

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

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Содержание

BOOK V	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Devereux — Volume 05

BOOK V

CHAPTER I

A PORTRAIT

MYSTERIOUS impulse at the heart, which never suffers us to be at rest, which urges us onward as by an unseen yet irresistible law—human planets in a petty orbit, hurried forever and forever, till our course is run and our light is quenched—through the circle of a dark and impenetrable destiny! art thou not some faint forecast and type of our wanderings hereafter; of the unslumbering nature of the soul; of the everlasting progress which we are predoomed to make through the countless steps and realms and harmonies in the infinite creation? Oh, often in my roving have I dared to dream so,—often have I soared on the wild wings of thought above the "smoke and stir" of this dim earth, and wrought, from the restless visions of my mind, a chart of the glories and the wonders which the released spirit may hereafter visit and behold!

What a glad awakening from self,—what a sparkling and fresh draught from a new source of being,—what a wheel within wheel, animating, impelling, arousing all the rest of this animal machine, is the first excitement of Travel! the first free escape from the bonds of the linked and tame life of cities and social vices,—the jaded pleasure and the hollow love, the monotonous round of sordid objects and dull desires,—the eternal chain that binds us to things and beings, mockeries of ourselves,—alike, but oh, how different! the shock that brings us nearer to men only to make us strive against them, and learn, from the harsh contest of veiled deceit and open force, that the more we share the aims of others, the more deeply and basely rooted we grow to the littleness of self!

I passed more lingeringly through France than I did through the other portions of my route. I had dwelt long enough in the capital to be anxious to survey the country. It was then that the last scale which the magic of Louis Quatorze and the memory of his gorgeous court had left upon the mortal eye fell off, and I saw the real essence of that monarch's greatness and the true relics of his reign. I saw the poor, and the degraded, and the racked, and the priest-ridden, tillers and peoplers of the soil, which made the substance beneath the glittering and false surface,—the body of that vast empire, of which I had hitherto beheld only the face, and THAT darkly, and for the most part covered by a mask!

No man can look upon France, beautiful France,—her rich soil, her temperate yet maturing clime, the gallant and bold spirits which she produces, her boundaries so indicated and protected by Nature itself, her advantages of ocean and land, of commerce and agriculture,—and not wonder that her prosperity should be so bloated, and her real state so wretched and diseased.

Let England draw the moral, and beware not only of wars which exhaust, but of governments which impoverish. A waste of the public wealth is the most lasting of public afflictions; and "the treasury which is drained by extravagance must be refilled by crime."¹

I remember one beautiful evening an accident to my carriage occasioned my sojourn for a whole afternoon in a small village. The Cure honoured me with a visit; and we strolled, after a slight repast,

¹ Tacitus.

into the hamlet. The priest was complaisant, quiet in manner, and not ill informed for his obscure station and scanty opportunities of knowledge; he did not seem, however, to possess the vivacity of his countrymen, but was rather melancholy and pensive, not only in his expression of countenance, but his cast of thought.

"You have a charming scene here: I almost feel as if it were a sin to leave it so soon."

We were, indeed, in a pleasant and alluring spot at the time I addressed this observation to the good Cure. A little rivulet emerged from the copse to the left, and ran sparkling and dimpling beneath our feet, to deck with a more living verdure the village green, which it intersected with a winding nor unmelodious stream. We had paused, and I was leaning against an old and solitary chestnut-tree, which commanded the whole scene. The village was a little in the rear, and the smoke from its few chimneys rose slowly to the silent and deep skies, not wholly unlike the human wishes, which, though they spring from the grossness and the fumes of earth, purify themselves as they ascend to heaven. And from the village (when other sounds, which I shall note presently, were for an instant still) came the whoop of children, mellowed by distance into a confused yet thrilling sound, which fell upon the heart like the voice of our gone childhood itself. Before, in the far expanse, stretched a chain of hills on which the autumn sun sank slowly, pouring its yellow beams over groups of peasantry, which, on the opposite side of the rivulet and at some interval from us, were scattered, partly over the green, and partly gathered beneath the shade of a little grove. The former were of the young, and those to whom youth's sports are dear, and were dancing to the merry music, which (ever and anon blended with the laugh and the tone of a louder jest) floated joyously on our ears. The fathers and matrons of the hamlet were inhaling a more quiet joy beneath the trees, and I involuntarily gave a tenderer interest to their converse by supposing them to sanction to each other the rustic loves which they might survey among their children.

"Will not Monsieur draw nearer to the dancers?" said the Cure; "there is a plank thrown over the rivulet a little lower down."

"No!" said I, "perhaps they are seen to better advantage where we are: what mirth will bear too close an inspection?"

True, Sir," remarked the priest, and he sighed.

"Yet," I resumed musingly, and I spoke rather to myself than to my companion, "yet, how happy do they seem! what a revival of our Arcadian dreams are the flute and the dance, the glossy trees all glowing in the autumn sunset, the green sod, and the murmuring rill, and the buoyant laugh, startling the satyr in his leafy haunts; and the rural loves which will grow sweeter still when the sun has set, and the twilight has made the sigh more tender and the blush of a mellower hue! Ah, why is it only the revival of a dream? why must it be only an interval of labour and woe, the brief saturnalia of slaves, the green resting-spot in a dreary and long road of travail and toil?"

"You are the first stranger I have met," said the Cure, "who seems to pierce beneath the thin veil of our Gallic gayety; the first to whom the scene we now survey is fraught with other feelings than a belief in the happiness of our peasantry, and an envy at its imagined exuberance. But as it is not the happiest individuals, so I fear it is not the happiest nations, that are the gayest."

I looked at the Cure with some surprise. "Your remark is deeper than the ordinary wisdom of your tribe, my Father," said I.

"I have travelled over three parts of the globe," answered the Cure: "I was not always intended for what I am;" and the priest's mild eyes flashed with a sudden light that as suddenly died away. "Yes, I have travelled over the greater part of the known world," he repeated, in a more quiet tone; "and I have noted that where a man has many comforts to guard, and many rights to defend, he necessarily shares the thought and the seriousness of those who feel the value of a treasure which they possess, and whose most earnest meditations are intent upon providing against its loss. I have noted, too, that the joy produced by a momentary suspense of labour is naturally great in proportion to the toil; hence it is that no European mirth is so wild as that of the Indian slave, when a brief holiday releases him

from his task. Alas! that very mirth is the strongest evidence of the weight of the previous chains; even as, in ourselves, we find the happiest moment we enjoy is that immediately succeeding the cessation of deep sorrow to the mind or violent torture to the body."²

I was struck by this observation of the priest.

"I see now," said I, "that as an Englishman I have no reason to repine at the proverbial gravity of my countrymen, or to envy the lighter spirit of the sons of Italy and France."

"No," said the Cure; "the happiest nations are those in whose people you witness the least sensible reverses from gayety to dejection; and that /thought/, which is the noblest characteristic of the isolated man, is also that of a people. Freemen are serious; they have objects at their heart worthy to engross attention. It is reserved for slaves to indulge in groans at one moment and laughter at another."

"At that rate," said I, "the best sign for France will be when the gayety of her sons is no longer a just proverb, and the laughing lip is succeeded by the thoughtful brow."

We remained silent for several minutes; our conversation had shed a gloom over the light scene before us, and the voice of the flute no longer sounded musically on my ear. I proposed to the Cure to return to my inn. As we walked slowly in that direction, I surveyed my companion more attentively than I had hitherto done. He was a model of masculine vigour and grace of form; and, had I not looked earnestly upon his cheek, I should have thought him likely to outlive the very oaks around the hamlet church where he presided. But the cheek was worn and hectic, and seemed to indicate that the keen fire which burns at the deep heart, unseen, but unslaking, would consume the mortal fuel, long before Time should even have commenced his gradual decay.

"You have travelled, then, much, Sir?" said I, and the tone of my voice was that of curiosity.

The good Cure penetrated into my desire to hear something of his adventures; and few are the recluses who are not gratified by the interest of others, or who are unwilling to reward it by recalling those portions of life most cherished by themselves. Before we parted that night, he told me his little history. He had been educated for the army; before he entered the profession he had seen the daughter of a neighbour, loved her, and the old story,—she loved him again, and died before the love passed the ordeal of marriage. He had no longer a desire for glory, but he had for excitement. He sold his little property and travelled, as he had said, for nearly fourteen years, equally over the polished lands of Europe and the far climates where Truth seems fable and Fiction finds her own legends realized or excelled.

He returned home poor in pocket and wearied in spirit. He became what I beheld him. "My lot is fixed now," said he, in conclusion; "but I find there is all the difference between quiet and content: my heart eats itself away here; it is the moth fretting the garment laid by, more than the storm or the fray would have worn it."

I said something, commonplace enough, about solitude, and the blessings of competence, and the country. The Cure shook his head gently, but made no answer; perhaps he did wisely in thinking the feelings are ever beyond the reach of a stranger's reasoning. We parted more affectionately than acquaintances of so short a date usually do; and when I returned from Russia, I stopped at the village on purpose to inquire after him. A few months had done the work: the moth had already fretted away the human garment; and I walked to his lowly and nameless grave, and felt that it contained the only quiet in which monotony is not blended with regret!

² This reflection, if true, may console us for the loss of those village dances and pleasant holidays for which "merry England" was once celebrated. The loss of them has been ascribed to the gloomy influence of the Puritans; but it has never occurred to the good poets, who have so mourned over that loss, that it is also to be ascribed to the /liberty/ which those Puritans /generalized/, if they did not introduce.—ED.

CHAPTER II

THE ENTRANCE INTO PETERSBURG.—A RENCONTRE WITH AN INQUISITIVE AND MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.—NOTHING LIKE TRAVEL

IT was certainly like entering a new world when I had the frigid felicity of entering Russia. I expected to have found Petersburg a wonderful city, and I was disappointed; it was a wonderful beginning of a city, and that was all I ought to have expected. But never, I believe, was there a place which there was so much difficulty in arriving at: such winds, such climate, such police arrangements,—arranged, too, by such fellows! six feet high, with nothing human about them but their uncleanness and ferocity! Such vexatious delays, difficulties, ordeals, through which it was necessary to pass, and to pass, too, with an air of the most perfect satisfaction and content. By the Lord! one would have imagined, at all events, it must be an earthly paradise, to be so arduous of access, instead of a Dutch-looking town, with comfortless canals, and the most terrible climate in which a civilized creature was ever frozen to death. "It is just the city a nation of bears would build, if bears ever became architects," said I to myself, as I entered the northern capital, with my teeth chattering and my limbs in a state of perfect insensibility.

My vehicle stopped, at last, at an hotel to which I had been directed. It was a circumstance, I believe, peculiar to Petersburg, that, at the time I speak of, none of its streets had a name; and if one wanted to find out a house, one was forced to do so by oral description. A pleasant thing it was, too, to stop in the middle of a street, to listen to such description at full length, and find one's self rapidly becoming ice as the detail progressed. After I was lodged, thawed, and fed, I fell fast asleep, and slept for eighteen hours, without waking once; to my mind, it was a miracle that I ever woke again.

I then dressed myself, and taking my interpreter,—who was a Livonian, a great rascal, but clever, who washed twice a week, and did not wear a beard above eight inches long,—I put myself into my carriage, and went to deliver my letters of introduction. I had one in particular to the Admiral Apraxin; and it was with him that I was directed to confer, previous to seeking an interview with the Emperor. Accordingly I repaired to his hotel, which was situated on a sort of quay, and was really, for Petersburg, very magnificent. In this quarter, then or a little later, lived about thirty other officers of the court, General Jagoyinsky, General Cyernichoff, etc.; and, appropriately enough, the most remarkable public building in the vicinity is the great slaughter-house,—a fine specimen that of practical satire!

On endeavouring to pass through the Admiral's hall I had the mortification of finding myself rejected by his domestics. As two men in military attire were instantly admitted, I thought this a little hard upon a man who had travelled so far to see his admiralship, and, accordingly, hinted my indignation to Mr. Muscotofsky, my interpreter.

"You are not so richly dressed as those gentlemen," said he.

"That is the reason, is it?"

"If it so please Saint Nicholas, it is; and, besides, those gentlemen have two men running before them to cry, 'Clear the way!'"

"I had better, then, dress myself better, and take two /avant couriers/."

"If it so please Saint Nicholas." Upon this I returned, robed myself in scarlet and gold, took a couple of lacqueys, returned to Admiral Apraxin's, and was admitted in an instant. Who would have thought these savages so like us? Appearances, you see, produce realities all over the world!

The Admiral, who was a very great man at court—though he narrowly escaped Siberia, or the knout, some time after—was civil enough to me: but I soon saw that, favourite as he was with the Czar, that great man left but petty moves in the grand chessboard of politics to be played by any

but himself; and my proper plan in this court appeared evidently to be unlike that pursued in most others, where it is better to win the favourite than the prince. Accordingly, I lost no time in seeking an interview with the Czar himself, and readily obtained an appointment to that effect.

On the day before the interview took place, I amused myself with walking over the city, gazing upon its growing grandeur, and casting, in especial, a wistful eye upon the fortress or citadel, which is situated in an island, surrounded by the city, and upon the building of which more than one hundred thousand men are supposed to have perished. So great a sacrifice does it require to conquer Nature!

While I was thus amusing myself, I observed a man in a small chaise with one horse pass me twice, and look at me very earnestly. Like most of my countrymen, I do not love to be stared at; however, I thought it better in that unknown country to change my intended frown for a good-natured expression of countenance, and turned away. A singular sight now struck my attention: a couple of men with beards that would have hidden a cassowary, were walking slowly along in their curious long garments, and certainly (I say it reverently) disgracing the semblance of humanity, when, just as they came by a gate, two other men of astonishing height started forth, each armed with a pair of shears. Before a second was over, off went the beards of the first two passengers; and before another second expired, off went the skirts of their garments too: I never saw excrescences so expeditiously lopped. The two operators, who preserved a profound silence during this brief affair, then retired a little, and the mutilated wanderers pursued their way with an air of extreme discomfiture.

"Nothing like travel, certainly!" said I, unconsciously aloud.

"True!" said a voice in English behind me. I turned, and saw the man who had noticed me so earnestly in the one horse chaise. He was a tall, robust man, dressed very plainly, and even shabbily, in a green uniform, with a narrow tarnished gold lace; and I judged him to be a foreigner, like myself, though his accent and pronunciation evidently showed that he was not a native of the country in the language of which he accosted me.

"It is very true," said he again; "there is nothing like travel!"

"And travel," I rejoined courteously, "in those places where travel seldom extends. I have only been six days at Petersburg, and till I came hither, I knew nothing of the variety of human nature or the power of human genius. But will you allow me to ask the meaning of the very singular occurrence we have just witnessed?"

"Oh, nothing," rejoined the man, with a broad strong smile, "nothing but an attempt to make men out of brutes. This custom of shaving is not, thank Heaven, much wanted now: some years ago it was requisite to have several stations for barbers and tailors to perform their duties in. Now this is very seldom necessary; those gentlemen were especially marked out for the operation. By ——" (and here the man swore a hearty English and somewhat seafaring oath, which a little astonished me in the streets of Petersburg), "I wish it were as easy to lop off all old customs! that it were as easy to clip the /beard of the mind/, Sir! Ha! ha!"

"But the Czar must have found a little difficulty in effecting even this outward amendment; and to say truth, I see so many beards about still that I think the reform has been more partial than universal."

"Ah, those are the beards of the common people: the Czar leaves those for the present. Have you seen the docks yet?"

"No, I am not sufficiently a sailor to take much interest in them."

"Humph! humph! you are a soldier, perhaps?"

"I hope to be so one day or other: I am not yet!"

"Not yet! humph! there are opportunities in plenty for those who wish it; what is your profession, then, and what do you know best?"

I was certainly not charmed with the honest inquisitiveness of the stranger. "Sir," said I, "Sir, my profession is to answer no questions; and what I know best is—to hold my tongue!"

The stranger laughed out. "Well, well, that is what all Englishmen know best!" said he; "but don't be offended: if you will come home with me I will give you a glass of brandy!"

"I am very much obliged for the offer, but business obliges me to decline it; good morning, Sir."

"Good morning!" answered the man, slightly moving his hat, in answer to my salutation.

We separated, as I thought; but I was mistaken. As ill-luck would have it, I lost my way in endeavouring to return home. While I was interrogating a French artisan, who seemed in a prodigious hurry, up comes my inquisitive friend in green again. "Ha! you have lost your way: I can put you into it better than any man in Petersburg!"

I thought it right to accept the offer; and we moved on side by side. I now looked pretty attentively at my gentleman. I have said that he was tall and stout; he was also remarkably well-built, and had a kind of seaman's ease and freedom of gait and manner. His countenance was very peculiar; short, firm, and strongly marked; a small, but thick mustachio covered his upper lip; the rest of his face was shaved. His mouth was wide, but closed, when silent, with that expression of iron resolution which no feature /but/ the mouth can convey. His eyes were large, well-opened, and rather stern; and when, which was often in the course of conversation, he pushed back his hat from his forehead, the motion developed two strong deep wrinkles between the eyebrows, which might be indicative either of thought or of irascibility,—perhaps of both. He spoke quickly, and with a little occasional embarrassment of voice, which, however, never communicated itself to his manner. He seemed, indeed, to have a perfect acquaintance with the mazes of the growing city; and, every now and then, stopped to say when such a house was built, whither such a street was to lead, etc. As each of these details betrayed some great triumph over natural obstacles and sometimes over national prejudice, I could not help dropping a few enthusiastic expressions in praise of the genius of the Czar. The man's eyes sparkled as he heard them.

"It is easy to see," said I, "that you sympathize with me, and that the admiration of this great man is not confined to Englishmen. How little in comparison seem all other monarchs!—they ruin kingdoms; the Czar creates one. The whole history of the world does not afford an instance of triumphs so vast, so important, so glorious as his have been. How his subjects should adore him!"

"No," said the stranger, with an altered and thoughtful manner, "it is not his subjects, but /their posterity/, that will appreciate his motives, and forgive him for wishing Russia to be an empire of MEN. The present generation may sometimes be laughed, sometimes forced, out of their more barbarous habits and brute-like customs, but they cannot be reasoned out of them; and they don't love the man who attempts to do it. Why, Sir, I question whether Ivan IV., who used to butcher the dogs between prayers for an occupation, and between meals for an appetite, I question whether his memory is not to the full as much loved as the living Czar. I know, at least, that whenever the latter attempts a reform, the good Muscovites shrug up their shoulders, and mutter, 'We did not do these things in the good old days of Ivan IV.'"

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