

**THE MASTER OF THE
CEREMONIES, A
NOVEL. IN THREE
VOLUMES. VOL. II**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649383603

The master of the ceremonies, a novel. In three volumes. Vol. II by George Manville Fenn

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
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GEORGE MANVILLE FENN

**THE MASTER OF THE
CEREMONIES, A
NOVEL. IN THREE
VOLUMES. VOL. II**

THE
MASTER OF THE CEREMONIES.

A Novel.

BY
GEORGE MANVILLE FENN,
AUTHOR OF 'DOUBLE GUNNING,' 'THE GARRON O' DUMFORD,' ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

London:
WARD AND DOWNEY,
YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN.
1886.

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F. J. Linn.

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THE
MASTER OF THE CEREMONIES.

CHAPTER I.

AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN.

CLAIRE shrank back for a moment, and her natural womanly timidity urged her to turn and hurry home by the way she had come.

But that would be showing Major Rockley that she was afraid of him, and this she wished to keep a secret in her own breast.

Bowing slightly, then, she declined the offer of his hand, stepped over the stile, and went on.

With anyone else Rockley would have felt bound to retire, but he only laughed. Claire was the daughter of the poor minister of fashion, who lived by the fees and offerings he received from new-comers; and he did not feel himself called upon to treat her as a lady.

'Why, my dear Miss Denville,' he said, laughing, 'what have I done that you should try to cut me like this? I am ignorant. Come, shake hands.'

He held his out, as he walked by her side, and she turned upon him a look full of indignation.

'Are you not making a mistake, sir?' she said coldly.

'Mistake? No. My dear Claire, why do you treat me like this? How absurd it is to refuse my letters, and play coquette when we meet. Here have I been watching for such an opportunity as this for weeks.'

Claire's eyes flashed at his assumption, but she made no reply, and walked on.

'How can you be so absurd,' he whispered, as he kept pace with her step for step, 'when you know how I love you?'

'Major Rockley!' she cried, stopping short and facing him, 'by what right do you insult me like this?'

'How beautiful she is!' he said in a low tone.

Claire bit her lips, and, divining that he was disposed to treat her as one in an entirely different rank of life, she hurried on along the path, with the tall corn waving on either side, trembling with dread and indignation, as she realized that he was behaving to her as he might to some servant-girl.

'Say what you like to me. Be angry. Punish me. I cannot help it,' he whispered. 'Your beauty maddens me,

as it has done all these weary months, and I must speak to you now.'

'Major Rockley, I am alone and unprotected. I ask you, as a gentleman, to leave me.'

'And as an officer and a gentleman I would leave you, but my passion masters me. Sweet Claire, whom I love so dearly, how can you be so cruel and so hard?'

He tried to take her hand, but she shrank from him and turned back.

'No, no, little one, you are not going to serve me like that!' he cried, darting before her. 'Come, how can you be so absurd?' he whispered. 'We are quite alone. No one can see our meeting, and yet you are trifling with me, and wasting golden moments. You know I love you.'

'Once more, Major Rockley, will you leave me? You insult me by staying.'

'No, I will not leave you,' he whispered excitedly; 'and I do not insult you.'

'I am alone now, sir, but I have a father—brothers, who shall call you to account for this!' she cried, with her eyes full of indignation.

'Don't,' he whispered imploringly. 'You make your eyes flash and your face light up in a way that drives me frantic. Claire, if you speak to me like that again, I shall risk being seen, and take you to my heart to cover those lips with kisses. No, no; don't shrink away; only be