

# **A Laodicean: A Story of To-Day**

**by**

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## PREFACE

The changing of the old order in country manors and mansions may be slow or sudden, may have many issues romantic or otherwise, its romantic issues being not necessarily restricted to a change back to the original order; though this admissible instance appears to have been the only romance formerly recognized by novelists as possible in the case. Whether the following production be a picture of other possibilities or not, its incidents may be taken to be fairly well supported by evidence every day forthcoming in most counties.

The writing of the tale was rendered memorable to two persons, at least, by a tedious illness of five months that laid hold of the author soon after the story was begun in a well-known magazine; during which period the narrative had to be strenuously continued by dictation to a predetermined cheerful ending.

As some of these novels of Wessex life address themselves more especially to readers into whose souls the iron has entered, and whose years have less pleasure in them now than heretofore, so "A Laodicean" may perhaps help to while away an idle afternoon of the comfortable ones whose lines have fallen to them in pleasant places; above all, of that large and happy section of the reading public which has not yet reached ripeness of years; those to whom marriage is the pilgrim's Eternal City, and not a milestone on the way. T.H.

January 1896.

## BOOK THE FIRST: George Somerset

The sun blazed down and down, till it was within half-an-hour of its setting; but the sketcher still lingered at his occupation of measuring and copying the chevroned doorway--a bold and quaint example of a transitional style of architecture, which formed the tower entrance to an English village church. The graveyard being quite open on its western side, the tweed-clad figure of the young draughtsman, and the tall mass of antique masonry which rose above him to a battlemented parapet, were fired to a great brightness by the solar rays, that crossed the neighbouring mead like a warp of gold threads, in whose mazes groups of equally lustrous gnats danced and wailed incessantly.

He was so absorbed in his pursuit that he did not mark the brilliant chromatic effect of which he composed the central feature, till it was brought home to his intelligence by the warmth of the moulded stonework under his touch when measuring; which led him at length to turn his head and gaze on its cause.

There are few in whom the sight of a sunset does not beget as much meditative melancholy as contemplative pleasure, the human decline and death that it illustrates being too obvious to escape the notice of the simplest observer. The sketcher, as if he had been brought to this reflection many hundreds of times before by the same spectacle, showed that he did not wish to pursue it just now, by turning away his face after a few moments, to resume his architectural studies.

He took his measurements carefully, and as if he revered the old workers whose trick he was endeavouring to acquire six hundred years after the original performance had ceased and the performers passed into the unseen. By means of a strip of lead called a leaden tape, which he pressed around and into the fillets and hollows with his finger and thumb, he transferred the exact contour of each moulding to his drawing, that lay on a sketching-stool a few feet distant; where were also a sketching-block, a small T-square, a bow-pencil, and other mathematical instruments. When he had marked down the line thus fixed, he returned to the doorway to copy another as before.

It being the month of August, when the pale face of the townsman and the stranger is to be seen among the brown skins of remotest uplanders, not only in England, but throughout the temperate zone, few of the homeward-bound labourers paused to notice him further than by a momentary turn of the head. They had beheld such gentlemen before, not exactly measuring the church so accurately as this one seemed to be doing, but painting it from a distance, or at least walking round the mouldy pile. At the same time the present visitor, even exteriorly, was not altogether commonplace. His features were good, his eyes of the dark deep sort called eloquent by the sex that ought to know, and with that

ray of light in them which announces a heart susceptible to beauty of all kinds,-- in woman, in art, and in inanimate nature. Though he would have been broadly characterized as a young man, his face bore contradictory testimonies to his precise age. This was conceivably owing to a too dominant speculative activity in him, which, while it had preserved the emotional side of his constitution, and with it the significant flexuousness of mouth and chin, had played upon his forehead and temples till, at weary moments, they exhibited some traces of being over-exercised. A youthfulness about the mobile features, a mature forehead--though not exactly what the world has been familiar with in past ages--is now growing common; and with the advance of juvenile introspection it probably must grow commoner still. Briefly, he had more of the beauty--if beauty it ought to be called--of the future human type than of the past; but not so much as to make him other than a nice young man.

His build was somewhat slender and tall; his complexion, though a little browned by recent exposure, was that of a man who spent much of his time indoors. Of beard he had but small show, though he was as innocent as a Nazarite of the use of the razor; but he possessed a moustache all-sufficient to hide the subtleties of his mouth, which could thus be tremulous at tender moments without provoking inconvenient criticism.

Owing to his situation on high ground, open to the west, he remained enveloped in the lingering aureate haze till a time when the eastern part of the churchyard was in obscurity, and damp with rising dew. When it was too dark to sketch further he packed up his drawing, and, beckoning to a lad who had been idling by the gate, directed him to carry the stool and implements to a roadside inn which he named, lying a mile or two ahead. The draughtsman leisurely followed the lad out of the churchyard, and along a lane in the direction signified.

The spectacle of a summer traveller from London sketching mediaeval details in these neo-Pagan days, when a lull has come over the study of English Gothic architecture, through a re-awakening to the art-forms of times that more nearly neighbour our own, is accounted for by the fact that George Somerset, son of the Academician of that name, was a man of independent tastes and excursive instincts, who unconsciously, and perhaps unhappily, took greater pleasure in floating in lonely currents of thought than with the general tide of opinion. When quite a lad, in the days of the French Gothic mania which immediately succeeded to the great English-pointed revival under Britton, Pugin, Rickman, Scott, and other mediaevalists, he had crept away from the fashion to admire what was good in Palladian and Renaissance. As soon as Jacobean, Queen Anne, and kindred accretions of decayed styles began to be popular, he purchased such old-school works as Revett and Stuart, Chambers, and the rest, and worked diligently at the Five Orders; till quite bewildered on the question of style, he concluded that all styles were extinct, and with them all architecture as a living art. Somerset was not old enough at that time to know that, in practice, art had at all times been as full of shifts and compromises as every other mundane thing;

that ideal perfection was never achieved by Greek, Goth, or Hebrew Jew, and never would be; and thus he was thrown into a mood of disgust with his profession, from which mood he was only delivered by recklessly abandoning these studies and indulging in an old enthusiasm for poetical literature. For two whole years he did nothing but write verse in every conceivable metre, and on every conceivable subject, from Wordsworthian sonnets on the singing of his tea-kettle to epic fragments on the Fall of Empires. His discovery at the age of five-and-twenty that these inspired works were not jumped at by the publishers with all the eagerness they deserved, coincided in point of time with a severe hint from his father that unless he went on with his legitimate profession he might have to look elsewhere than at home for an allowance. Mr. Somerset junior then awoke to realities, became intently practical, rushed back to his dusty drawing-boards, and worked up the styles anew, with a view of regularly starting in practice on the first day of the following January.

It is an old story, and perhaps only deserves the light tone in which the soaring of a young man into the empyrean, and his descent again, is always narrated. But as has often been said, the light and the truth may be on the side of the dreamer: a far wider view than the wise ones have may be his at that recalcitrant time, and his reduction to common measure be nothing less than a tragic event. The operation called lunging, in which a haltered colt is made to trot round and round a horsebreaker who holds the rope, till the beholder grows dizzy in looking at them, is a very unhappy one for the animal concerned. During its progress the colt springs upward, across the circle, stops, flies over the turf with the velocity of a bird, and indulges in all sorts of graceful antics; but he always ends in one way--thanks to the knotted whipcord--in a level trot round the lunger with the regularity of a horizontal wheel, and in the loss for ever to his character of the bold contours which the fine hand of Nature gave it. Yet the process is considered to be the making of him.

Whether Somerset became permanently made under the action of the inevitable lunge, or whether he lapsed into mere dabbling with the artistic side of his profession only, it would be premature to say; but at any rate it was his contrite return to architecture as a calling that sent him on the sketching excursion under notice. Feeling that something still was wanting to round off his knowledge before he could take his professional line with confidence, he was led to remember that his own native Gothic was the one form of design that he had totally neglected from the beginning, through its having greeted him with wearisome iteration at the opening of his career. Now it had again returned to silence; indeed--such is the surprising instability of art 'principles' as they are facetiously called--it was just as likely as not to sink into the neglect and oblivion which had been its lot in Georgian times. This accident of being out of vogue lent English Gothic an additional charm to one of his proclivities; and away he went to make it the business of a summer circuit in the west.

The quiet time of evening, the secluded neighbourhood, the unusually gorgeous liveries of the clouds packed in a pile over that quarter of the heavens in which the sun had disappeared, were such as to make a traveller loiter on his walk. Coming to a stile, Somerset mounted himself on the top bar, to imbibe the spirit of the scene and hour. The evening was so still that every trifling sound could be heard for miles. There was the rattle of a returning waggon, mixed with the smacks of the waggoner's whip: the team must have been at least three miles off. From far over the hill came the faint periodic yell of kennelled hounds; while from the nearest village resounded the voices of boys at play in the twilight. Then a powerful clock struck the hour; it was not from the direction of the church, but rather from the wood behind him; and he thought it must be the clock of some mansion that way.

But the mind of man cannot always be forced to take up subjects by the pressure of their material presence, and Somerset's thoughts were often, to his great loss, apt to be even more than common truants from the tones and images that met his outer senses on walks and rides. He would sometimes go quietly through the queerest, gayest, most extraordinary town in Europe, and let it alone, provided it did not meddle with him by its beggars, beauties, innkeepers, police, coachmen, mongrels, bad smells, and such like obstructions. This feat of questionable utility he began performing now. Sitting on the three-inch ash rail that had been peeled and polished like glass by the rubbings of all the small-clothes in the parish, he forgot the time, the place, forgot that it was August--in short, everything of the present altogether. His mind flew back to his past life, and deplored the waste of time that had resulted from his not having been able to make up his mind which of the many fashions of art that were coming and going in kaleidoscopic change was the true point of departure from himself. He had suffered from the modern malady of unlimited appreciativeness as much as any living man of his own age. Dozens of his fellows in years and experience, who had never thought specially of the matter, but had blunderingly applied themselves to whatever form of art confronted them at the moment of their making a move, were by this time acquiring renown as new lights; while he was still unknown. He wished that some accident could have hemmed in his eyes between inexorable blinkers, and sped him on in a channel ever so worn.

Thus balanced between believing and not believing in his own future, he was recalled to the scene without by hearing the notes of a familiar hymn, rising in subdued harmonies from a valley below. He listened more heedfully. It was his old friend the 'New Sabbath,' which he had never once heard since the lispings days of childhood, and whose existence, much as it had then been to him, he had till this moment quite forgotten. Where the 'New Sabbath' had kept itself all these years--why that sound and hearty melody had disappeared from all the cathedrals, parish churches, minsters and chapels-of-ease that he had been acquainted with during his apprenticeship to life, and until his ways had become irregular and uncongregational-- he could not, at first, say. But then he recollected that the tune appertained to the old west-gallery period of church-

music, anterior to the great choral reformation and the rule of Monk--that old time when the repetition of a word, or half- line of a verse, was not considered a disgrace to an ecclesiastical choir.

Willing to be interested in anything which would keep him out- of-doors, Somerset dismounted from the stile and descended the hill before him, to learn whence the singing proceeded.

II.

He found that it had its origin in a building standing alone in a field; and though the evening was not yet dark without, lights shone from the windows. In a few moments Somerset stood before the edifice. Being just then en rapport with ecclesiasticism by reason of his recent occupation, he could not help murmuring, 'Shade of Pugin, what a monstrosity!'



Perhaps this exclamation (rather out of date since the discovery that Pugin himself often nodded amazingly) would not have been indulged in by Somerset but for his new architectural resolves, which caused professional opinions to advance themselves officiously to his lips whenever occasion offered. The building was, in short, a recently-erected chapel of red brick, with pseudo-classic ornamentation, and the white regular joints of mortar could be seen streaking its surface in geometrical oppressiveness from top to bottom. The roof was of blue slate, clean as a table, and unbroken from gable to gable; the windows were glazed with sheets of plate glass, a temporary iron stovepipe passing out near one of these, and running up to the height of the ridge, where it was finished by a covering like a parachute. Walking round to the end, he perceived an oblong white stone let into the wall just above the plinth, on which was inscribed in deep letters:--

Erected 187-

AT THE SOLE EXPENSE OF

JOHN POWER, ESQ., M.P.

The 'New Sabbath' still proceeded line by line, with all the emotional swells and cadences that had of old characterized the tune: and the body of vocal harmony that it evoked implied a large congregation within, to whom it was plainly as familiar as it had been to church-goers of a past generation. With a whimsical sense of regret at the secession of his once favourite air Somerset moved away, and would have quite withdrawn from the field had he not at that moment observed two young men with pitchers of water coming up from a stream hard by, and hastening with their burdens into the chapel vestry by a side door. Almost as soon as they had entered they emerged again with empty pitchers, and proceeded to the stream to fill them as before, an operation which they repeated several times. Somerset went forward to the stream, and waited till the young men came out again.

'You are carrying in a great deal of water,' he said, as each dipped his pitcher.

One of the young men modestly replied, 'Yes: we filled the cistern this morning; but it leaks, and requires a few pitcherfuls more.'

'Why do you do it?'

'There is to be a baptism, sir.'

Somerset was not sufficiently interested to develop a further conversation, and observing them in silence till they had again vanished into the building, he went on his way. Reaching the brow of the hill he stopped and looked back. The chapel was still in view, and the shades of night having deepened, the lights

shone from the windows yet more brightly than before. A few steps further would hide them and the edifice, and all that belonged to it from his sight, possibly for ever. There was something in the thought which led him to linger. The chapel had neither beauty, quaintness, nor congeniality to recommend it: the dissimilitude between the new utilitarianism of the place and the scenes of venerable Gothic art which had occupied his daylight hours could not well be exceeded. But Somerset, as has been said, was an instrument of no narrow gamut: he had a key for other touches than the purely aesthetic, even on such an excursion as this. His mind was arrested by the intense and busy energy which must needs belong to an assembly that required such a glare of light to do its religion by; in the heaving of that tune there was an earnestness which made him thoughtful, and the shine of those windows he had characterized as ugly reminded him of the shining of the good deed in a naughty world. The chapel and its shabby plot of ground, from which the herbage was all trodden away by busy feet, had a living human interest that the numerous minsters and churches knee-deep in fresh green grass, visited by him during the foregoing week, had often lacked. Moreover, there was going to be a baptism: that meant the immersion of a grown-up person; and he had been told that Baptists were serious people and that the scene was most impressive. What manner of man would it be who on an ordinary plodding and bustling evening of the nineteenth century could single himself out as one different from the rest of the inhabitants, banish all shyness, and come forward to undergo such a trying ceremony? Who was he that had pondered, gone into solitudes, wrestled with himself, worked up his courage and said, I will do this, though few else will, for I believe it to be my duty?

Whether on account of these thoughts, or from the circumstance that he had been alone amongst the tombs all day without communion with his kind, he could not tell in after years (when he had good reason to think of the subject); but so it was that Somerset went back, and again stood under the chapel- wall.

Instead of entering he passed round to where the stove-chimney came through the bricks, and holding on to the iron stay he put his toes on the plinth and looked in at the window. The building was quite full of people belonging to that vast majority of society who are denied the art of articulating their higher emotions, and crave dumbly for a fogleman-- respectably dressed working people, whose faces and forms were worn and contorted by years of dreary toil. On a platform at the end of the chapel a haggard man of more than middle age, with grey whiskers ascetically cut back from the fore part of his face so far as to be almost banished from the countenance, stood reading a chapter. Between the minister and the congregation was an open space, and in the floor of this was sunk a tank full of water, which just made its surface visible above the blackness of its depths by reflecting the lights overhead.

Somerset endeavoured to discover which one among the assemblage was to be the subject of the ceremony. But nobody appeared there who was at all out of the region of commonplace. The people were all quiet and settled; yet he could

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