

**GEORGE MEREDITH:  
HIS LIFE, GENIUS &  
TEACHING**

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George Meredith: his life, genius & teaching by Constantin Photiadès

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# GEORGE MEREDITH

## CHAPTER I

### A VISIT TO FLINT COTTAGE

(22ND SEPTEMBER, 1911)

ON arriving at George Meredith's home, at Box Hill, near Dorking, one showery afternoon at the end of September, I found a pretty country house, quite different from the luxurious retreats inhabited by those fashionable French writers who are well assured of their fame. Many wealthy tradesmen possess villas far more pretentious on the outskirts of Paris or of London. But the charm of Flint Cottage lies in its absolute simplicity. The little house, where Meredith had lived for forty years, is situated half-way up a slope which inclines slowly towards a wood of firs; a little garden, admirably kept, surrounds it. When I entered the garden, the convulvuses were more than half-closed and the first drops of rain fell noiselessly upon the grassy slopes of the hill-side. It was autumn; and the day

was calm and fresh. A light breeze just swayed the leaves of the lime trees and the elms, which had begun to turn colour. The blackberries were already ripe upon the brambles ; and from the laurel hedges exhaled a bitter odour.

I am received by a lady, who is a trained nurse and also Meredith's housekeeper. While I am taking off my overcoat, on my right hand, through the open door of a narrow room or study I catch sight of the poet.

A dark-coloured rug is wrapped about his knees, as he sits in an invalid's chair facing a photographic reproduction of Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*. Over the mantelpiece is the framed picture of his wife, and there are other pictures in colour on the walls. Some books and periodicals litter a low table on the left-hand side of his chair ; and on the right is a fire-place. Through the window and the haze beyond one can see, at the bottom of the garden, the branches of a beech intertwined with ivy and the little lawn and garden between the house and the road.

Meredith's head, as outlined in this unreal light, stands out with vigour, even with severity, against the grey depth beyond. His abundant silvery hair curls around his noble and ruddy countenance. His snow-white beard and moustache do not conceal a rather large and very mobile mouth. His nostrils

indicate both delicacy and pride ; his eyes retain their eloquent expression, despite the film which sometimes veils their depths. To my mind Sargent has caught their expression better than Watts.<sup>1</sup> A loose, light homespun jacket amplifies his figure. His hands display a movement, an energy, and a vigour truly surprising in an old man who is partly paralysed. The nervous and quick gestures which accompany his speech, denote a temperament certainly passionate if not irritable. Decay is not apparent in this splendid old man of eighty ; and, so far from yielding to physical decadence, he struggles to deny it. Thus, though attacked by ataxy, Meredith complains that he is no longer allowed to go out, as formerly, and ramble across the fields. He tells me that he is a great smoker ; but in my presence he does not even smoke a cigarette. His memory betrays him only on one occasion, when he gropes for the name of Gobineau. He attracts and compels attention by the energy of his utterances and by the variety of his reminiscences. From the first words of welcome which I receive, I notice that he speaks both clearly and distinctly, and that he articulates each syllable with a precision very remarkable in an Englishman. Certainly, apart from his sad affliction, he would appear to be the embodiment of health.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the portrait at the commencement of the " edition de luxe " of *The Complete Works*, published by Constable and Co.