sunshine upon the terrace before the windows, where there fell at her feet some little white object that had come over a boundary wall hard by. It proved to be a tiny note wrapped round a stone. Lady Icenway opened it and read it, and immediately (no doubt, with a stern fixture of her queenly countenance) walked hastily along the terrace, and through the door into the shrubbery, whence the note had come. The man who had first married her stood under the bushes before her. It was plain from his appearance that something had gone wrong with him.

'You notice a change in me, my best-beloved,' he said. 'Yes, Maria--I have lost all the wealth I once possessed--mainly by reckless gambling in the Continental hells to which you banished me. But one thing in the world remains to me--the child--and it is for him that I have intruded here. Don't fear me, darling! I shall not inconvenience you long; I love you too well! But I think of the boy day and night--I cannot help it--I cannot keep my feeling for him down; and I long to see him, and speak a word to him once in my lifetime!'

'But your oath?' says she. 'You promised never to reveal by word or sign--'

'I will reveal nothing. Only let me see the child. I know what I have sworn to you, cruel mistress, and I respect my oath. Otherwise I might have seen him by some subterfuge. But I preferred the frank course of asking your permission.'

She demurred, with the haughty severity which had grown part of her character, and which her elevation to the rank of a peeress had rather intensified than diminished. She said that she would consider, and would give him an answer the day after the next, at the same hour and place, when her husband would again be absent with his pack of hounds.

The gentleman waited patiently. Lady Icenway, who had now no conscious love left for him, well considered the matter, and felt that it would be advisable not to push to extremes a man of so passionate a heart. On the day and hour she met him as she had promised to do.

'You shall see him,' she said, 'of course on the strict condition that you do not reveal yourself, and hence, though you see him, he must not see you, or your manner might betray you and me. I will lull him into a nap in the afternoon, and then I will come to you here, and fetch you indoors by a private way.'

The unfortunate father, whose misdemeanour had recoiled upon his own head
in a way he could not have foreseen, promised to adhere to her instructions, and waited in the shrubberies till the moment when she

should call him. This she duly did about three o'clock that day, leading him in by a garden door, and upstairs to the nursery where the child lay. He was in his little cot, breathing calmly, his arm thrown over his head, and his silken curls crushed into the pillow. His father, now almost to be pitied, bent over him, and a tear from his eye wetted the coverlet.

She held up a warning finger as he lowered his mouth to the lips of the boy.

'But oh, why not?' implored he.

'Very well, then,' said she, relenting. 'But as gently as possible.'

He kissed the child without waking him, turned, gave him a last look, and followed her out of the chamber, when she conducted him off the premises by the way he had come.

But this remedy for his sadness of heart at being a stranger to his own son, had the effect of intensifying the malady; for while originally, not knowing or having ever seen the boy, he had loved him vaguely and imaginatively only, he now became attached to him in flesh and bone, as any parent might; and the feeling that he could at best only see his child at the rarest and most cursory moments, if at all, drove him into a state of distraction which threatened to overthrow his promise to the boy's mother to keep out of his sight.

But such was his chivalrous respect for Lady Icenway, and his regret at having ever deceived her, that he schooled his poor heart into submission. Owing to his loneliness, all the fervour of which he was capable--and that was much--flowed now in the channel of parental and marital love--for a child who did not know him, and a woman who had ceased to love him.

At length this singular punishment became such a torture to the poor foreigner that he resolved to lessen it at all hazards, compatible with punctilious care for the name of the lady his former wife, to whom his attachment seemed to increase in proportion to her punitive treatment of him. At one time of his life he had taken great interest in tulip-culture, as well as gardening in general; and since the ruin of his fortunes, and his arrival in England, he had made of his knowledge a precarious income in the hot-houses of nurserymen and others. With the new idea in his head he applied himself zealously to the business, till he acquired in a few months great skill in horticulture. Waiting till the noble lord, his lady's husband, had room for an under-gardener of a general sort, he offered himself for the place, and was engaged immediately by reason of his civility and intelligence, before Lady Icenway knew anything of the matter. Much therefore did he surprise her when she found him in the conservatories of her mansion a week or two after his arrival. The punishment of instant dismissal, with which at first she haughtily threatened him, my lady thought fit, on reflection, not to enforce. While he served her thus she knew he would not harm her by a word, while, if he were expelled, chagrin might induce him to reveal

in a moment of exasperation what kind treatment would assist him to conceal.

So he was allowed to remain on the premises, and had for his residence a little cottage by the garden-wall which had been the domicile of some of his predecessors in the same occupation. Here he lived absolutely alone, and spent much of his leisure in reading, but the greater part in watching the windows and lawns of his lady's house for glimpses of the form of the child. It was for that child's sake that he abandoned the tenets of the Roman Catholic Church in which he had been reared, and became the most regular attendant at the services in the parish place of worship hard by, where, sitting behind the pew of my lady, my lord, and his stepson, the gardener could pensively study the traits and movements of the youngster at only a few feet distance, without suspicion or hindrance.

He filled his post for more than two years with a pleasure to himself which, though mournful, was soothing, his lady never forgiving him, or allowing him to be anything more than 'the gardener' to her child, though once or twice the boy said, 'That gardener's eyes are so sad! Why does he look so sadly at me?' He sunned himself in her scornfulness as if it were love, and his ears drank in her curt monosyllables as though they were rhapsodies of endearment. Strangely enough, the coldness with which she treated her foreigner began to be the conduct of Lord Icenway towards herself. It was a matter of great anxiety to him that there should be a lineal successor to the title, yet no sign of that successor appeared.

One day he complained to her quite roughly of his fate. 'All will go to that dolt of a cousin!' he cried. 'I'd sooner see my name and place at the bottom of the sea!'

The lady soothed him and fell into thought, and did not recriminate. But one day, soon after, she went down to the cottage of the gardener to inquire how he was getting on, for he had been ailing of late, though, as was supposed, not seriously. Though she often visited the poor, she had never entered her under-gardener's home before, and was much surprised--even grieved and dismayed--to find that he was too ill to rise from his bed. She went back to her mansion and returned with some delicate soup, that she might have a reason for seeing him.

His condition was so feeble and alarming, and his face so thin, that it quite shocked her softening heart, and gazing upon him she said, 'You must get well--you must! I have been hard with you--I know it. I will not be so again.'

The sick and dying man--for he was dying indeed--took her hand and pressed it to his lips. 'Too late, my darling, too late!' he murmured.

'But you must not die! Oh, you must not!' she said. And on an impulse she bent down and whispered some words to him, blushing as she had blushed in her maiden days.

He replied by a faint wan smile. 'Time was! . . . but that's past!' he

said, 'I must die!'

And die he did, a few days later, as the sun was going down behind the garden-wall. Her harshness seemed to come trebly home to her then, and she remorsefully exclaimed against herself in secret and alone. Her one desire now was to erect some tribute to his memory, without its being recognized as her handiwork. In the completion of this scheme there arrived a few months later a handsome stained-glass window for the church; and when it was unpacked and in course of erection Lord Icenway strolled into the building with his wife.

'"Erected to his memory by his grieving widow,"' he said, reading the legend on the glass. 'I didn't know that he had a wife; I've never seen her.'

'Oh yes, you must have, Icenway; only you forget,' replied his lady blandly. 'But she didn't live with him, and was seldom seen visiting him, because there were differences between them; which, as is usually the case, makes her all the more sorry now.'

'And go ruining herself by this expensive ruby-and-azure glass-design.'

'She is not poor, they say.'

As Lord Icenway grew older he became crustier and crustier, and whenever he set eyes on his wife's boy by her other husband he would burst out

morosely, saying,

''Tis a very odd thing, my lady, that you could oblige your first husband, and couldn't oblige me.'

'Ah! if I had only thought of it sooner!' she murmured.

'What?' said he.

'Nothing, dearest,' replied Lady Icenway.

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The Colonel was the first to comment upon the Churchwarden's tale, by saying that the fate of the poor fellow was rather a hard one.

The gentleman-tradesman could not see that his fate was at all too hard for him. He was legally nothing to her, and he had served her shamefully. If he had been really her husband it would have stood differently.

The Bookworm remarked that Lord Icenway seemed to have been a very unsuspicious man, with which view a fat member with a crimson face agreed. It was true his wife was a very close-mouthed personage, which made a difference. If she had spoken out recklessly her lord might have been suspicious enough, as in the case of that lady who lived at

Stapleford Park in their great-grandfathers' time. Though there, to be sure, considerations arose which made her husband view matters with much philosophy.

A few of the members doubted the possibility of this.

The crimson man, who was a retired maltster of comfortable means, ventru, and short in stature, cleared his throat, blew off his superfluous breath, and proceeded to give the instance before alluded to of such possibility, first apologizing for his heroine's lack of a title, it never having been his good fortune to know many of the nobility. To his style of narrative the following is only an approximation.