

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**EUGENE ARAM —
VOLUME 05**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон
Eugene Aram — Volume 05

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Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton

Eugene Aram — Volume 05

BOOK V

Surely the man that plotteth ill against his neighbor perpetrath ill against himself, and the evil design is most evil to him that deviseth it.
—*Hesiod*

CHAPTER I.

GRASSDALE.—THE MORNING OF THE MARRIAGE.—THE CRONES GOSSIP.—THE BRIDE AT HER TOILET.—THE ARRIVAL

*JAM veniet virgo, jam dicetur Hymenaeus,
Hymen, O Hymenae! Hymen ades, O Hymenae!*
CATULLUS: Carmen Nuptiale.

It was now the morning in which Eugene Aram was to be married to Madeline Lester. The student's house had been set in order for the arrival of the bride; and though it was yet early morn, two old women, whom his domestic (now not the only one, for a buxom lass of eighteen had been transplanted from Lester's household to meet the additional cares that the change of circumstances brought to Aram's) had invited to assist her in arranging what was already arranged, were bustling about the lower apartments and making matters, as they call it, "tidy."

"Them flowers look but poor things, after all," muttered an old crone, whom our readers will recognize as Dame Darkmans, placing a bowl of exotics on the table. "They does not look nigh so cheerful as them as grows in the open air."

"Tush! Goody Darkmans," said the second gossip. "They be much prettier and finer, to my mind; and so said Miss Nelly when she plucked them last night and sent me down with them. They says there is not a blade o' grass that the master does not know. He must be a good man to love the things of the field so."

"Ho!" said Dame Darkmans, "ho! When Joe Wrench was hanged for shooting the lord's keeper, and he mounted the scaffold wid a nosegay in his hand, he said, in a peevish voice, says he: 'Why does not they give me a tarnation? I always loved them sort o' flowers,—I wore them when I went a courting Bess Lucas,—an' I would like to die with one in my hand!' So a man may like flowers, and be but a hempen dog after all!"

"Now don't you, Goody; be still, can't you? What a tale for a marriage day!"

"Tally vally!" returned the grim hag, "many a blessing carries a curse in its arms, as the new moon carries the old. This won't be one of your happy weddings, I tell ye."

"And why d' ye say that?"

"Did you ever see a man with a look like that make a happy husband? No, no! Can ye fancy the merry laugh o' childer in this house, or a babe on the father's knee, or the happy, still smile on

the mother's winsome face, some few years hence? No, Madge! the devil has set his black claw on the man's brow."

"Hush, hush, Goody Darkmans; he may hear o' ye!" said the second gossip, who, having now done all that remained to do, had seated herself down by the window, while the more ominous crone, leaning over Aram's oak chair, uttered from thence her sibyl bodings.

"No," replied Mother Darkmans, "I seed him go out an hour ago, when the sun was just on the rise; and I said, when I seed him stroom into the wood yonder, and the ould leaves splashed in the damp under his feet, and his hat was aboon his brows, and his lips went so,—I said, says I, 't is not the man that will make a hearth bright that would walk thus on his marriage day. But I knows what I knows, and I minds what I seed last night."

"Why, what did you see last night?" asked the listener, with a trembling voice; for Plother Darkmans was a great teller of ghost and witch tales, and a certain ineffable awe of her dark gypsy features and malignant words had circulated pretty largely throughout the village.

"Why, I sat up here with the ould deaf woman, and we were a drinking the health of the man and his wife that is to be, and it was nigh twelve o' the clock ere I minded it was time to go home. Well, so I puts on my cloak, and the moon was up, an' I goes along by the wood, and up by Fairlegh Field, an' I was singing the ballad on Joe Wrench's hanging, for the spirats had made me gamesome, when I sees somemut dark creep, creep, but iver so fast, arter me over the field, and making right ahead to the village. And I stands still, an' I was not a bit afeared; but sure I thought it was no living cretur, at the first sight. And so it comes up faster and faster, and then I sees it was not one thing, but a many, many things, and they darkened the whole field afore me. And what d' ye think they was? A whole body o' gray rats, thousands and thousands on 'em; and they were making away from the outbuildings here. For sure they knew, the witch things, that an ill luck sat on the spot. And so I stood aside by the tree, an' I laughed to look on the ugsome creturs as they swept close by me, tramp, tramp! and they never heeded me a jot; but some on 'em looked aslant at me with their glittering eyes, and showed their white teeth, as if they grinned, and were saying to me, 'Ha, ha! Goody Darkmans, the house that we leave is a falling house, for the devil will have his own.'"

In some parts of the country, and especially in that where our scene is laid, no omen is more superstitiously believed evil than the departure of these loathsome animals from their accustomed habitation; the instinct which is supposed to make them desert an unsafe tenement is supposed also to make them predict, in desertion, ill fortune to the possessor. But while the ears of the listening gossip were still tingling with this narration, the dark figure of the student passed the window, and the old women, starting up, appeared in all the bustle of preparation, as Aram now entered the apartment.

"A happy day, your honor; a happy good morning," said both the crones in a breath; but the blessing of the worse-natured was vented in so harsh a croak that Aram turned round as if struck by the sound, and still more disliking the well-remembered aspect of the person from whom it came, waved his hand impatiently, and bade them begone.

"A-whish, a-whish!" muttered Dame Darkmans,— "to spake so to the poor; but the rats never lie, the bonny things!"

Aram threw himself into his chair, and remained for some moments absorbed in a revery, which did not bear the aspect of gloom. Then, walking once or twice to and fro the apartment, he stopped opposite the chimney-piece, over which were slung the firearms, which he never omitted to keep charged and primed.

"Humph!" he said, half aloud, "ye have been but idle servants; and now ye are but little likely ever to requite the care I have bestowed upon you."

With that a faint smile crossed his features; and turning away, he ascended the stairs that led to the lofty chamber in which he had been so often wont to outwatch the stars,—

"The souls of systems, and the lords of life,

Through their wide empires."

Before we follow him to his high and lonely retreat we will bring the reader to the manor-house, where all was already gladness and quiet but deep joy.

It wanted about three hours to that fixed for the marriage; and Aram was not expected at the manor-house till an hour before the celebration of the event. Nevertheless, the bells were already ringing loudly and blithely; and the near vicinity of the church to the house brought that sound, so inexpressibly buoyant and cheering, to the ears of the bride with a noisy merriment that seemed like the hearty voice of an old-fashioned friend who seeks in his greeting rather cordiality than discretion. Before her glass stood the beautiful, the virgin, the glorious form of Madeline Lester; and Ellinor, with trembling hands (and a voice between a laugh and a cry), was braiding up her sister's rich hair, and uttering her hopes, her wishes, her congratulations. The small lattice was open, and the air came rather chillingly to the bride's bosom.

"It is a gloomy morning, dearest Nell," said she, shivering; "the winter seems about to begin at last."

"Stay, I will shut the window. The sun is struggling with the clouds at present, but I am sure it will clear up by and by. You don't, you don't leave us—the word must out—till evening."

"Don't cry!" said Madeline, half weeping herself, and sitting down, she drew Ellinor to her; and the two sisters, who had never been parted since birth, exchanged tears that were natural, though scarcely the unmixed tears of grief.

"And what pleasant evenings we shall have," said Madeline, holding her sister's hands, "in the Christmas time! You will be staying with us, you know; and that pretty old room in the north of the house Eugene has already ordered to be fitted up for you. Well, and my dear father, and dear Walter, who will be returned long ere then, will walk over to see us, and praise my housekeeping, and so forth. And then, after dinner, we will draw near the fire,—I next to Eugene, and my father, our guest, on the other side of me, with his long gray hair and his good fine face, with a tear of kind feeling in his eye,—you know that look he has whenever he is affected. And at a little distance on the other side of the hearth will be you—and Walter; I suppose we must make room for him. And Eugene, who will be then the liveliest of you all, shall read to us with his soft, clear voice, or tell us all about the birds and flowers and strange things in other countries. And then after supper we will walk half-way home across that beautiful valley—beautiful even in winter—with my father and Walter, and count the stars, and take new lessons in astronomy, and hear tales about the astrologers and the alchemists, with their fine old dreams. Ah! it will be such a happy Christmas! And then, when spring comes, some fine morning—finer than this—when the birds are about, and the leaves getting green, and the flowers springing up every day, I shall be called in to help your toilet, as you have helped mine, and to go with you to church, though not, alas! as your bridesmaid. Ah! whom shall we have for that duty?"

"Pshaw!" said Ellinor, smiling through her tears.

While the sisters were thus engaged, and Madeline was trying, with her innocent kindness of heart, to exhilarate the spirits, so naturally depressed, of her doting sister, the sound of carriage-wheels was heard in the distance,—nearer, nearer; now the sound stopped, as at the gate; now fast, faster,—fast as the postilions could ply whip and the horses tear along. While the groups in the churchyard ran forth to gaze, and the bells rang merrily all the while, two chaises whirled by Madeline's window and stopped at the porch of the house. The sisters had flown in surprise to the casement.

"It is, it is—good God! it is Walter," cried Ellinor; "but how pale he looks!"

"And who are those strange men with him?" faltered Madeline, alarmed, though she knew not why.

CHAPTER II. THE STUDENT ALONE IN HIS CHAMBER. —THE INTERRUPTION.—FAITHFUL LOVE

*NEQUICQUAM thalamo graves
Hastas
Vitabis strepitumque et celerem sequi
Ajacem.*

—HORACE: *Od. xv. lib. 1.*

*['In vain within your nuptial chamber will you shun the
deadly spears, ... the hostile shout, and Ajax eager in
pursuit.']*

Alone in his favorite chamber, the instruments of science around him, and books, some of astronomical research, some of less lofty but yet abstruser lore, scattered on the tables, Eugene Aram indulged the last meditation he believed likely to absorb his thoughts before that great change of life which was to bless solitude with a companion.

"Yes," said he, pacing the apartment with folded arms, "yes, all is safe! He will not again return; the dead sleeps now without a witness. I may lay this working brain upon the bosom that loves me, and not start at night and think that the soft hand around my neck is the hangman's gripe. Back to thyself, henceforth and forever, my busy heart! Let not thy secret stir from its gloomy depth! The seal is on the tomb; henceforth be the spectre laid. Yes, I must smooth my brow, and teach my lip restraint, and smile and talk like other men. I have taken to my hearth a watch, tender, faithful, anxious,—but a watch. Farewell the unguarded hour! The soul's relief in speech, the dark and broken, yet how grateful, confidence with self, farewell! And come, thou veil! subtle, close, unvarying, the everlasting curse of entire hypocrisy, that under thee, as night, the vexed world within may sleep, and stir not! and all, in truth concealment, may seem repose!"

As he uttered these thoughts, the student paused and looked on the extended landscape that lay below. A heavy, chill, and comfortless mist sat saddening over the earth. Not a leaf stirred on the autumnal trees, but the moist damps fell slowly and with a mournful murmur upon the unwavering grass. The outline of the morning sun was visible, but it gave forth no lustre: a ring of watery and dark vapor girded the melancholy orb. Far at the entrance of the valley the wild fern showed red and faded, and the first march of the deadly winter was already heralded by that drear and silent desolation which cradles the winds and storms. But amidst this cheerless scene the distant note of the merry marriage-bell floated by, like the good spirit of the wilderness, and the student rather paused to hearken to the note than to survey the scene. "My marriage-bell!" said he. "Could I, two short years back, have dreamed of this? My marriage-bell! How fondly my poor mother, when first she learned pride for her young scholar, would predict this day, and blend its festivities with the honor and the wealth her son was to acquire! Alas! can we have no science to count the stars and forebode the black eclipse of the future? But peace! peace! peace! I am, I will, I shall be happy now! Memory, I defy thee!"

He uttered the last words in a deep and intense tone; and turning away as the joyful peal again broke distinctly on his ear,—

"My marriage-bell! Oh, Madeline, how wondrously beloved, how unspeakably dear thou art to me! What hast thou conquered! How many reasons for resolve, how vast an army in the Past, has

thy bright and tender purity overthrown! But thou—No, never shalt thou repent!" And for several minutes the sole thought of the soliloquist was love. But scarce consciously to himself, a spirit, not, to all seeming, befitted to that bridal-day,—vague, restless, impressed with the dark and fluttering shadow of coming change,—had taken possession of his breast, and did not long yield the mastery to any brighter and more serene emotion.

"And why," he said, as this spirit regained its empire over him, and he paused before the "starred tubes" of his beloved science,— "and why this chill, this shiver, in the midst of hope? Can the mere breath of the seasons, the weight or lightness of the atmosphere, the outward gloom or smile of the brute mass called Nature, affect us thus? Out on this empty science, this vain knowledge, this little lore, if we are so fooled by the vile clay and the common air from our one great empire, self! Great God! hast thou made us in mercy, or in disdain? Placed in this narrow world, darkness and cloud around us; no fixed rule for men; creeds, morals, changing in every clime, and growing like herbs upon the mere soil,—we struggle to dispel the shadows; we grope around; from our own heart and our sharp and hard endurance we strike our only light. For what? To show us what dupes we are,—creatures of accident, tools of circumstance, blind instruments of the scorner Fate; the very mind, the very reason, a bound slave to the desires, the weakness of the clay; affected by a cloud, dulled by the damps of the foul marsh; stricken from power to weakness, from sense to madness, to gaping idiocy, or delirious raving, by a putrid exhalation! A rheum, a chill, and Caesar trembles! The world's gods, that slay or enlighten millions, poor puppets to the same rank imp which calls up the fungus or breeds the worm,—pah! How little worth is it in this life to be wise! Strange, strange, how my heart sinks. Well, the better sign, the better sign! In danger it never sank."

Absorbed in these reflections, Aram had not for some minutes noticed the sudden ceasing of the bell; but now, as he again paused from his irregular and abrupt pacings along the chamber, the silence struck him, and looking forth, and striving again to catch the note, he saw a little group of men, among whom he marked the erect and comely form of Rowland Lester, approaching towards the house.

"What!" he thought, "do they come for me? Is it so late? Have I played the laggard? Nay, it yet wants near an hour to the time they expected me. Well, some kindness, some attention from my good father-in-law; I must thank him for it. What! my hand trembles. How weak are these poor nerves; I must rest and recall my mind to itself!"

And indeed, whether or not from the novelty and importance of the event he was about to celebrate, or from some presentiment, occasioned, as he would fain believe, by the mournful and sudden change in the atmosphere, an embarrassment, a wavering, a fear, very unwonted to the calm and stately self-possession of Eugene Aram, made itself painfully felt throughout his frame. He sank down in his chair and strove to re-collect himself; it was an effort in which he had just succeeded, when a loud knocking was heard at the outer door; it swung open; several voices were heard. Aram sprang up, pale, breathless, his lips apart.

"Great God!" he exclaimed, clasping his hands. "Murderer!"—was that the word I heard shouted forth? The voice, too, is Walter Lester's. Has he returned? Can he have learned—?"

To rush to the door, to throw across it a long, heavy iron bar, which would resist assaults of no common strength, was his first impulse. Thus enabled to gain time for reflection, his active and alarmed mind ran over the whole field of expedient and conjecture. Again, "Murderer!" "Stay me not," cried Walter, from below; "my hand shall seize the murderer!"

Guess was now over; danger and death were marching on him. Escape,—how? whither? The height forbade the thought of flight from the casement! The door?—he heard loud steps already hurrying up the stairs; his hands clutched convulsively at his breast, where his fire-arms were generally concealed,—they were left below. He glanced one lightning glance round the room; no weapon of any kind was at hand. His brain reeled for a moment, his breath gasped, a mortal sickness passed over his heart, and then the MIND triumphed over all. He drew up to his full height, folded his arms

doggedly on his breast, and muttering, "The accuser comes,—I have it still to refute the charge!" he stood prepared to meet, nor despairing to evade, the worst.

As waters close over the object which divided them, all these thoughts, these fears, and this resolution had been but the work, the agitation, and the succeeding calm of the moment; that moment was past.

"Admit us!" cried the voice of Walter Lester, knocking fiercely at the door.

"Not so fervently, boy," said Lester, laying his hand on his nephew's shoulder; "your tale is yet to be proved,—I believe it not. Treat him as innocent, I pray,—I command,—till you have shown him guilty."

"Away, uncle!" said the fiery Walter; "he is my father's murderer. God hath given justice to my hands." These words, uttered in a lower key than before, were but indistinctly heard by Aram through the massy door.

"Open, or we force our entrance!" shouted Walter again; and Aram, speaking for the first time, replied in a clear and sonorous voice, so that an angel, had one spoken, could not have more deeply impressed the heart of Rowland Lester with a conviction of the student's innocence,

"Who knocks so rudely? What means this violence? I open my doors to my friends. Is it a friend who asks it?"

"I ask it," said Rowland Lester, in a trembling and agitated voice. "There seems some dreadful mistake: come forth, Eugene, and rectify it by a word."

Is it you, Rowland Lester? It is enough. I was but with my books, and had secured myself from intrusion. Enter." The bar was withdrawn, the door was burst open, and even Walter Lester, even the officers of justice with him, drew back for a moment as they beheld the lofty brow, the majestic presence, the features so unutterably calm, of Eugene Aram. "What want you, sirs?" said he, unmoved and unfaltering, though in the officers of justice he recognized faces he had known before, and in that distant town in which all that he dreaded in the past lay treasured up. At the sound of his voice the spell that for an instant had arrested the step of the avenging son melted away.

"Seize him!" he cried to the officers; "you see your prisoner."

"Hold!" cried Aram, drawing back. "By what authority is this outrage, —for what am I arrested?"

"Behold," said Walter, speaking through his teeth, "behold our warrant! You are accused of murder! Know you the name of Richard Houseman,— pause, consider,—or that of Daniel Clarke?"

Slowly Aram lifted his eyes from the warrant, and it might be seen that his face was a shade more pale, though his look did not quail, or his nerves tremble. Slowly he turned his gaze upon Walter; and then, after one moment's survey, dropped it once more on the paper.

"The name of Houseman is not unfamiliar to me," said he calmly, but with effort.

"And knew you Daniel Clarke

"What mean these questions?" said Aram, losing temper, and stamping violently on the ground. "Is it thus that a man, free and guiltless, is to be questioned at the behest, or rather outrage, of every lawless boy? Lead me to some authority meet for me to answer; for you, boy, my answer is contempt."

"Big words shall not save thee, murderer!" cried Walter, breaking from his uncle, who in vain endeavored to hold him, and laying his powerful grasp upon Aram's shoulder. Livid was the glare that shot from the student's eye upon his assailer; and so fearfully did his features work and change with the passions within him that even Walter felt a strange shudder thrill through his frame.

"Gentlemen," said Aram at last, mastering his emotions, and resuming some portion of the remarkable dignity that characterized his usual bearing, as he turned towards the officers of justice, "I call upon you to discharge your duty. If this be a rightful warrant, I am your prisoner, but I am not this man's. I command your protection from him!"

Walter had already released his gripe, and said, in a muttered voice,

"My passion misled me; violence is unworthy my solemn cause. God and Justice—not these hands—are my avengers."

"Your avengers!" said Aram. "What dark words are these? This warrant accuses me of the murder of one Daniel Clarke. What is he to thee?"

"Mark me, man!" said Walter, fixing his eyes on Aram's countenance.

"The name of Daniel Clarke was a feigned name; the real name was Geoffrey Lester: that murdered Lester was my father, and the brother of him whose daughter, had I not come to-day, you would have called your wife!"

Aram felt, while these words were uttered, that the eyes of all in the room were on him; and perhaps that knowledge enabled him not to reveal by outward sign what must have passed within during the awful trial of that moment.

"It is a dreadful tale," he said, "if true,—dreadful to me, so nearly allied to that family. But as yet I grapple with shadows."

"What! does not your conscience now convict you?" cried Walter, staggered by the calmness of the prisoner. But here Lester, who could no longer contain himself, interposed; he put by his nephew, and rushing to Aram, fell, weeping, upon his neck.

"I do not accuse thee, Eugene, my son, my son! I feel, I know thou art innocent of this monstrous crime; some horrid delusion darkens that poor boy's sight. You, you, who would walk aside to save a worm!" and the poor old man, overcome with his emotions, could literally say no more.

Aram looked down on Lester with a compassionate expression; and soothing him with kind words, and promises that all would be explained, gently moved from his hold, and, anxious to terminate the scene, silently motioned the officers to proceed. Struck with the calmness and dignity of his manner, and fully impressed by it with the notion of his innocence, the officers treated him with a marked respect; they did not even walk by his side, but suffered him to follow their steps. As they descended the stairs, Aram turned round to Walter, with a bitter and reproachful countenance,

"And so, young man, your malice against me has reached even to this!

Will nothing but my life content you?"

"Is the desire of execution on my father's murderer but the wish of malice?" retorted Walter; though his heart yet well-nigh misgave him as to the grounds on which his suspicion rested.

Aram smiled, as half in scorn, half through incredulity; and, shaking his head gently, moved on without further words.

The three old women, who had remained in listening astonishment at the foot of the stairs, gave way as the men descended; but the one who so long had been Aram's solitary domestic, and who, from her deafness, was still benighted and uncomprehending as to the causes of his seizure, though from that very reason her alarm was the greater and more acute, she, impatiently thrusting away the officers, and mumbling some unintelligible anathema as she did so, flung herself at the feet of a master whose quiet habits and constant kindness had endeared him to her humble and faithful heart, and exclaimed,—

"What are they doing? Have they the heart to ill-use you? O master, God bless you! God shield you! I shall never see you, who was my only friend—who was every one's friend—any more!"

Aram drew himself from her, and said, with a quivering lip to Rowland Lester,—

"If her fears are true—if—if I never more return hither, see that her old age does not starve—does not want." Lester could not speak for sobbing, but the request was remembered. And now Aram, turning aside his proud head to conceal his emotion, beheld open the door of the room so trimly prepared for Madeline's reception: the flowers smiled upon him from their stands. "Lead on, gentlemen," he said quickly. And so Eugene Aram passed his threshold!

"Ho, ho!" muttered the old hag whose predictions in the morning had been so ominous,— "ho, ho! you'll believe Goody Darkmans another time! Providence respects the sayings of the ould. 'T was

not for nothing the rats grinned at me last night. But let's in and have a warm glass. He, he! there will be all the strong liquors for us now; the Lord is merciful to the poor!"

As the little group proceeded through the valley, the officers first, Aram and Lester side by side, Walter, with his hand on his pistol and his eye on the prisoner, a little behind, Lester endeavored to cheer the prisoner's spirits and his own by insisting on the madness of the charge and the certainty of instant acquittal from the magistrate to whom they were bound, and who was esteemed the one both most acute and most just in the county. Aram interrupted him somewhat abruptly,

"My friend, enough of this presently. But Madeline, what knows she as yet?"

"Nothing; of course, we kept—"

"Exactly, exactly; you have done wisely. Why need she learn anything as yet? Say an arrest for debt, a mistake, an absence but of a day or so at most,—you understand?"

"Yes. Will you not see her, Eugene, before you go, and say this yourself?"

"I!—O God!—I! to whom this day was—No, no; save me, I implore you, from the agony of such a contrast,—an interview so mournful and unavailing. No, we must not meet! But whither go we now? Not, not, surely, through all the idle gossips of the village,—the crowd already excited to gape and stare and speculate on the—"

"No," interrupted Lester; "the carriages await us at the farther end of the valley. I thought of that,—for the rash boy behind seems to have changed his nature. I loved—Heaven knows how I loved my brother! But before I would let suspicion thus blind reason, I would suffer inquiry to sleep forever on his fate."

"Your nephew," said Aram, "has ever wronged me. But waste not words on him; let us think only of Madeline. Will you go back at once to her,— tell her a tale to lull her apprehensions, and then follow us with haste? I am alone among enemies till you come."

Lester was about to answer, when, at a turn in the road which brought the carriage within view, they perceived two figures in white hastening towards them; and ere Aram was prepared for the surprise, Madeline had sunk pale, trembling, and all breathless on his breast.

"I could not keep her back," said Ellinor, apologetically, to her father.

"Back! and why? Am I not in my proper place?" cried Madeline, lifting her face from Aram's breast; and then, as her eyes circled the group, and rested on Aram's countenance, now no longer calm, but full of woe, of passion, of disappointed love, of anticipated despair, she rose, and gradually recoiling with a fear which struck dumb her voice, thrice attempted to speak, and thrice failed.

"But what—what is—what means this?" exclaimed Ellinor. "Why do you weep, father? Why does Eugene turn away his face? You answer not. Speak, for God's sake! These strangers,—what are they? And you, Walter, you,—why are you so pale? Why do you thus knit your brows and fold your arms! You, you will tell me the meaning of this dreadful silence,—this scene. Speak, cousin, dear cousin, speak!"

"Speak!" cried Madeline, finding voice at length, but in the sharp and straining tone of wild terror, in which they recognized no note of the natural music. The single word sounded rather as a shriek than an adjuration; and so piercingly it ran through the hearts of all present that the very officers, hardened as their trade had made them, felt as if they would rather have faced death than answered that command.

A dead, long, dreary pause, and Aram broke it. "Madeline Lester," said he, "prove yourself worthy of the hour of trial. Exert yourself; arouse your heart; be prepared! You are the betrothed of one whose soul never quailed before man's angry word. Remember that, and fear not!"

"I will not, I will not, Eugene! Speak, only speak!"

"You have loved me in good report; trust me now in ill. They accuse me of a crime,—a heinous crime! At first I would not have told you the real charge. Pardon me, I wronged you,—now, know all! They accuse me, I say, of crime. Of what crime? you ask. Ay, I scarce know, so vague is the charge, so fierce the accuser; but prepare, Madeline,—it is of murder!"

Raised as her spirits had been by the haughty and earnest tone of Aram's exhortation, Madeline now, though she turned deadly pale, though the earth swam round and round, yet repressed the shriek upon her lips as those horrid words shot into her soul.

"You!—murder!—you! And who dares accuse you?"

"Behold him,—your cousin!"

Ellinor heard, turned, fixed her eyes on Walter's sullen brow and motionless attitude, and fell senseless to the earth. Not thus Madeline. As there is an exhaustion that forbids, not invites repose, so when the mind is thoroughly on the rack, the common relief to anguish is not allowed; the senses are too sharply strung, thus happily to collapse into forgetfulness; the dreadful inspiration that agony kindles, supports nature while it consumes it. Madeline passed, without a downward glance, by the lifeless body of her sister; and walking with a steady step to Walter, she laid her hand upon his arm, and fixing on his countenance that soft clear eye, which was now lit with a searching and preternatural glare, and seemed to pierce into his soul, she said,

"Walter, do I hear aright? Am I awake? Is it you who accuse Eugene Aram,—your Madeline's betrothed husband,—Madeline, whom you once loved?"

Of what? Of crimes which death alone can punish. Away! It is not you,
—I know it is not. Say that I am mistaken,—that I am mad, if you will.

Come, Walter, relieve me; let me not abhor the very air you breathe!"

"Will no one have mercy on me?" cried Walter, rent to the heart, and covering his face with his hands. In the fire and heat of vengeance he had not reeked of this. He had only thought of justice to a father, punishment to a villain, rescue for a credulous girl. The woe, the horror he was about to inflict on all he most loved: this had not struck upon him with a due force till now!

"Mercy—you talk of mercy! I knew it could not be true!" said Madeline, trying to pluck her cousin's hand from his face; "you could not have dreamed of wrong to Eugene and—and upon this day. Say we have erred, or that you have erred, and we will forgive and bless you even now!" Aram had not interfered in this scene; he kept his eyes fixed on the cousins, not uninterested to see what effect Madeline's touching words might produce on his accuser. Meanwhile she continued: "Speak to me, Walter, dear Walter, speak to me'. Are you, my cousin, my playfellow, —are you the one to blight our hopes, to dash our joys, to bring dread and terror into a home so lately all peace and sunshine, your own home, your childhood's home? What have you done? What have you dared to do? Accuse him! Of what? Murder! Speak, speak. Murder, ha! ha!—murder! nay, not so! You would not venture to come here, you would not let me take your hand, you would not look us, your uncle, your more than sisters, in the face if you could nurse in your heart this lie,—this black, horrid lie!"

Walter withdrew his hands, and as he turned his face said,—

"Let him prove his innocence. Pray God he do! I am not his accuser, Madeline. His accusers are the bones of my dead father! Save these, Heaven alone and the revealing earth are witness against him!"

"Your father!" said Madeline, staggering back,— "my lost uncle! Nay, now I know indeed what a shadow has appalled us all! Did you know my uncle, Eugene? Did you ever see Geoffrey Lester?"

"Never, as I believe, so help me God!" said Aram, laying his hand on his heart. "But this is idle now," as, recollecting himself, he felt that the case had gone forth from Walter's hands, and that appeal to him had become vain. "Leave us now, dearest Madeline, my beloved wife that shall be, that is! I go to disprove these charges. Perhaps I shall return to-night. Delay not my acquittal, even from doubt,—a boy's doubt. Come, sirs."

"O Eugene! Eugene!" cried Madeline, throwing herself on her knees before him, "do not order me to leave you now, now in the hour of dread! I will not. Nay, look not so! I swear I will not! Father, dear father, come and plead for me,—say I shall go with you. I ask nothing more. Do not fear for my nerves,—cowardice is gone. I will not shame you, I will not play the woman. I know what is due to one who loves him. Try me, only try me. You weep, father, you shake your head. But you, Eugene,

—you have not the heart to deny me? Think—think if I stayed here to count the moments till you return, my very senses would leave me. What do I ask? But to go with you, to be the first to hail your triumph! Had this happened two hours hence, you could not have said me nay,—I should have claimed the right to be with you; I now but implore the blessing. You relent, you relent; I see it!"

"O Heaven!" exclaimed Aram, rising, and clasping her to his breast, and wildly kissing her face, but with cold and trembling lips, "this is indeed a bitter hour; let me not sink beneath it. Yes, Madeline, ask your father if he consents; I hail your strengthening presence as that of an angel. I will not be the one to sever you from my side."

"You are right, Eugene," said Lester, who was supporting Ellinor, not yet recovered,— "let her go with us; it is but common kindness and common mercy."

Madeline uttered a cry of joy (joy even at such a moment!), and clung fast to Eugene's arm, as if for assurance that they were not indeed to be separated.

By this time some of Lester's servants, who had from a distance followed their young mistresses, reached the spot. To their care Lester gave the still scarce reviving Ellinor; and then, turning round with a severe countenance to Walter, said, "Come, sir, your rashness has done sufficient wrong for the present; come now, and see how soon your suspicions will end in shame."

"Justice, and blood for blood!" said Walter, sternly; but his heart felt as if it were broken. His venerable uncle's tears, Madeline's look of horror as she turned from him, Ellinor all lifeless, and he not daring to approach her,—this was HIS work! He pulled his hat over his eyes, and hastened into the carriage alone. Lester, Madeline, and Aram followed in the other vehicle; and the two officers contented themselves with mounting the box, certain the prisoner would attempt no escape.

CHAPTER III.
THE JUSTICE—THE DEPARTURE—THE EQUANIMITY
OF THE CORPORAL IN BEARING THE MISFORTUNES
OF OTHER PEOPLE.—THE EXAMINATION; ITS RESULT.
—ARAM'S CONDUCT IN PRISON.—THE ELASTICITY
OF OUR HUMAN NATURE.—A VISIT FROM THE
EARL.—WALTER'S DETERMINATION.—MADELINE

Bear me to prison, where I am committed.
—Measure for Measure.

On arriving at Sir—'s, a disappointment, for which, had they previously conversed with the officers they might have been prepared, awaited them. The fact was, that the justice had only endorsed the warrant sent from Yorkshire; and after a very short colloquy, in which he expressed his regret at the circumstance, his conviction that the charge would be disproved, and a few other courteous common-places, he gave Aram to understand that the matter now did not rest with him, but that it was to Yorkshire that the officers were bound, and before Mr. Thornton, a magistrate of that country, that the examination was to take place. "All I can do," said the magistrate, "I have already done; but I wished for an opportunity of informing you of it. I have written to my brother justice at full length respecting your high character, and treating the habits and rectitude of your life alone as a sufficient refutation of so monstrous a charge."

For the first time a visible embarrassment came over the firm nerves of the prisoner: he seemed to look with great uneasiness at the prospect of this long and dreary journey, and for such an end. Perhaps, the very notion of returning as a suspected criminal to that part of the country where a portion of his youth had been passed, was sufficient to disquiet and deject him. All this while his poor Madeline seemed actuated by a spirit beyond herself; she would not be separated from his side—she held his hand in hers—she whispered comfort and courage at the very moment when her own heart most sank. The magistrate wiped his eyes when he saw a creature so young, so beautiful, in circumstances so fearful, and bearing up with an energy so little to be expected from her years and delicate appearance. Aram said but little; he covered his face with his right hand for a few moments, as if to hide a passing emotion, a sudden weakness. When he removed it, all vestige of colour had died away; his face was pale as that of one who has risen from the grave; but it was settled and composed.

"It is a hard pang, Sir," said he, with a faint smile; "so many miles—so many days—so long a deferment of knowing the best, or preparing to meet the worst. But, be it so! I thank you, Sir,—I thank you all,—Lester, Madeline, for your kindness; you two must now leave me; the brand is on my name—the suspected man is no fit object for love or friendship! Farewell!"

"We go with you!" said Madeline firmly, and in a very low voice.

Aram's eye sparkled, but he waved his hand impatiently.

"We go with you, my friend!" repeated Lester.

And so, indeed, not to dwell long on a painful scene, it was finally settled. Lester and his two daughters that evening followed Aram to the dark and fatal bourne to which he was bound.

It was in vain that Walter, seizing his uncle's hands, whispered,

"For Heaven's sake, do not be rash in your friendship! You have not yet learnt all. I tell you, that there can be no doubt of his guilt! Remember, it is a brother for whom you mourn! will you countenance his murderer?"

Lester, despite himself, was struck by the earnestness with which his nephew spoke, but the impression died away as the words ceased: so strong and deep had been the fascination which Eugene Aram had exercised over the hearts of all once drawn within the near circle of his attraction, that had the charge of murder been made against himself, Lester could not have repelled it with a more entire conviction of the innocence of the accused. Still, however, the deep sincerity of his nephew's manner in some measure served to soften his resentment towards him.

"No, no, boy!" said he, drawing away his hand, "Rowland Lester is not the one to desert a friend in the day of darkness and the hour of need. Be silent I say!—My brother, my poor brother, you tell me, has been murdered. I will see justice done to him: but, Aram! Fie! fie! it is a name that would whisper falsehood to the loudest accusation. Go, Walter! go! I do not blame you!—you may be right—a murdered father is a dread and awful memory to a son! What wonder that the thought warps your judgment? But go! Eugene was to me both a guide and a blessing; a father in wisdom, a son in love. I cannot look on his accuser's face without anguish. Go! we shall meet again.—How! Go!"

"Enough, Sir!" said Walter, partly in anger, partly in sorrow—"Time be the judge between us all!"

With those words he turned from the house, and proceeded on foot towards a cottage half way between Grassdale and the Magistrate's house, at which, previous to his return to the former place, he had prudently left the Corporal—not willing to trust to that person's discretion, as to the tales and scandal that he might propagate throughout the village on a matter so painful and so dark.

Let the world wag as it will, there are some tempers which its vicissitudes never reach. Nothing makes a picture of distress more sad than the portrait of some individual sitting indifferently looking on in the back-ground. This was a secret Hogarth knew well. Mark his deathbed scenes:—Poverty and Vice worked up into horror—and the Physicians in the corner wrangling for the fee!—or the child playing with the coffin- -or the nurse filching what fortune, harsh, yet less harsh than humanity, might have left. In the melancholy depth of humour that steepes both our fancy and our heart in the immortal Romance of Cervantes (for, how profoundly melancholy is it to be compelled by one gallant folly to laugh at all that is gentle, and brave, and wise, and generous!) nothing grates on us more than when—last scene of all, the poor Knight lies dead—his exploits for ever over—for ever dumb his eloquent discourses: than when, I say, we are told that, despite of his grief, even little Sancho did not eat or drink the less:—these touches open to us the real world, it is true; but it is not the best part of it. What a pensive thing is true humour! Certain it was, that when Walter, full of contending emotions at all he had witnessed,—harassed, tortured, yet also elevated, by his feelings, stopped opposite the cottage door, and saw there the Corporal sitting comfortably in the porch,—his vile modicum Sabini before him— his pipe in his mouth, and a complacent expression of satisfaction diffusing itself over features which shrewdness and selfishness had marked for their own;—certain it was, that, at this sight Walter experienced a more displeasing revulsion of feeling—a more entire conviction of sadness—a more consummate disgust of this weary world and the motley masquers that walk thereon, than all the tragic scenes he had just witnessed had excited within him.

"And well, Sir," said the Corporal, slowly rising, "how did it go off?—

Wasn't the villain bash'd to the dust?—You've nabbed him safe, I hope?"

"Silence," said Walter, sternly, "prepare for our departure. The chaise will be here forthwith; we return to Yorkshire this day. Ask me no more now."

"A—well—baugh!" said the Corporal.

There was a long silence. Walter walked to and fro the road before the cottage. The chaise arrived; the luggage was put in. Walter's foot was on the step; but before the Corporal mounted the rumbling dickey, that invaluable domestic hemmed thrice.

"And had you time, Sir, to think of poor Jacob, and look at the cottage, and slip in a word to your uncle about the bit tato ground?"

We pass over the space of time, short in fact, long in suffering, that elapsed, till the prisoner and his companions reached Knaresbro'. Aram's conduct during this time was not only calm but cheerful. The stoical doctrines he had affected through life, he on this trying interval called into remarkable exertion. He it was who now supported the spirits of his mistress and his friend; and though he no longer pretended to be sanguine of acquittal—though again and again he urged upon them the gloomy fact— first, how improbable it was that this course had been entered into against him without strong presumption of guilt; and secondly, how little less improbable it was, that at that distance of time he should be able to procure evidence, or remember circumstances, sufficient on the instant to set aside such presumption,—he yet dwelt partly on the hope of ultimate proof of his innocence, and still more strongly on the firmness of his own mind to bear, without shrinking, even the hardest fate.

"Do not," he said to Lester, "do not look on these trials of life only with the eyes of the world. Reflect how poor and minute a segment in the vast circle of eternity existence is at the best. Its sorrow and its shame are but moments. Always in my brightest and youngest hours I have wrapt my heart in the contemplation of an august futurity.

"The soul, secure in its existence, smiles
At the drawn dagger, and defies its point.'

"If I die even the death of the felon, it is beyond the power of fate to separate us for long. It is but a pang, and we are united again for ever; for ever in that far and shadowy clime, where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.' Were it not for Madeline's dear sake, I should long since have been over weary of the world. As it is, the sooner, even by a violent and unjust fate, we leave a path begirt with snares below and tempests above, the happier for that soul which looks to its lot in this earth as the least part of its appointed doom."

In discourses like this, which the nature of his eloquence was peculiarly calculated to render solemn and impressive, Aram strove to prepare his friends for the worst, and perhaps to cheat, or to steel, himself. Ever as he spoke thus, Lester or Ellinor broke on him with impatient remonstrance; but Madeline, as if imbued with a deeper and more mournful penetration into the future, listened in tearless and breathless attention. She gazed upon him with a look that shared the thought he expressed, though it read not (yet she dreamed so) the heart from which it came. In the words of that beautiful poet, to whose true nature, so full of unuttered tenderness—so fraught with the rich nobility of love—we have begun slowly to awaken,

"Her lip was silent, scarcely beat her heart.
Her eye alone proclaimed 'we will not part!'
Thy 'hope' may perish, or thy friends may flee.
Farewell to life—but not adieu to thee!"

—[Lara]

They arrived at noon at the house of Mr. Thornton, and Aram underwent his examination. Though he denied most of the particulars in Houseman's evidence, and expressly the charge of murder, his commitment was made out; and that day he was removed by the officers, (Barker and Moor, who had arrested him at Grassdale,) to York Castle, to await his trial at the assizes.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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