

Complete Story.

ATALANTA.

By EDONARD ROD.

(TRANSLATED BY ELIZABETH LISTER MULLINS, FROM THE FRENCH.)

You can emancipate women as some of them and a great many men demand; you can make them apothecaries, notaries, lawyers, voters, legislators, ministers, and as they do in I know not which State of the Union, National Guards. You can allow them the free disposal of their property and of their earnings, let them exercise in all the sports, strengthen their muscles and develop their brains; you can enact laws for them, grant the equality of the sexes, substitute free-love for matrimony; you can realise the most extravagant Utopias, the most whimsical sectaries, but you will never prevent their being women. They are women incurably. When they cease to be so for an instant they soon return. Oh! we need not fear an upheaval of civilisation in which woman-kind will push us aside. They lose nothing we love in them. Even though it is necessary to suffer their apostles to preach for a little more justice in the division of rights, of labour and of wages, that will not harm love. Existence could be made easier by a growth of independence, and as for those we do not love—we never would love them; the others, those we call "real women," because they are to us what we are to them, an inspiration of passion, we will always yield to them at the opportune moment, provided our egotism is not baffled by their beauty, their charms. I know very well that many fine minds dispute this and alarm themselves by calculating the perils to which Woman's Rights expose the future of the race. But they are mistaken, as the story I am about to relate will testify. To tell the truth, it is but a story and I cannot ignore the fact that the case never comes to the point, that you will find in it support for all shades of opinion, and that it is poor logic to draw general conclusions from an incident. Only my story has the advantage over those of many novelists by being scrupulously true, and it seems to me what is called "representative." You will object that it proves nothing. I admit it, but I will tell it anyhow, and I believe just as womanliness makes headway in the instance of Lucy Perceval, it will often repeat itself under different forms, varying according to the medium and the circumstances.

Lucy Perceval was fourteen when I saw her for the first time. Her father was an American gentleman, whom for a while the chances of travel made my neighbour in the country. A widower for several years, he looked quite young, although he was approaching forty; with a noble face, fine carriage and that independence in action and judgment which make the habits and fortune of Anglo-Saxons. Quoting his own expression he "lived in Europe" and treated our old Continent as if it were a garden where he wandered at leisure, carrying his camp-stool under the shade of whatever tree pleased him. A faithful friend, I have had occasion to know it, he attached himself to no place. He has lived in London, Paris, Rome, Florence, Munich, on the banks of Lake Lucerne, and of Lake Geneva, in the south and in the Alps. The only attempt he had ever made to settle himself had not succeeded. One day he bought a chateau in Touraine, but the chateau burned while it was being repaired. Mr Perceval sustained a long suit against the company in which he had insured his property and lost it. He concluded from this misadventure that he was never meant to be a proprietor, and though he preserved the ruins of his chateau, which crumbled away year by year, to him it was never anything more than a subject of pleasantry. Through this wandering life Lucy's education, as you can surmise, was entirely fantastical, her father taking charge of it himself, sid-

ed by professors recruited in the towns where they passed a month or a season. Never a governess. Lucy would not tolerate an indiscreet or tyrannical chaperon. She grew in freedom, learning what she pleased to learn and doing what she pleased to do, and thus becoming what her father called "a droll little fellow," adding, not without pride, "she has her ideas. She positively wishes to be a man. We will see what will become of her."

Mr Perceval explained all this to me the day he introduced himself to a neighbour in the old house I lived in ten years ago at Champel. The curiosity he excited in me by describing his daughter contributed perhaps as much as the sympathy he inspired me with at first sight to my haste in returning his call. He received me in a large incongruous drawing-room, where two beautiful ancient chests contrasted with the commonplace couches and arm-chairs of a hired apartment. Then he proposed to go out into the garden, the fine foliage of which I had so often admired from my windows. He looked round and called "Lucy!"

A strong voice replied from the top of a fir tree "Father."
"Our neighbour, Mr Rod, is here, so come offer us a cup of tea."
"Yes, father."

Something came tumbling down from branch to branch, and then it fell in front of us. I saw a mat of rather short, thick hair of a pretty light ash colour, large sparkling eyes that flashed themselves upon me with a singular expression of audacious frankness, and the bright face of a merry little girl in good health. As for her costume, it would be difficult to describe it, for the usual terms would hardly suit. Her dress, for example, was not exactly a dress. Invented by Miss Lucy, it resembled as much as possible a boy's blouse, reaching to the knee and caught at the waist by a leather belt. It was made of grey corduroy, strong enough to defy wear and tear. At the neck of the waist she wore a large cravat, a perfect breastplate of bright red pierced by a gold pin in the form of a dagger. Lucy took my hand, shook it vigorously, and said in a hearty tone "I am very glad to make your acquaintance, sir." Then she turned round and went at a gallop towards the house, calling back, "I am going to order the tea."

As I followed her with a look, smiling a little, Mr Perceval said to me, "Doesn't she run well? Racing is her forte. I have forewarned you she is a boy, or rather one of Shakspeare's pages. Reminds you of Rosalind in "As You Like It." I do not object to it at all."

What I saw during the afternoon showed me that Mr Perceval had not exaggerated. He made me go through the house, and Lucy's room astonished me even more than the young lady's costume. You might have called it a cell. A plain iron bed, a square table, and three straw chairs were all the furniture. As for the decorations, they consisted in a map of the world and a panoply of foils, pistols and whips. Lucy showed me the arms, saying, "These are my dolls." Her voice and her gestures were always always those of a turbulent boy. She talked loudly, she laughed loudly, she entertained me with her projects for the future. She absolutely wanted "to do something," to follow a man's career; to be an agriculturist pleased her particularly, because her father owned large plantations in the Southern States. From time to time, whenever the woman would betray herself in her need of approbation, she would turn towards her father, asking, "Isn't that so, father?"

Mr Perceval assented. As they accompanied me to the gate, Lucy caught sight of the postman

hobbling along under his weight of letters and papers.

"Isn't he late? Poor old fellow." Then, "I will run and get what he has for us," and away she darted like an arrow.

When she returned at the same speed I laughingly called her "Miss Atalanta."

"That is just it," said Mr Perceval, "Atalanta, Atalanta."

"Who was Atalanta?" asked Lucy. "I tried to recall my classics so as to reply," she was a princess of ancient times, Miss Lucy, whose father, furious at having a daughter, had her reared in the woods. She was nourished on the milk of a bear, and became in time a great huntress. She could run as fast as you. When she was of age to marry suitors presented themselves in great numbers, for she was, as we would say to-day, a good catch. But she declared she would only marry the man who could outstrip her in a race. Those who outran her justly fell to death. You would not be so cruel, would you?"

Lucy had been listening with great attention. Brought to a sudden stop, she said seriously, "No, that is no longer our custom."

"Many youths have perished on her account, when a young prince presented himself, by the name of Meilanon. He was so handsome that Aphrodite had made him a gift of three golden apples, which saved him, for as he ran he let fall one after another. Atalanta, who despite all was a woman, stopped to pick them up, and thus she was finally vanquished."

Lucy burst out laughing. "Oh, that is a good story," she exclaimed, "but Atalanta was a goose. As for me, when I run, I would never stop for such a trifle."

We retained for Lucy the nickname of Atalanta, and later I was amazed to have found one so appropriate. Mr Perceval and his daughter returned for several years to spend the summer months at Champel. They loved their beautiful garden, planted in old trees, and the fine bold landscape which stretched between the bare borders of the Saleve and the distant outline of the Jura.

Until she was seventeen Miss Atalanta wore her peculiar garb, short hair, man's cravat and boy's hat, while racing remained her chief pleasure. Nothing delighted her more than to challenge a country neighbour on the highway and then to beat him. The humiliation of her victims amused her excessively, and she enjoyed it. I do not believe it was anything more than her personal vanity, as if her victory were an honour to her whole sex. The road which wound between flowering hedges, broken by the cliffs of the Arve, was often witness to these sports, and the occupants of the neighbouring fields, honest folks, quiet and sedate, could not refrain from being scandalized. They would ask me, "What is the matter with that strange young girl, who is so much like a boy?"

When I explained to them that she was an American they were reassured. Anything is allowed to persons from the other Continents, even their eccentricities do not clash with our usages.

It was in the course of her eighteenth year that Lucy changed. In the spring I saw her return in the fashionable costume of her sex, and her magnificent hair smooth and glossy as silk. I recall almost word for word the conversation we had walking slowly along the road, where the year before she had raced at such a rate.

"And so, Miss Lucy, you have become a young lady in earnest."
"She contented herself by saying 'Pshaw,' with a slight pout which was to intimate as nearly as possible, 'A lady could not always escape her sex, but it was not her fault and I would rather talk of other things.'"
"However, I had the matter to insist, 'Atalanta is dead.'"
"She cried out, 'Oh, I still run!'"
"Not so fast, I bet."

"No, no, very well, I assure you—only, you understand," throwing a look of unmistakable hatred at her skirts, which explained to me that she had no longer the same freedom of action.

"Long skirts, long hair and jewels. Ah, ah, it is the woman that awakens. Eve, the mother of us all, you know."

She snapped her unglued fingers in a gesture of indifference.
"Bah!" she said.

"And soon that little blue flower, love."

She burst out laughing. "As for that, no, bless me, never." Her laugh sounded frank and clear, so the metamorphosis was evidently not due to the sentimental motives that I could not refrain from supposing. Notwithstanding, I persisted:

"All young ladies say that, even those who cannot race."
She shrugged her shoulders.
"Love," she said, "is good enough for sentimental dolls."
"It will come, nevertheless, in its time."
"Never."

"And you will marry."
"No, no, no."
She stamped the ground with her foot so as to raise the dust. Then, calming herself, she began, "Or rather—"

"If it is necessary for me to have a husband, let us see."

Then she described to me her ideal of a fiance, handsome, strong, manly, manly above all. He was the conquering prince of the legend, Meilanon overcoming Atalanta without resorting to the ruse of the golden apples, Siegfried subduing Brunehilde, the man of iron muscle, of brave-iron will, a demi-god of heroic times, resuscitated in our days expressly to realise the dreams of Miss Lucy.

Mr Perceval, who had rejoined us, listened with half-closed eyes, and a smile of approval in the corner of his lips, persuaded that his Lucy would never marry unless she met a Zeus, an Apollo, or at least a Perseus.

As for me, I asked myself what life, that great demolisher of our dreams, reserved in her case, and I awaited in advance the future disappointments of my young friend, so confident of her destiny. Oh, the bright to be, it opens like a frail and lovely flower, to throw its colours to the light, its perfume to the winds. She raced no more, but she rode a spirited horse, a superb Anglo-Norman that answered to the name of Aster. Her father usually accompanied her, but often she would go out alone disdainful of appearances or of what people would say. At the same time she worked earnestly, her father having at length consented to allow her to take up regular studies, and she was to leave for the University of Zurich when it reopened in the autumn.

Things were at this stage when Mr Perceval said to me one day, "We are going to have a companion in our hermitage, the son of a very intimate friend of mine who died several years ago. He has just lost his mother and is very wretched, for he is weak and infirm, so I have invited him to come and finish the summer with us. He is a man of twenty-five, and his name is Walter Leigh."

I knew enough of Mr Perceval's benevolence under an exterior of indifference to guess that there was some kindness at the bottom of that tale, so I did not press him, but contented myself by saying I should be happy to help him divert his young friend. He thanked me for my offer, and said in accepting it, "I will certainly have to have recourse to your good will, for you understand that I cannot count upon Lucy occupying herself with him."

"The fact is," I replied laughing, "that I cannot picture to myself Miss Atalanta as a sister of charity, nursing a melancholy young invalid."

And I thought of the contempt she would hardly be able to repress at having this wretched being thrown by chance into her sphere of health and exuberance. When I saw him the day after his arrival this impression was even more lively. Walter Leigh, after the idea I had formed of him, was one of those poor deformed creatures to whom nature had been doubly cruel, having pent up in weak bodies fervent spirits and having inflicted them with a keen sense of their own inferiority. His deformity was not so great, he was slightly lame, his left limb was a little too short, with a crippled foot, but above all he was distressingly thin. Well over medium height, his leanness was almost appalling, with his bones jutting out as if they were ready to break through his skin. His features had a certain beauty, and his great black velvet eyes were of unusual splendour, but his swarthy complexion betrayed a constant feverishness, while his poor weak hands with their bony fingers trembled like those of an old man. Moreover, accustomed to the indulgence of a mother who from his early infancy had cared for him like a frail object to be preserved