ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

DEVEREUX — VOLUME 03

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

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Bulwer-Lytton E. G.

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Содержание

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BOOK III

CHAPTER I

WHEREIN THE HISTORY MAKES GREAT PROGRESS AND IS MARKED BY ONE IMPORTANT EVENT IN HUMAN LIFE

SPINOZA is said to have loved, above all other amusements, to put flies into a spider's web; and the struggles of the imprisoned insects were wont to bear, in the eyes of this grave philosopher, so facetious and hilarious an appearance, that he would stand and laugh thereat until the tears "coursed one another down his innocent nose." Now it so happened that Spinoza, despite the general (and, in my most meek opinion, the just) condemnation of his theoretical tenets,[1] was, in character and in nature, according to the voices of all who knew him, an exceedingly kind, humane, and benevolent biped; and it doth, therefore, seem a little strange unto us grave, sober members of the unphilosophical Many, that the struggles and terrors of these little winged creatures should strike the good subtleist in a point of view so irresistibly ludicrous and delightful. But, for my part, I believe that that most imaginative and wild speculator beheld in the entangled flies nothing more than a living simile—an animated illustration—of his own beloved vision of Necessity; and that he is no more to be considered cruel for the complacency with which he gazed upon those agonized types of his system than is Lucan for dwelling with a poet's pleasure upon the many ingenious ways with which that Grand Inquisitor of Verse has contrived to vary the simple operation of dying. To the bard, the butchered soldier was only an epic ornament; to the philosopher, the murdered fly was only a metaphysical illustration. For, without being a fatalist, or a disciple of Baruch de Spinoza, I must confess that I cannot conceive a greater resemblance to our human and earthly state than the penal predicament of the devoted flies. Suddenly do we find ourselves plunged into that Vast Web,—the World; and even as the insect, when he first undergoeth a similar accident of necessity, standeth amazed and still, and only by little and little awakeneth to a full sense of his situation; so also at the first abashed and confounded, we remain on the mesh we are urged upon, ignorant, as yet, of the toils around us, and the sly, dark, immitigable foe that lieth in yonder nook, already feasting her imagination upon our destruction. Presently we revive, we stir, we flutter; and Fate, that foe—the old arch-spider, that hath no moderation in her maw —now fixeth one of her many eyes upon us, and giveth us a partial glimpse of her laidly and grim aspect. We pause in mute terror; we gaze upon the ugly spectre, so imperfectly beheld; the net ceases to tremble, and the wily enemy draws gently back into her nook. Now we begin to breathe again; we sound the strange footing on which we tread; we move tenderly along it, and again the grisly monster advances on us; again we pause; the foe retires not, but remains still, and surveyeth us; we see every step is accompanied with danger; we look round and above in despair; suddenly we feel within us a new impulse and a new power! we feel a vague sympathy with /that/ unknown region which spreads beyond this great net,—/that limitless beyond/ hath a mystic affinity with a part of our own frame;

[1] One ought, however, to be very cautious before one condemns a philosopher. The master's opinions are generally pure: it is the conclusions and corollaries of his disciples that "draw the honey forth that drives men mad." Schlegel seems to have studied Spinoza / de fonte/, and vindicates him very earnestly from the charges brought against him,—atheism, etc.—ED.

we unconsciously extend our wings (for the soul to us is as the wings to the fly!); we attempt to rise,—to soar above this perilous snare, from which we are unable to crawl. The old spider watcheth us in self-hugging quiet, and, looking up to our native air, we think,—now shall we escape thee. Out on it! We rise not a hair's breadth: we have the /wings/, it is true, but the /feet/ are fettered. We strive desperately again: the whole web vibrates with the effort; it will break beneath our strength. Not a jot of it! we cease; we are more entangled than ever! wings, feet, frame, the foul slime is over all! where shall we turn? every line of the web leads to the one den,—we know not,—we care not,—we grow blind, confused, lost. The eyes of our hideous foe gloat upon us; she whetteth her insatiate maw; she leapeth towards us; she fixeth her fangs upon us; and so endeth my parallel!

But what has this to do with my tale? Ay, Reader, that is thy question; and I will answer it by one of mine. When thou hearest a man moralize and preach of Fate, art thou not sure that he is going to tell thee of some one of his peculiar misfortunes? Sorrow loves a parable as much as mirth loves a jest. And thus already and from afar, I prepare thee, at the commencement of this, the third of these portions into which the history of my various and wild life will be divided, for that event with which I purpose that the said portion shall be concluded.

It is now three months after my entire recovery from my wounds, and I am married to Isora!—married,—yes, but /privately/ married, and the ceremony is as yet closely concealed. I will explain.

The moment Isora's anxiety for me led her across the threshold of my house it became necessary for her honour that our wedding should take place immediately on my recovery: so far I was decided on the measure; now for the method. During my illness, I received a long and most affectionate letter from Aubrey, who was then at Devereux Court: /so/ affectionate was the heart-breathing spirit of that letter, so steeped in all our old household remembrances and boyish feelings, that coupled as it was with a certain gloom when he spoke of himself and of worldly sins and trials, it brought tears to my eyes whenever I recurred to it; and many and many a time afterwards, when I thought his affections seemed estranged from me, I did recur to it to convince myself that I was mistaken. Shortly afterwards I received also a brief epistle from my uncle; it was as kind as usual, and it mentioned Aubrey's return to Devereux Court. "That unhappy boy," said Sir William, "is more than ever devoted to his religious duties; nor do I believe that any priest-ridden poor devil in the dark ages ever made such use of the scourge and the penance."

Now, I have before stated that my uncle would, I knew, be averse to my intended marriage; and on hearing that Aubrey was then with him, I resolved, in replying to his letter, to entreat the former to sound Sir William on the subject I had most at heart, and ascertain the exact nature and extent of the opposition I should have to encounter in the step I was resolved to take. By the same post I wrote to the good old knight in as artful a strain as I was able, dwelling at some length upon my passion, upon the high birth, as well as the numerous good qualities of the object, but mentioning not her name; and I added everything that I thought likely to enlist my uncle's kind and warm feelings on my behalf. These letters produced the following ones:—

FROM SIR WILLIAM DEVEREUX.

'Sdeath, nephew Morton,—but I won't scold thee, though thou deservest it. Let me see, thou art now scarce twenty, and thou talkest of marriage, which is the exclusive business of middle age, as familiarly as "girls of thirteen do of puppy-dogs." Marry!—go hang thyself rather. Marriage, my dear boy, is at the best a treacherous proceeding; and a friend—a true friend—will never counsel another to adopt it rashly. Look you: I have had experience in these matters; and, I think, the moment a woman is wedded some terrible revolution happens in her system; all her former good qualities vanish, /hey presto/! like eggs out of a conjuror's box; 'tis true they appear on t' other side of the box, the side turned to other people, but for the poor husband they are gone forever. Ods fish, Morton, go to! I tell thee again that I have had experience in these matters which thou never hast had, clever as thou thinkest thyself. If now it were a good marriage thou wert about to make; if thou wert going to wed power, and money, and places at court,—why, something might be said for thee. As it is, there

is no excuse—none. And I am astonished how a boy of thy sense could think of such nonsense. Birth, Morton, what the devil does that signify so long as it is birth in another country? A foreign damsel, and a Spanish girl, too, above all others! 'Sdeath, man, as if there was not quicksilver enough in the English women for you, you must make a mercurial exportation from Spain, must you! Why, Morton, Morton, the ladies in that country are proverbial. I tremble at the very thought of it. But as for my consent, I never will give it,—never; and though I threaten thee not with disinheritance and such like, yet I do ask something in return for the great affection I have always borne thee; and I make no doubt that thou wilt readily oblige me in such a trifle as giving up a mere Spanish donna. So think of her no more. If thou wantest to make love, there are ladies in plenty whom thou needest not to marry. And for my part, I thought that thou wert all in all with the Lady Hasselton: Heaven bless her pretty face! Now don't think I want to scold thee; and don't think thine old uncle harsh,—God knows he is not,—but my dear, dear boy, this is quite out of the question, and thou must let me hear no more about it. The gout cripples me so that I must leave off. Ever thine old uncle,

WILLIAM DEVEREUX.

P. S. Upon consideration, I think, my dear boy, that thou must want money, and thou art ever too sparing. Messrs. Child, or my goldsmiths in Aldersgate, have my orders to pay to thy hand's-writing whatever thou mayst desire; and I do hope that thou wilt now want nothing to make thee merry withal. Why dost thou not write a comedy? is it not the mode still?

LETTER FROM AUBREY DEVEREUX.

I have sounded my uncle, dearest Morton, according to your wishes; and I grieve to say that I have found him inexorable. He was very much hurt by your letter to him, and declared he should write to you forthwith upon the subject. I represented to him all that you have said upon the virtues of your intended bride; and I also insisted upon your clear judgment and strong sense upon most points being a sufficient surety for your prudence upon this. But you know the libertine opinions and the depreciating judgment of women entertained by my poor uncle; and he would, I believe, have been less displeased with the heinous crime of an illicit connection than the amiable weakness of an imprudent marriage—I might say of any marriage—until it was time to provide heirs to the estate.

Here Aubrey, in the most affectionate and earnest manner, broke off, to point out to me the extreme danger to my interests that it would be to disoblige my uncle; who, despite his general kindness, would, upon a disagreement on so tender a matter as his sore point, and his most cherished hobby, consider my disobedience as a personal affront. He also recalled to me all that my uncle had felt and done for me; and insisted, at all events, upon the absolute duty of my delaying, even though I should not break off, the intended measure. Upon these points he enlarged much and eloquently; and this part of his letter certainly left no cheering or comfortable impression upon my mind.

Now my good uncle knew as much of love as L. Mummius did of the fine arts,[2] and it was impossible to persuade him that if one wanted to indulge the tender passion, one woman would not do exactly as well as another, provided she were equally pretty. I knew therefore that he was incapable, on the one hand, of understanding my love for Isora, or, on the other, of acknowledging her claims upon me. I had not, of course, mentioned to him the generous imprudence which, on the news of my wound, had brought Isora to my house: for if I had done so, my uncle, with the eye of a courtier of Charles II., would only have seen the advantage to be derived from the impropriety, not the gratitude due to the devotion; neither had I mentioned this circumstance to Aubrey,—it seemed to me too delicate for any written communication; and therefore, in his advice to delay my marriage, he was unaware of the necessity which rendered the advice unavailing. Now then was I in this dilemma, either to marry, and that /instanter/, and so, seemingly, with the most hasty and the most insolent decorum, incense, wound, and in his interpretation of the act, contemn one whom I loved as I loved my uncle;

[2] A Roman consul, who, removing the most celebrated remains of Grecian antiquity to Rome, assured the persons charged with conveying them that, if they injured any, they should make others to replace them.

or, to delay the marriage, to separate Isora, and to leave my future wife to the malignant consequences that would necessarily be drawn from a sojourn of weeks in my house. This fact there was no chance of concealing; servants have more tongues than Argus had eyes, and my youthful extravagance had filled my whole house with those pests of society. The latter measure was impossible, the former was most painful. Was there no third way?—there was that of a private marriage. This obviated not every evil; but it removed many: it satisfied my impatient love; it placed Isora under a sure protection; it secured and established her honour the moment the ceremony should be declared; and it avoided the seeming ingratitude and indelicacy of disobeying my uncle, without an effort of patience to appease him. I should have time and occasion then, I thought, for soothing and persuading him, and ultimately winning that consent which I firmly trusted I should sooner or later extract from his kindness of heart.

That some objections existed to this mediatory plan was true enough: those objections related to Isora rather than to myself, and she was the first, on my hinting at the proposal, to overcome its difficulties. The leading feature in Isora's character was generosity; and, in truth, I know not a quality more dangerous either to man or woman. Herself was invariably the last human being whom she seemed to consider; and no sooner did she ascertain what measure was the most prudent for me to adopt, than it immediately became that upon which she insisted. Would it have been possible for me, man of pleasure and of the world as I was thought to be,—no, my good uncle, though it went to my heart to wound thee so secretly, it would /not/ have been possible for me, even if I had not coined my whole nature into love, even if Isora had not been to me what one smile of Isora's really was,—it would not have been possible to have sacrificed so noble and so divine a heart, and made myself, in that sacrifice, a wretch forever. No, my good uncle. I could not have made that surrender to thy reason, much less to thy prejudices. But if I have not done great injustice to the knight's character, I doubt whether the youngest reader will not forgive him for a want of sympathy with one feeling, when they consider how susceptible that charming old man was to all others.

And herewith I could discourse most excellent wisdom upon that mysterious passion of love. I could show, by tracing its causes, and its inseparable connection with the imagination, that it is only in certain states of society, as well as in certain periods of life, that love—real, pure, high love—can be born. Yea, I could prove, to the nicety of a very problem, that, in the court of Charles II., it would have been as impossible for such a feeling to find root, as it would be for myrtle trees to effloresce from a Duvillier periwig. And we are not to expect a man, however tender and affectionate he may be, to sympathize with that sentiment in another, which, from the accidents of birth and position, nothing short of a miracle could have ever produced in himself.

We were married then in private by a Catholic priest. St. John, and one old lady who had been my father's godmother—for I wished for a female assistant in the ceremony, and this old lady could tell no secrets, for, being excessively deaf, nobody ever talked to her, and indeed she scarcely ever went abroad—were the sole witnesses. I took a small house in the immediate neighbourhood of London; it was surrounded on all sides with a high wall which defied alike curiosity and attack. This was, indeed, the sole reason which had induced me to prefer it to many more gaudy or more graceful dwellings. But within I had furnished it with every luxury that wealth, the most lavish and unsparing, could procure. Thither, under an assumed name, I brought my bride, and there was the greater part of my time spent. The people I had placed in the house believed I was a rich merchant, and this accounted for my frequent absences (absences which Prudence rendered necessary), for the wealth which I lavished, and for the precautions of bolt, bar, and wall, which they imagined the result of commercial caution.

Oh the intoxication of that sweet Elysium, that Tadmor in life's desert,—the possession of the one whom we have first loved! It is as if poetry, and music, and light, and the fresh breath of flowers, were all blended into one being, and from that being rose our existence! It is content made rapture, —nothing to wish for, yet everything to feel! Was that air the air which I had breathed hitherto? that

earth the earth which I had hitherto beheld? No, my heart dwelt in a new world, and all these motley and restless senses were melted into one sense,—deep, silent, fathomless delight!

Well, too much of this species of love is not fit for a worldly tale, and I will turn, for the reader's relief, to worldly affections. From my first reunion with Isora, I had avoided all the former objects and acquaintances in which my time had been so charmingly employed. Tarleton was the first to suffer by my new pursuit. "What has altered you?" said he; "you drink not, neither do you play. The women say you are grown duller than a Norfolk parson, and neither the Puppet Show nor the Water Theatre, the Spring Gardens nor the Ring, Wills's nor the Kit Cat, the Mulberry Garden nor the New Exchange, witness any longer your homage and devotion. What has come over you?—speak!"

"Apathy!"

"Ah! I understand,—you are tired of these things; pish, man!—go down into the country, the green fields will revive thee, and send thee back to London a new man! One would indeed find the town intolerably dull, if the country were not, happily, a thousand times duller: go to the country, Count, or I shall drop your friendship."

"Drop it!" said I, yawning, and Tarleton took pet, and did as I desired him. Now I had got rid of my friend as easily as I had found him,—a matter that would not have been so readily accomplished had not Mr. Tarleton owed me certain moneys, concerning which, from the moment he had "dropped my friendship," good breeding effectually prevented his saying a single syllable to me ever after. There is no knowing the blessings of money until one has learned to manage it properly!

So much, then, for the friend; now for the mistress. Lady Hasselton had, as Tarleton hinted before, resolved to play me a trick of spite; the reasons of our rupture really were, as I had stated to Tarleton, the mighty effects of little things. She lived in a sea of trifles, and she was desperately angry if her lover was not always sailing a pleasure-boat in the same ocean. Now this was expecting too much from me, and, after twisting our silken strings of attachment into all manner of fantastic forms, we fell fairly out one evening and broke the little ligatures in two. No sooner had I quarrelled with Tarleton than Lady Hasselton received him in my place, and a week afterwards I was favoured with an anonymous letter, informing me of the violent passion which a certain /dame de la cour/ had conceived for me, and requesting me to meet her at an appointed place. I looked twice over the letter, and discovered in one corner of it two /g's/ peculiar to the caligraphy of Lady Hasselton, though the rest of the letter (bad spelling excepted) was pretty decently disguised. Mr. Fielding was with me at the time. "What disturbs you?" said he, adjusting his knee-buckles.

"Read it!" said I, handing him the letter.

"Body of me, you are a lucky dog!" cried the beau. "You will hasten thither on the wings of love."

"Not a whit of it," said I; "I suspect that it comes from a rich old widow whom I hate mortally."

"A rich old widow!" repeated Mr. Fielding, to whose eyes there was something very piquant in a jointure, and who thought consequently that there were few virginal flowers equal to a widow's weeds. "A rich old widow: you are right, Count, you are right. Don't go, don't think of it. I cannot abide those depraved creatures. Widow, indeed,—quite an affront to your gallantry."

"Very true," said I. "Suppose you supply my place?"

"I'd sooner be shot first," said Mr. Fielding, taking his departure, and begging me for the letter to wrap some sugar plums in.

Need I add, that Mr. Fielding repaired to the place of assignation, where he received, in the shape of a hearty drubbing, the kind favours intended for me? The story was now left for me to tell, not for the Lady Hasselton; and that makes all the difference in the manner a story is told,—/me/ narrante, it is de /te/ fabula narratur; /te/ narrante, and it is de /me/ fabula, etc. Poor Lady Hasselton! to be laughed at, and have Tarleton for a lover!

I have gone back somewhat in the progress of my history in order to make the above honourable mention of my friend and my mistress, thinking it due to their own merits, and thinking it may also

be instructive to young gentlemen who have not yet seen the world to testify the exact nature and the probable duration of all the loves and friendships they are likely to find in that Great Monmouth Street of glittering and of damaged affections! I now resume the order of narration.

I wrote to Aubrey, thanking him for his intercession, but concealing, till we met, the measure I had adopted. I wrote also to my uncle, assuring him that I would take an early opportunity of hastening to Devereux Court, and conversing with him on the subject of his letter. And after an interval of some weeks, I received the two following answers from my correspondents; the latter arrived several days after the former:—

FROM AUBREY DEVEREUX.

I am glad to understand from your letter, unexplanatory as it is, that you have followed my advice. I will shortly write to you more at large; at present I am on the eve of my departure for the North of England, and have merely time to assure you of my affection.

AUBREY DEVEREUX.

P. S. Gerald is in London; have you seen him? Oh, this world! this world! how it clings to us, despite our education, our wishes, our conscience, our knowledge of the Dread Hereafter!

LETTER FROM SIR WILLIAM DEVEREUX.

MY DEAR NEPHEW,—Thank thee for thy letter, and the new plays thou sentest me down, and that droll new paper, the "Spectator:" it is a pretty shallow thing enough,—though it is not so racy as Rochester or little Sid would have made it; but I thank thee for it, because it shows thou wast not angry with thine old uncle for opposing thee on thy love whimsies (in which most young men are dreadfully obstinate), since thou didst provide so kindly for his amusement. Well, but, Morton, I hope thou hast got that crotchet clear out of thy mind, and prithee now /don't/ talk of it when thou comest down to see me. I hate conversations on marriage more than a boy does flogging,—ods fish, I do. So you must humour me on that point!

Aubrey has left me again, and I am quite alone,—not that I was much better off when he was here, for he was wont, of late, to shun my poor room like a "lazar house," and when I spoke to his mother about it, she muttered something about "example" and "corrupting." 'Sdeath, Morton, is your old uncle, who loves all living things, down to poor Ponto the dog, the sort of man whose example corrupts youth? As for thy mother, she grows more solitary every day; and I don't know how it is, but I am not so fond of strange faces as I used to be. 'Tis a new thing for me to be avoided and alone. Why, I remember even little Sid, who had as much venom as most men, once said it was impossible to—Fie now—see if I was not going to preach a sermon from a text in favour of myself! But come, Morton, come, I long for your face again: it is not so soft as Aubrey's, nor so regular as Gerald's; but it is twice as kind as either. Come, before it is too late: I feel myself going; and, to tell thee a secret, the doctors tell me I may not last many months longer. Come, and laugh once more at the old knight's stories. Come, and show him that there is still some one not too good to love him. Come, and I will tell thee a famous thing of old Rowley, which I am too ill and too sad to tell thee now.

WM. DEVEREUX.

Need I say that, upon receiving this letter, I resolved, without any delay, to set out for Devereux Court? I summoned Desmarais to me; he answered not my call: he was from home,—an unfrequent occurrence with the necessitarian valet. I waited his return, which was not for some hours, in order to give him sundry orders for my departure. The exquisite Desmarais hemmed thrice,—"Will Monsieur be so very kind as to excuse my accompanying him?" said he, with his usual air and tone of obsequious respect.

"And why?" The valet explained. A relation of his was in England only for a few days: the philosopher was most anxious to enjoy his society, a pleasure which fate might not again allow him.

Though I had grown accustomed to the man's services, and did not like to lose him even for a time, yet I could not refuse his request; and I therefore ordered another of my servants to supply his

place. This change, however, determined me to adopt a plan which I had before meditated; namely, the conveying of my own person to Devereux Court on horseback, and sending my servant with my luggage in my post-chaise. The equestrian mode of travelling is, indeed to this day, the one most pleasing to me; and the reader will find me pursuing it many years afterwards, and to the same spot.

I might as well observe here that I had never intrusted Desmarais—no, nor one of my own servants—with the secret of my marriage with, or my visits to, Isora. I am a very fastidious person on those matters; and of all confidants, even in the most trifling affairs, I do most eschew those by whom we have the miserable honour of being served.

In order, then, to avoid having my horse brought me to Isora's house by any of these menial spies, I took the steed which I had selected for my journey, and rode to Isora's with the intention of spending the evening there, and thence commencing my excursion with the morning light.

CHAPTER II

LOVE; PARTING; A DEATH-BED.—AFTER ALL HUMAN NATURE IS A BEAUTIFUL FABRIC; AND EVEN ITS IMPERFECTIONS ARE NOT ODIOUS TO HIM WHO HAS STUDIED THE SCIENCE OF ITS ARCHITECTURE, AND FORMED A REVERENT ESTIMATE OF ITS CREATOR

IT is a noticeable thing how much fear increases love. I mean—for the aphorism requires explanation—how much we love in proportion to our fear of losing (or even to our fear of injury done to) the beloved object. 'Tis an instance of the reaction of the feelings: the love produces the fear, and the fear reproduces the love. This is one reason, among many, why women love so much more tenderly and anxiously than we do; and it is also one reason among many why frequent absences are, in all stages of love, the most keen exciters of the passion. I never breathed, away from Isora, without trembling for her safety. I trembled lest this Barnard, if so I should still continue to call her persecutor, should again discover and again molest her. Whenever (and that was almost daily) I rode to the quiet and remote dwelling I had procured her, my heart beat so vehemently, and my agitation was so intense, that on arriving at the gate I have frequently been unable, for several minutes, to demand admittance. There was, therefore, in the mysterious danger which ever seemed to hang over Isora, a perpetual irritation to a love otherwise but little inclined to slumber; and this constant excitement took away from the torpor into which domestic affection too often languishes, and increased my passion even while it diminished my happiness.

On my arrival now at Isora's, I found her already stationed at the window, watching for my coming. How her dark eyes lit into lustre when they saw me! How the rich blood mantled up under the soft cheek which feeling had refined of late into a paler hue than it was wont, when I first gazed upon it, to wear! Then how sprang forth her light step to meet me! How trembled her low voice to welcome me! How spoke, from every gesture of her graceful form, the anxious, joyful, all-animating gladness of her heart! It is a melancholy pleasure to the dry, harsh afterthoughts of later life, to think one has been thus loved; and one marvels, when one considers what one is now, how it could have ever been! That love /of ours/ was never made for after years! It could never have flowed into the common and cold channel of ordinary affairs! It could never have been mingled with the petty cares and the low objects with which the loves of all who live long together in this sordid and most earthly earth are sooner or later blended! We could not have spared to others an atom of the great wealth of our affection. We were misers of every coin in that boundless treasury. It would have pierced me to the soul to have seen Isora smile upon another. I know not even, had we had children, if I should not have been jealous of my child! Was this selfish love? yes, it was, intensely, wholly selfish; but it was a love made so only by its excess; nothing selfish on a smaller scale polluted it. There was not on earth that which the one would not have forfeited at the lightest desire of the other. So utterly were happiness and Isora entwined together that I could form no idea of the one with which the other was not connected. Was this love made for the many and miry roads through which man must travel? Was it made for age, or, worse than age, for those cool, ambitious, scheming years that we call mature, in which all the luxuriance and verdure of things are pared into tame shapes that mimic life, but a life that is estranged from Nature, in which art is the only beauty and regularity the only grace? No, in my heart of hearts, I feel that our love was not meant for the stages of life through which I have already passed; it would have made us miserable to see it fritter itself away, and to remember what it once was. Better as it is! better to mourn over the green bough than to look upon the sapless stem. You who now glance over these pages, are you a mother? If so, answer me one question: Would you

not rather that the child whom you have cherished with your soul's care, whom you have nurtured at your bosom, whose young joys your eyes have sparkled to behold, whose lightest grief you have wept to witness as you would have wept not for your own; over whose pure and unvexed sleep you have watched and prayed, and, as it lay before you thus still and unconscious of your vigil, have shaped out, oh, such bright hopes for its future lot,—would you not rather that while thus young and innocent, not a care tasted, not a crime incurred, it went down at once into the dark grave? Would you not rather suffer this grief, bitter though it be, than watch the predestined victim grow and ripen, and wind itself more and more around your heart, and when it is of full and mature age, and you yourself are stricken by years, and can form no new ties to replace the old that are severed, when woes have already bowed the darling of your hope, whom woe never was to touch, when sins have already darkened the bright, seraph, unclouded heart which sin never was to dim,—behold it sink day by day altered, diseased, decayed, into the tomb which its childhood had in vain escaped? Answer me: would not the earlier fate be far gentler than the last? And if you /have/ known and wept over that early tomb, if you have seen the infant flower fade away from the green soil of your affections; if you have missed the bounding step, and the laughing eye, and the winning mirth which made this sterile world a perpetual holiday,—Mother of the Lost, if you have known, and you still pine for these, answer me yet again! Is it not a comfort, even while you mourn, to think of all that that breast, now so silent, has escaped? The cream, the sparkle, the elixir of life, it had already quaffed: is it not sweet to think it shunned the wormwood and the dregs? Answer me, even though the answer be in tears! Mourner, your child was to you what my early and only love was to me; and could you pierce down, down through a thousand fathom of ebbing thought, to the far depths of my heart, you would there behold a sorrow /and a consolation/ that have something in unison with your own!

When the light of the next morning broke into our room, Isora was still sleeping. Have you ever observed that the young, seen asleep and by the morning light, seem much younger even than they are? partly because the air and the light sleep of dawn bring a fresher bloom to the cheek, and partly, because the careless negligence and the graceful postures exclusively appropriated to youth, are forbidden by custom and formality through the day, and developing themselves unconsciously in sleep, they strike the eye like the ease and freedom of childhood itself. There, as I looked upon Isora's tranquil and most youthful beauty, over which circled and breathed an ineffable innocence,—even as the finer and subtler air, which was imagined by those dreamy bards who kindled the soft creations of naiad and of nymph, to float around a goddess,—I could not believe that aught evil awaited one for whom infancy itself seemed to linger,—linger as if no elder shape and less delicate hue were meet to be the garment of so much guilelessness and tenderness of heart. I felt, indeed, while I bent over her, and her regular and quiet breath came upon my cheek, that feeling which is exactly the reverse to a presentiment of ill. I felt as if, secure in her own purity, she had nothing to dread, so that even the pang of parting was lost in the confidence which stole over me as I then gazed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.