

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

ZICCI – COMPLETE

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
Zicci — Complete

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=35009561

Zicci: A Tale — Complete:

Содержание

BOOK I	4
CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	13
CHAPTER III	24
CHAPTER IV	29
CHAPTER V	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	37

Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton

Zicci: A Tale — Complete

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

In the gardens at Naples, one summer evening in the last century, some four or five gentlemen were seated under a tree drinking their sherbet and listening, in the intervals of conversation, to the music which enlivened that gay and favorite resort of an indolent population. One of this little party was a young Englishman who had been the life of the whole group, but who for the last few moments had sunk into a gloomy and abstracted revery. One of his countrymen observed this sudden gloom, and tapping him on the back, said, “Glyndon, why, what ails you? Are you ill? You have grown quite pale; you tremble: is it a sudden chill? You had better go home; these Italian nights are often dangerous to our English constitutions.”

“No, I am well now,—it was but a passing shudder; I cannot account for it myself.”

A man apparently of about thirty years of age, and of a mien and countenance strikingly superior to those around him, turned

abruptly, and looked steadfastly at Glyndon.

“I think I understand what you mean,” said he,—“and perhaps,” he added, with a grave smile, “I could explain it better than yourself.” Here, turning to the others, he added, “You must often have felt, gentlemen,—each and all of you,—especially when sitting alone at night, a strange and unaccountable sensation of coldness and awe creep over you; your blood curdles, and the heart stands still; the limbs shiver, the hair bristles; you are afraid to look up, to turn your eyes to the darker corners of the room; you have a horrible fancy that something unearthly is at hand. Presently the whole spell, if I may so call it, passes away, and you are ready to laugh at your own weakness. Have you not often felt what I have thus imperfectly described? If so, you can understand what our young friend has just experienced, even amidst the delights of this magical scene, and amidst the balmy whispers of a July night.”

“Sir,” replied Glyndon, evidently much surprised, “you have defined exactly the nature of that shudder which came over me. But how could my manner be so faithful an index to my impressions?”

“I know the signs of the visitation,” returned the stranger, gravely; “they are not to be mistaken by one of my experience.”

All the gentlemen present then declared that they could comprehend, and had felt, what the stranger had described. “According to one of our national superstitions,” said Merton, the Englishman who had first addressed Glyndon, “the moment

you so feel your blood creep, and your hair stand on end, some one is walking over the spot which shall be your grave.”

“There are in all lands different superstitions to account for so common an occurrence,” replied the stranger; “one sect among the Arabians hold that at that instant God is deciding the hour either of your death or that of some one dear to you. The African savage, whose imagination is darkened by the hideous rites of his gloomy idolatry, believes that the Evil Spirit is pulling you towards him by the hair. So do the Grotesque and the Terrible mingle with each other.”

“It is evidently a mere physical accident,—a derangement of the stomach; a chill of the blood,” said a young Neapolitan.

“Then why is it always coupled, in all nations, with some superstitious presentiment or terror,—some connection between the material frame and the supposed world without us?” asked the stranger. “For my part, I think—”

“What do you think, sir?” asked Glyndon, curiously.

“I think,” continued the stranger, “that it is the repugnance and horror of that which is human about us to something indeed invisible, but antipathetic to our own nature, and from a knowledge of which we are happily secured by the imperfection of our senses.”

“You are a believer in spirits, then?” asked Merton, with an incredulous smile.

“Nay, I said not so. I can form no notion of a spirit, as the metaphysicians do, and certainly have no fear of one; but there

may be forms of matter as invisible and impalpable to us as the animalculae to which I have compared them. The monster that lives and dies in a drop of water, carnivorous, insatiable, subsisting on the creatures minuter than himself, is not less deadly in his wrath, less ferocious in his nature, than the tiger of the desert. There may be things around us malignant and hostile to men, if Providence had not placed a wall between them and us, merely by different modifications of matter.”

“And could that wall never be removed?” asked young Glyndon, abruptly. “Are the traditions of sorcerer and wizard, universal and immemorial as they are, merely fables?”

“Perhaps yes; perhaps no,” answered the stranger, indifferently. “But who, in an age in which the reason has chosen its proper bounds, would be mad enough to break the partition that divides him from the boa and the lion, to repine at and rebel against the law of nature which confines the shark to the great deep? Enough of these idle speculations.”

Here the stranger rose, summoned the attendant, paid for his sherbet, and, bowing slightly to the company, soon disappeared among the trees.

“Who is that gentleman?” asked Glyndon, eagerly.

The rest looked at each other, without replying, for some moments.

“I never saw him before,” said Merton, at last.

“Nor I.”

“Nor I.”

“I have met him often,” said the Neapolitan, who was named Count Cetoxa; “it was, if you remember, as my companion that he joined you. He has been some months at Naples; he is very rich,—indeed enormously so. Our acquaintance commenced in a strange way.”

“How was it?”

“I had been playing at a public gaming-house, and had lost considerably. I rose from the table, resolved no longer to tempt Fortune, when this gentleman, who had hitherto been a spectator, laying his hand on my arm, said with politeness, ‘Sir, I see you enjoy play,—I dislike it; but I yet wish to have some interest in what is going on. Will you play this sum for me? The risk is mine,—the half-profits yours.’ I was startled, as you may suppose, at such an address; but the stranger had an air and tone with him it was impossible to resist. Besides, I was burning to recover my losses, and should not have risen had I had any money left about me. I told him I would accept his offer, provided we shared the risk as well as profits. ‘As you will,’ said he, smiling, ‘we need have no scruple, for you will be sure to win.’ I sat down, the stranger stood behind me; my luck rose, I invariably won. In fact, I rose from the table a rich man.”

“There can be no foul play at the public tables, especially when foul play would make against the bank.”

“Certainly not,” replied the count. “But our good fortune was indeed marvellous,—so extraordinary that a Sicilian (the Sicilians are all ill-bred, bad-tempered fellows) grew angry and

insolent. ‘Sir,’ said he, turning to my new friend, ‘you have no business to stand so near to the table. I do not understand this; you have not acted fairly.’ The spectator replied, with great composure, that he had done nothing against the rules; that he was very sorry that one man could not win without another man losing; and that he could not act unfairly even if disposed to do so. The Sicilian took the stranger’s mildness for apprehension, —blustered more loudly, and at length fairly challenged him. ‘I never seek a quarrel, and I never shun a danger,’ returned my partner; and six or seven of us adjourned to the garden behind the house. I was of course my partner’s second. He took me aside. ‘This man will die,’ said he; ‘see that he is buried privately in the church of St. Januario, by the side of his father.’

“Did you know his family?” I asked with great surprise. He made no answer, but drew his sword and walked deliberately to the spot we had selected. The Sicilian was a renowned swordsman; nevertheless, in the third pass he was run through the body. I went up to him; he could scarcely speak. ‘Have you any request to make,—any affairs to settle?’ He shook his head. ‘Where would you wish to be interred?’ He pointed towards the Sicilian coast. ‘What!’ said I, in surprise, ‘not by the side of your father?’ As I spoke, his face altered terribly, he uttered a piercing shriek; the blood gushed from his mouth, and he fell dead. The most strange part of the story is to come. We buried him in the church of St. Januario. In doing so, we took up his father’s coffin; the lid came off in moving it, and the skeleton

was visible. In the hollow of the skull we found a very slender wire of sharp steel; this caused great surprise and inquiry. The father, who was rich and a miser, had died suddenly and been buried in haste, owing, it was said, to the heat of the weather. Suspicion once awakened, the examination became minute. The old man's servant was questioned, and at last confessed that the son had murdered the sire. The contrivance was ingenious; the wire was so slender that it pierced to the brain and drew but one drop of blood, which the gray hairs concealed. The accomplice was executed."

"And this stranger, did he give evidence? Did he account for —"

"No," interrupted the count, "he declared that he had by accident visited the church that morning; that he had observed the tombstone of the Count Salvolio; that his guide had told him the count's son was in Naples,—a spendthrift and a gambler. While we were at play, he had heard the count mentioned by name at the table; and when the challenge was given and accepted, it had occurred to him to name the place of burial, by an instinct he could not account for."

"A very lame story," said Merton.

"Yes, but we Italians are superstitious. The alleged instinct was regarded as the whisper of Providence; the stranger became an object of universal interest and curiosity. His wealth, his manner of living, his extraordinary personal beauty, have assisted also to make him the rage."

“What is his name?” asked Glyndon.

“Zicci. Signor Zicci.”

“Is it not an Italian name? He speaks English like a native.”

“So he does French and German, as well as Italian, to my knowledge. But he declares himself a Corsican by birth, though I cannot hear of any eminent Corsican family of that name. However, what matters his birth or parentage? He is rich, generous, and the best swordsman I ever saw in my life. Who would affront him?”

“Not I, certainly,” said Merton, rising. “Come, Glyndon, shall we seek our hotel? It is almost daylight. Adieu, signor.”

“What think you of this story?” said Glyndon as the young men walked homeward.

“Why, it is very clear that this Zicci is some impostor, some clever rogue; and the Neapolitan shares booty, and puffs him off with all the hackneyed charlatanism of the marvellous. An unknown adventurer gets into society by being made an object of awe and curiosity; he is devilish handsome; and the women are quite content to receive him without any other recommendation than his own face and Cetoxa’s fables.”

“I cannot agree with you. Cetoxa, though a gambler and a rake, is a nobleman of birth and high repute for courage and honor. Besides, this stranger, with his grand features and lofty air,—so calm, so unobtrusive,—has nothing in common with the forward garrulity of an impostor.”

“My dear Glyndon, pardon me, but you have not yet acquired

any knowledge of the world; the stranger makes the best of a fine person, and his grand air is but a trick of the trade. But to change the subject: how gets on the love affair?"

"Oh! Isabel could not see me to-night. The old woman gave me a note of excuse."

"You must not marry her; what would they all say at home?"

"Let us enjoy the present," said Glyndon, with vivacity; "we are young, rich, good-looking: let us not think of to-morrow."

"Bravo, Glyndon! Here we are at the hotel. Sleep sound, and don't dream of Signor Zicci."

CHAPTER II

Clarence Glyndon was a young man of small but independent fortune. He had, early in life, evinced considerable promise in the art of painting, and rather from enthusiasm than the want of a profession, he had resolved to devote himself to a career which in England has been seldom entered upon by persons who can live on their own means. Without being a poet, Glyndon had also manifested a graceful faculty for verse, which had contributed to win his entry into society above his birth. Spoiled and flattered from his youth upward, his natural talents were in some measure relaxed by indolence and that worldly and selfish habit of thought which frivolous companionship often engenders, and which is withering alike to stern virtue and high genius. The luxuriance of his fancy was unabated; but the affections, which are the life of fancy, had grown languid and inactive. His youth, his vanity, and a restless daring and thirst of adventure had from time to time involved him in dangers and dilemmas, out of which, of late, he had always extricated himself with the ingenious felicity of a clever head and cool heart. He had left England for Rome with the avowed purpose and sincere resolution of studying the divine masterpieces of art; but pleasure had soon allured him from ambition, and he quitted the gloomy palaces of Rome for the gay shores and animated revelries of Naples. Here he had fallen in love—deeply in love, as he said and thought—with a

young person celebrated at Naples, Isabel di Pisani. She was the only daughter of an Italian by an English mother. The father had known better days; in his prosperity he had travelled, and won in England the affections of a lady of some fortune. He had been induced to speculate; he lost his all; he settled at Naples, and taught languages and music. His wife died when Isabel, christened from her mother, was ten years old. At sixteen she came out on the stage; two years afterwards her father departed this life, and Isabel was an orphan.

Glyndon, a man of pleasure and a regular attendant at the theatre, had remarked the young actress behind the scenes; he fell in love with her, and he told her so. The girl listened to him, perhaps from vanity, perhaps from ambition, perhaps from coquetry; she listened, and allowed but few stolen interviews, in which she permitted no favor to the Englishman it was one reason why he loved her so much.

The day following that on which our story opens, Glyndon was riding alone by the shores of the Neapolitan sea, on the other side of the Cavern of Pausilippo. It was past noon; the sun had lost its early fervor, and a cool breeze sprang voluptuously from the sparkling sea. Bending over a fragment of stone near the roadside, he perceived the form of a man; and when he approached he recognized Zicci.

The Englishman saluted him courteously. "Have you discovered some antique?" said he, with a smile; "they are as common as pebbles on this road."

“No,” replied Zicci; “it was but one of those antiques that have their date, indeed, from the beginning of the world, but which Nature eternally withers and renews.” So saying, he showed Glyndon a small herb with a pale blue flower, and then placed it carefully in his bosom.

“You are an herbalist?”

“I am.”

“It is, I am told, a study full of interest.”

“To those who understand it, doubtless. But,” continued Zicci, looking up with a slight and cold smile, “why do you linger on your way to converse with me on matters in which you neither have knowledge nor desire to obtain it? I read your heart, young Englishman: your curiosity is excited; you wish to know me, and not this humble herb. Pass on; your desire never can be satisfied.”

“You have not the politeness of your countrymen,” said Glyndon, somewhat discomposed. “Suppose I were desirous to cultivate your acquaintance, why should you reject my advances?”

“I reject no man’s advances,” answered Zicci. “I must know them, if they so desire; but me, in return, they can never comprehend. If you ask my acquaintance, it is yours; but I would warn you to shun me.”

“And why are you then so dangerous?”

“Some have found me so; if I were to predict your fortune by the vain calculations of the astrologer, I should tell you, in their despicable jargon, that my planet sat darkly in your house of life.

Cross me not, if you can avoid it. I warn you now for the first time and last.”

“You despise the astrologers, yet you utter a jargon as mysterious as theirs. I neither gamble nor quarrel: why then should I fear you?”

“As you will; I have done.”

“Let me speak frankly: your conversation last night interested and amused me.”

“I know it; minds like yours are attracted by mystery.”

Glyndon was piqued at those words, though in the tone in which they were spoken there was no contempt.

“I see you do not consider me worthy of your friendship be it so. Good day.”

Zicci coldly replied to the salutation, and as the Englishman rode on, returned to his botanical employment.

The same night Glyndon went, as usual, to the theatre. He was standing behind the scenes watching Isabel, who was on the stage in one of her most brilliant parts. The house resounded with applause. Glyndon was transported with a young man’s passion and a young man’s pride. “This glorious creature,” thought he, “may yet be mine.”

He felt, while thus rapt in delicious revery, a slight touch upon his shoulder; he turned, and beheld Zicci. “You are in danger,” said the latter. “Do not walk home to-night; or if you do, go not alone.”

Before Glyndon recovered from his surprise, Zicci

disappeared; and when the Englishman saw him again, he was in the box of one of the Neapolitan ministers, where Glyndon could not follow him.

Isabel now left the stage, and Glyndon accosted her with impassioned gallantry. The actress was surprisingly beautiful; of fair complexion and golden hair, her countenance was relieved from the tame and gentle loveliness which the Italians suppose to be the characteristics of English beauty, by the contrast of dark eyes and lashes, by a forehead of great height, to which the dark outline of the eyebrows gave some thing of majesty and command. In spite of the slightness of virgin youth, her proportions had the nobleness, blent with the delicacy, that belongs to the masterpieces of ancient sculpture; and there was a conscious pride in her step, and in the swanlike bend of her stately head, as she turned with an evident impatience from the address of her lover. Taking aside an old woman, who was her constant and confidential attendant at the theatre, she said, in an earnest whisper,—

“Oh, Gionetta, he is here again! I have seen him again! And again, he alone of the whole theatre withholds from me his applause. He scarcely seems to notice me; his indifference mortifies me to the soul,—I could weep for rage and sorrow.”

“Which is he, my darling?” said the old woman, with fondness in her voice. “He must be dull,—not worth thy thoughts.”

The actress drew Gionetta nearer to the stage, and pointed out to her a man in one of the nearer boxes, conspicuous amongst all

else by the simplicity of his dress and the extraordinary beauty of his features.

“Not worth a thought, Gionetta,” repeated Isabel,—“not worth a thought! Saw you ever one so noble, so godlike?”

“By the Holy Mother!” answered Gionetta, “he is a proper man, and has the air of a prince.”

The prompter summoned the Signora Pisani. “Find out his name, Gionetta,” said she, sweeping on to the stage, and passing by Glyndon, who gazed at her with a look of sorrowful reproach.

The scene on which the actress now entered was that of the final catastrophe, wherein all her remarkable powers of voice and art were pre-eminently called forth. The house hung on every word with breathless worship, but the eyes of Isabel sought only those of one calm and unmoved spectator; she exerted herself as if inspired. The stranger listened, and observed her with an attentive gaze, but no approval escaped his lips, no emotion changed the expression of his cold and half-disdainful aspect. Isabel, who was in the character of a jealous and abandoned mistress, never felt so acutely the part she played. Her tears were truthful; her passion that of nature: it was almost too terrible to behold. She was borne from the stage, exhausted and insensible, amidst such a tempest of admiring rapture as Continental audiences alone can raise. The crowd stood up, handkerchiefs waved, garlands and flowers were thrown on the stage, men wiped their eyes, and women sobbed aloud.

“By heavens!” said a Neapolitan of great rank, “she has fired

me beyond endurance. To-night, this very night, she shall be mine! You have arranged all, Mascari?"

"All, signor. And if this young Englishman should accompany her home?"

"The presuming barbarian! At all events let him bleed for his folly. I hear that she admits him to secret interviews. I will have no rival."

"But an Englishman! There is always a search after the bodies of the English."

"Fool! Is not the sea deep enough, or the earth secret enough, to hide one dead man? Our ruffians are silent as the grave itself. And I,—who would dare to suspect, to arraign, the Prince di—? See to it,—let him be watched, and the fitting occasion taken. I trust him to you,—robbers murder him; you understand: the country swarms with them. Plunder and strip him. Take three men; the rest shall be my escort."

Mascari shrugged his shoulders, and bowed submissively. Meanwhile Glyndon besought Isabel, who recovered but slowly, to return home in his carriage.¹ She had done so once or twice before, though she had never permitted him to accompany her. This time she refused, and with some petulance. Glyndon, offended, was retiring sullenly, when Gionetta stopped him. "Stay, signor," said she, coaxingly, "the dear signora is not well: do not be angry with her; I will make her accept your offer."

¹ At that time in Naples carriages were both cheaper to hire, and more necessary for strangers than they are now.

Glyndon stayed, and after a few moments spent in expostulation on the part of Gionetta, and resistance on that of Isabel, the offer was accepted; the actress, with a mixture of naivete and coquetry, gave her handy to her lover, who kissed it with delight. Gionetta and her charge entered the carriage, and Glyndon was left at the door of the theatre, to return home on foot. The mysterious warning of Zicci then suddenly occurred to him; he had forgotten it in the interest of his lover's quarrel with Isabel. He thought it now advisable to guard against danger foretold by lips so mysterious; he looked round for some one he knew. The theatre was disgorging its crowds, who hustled and jostled and pressed upon him; but he recognized no familiar countenances. While pausing irresolute, he heard Merton's voice calling on him, and to his great relief discovered his friend making his way through the throng.

"I have secured you a place in the Count Cetoxa's carriage," said he. "Come along, he is waiting for us."

"How kind in you! How did you find me out?"

"I met Zicci in the passage. 'Your friend is at the door of the theatre,' said he; 'do not let him go home alone to-night the streets of Naples are not always safe.' I immediately remembered that some of the Calabrian bravos had been busy within the city the last few weeks, and asked Cetoxa, who was with me, to accompany you."

Further explanation was forbidden, for they now joined the count. As Glyndon entered the carriage and drew up the glass,

he saw four men standing apart by the pavement, who seemed to eye him with attention.

“Cospetto!” cried one; “ecco Inglese!” Glyndon imperfectly heard the exclamation as the carriage drove on. He reached home in safety.

“Have you discovered who he is?” asked the actress, as she was now alone in the carriage with Gionetta.

“Yes, he is the celebrated Signor Zicci, about whom the court has run mad. They say he is so rich,—oh, so much richer than any of the Inglese! But a bird in the hand, my angel, is better than—”

“Cease,” interrupted the young actress. “Zicci! Speak of the Englishman no more.”

The carriage was now entering that more lonely and remote part of the city in which Isabel’s house was situated, when it suddenly stopped.

Gionetta, in alarm, thrust her head out of window, and perceived by the pale light of the moon that the driver, torn from his seat, was already pinioned in the arms of two men; the next moment the door was opened violently, and a tall figure, masked and mantled, appeared.

“Fear not, fairest Pisani,” said he, gently, “no ill shall befall you.” As he spoke, he wound his arms round the form of the fair actress, and endeavored to lift her from the carriage. But the Signora Pisani was not an ordinary person; she had been before exposed to all the dangers to which the beauty of the low-born was subjected amongst a lawless and profligate nobility. She

thrust back the assailant with a power that surprised him, and in the next moment the blade of a dagger gleamed before his eyes. "Touch me," said she, drawing herself to the farther end of the carriage, "and I strike!"

The mask drew back.

"By the body of Bacchus, a bold spirit!" said he, half laughing and half alarmed. "Here, Luigi, Giovanni! disarm and seize her. Harm her not."

The mask retired from the door, and another and yet taller form presented itself. "Be calm, Isabel di Pisani," said he, in a low voice; "with me you are indeed safe!" He lifted his mask as he spoke, and showed the noble features of Zicci. "Be calm, be hushed; I can save you." He vanished, leaving Isabel lost in surprise, agitation, and delight. There were in all nine masks: two were engaged with the driver; one stood at the head of the carriage-horses; a third guarded the well-trained steeds of the party; three others, besides Zicci and the one who had first accosted Isabel, stood apart by a carriage drawn to the side of the road. To these Zicci motioned: they advanced; he pointed towards the first mask, who was in fact the Prince di—, and to his unspeakable astonishment the Prince was suddenly seized from behind.

"Treason," he cried, "treason among my own men! What means this?"

"Place him in his carriage. If he resist, shoot him!" said Zicci, calmly.

He approached the men who had detained the coachman. "You are outnumbered and outwitted," said he. "Join your lord; you are three men,—we six, armed to the teeth. Thank our mercy that we spare your lives. Go!"

The men gave way, dismayed. The driver remounted. "Cut the traces of their carriage and the bridles of their horses," said Zicci, as he entered the vehicle containing Isabel, and which now drove on rapidly, leaving the discomfited ravisher in a state of rage and stupor impossible to describe.

"Allow me to explain this mystery to you," said Zicci. "I discovered the plot against you,—no matter how. I frustrated it thus: the head of this design is a nobleman who has long persecuted you in vain. He and two of his creatures watched you from the entrance of the theatre, having directed six others to await him on the spot where you were attacked; myself and five of my servants supplied their place, and were mistaken for his own followers. I had previously ridden alone to the spot where the men were waiting, and informed them that their master would not require their services that night. They believed me, for I showed them his signet-ring, and accordingly dispersed; I then joined my own band, whom I had left in the rear. You know all. We are at your door."

CHAPTER III

Zicci was left alone with the young Italian. She had thrown aside her cloak and head-gear; her hair, somewhat dishevelled, fell down her ivory neck, which the dress partially displayed; she seemed, as she sat in that low and humble chamber, a very vision of light and glory.

Zicci gazed at her with an admiration mingled with compassion; he muttered a few words to himself, and then addressed her aloud:—

“Isabel di Pisani, I have saved you from a great peril,—not from dishonor only, but perhaps from death. The Prince di —, under the weak government of a royal child and a venal administration, is a man above the law. He is capable of every crime; but amongst his passions he has such prudence as belongs to ambition: if you were not to reconcile yourself to your shame, you would never enter the world again to tell your tale. The ravisher has no heart for repentance, but he has a hand that can murder. I have saved thee, Isabel di Pisani. Perhaps you would ask me wherefore?” Zicci paused, and smiled mournfully as he added: “My life is not that of others, but I am still human,—I know pity; and more, Isabel, I can feel gratitude for affection. You love me; it was my fate to fascinate your eye, to arouse your vanity, to inflame your imagination. It was to warn you from this folly that I consented for a few minutes to become your guest.

The Englishman, Glyndon, loves thee well,—better than I can ever love; he may wed thee, he may bear thee to his own free and happy land,—the land of thy mother's kin. Forget me, teach thyself to return and to deserve his love; and I tell thee that thou wilt be honored and be happy.”

Isabel listened with silent wonder and deep blushes to this strange address; and when the voice ceased, she covered her face with her hands and wept.

Zicci rose. “I have fulfilled my duty to you, and I depart. Remember that you are still in danger from the prince; be wary, and be cautious. Your best precaution is in flight; farewell.”

“Oh, do not leave me yet! You have read a secret of which I myself was scarcely conscious: you despise me,—you, my preserver! Ah! do not misjudge me; I am better, higher than I seem. Since I saw thee I have been a new being.” The poor girl clasped her hands passionately as she spoke, and her tears streamed down her cheeks.

“What would you that I should answer?” said Zicci, pausing, but with a cold severity in his eye.

“Say that you do not despise,—say that you do not think me light and shameless.”

“Willingly, Isabel. I know your heart and your history you are capable of great virtues; you have the seeds of a rare and powerful genius. You may pass through the brief period of your human life with a proud step and a cheerful heart, if you listen to my advice. You have been neglected from your childhood;

you have been thrown among nations at once frivolous and coarse; your nobler dispositions, your higher qualities, are not developed. You were pleased with the admiration of Glyndon; you thought that the passionate stranger might marry you, while others had only uttered the vows that dishonor. Poor child, it was the instinctive desire of right within thee that made thee listen to him; and if my fatal shadow had not crossed thy path, thou wouldst have loved him well enough, at least, for content. Return to that hope, and nurse again that innocent affection: this is my answer to thee. Art thou contented?"

"No! ah, no! Severe as thou art, I love better to hear thee than, than—What am I saying? And now you have saved me, I shall pray for you, bless you, think of you; and am I never to see you more? Alas! the moment you leave me, danger and dread will darken round me. Let me be your servant, your slave; with you I should have no fear."

A dark shade fell over Zicci's brow; he looked from the ground, on which his eyes had rested while she spoke, upon the earnest and imploring face of the beautiful creature that now knelt before him, with all the passions of an ardent and pure, but wholly untutored and half-savage, nature speaking from the tearful eyes and trembling lips. He looked at her with an aspect she could not interpret; in his eyes were kindness, sorrow, and even something, she thought, of love: yet the brow frowned, and the lip was stern.

"It is in vain that we struggle with our doom," said he, calmly;

“listen to me yet. I am a man, Isabel, in whom there are some good impulses yet left, but whose life is, on the whole, devoted to a systematic and selfish desire to enjoy whatever life can afford. To me it is given to warn: the warning neglected, I interfere no more; I leave her victories to that Fate that I cannot baffle of her prey. You do not understand me; no matter: what I am now about to say will be more easy to comprehend. I tell thee to tear from thy heart all thought of me: thou hast yet the power. If thou wilt not obey me, thou must reap the seeds that thou wilt sow. Glyndon, if thou acceptest his homage, will love thee throughout life; I, too, can love thee.”

“You, you—”

“But with a lukewarm and selfish love, and one that cannot last. Thou wilt be a flower in my path; I inhale thy sweetness and pass on, caring not what wind shall sup thee, or what step shall tread thee to the dust. Which is the love thou wouldst prefer?”

“But do you, can you love me,—you, you, Zicci,—even for an hour? Say it again.”

“Yes, Isabel; I am not dead to beauty, and yours is that rarely given to the daughters of men. Yes, Isabel, I could love thee!”

Isabel uttered a cry of joy, seized his hand, and kissed it through burning and impassioned tears. Zicci raised her in his arms and imprinted one kiss upon her forehead.

“Do not deceive thyself,” he said; “consider well. I tell thee again that my love is subjected to the certain curse of change. For my part, I shall seek thee no more. Thy fate shall be thine own,

and not mine. For the rest, fear not the Prince di—. At present, I can save thee from every harm.” With these words he withdrew himself from her embrace, and had gained the outer door just as Gionetta came from the kitchen with her hands full of such cheer as she had managed to collect together. Zicci laid his hand on the old woman’s arm.

“Signor Glyndon,” said he, “loves Isabel; he may wed her. You love your mistress: plead for him. Disabuse her, if you can, of any caprice for me. I am a bird ever on the wing.” He dropped a purse, heavy with gold, into Gionetta’s bosom, and was gone.

CHAPTER IV

The palace of Zicci was among the noblest in Naples. It still stands, though ruined and dismantled, in one of those antique streets from which the old races of the Norman and the Spaniard have long since vanished.

He ascended the vast staircase, and entered the rooms reserved for his private hours. They were no wise remarkable except for their luxury and splendor, and the absence of what men so learned as Zicci was reputed, generally prize, namely, books. Zicci seemed to know everything that books can teach; yet of books themselves he spoke and thought with the most profound contempt.

He threw himself on a sofa, and dismissed his attendants for the night; and here it may be observed that Zicci had no one servant who knew anything of his origin, birth, or history. Some of his attendants he had brought with him from other cities; the rest he had engaged at Naples. He hired those only whom wealth can make subservient. His expenditure was most lavish, his generosity, regal; but his orders were ever given as those of a general to his army. The least disobedience, the least hesitation, and the offender was at once dismissed. He was a man who sought tools, and never made confidants.

Zicci remained for a considerable time motionless and thoughtful. The hand of the clock before him pointed to the first

hour of morning. The solemn voice of the timepiece aroused him from his reverie.

“One sand more out of the mighty hour-glass,” said he, rising; “one hour nearer to the last! I am weary of humanity. I will enter into one of the countless worlds around me.” He lifted the arras that clothed the walls, and touching a strong iron door (then made visible) with a minute key which he wore in a ring, passed into an inner apartment lighted by a single lamp of extraordinary lustre. The room was small; a few phials and some dried herbs were ranged in shelves on the wall, which was hung with snow-white cloth of coarse texture. From the shelves Zicci selected one of the phials, and poured the contents into a crystal cup. The liquid was colorless, and sparkled rapidly up in bubbles of light; it almost seemed to evaporate ere it reached his lips. But when the strange beverage was quaffed, a sudden change was visible in the countenance of Zicci: his beauty became yet more dazzling, his eyes shone with intense fire, and his form seemed to grow more youthful and ethereal.

CHAPTER V

The next day, Glyndon bent his steps towards Zicci's palace. The young man's imagination, naturally inflammable, was singularly excited by the little he had seen and heard of this strange being; a spell he could neither master nor account for, attracted him towards the stranger. Zicci's power seemed mysterious and great, his motives kindly and benevolent, yet his manners chilling and repellent. Why at one moment reject Glyndon's acquaintance, at another save him from danger? How had Zicci thus acquired the knowledge of enemies unknown to Glyndon himself? His interest was deeply roused, his gratitude appealed to; he resolved to make another effort to conciliate Zicci.

The signor was at home, and Glyndon was admitted into a lofty saloon, where in a few moments Zicci joined him.

"I am come to thank you for your warning last night," said he, "and to entreat you to complete my obligation by informing me of the quarter to which I may look for enmity and peril."

"You are a gallant, Mr. Glyndon," said Zicci, with a smile; "and do you know so little of the South as not to be aware that gallants have always rivals?"

"Are you serious?" said Glyndon, coloring.

"Most serious. You love Isabel di Pisani; you have for rival one of the most powerful and relentless of the Neapolitan princes.

Your danger is indeed great.”

“But, pardon me, how came it known to you?”

“I give no account of myself to mortal man,” replied Zicci, haughtily; “and to me it matters not whether you regard or scorn my warning.”

“Well, if I may not question you, be it so; but at least advise me what to do.”

“You will not follow my advice.”

“You wrong me! Why?”

“Because you are constitutionally brave; you are fond of excitement and mystery; you like to be the hero of a romance. I should advise you to leave Naples, and you will disdain to do so while Naples contains a foe to shun or a mistress to pursue.”

“You are right,” said the young Englishman, with energy; “and you cannot reproach me for such a resolution.”

“No, there is another course left to you. Do you love Isabel di Pisani truly and fervently? If so, marry her, and take a bride to your native land.”

“Nay,” answered Glyndon, embarrassed. “Isabel is not of my rank; her character is strange and self-willed; her education neglected. I am enslaved by her beauty, but I cannot wed her.”

Zicci frowned.

“Your love, then, is but selfish lust; and by that love you will be betrayed. Young man, Destiny is less inexorable than it appears. The resources of the great Ruler of the Universe are not so scanty and so stern as to deny to men the divine privilege of Free Will;

all of us can carve out our own way, and God can make our very contradictions harmonize with His solemn ends. You have before you an option. Honorable and generous love may even now work out your happiness and effect your escape; a frantic and interested passion will but lead you to misery and doom.”

“Do you pretend, then, to read the Future?”

“I have said all that it pleases me to utter.”

“While you assume the moralist to me, Signor Zicci,” said Glyndon, with a smile, “if report says true you do not yourself reject the allurements of unfettered love.”

“If it were necessary that practice square with precept,” said Zicci, with a sneer, “our pulpits would be empty. Do you think it matters, in the great aggregate of human destinies, what one man’s conduct may be? Nothing,—not a grain of dust; but it matters much what are the sentiments he propagates. His acts are limited and momentary; his sentiments may pervade the universe, and inspire generations till the day of doom. All our virtues, all our laws, are drawn from books and maxims, which are sentiments, not from deeds. Our opinions, young Englishman, are the angel part of us; our acts the earthly.”

“You have reflected deeply, for an Italian,” said Glyndon.

“Who told you I was an Italian?”

“Are you not of Corsica?”

“Tush!” said Zicci, impatiently turning away. Then, after a pause, he resumed, in a mild voice: “Glyndon, do you renounce Isabel di Pisani? Will you take three days to consider of what I

have said?"

"Renounce her,—never!"

"Then you will marry her?"

"Impossible."

"Be it so; she will then renounce you. I tell you that you have rivals."

"Yes, the Prince di—; but I do not fear him."

"You have another, whom you will fear more."

"And who is he?"

"Myself."

Glyndon turned pale, and started from his seat.

"You, Signor Zicci, you,—and you dare to tell me so?"

"Dare! Alas! you know there is nothing on earth left me to fear!"

These words were not uttered arrogantly, but in a tone of the most mournful dejection. Glyndon was enraged, confounded, and yet awed. However, he had a brave English heart within his breast, and he recovered himself quickly.

"Signor," said he, calmly, "I am not to be duped by these solemn phrases and these mystical sympathies. You may have power which I cannot comprehend or emulate, or you may be but a keen impostor."

"Well, sir, your logical position is not ill-taken; proceed."

"I mean then," continued Glyndon, resolutely, though somewhat disconcerted, "I mean you to understand, that, though I am not to be persuaded or compelled by a stranger to marry

Isabel di Pisani, I am not the less determined never tamely to yield her to another.”

Zicci looked gravely at the young man, whose sparkling eyes and heightened color testified the spirit to support his words, and replied: “So bold! well, it becomes you. You have courage, then; I thought it. Perhaps it may be put to a sharper test than you dream of. But take my advice: wait three days, and tell me then if you will marry this young person.”

“But if you love her, why, why—”

“Why am I anxious that she should wed another? To save her from myself! Listen to me. That girl, humble and uneducated though she be, has in her the seeds of the most lofty qualities and virtues. She can be all to the man she loves,—all that man can desire in wife or mistress. Her soul, developed by affection, will elevate your own; it will influence your fortunes, exalt your destiny; you will become a great and prosperous man. If, on the contrary, she fall to me, I know not what may be her lot; but I know that few can pass the ordeal, and hitherto no woman has survived the struggle.”

As Zicci spoke, his face became livid, and there was something in his voice that froze the warm blood of his listener.

“What is this mystery which surrounds you?” exclaimed Glyndon, unable to repress his emotion. “Are you, in truth, different from other men? Have you passed the boundary of lawful knowledge? Are you, as some declare, a sorcerer, only a —”

“Hush!” interrupted Zicci, gently, and with a smile of singular but melancholy sweetness: “have you earned the right to ask me these questions? The clays of torture and persecution are over; and a man may live as he pleases, and talk as it suits him, without fear of the stake and the rack. Since I can defy persecution, pardon me if I do not succumb to curiosity.”

Glyndon blushed, and rose. In spite of his love for Isabel, and his natural terror of such a rival, he felt himself irresistibly drawn towards the very man he had most cause to suspect and dread. It was like the fascination of the basilisk. He held out his hand to Zicci, saying, “Well, then, if we are to be rivals, our swords must settle our rights; till then I would fain be friends.”

“Friends! Pardon me, I like you too well to give you my friendship. You know not what you ask.”

“Enigmas again!”

“Enigmas!” cried Zicci, passionately, “Nay: can you dare to solve them! Would you brave all that human heart can conceive of peril and of horror, so that you at last might stand separated from this visible universe side by side with me? When you can dare this, and when you are fit to dare it, I may give you my right hand and call you friend.”

“I could dare everything and all things for the attainment of superhuman wisdom,” said Glyndon; and his countenance was lighted up with wild and intense enthusiasm.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.