

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

DEVEREUX — VOLUME

06

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
Devereux — Volume 06

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BOOK VI

CHAPTER I

THE RETREAT

I ARRIVED at St. Petersburg, and found the Czarina, whose conjugal perfidy was more than suspected, tolerably resigned to the extinction of that dazzling life whose incalculable and god-like utility it is reserved for posterity to appreciate! I have observed, by the way, that in general men are the less mourned by their families in proportion as they are the more mourned by the community. The great are seldom amiable; and those who are the least lenient to our errors are invariably our relations!

Many circumstances at that time conspired to make my request to quit the imperial service appear natural and appropriate. The death of the Czar, joined to a growing jealousy and suspicion between the English monarch and Russia, which, though long existing, was now become more evident and notorious than heretofore, gave me full opportunity to observe that my pardon had been obtained from King George three years since, and that private as well as national ties rendered my return to England a measure not only of expediency but necessity. The imperial Catherine granted me my dismissal in the most flattering terms, and added the high distinction of the Order founded in honour of the memorable feat by which she had saved her royal consort and the Russian army to the Order of St. Andrew, which I had already received.

I transferred my wealth, now immense, to England, and, with the pomp which became the rank and reputation Fortune had bestowed upon me, I commenced the long land-journey I had chalked out to myself. Although I had alleged my wish to revisit England as the main reason of my retirement from Russia, I had also expressed an intention of visiting Italy previous to my return to England. The physicians, indeed, had recommended to me that delicious climate as an antidote to the ills my constitution had sustained in the freezing skies of the north; and in my own heart I had secretly appointed some more solitary part of the Divine Land for the scene of my purposed hermitage and seclusion. It is indeed astonishing how those who have lived much in cold climates yearn for lands of mellow light and summer luxuriance; and I felt for a southern sky the same resistless longing which sailors, in the midst of the vast ocean, have felt for the green fields and various landscape of the shore.

I traversed, then, the immense tracts of Russia, passed through Hungary, entered Turkey, which I had wished to visit, where I remained a short time; and, crossing the Adriatic, hailed, for the first time, the Ausonian shore. It was the month of May—that month, of whose lustrous beauty none in a northern clime can dream—that I entered Italy. It may serve as an instance of the power with which a thought that, however important, is generally deemed of too abstract and metaphysical a nature deeply to engross the mind, possessed me then, that I—no cold nor unenthusiastic votary of the classic Muse—made no pilgrimage to city or ruin, but, after a brief sojourn at Ravenna, where I dismissed all my train, set out alone to find the solitary cell for which I now sickened with a hermit's love.

It was at a small village at the foot of the Apennines that I found the object of my search. Strangely enough, there blended with my philosophical ardour a deep mixture of my old romance. Nature, to whose voice the dweller in cities and struggler with mankind had been so long obtuse,

now pleaded audibly at my heart, and called me to her embraces, as a mother calls unto her wearied child. My eye, as with a new vision, became open to the mute yet eloquent loveliness of this most fairy earth; and hill and valley, the mirror of silent waters, the sunny stillness of woods, and the old haunts of satyr and nymph, revived in me the fountains of past poetry, and became the receptacles of a thousand spells, mightier than the charms of any enchanter save Love, which was departed,—Youth, which was nearly gone,—and Nature, which (more vividly than ever) existed for me still.

I chose, then, my retreat. As I was fastidious in its choice, I cannot refrain from the luxury of describing it. Ah, little did I dream that I had come thither, not only to find a divine comfort but the sources of a human and most passionate woe! Mightiest of the Roman bards! in whom tenderness and reason were so entwined, and who didst sanctify even thine unholy errors with so beautiful and rare a genius! what an invariable truth one line of thine has expressed: "Even in the fairest fountain of delight there is a secret and evil spring eternally bubbling up and scattering its bitter waters over the very flowers which surround its margin!"

In the midst of a lovely and tranquil vale was a small cottage; that was my home. The good people there performed for me all the hospitable offices I required. At a neighbouring monastery I had taken the precaution to make myself known to the superior. Not all Italians—no, nor all monks—belong to either of the two great tribes into which they are generally divided,—knaves or fools. The Abbot Anselmo was a man of rather a liberal and enlarged mind; he not only kept my secret, which was necessary to my peace, but he took my part, which was perhaps necessary to my safety. A philosopher, who desires only to convince himself, and upon one subject, does not require many books. Truth lies in a small compass; and for my part, in considering any speculative subject, I would sooner have with me one book of Euclid as a model than all the library of the Vatican as authorities. But then I am not fond of drawing upon any resources but those of reason for reasonings: wiser men than I am are not so strict. The few books that I did require were, however, of a nature very illicit in Italy; the good Father passed them to me from Ravenna, under his own protection. "I was a holy man," he said, "who wished to render the Catholic Church a great service, by writing a vast book against certain atrocious opinions; and the works I read were, for the most part, works that I was about to confute." This report gained me protection and respect; and, after I had ordered my agent at Ravenna to forward to the excellent Abbot a piece of plate, and a huge cargo of a rare Hungary wine, it was not the Abbot's fault if I was not the most popular person in the neighbourhood.

But to my description: my home was a cottage; the valley in which it lay was divided by a mountain stream, which came from the forest Apennine, a sparkling and wild stranger, and softened into quiet and calm as it proceeded through its green margin in the vale. And that margin, how dazzlingly green it was! At the distance of about a mile from my hut, the stream was broken into a slight waterfall, whose sound was heard distinct and deep in that still place; and often I paused, from my midnight thoughts, to listen to its enchanted and wild melody. The fall was unseen by the ordinary wanderer, for, there, the stream passed through a thick copse; and even when you pierced the grove, and gained the water-side, dark trees hung over the turbulent wave, and the silver spray was thrown upward through the leaves, and fell in diamonds upon the deep green sod.

This was a most favoured haunt with me: the sun glancing through the idle leaves; the music of the water; the solemn absence of all other sounds, except the songs of birds, to which the ear grew accustomed, and, at last, in the abstraction of thought, scarcely distinguished from the silence; the fragrant herbs; and the unnumbered and nameless flowers which formed my couch,—were all calculated to make me pursue uninterruptedly the thread of contemplation which I had, in the less voluptuous and harsher solitude of the closet, first woven from the web of austere thought. I say pursue, for it was too luxurious and sensual a retirement for the conception of a rigid and severe train of reflection; at least it would have been so to me. But when the thought /is once born/, such scenes seem to me the most fit to cradle and to rear it. The torpor of the physical appears to leave to the mental frame a full scope and power; the absence of human cares, sounds, and intrusions, becomes

the best nurse to contemplation; and even that delicious and vague sense of enjoyment which would seem, at first, more genial to the fancy than the mind, preserves the thought undisturbed because contented; so that all but the scheming mind becomes lapped in sleep, and the mind itself lives distinct and active as a dream,—a dream, not vague nor confused nor unsatisfying, but endowed with more than the clearness, the precision, the vigour, of waking life.

A little way from this waterfall was a fountain, a remnant of a classic and golden age. Never did Naiad gaze on a more glassy mirror, or dwell in a more divine retreat. Through a crevice in an overhanging mound of the emerald earth, the father stream of the fountain crept out, born, like Love, among flowers, and in the most sunny smiles; it then fell, broadening and glowing, into a marble basin, at whose bottom, in the shining noon, you might see a soil which mocked the very hues of gold, and the water insects, in their quaint shapes and unknown sports, grouping or gliding in the mid-most wave. A small temple of the lightest architecture stood before the fountain, and in a niche therein a mutilated statue,—possibly of the Spirit of the place. By this fountain my evening walk would linger till the short twilight melted away and the silver wave trembled in the light of the western star. Oh, then what feelings gathered over me as I turned slowly homeward! the air still, breathless, shining; the stars gleaming over the woods of the far Apennine; the hills growing huger in the shade; the small insects humming on the wing; and, ever and anon, the swift bat, wheeling round and amidst them; the music of the waterfall deepening on the ear; and the light and hour lending even a mysterious charm to the cry of the weird owl, flitting after its prey,—all this had a harmony in my thoughts and a food for the meditations in which my days and nights were consumed. The World moulders away the fabric of our early nature, and Solitude rebuilds it on a firmer base.

CHAPTER II

THE VICTORY

O EARTH! Reservoir of life, over whose deep bosom brood the wings of the Universal Spirit, shaking upon thee a blessing and a power,—a blessing and a power to produce and reproduce the living from the dead, so that our flesh is woven from the same atoms which were once the atoms of our sires, and the inexhaustible nutriment of Existence is Decay! O eldest and most solemn Earth, blending even thy loveliness and joy with a terror and an awe! thy sunshine is girt with clouds and circled with storm and tempest; thy day cometh from the womb of darkness, and returneth unto darkness, as man returns unto thy bosom. The green herb that laughs in the valley, the water that sings merrily along the wood; the many-winged and all-searching air, which garners life as a harvest and scatters it as a seed,—all are pregnant with corruption and carry the cradled death within them, as an oak banqueteth the destroying worm. But who that looks upon thee, and loves thee, and inhales thy blessings will ever mingle too deep a moral with his joy? Let us not ask whence come the garlands that we wreath around our altars or shower upon our feasts: will they not bloom as brightly, and breathe with as rich a fragrance, whether they be plucked from the garden or the grave? O Earth, my Mother Earth! dark Sepulchre that closes upon all which the Flesh bears, but Vestibule of the vast regions which the Soul shall pass, how leaped my heart within me when I first fathomed thy real spell!

Yes! never shall I forget the rapture with which I hailed the light that dawned upon me at last! Never shall I forget the suffocating, the full, the ecstatic joy with which I saw the mightiest of all human hopes accomplished; and felt, as if an angel spoke, that there is a life beyond the grave! Tell me not of the pride of ambition; tell me not of the triumphs of science: never had ambition so lofty an end as the search after immortality! never had science so sublime a triumph as the conviction that immortality will be gained! I had been at my task the whole night,—pale alchemist, seeking from meaner truths to extract the greatest of all! At the first hour of day, lo! the gold was there: the labour for which I would have relinquished life was accomplished; the dove descended upon the waters of my soul. I fled from the house. I was possessed as with a spirit. I ascended a hill, which looked for leagues over the sleeping valley. A gray mist hung around me like a veil; I paused, and the great sun broke slowly forth; I gazed upon its majesty, and my heart swelled. "So rises the soul," I said, "from the vapours of this dull being; but the soul waneth not, neither setteth it, nor knoweth it any night, save that from which it dawneth!" The mists rolled gradually away, the sunshine deepened, and the face of Nature lay in smiles, yet silently, before me. It lay before me, a scene that I had often witnessed and hailed and worshipped: /but it was not the same/; a glory had passed over it; it was steeped in a beauty and a holiness, in which neither youth nor poetry nor even love had ever robed it before! The change which the earth had undergone was like that of some being we have loved, when death is passed, and from a mortal it becomes an angel!

I uttered a cry of joy, and was then as silent as all around me. I felt as if henceforth there was a new compact between Nature and myself. I felt as if every tree and blade of grass were henceforth to be eloquent with a voice and instinct with a spell. I felt as if a religion had entered into the earth, and made oracles of all that the earth bears; the old fables of Dodona were to become realized, and /the very leaves/ to be hallowed by a sanctity and to murmur with a truth. I was no longer only a part of that which withers and decays; I was no longer a machine of clay, moved by a spring, and to be trodden into the mire which I had trod; I was no longer tied to humanity by links which could never be broken, and which, if broken, would avail me not. I was become, as if by a miracle, a part of a vast though unseen spirit. It was not to the matter, but to the essences, of things that I bore kindred and alliance; the stars and the heavens resumed over me their ancient influence; and, as I looked along

the far hills and the silent landscape, a voice seemed to swell from the stillness, and to say, "I am the life of these things, a spirit distinct from the things themselves. It is to me that you belong forever and forever: separate, but equally indissoluble; apart, but equally eternal!"

I spent the day upon the hills. It was evening when I returned. I lingered by the old fountain, and saw the stars rise, and tremble, one by one, upon the wave. The hour was that which Isora had loved the best, and that which the love of her had consecrated the most to me. And never, oh, never, did it sink into my heart with a deeper sweetness, or a more soothing balm. I had once more knit my soul to Isora's: I could once more look from the toiling and the dim earth, and forget that Isora had left me, in dreaming of our reunion. Blame me not, you who indulge in a religious hope more severe and more sublime; you who miss no footsteps from the earth, nor pine for a voice that your human wanderings can hear no more,—blame me not, you whose pulses beat not for the wild love of the created, but whose spirit languishes only for a nearer commune with the Creator,—blame me not too harshly for my mortal wishes, nor think that my faith was the less sincere because it was tinted in the most unchanging dyes of the human heart, and indissolubly woven with the memory of the dead! Often from our weaknesses our strongest principles of conduct are born; and from the acorn which a breeze has wafted springs the oak which defies the storm.

The first intoxication and rapture consequent upon the reward of my labour passed away; but, unlike other excitement, it was followed not by languor or a sated and torpid calm: a soothing and delicious sensation possessed me; my turbulent senses slept; and Memory, recalling the world, rejoiced at the retreat which Hope had acquired.

I now surrendered myself to a nobler philosophy than in crowds and cities I had hitherto known. I no longer satirized; I inquired: I no longer derided; I examined. I looked from the natural proofs of immortality to the written promise of our Father; I sought not to baffle men, but to worship Truth; I applied myself more to the knowledge of good and evil; I bowed my soul before the loveliness of Virtue; and though scenes of wrath and passion yet lowered in the future, and I was again speedily called forth to act, to madden, to contend, perchance to sin, the Image is still unbroken, and the Votary has still an offering for its Altar!

CHAPTER III

THE HERMIT OF THE WELL

THE thorough and deep investigation of those principles from which we learn the immortality of the soul, and the nature of its proper ends, leads the mind through such a course of reflection and of study; it is attended with so many exalting, purifying, and, if I may so say, etherealizing thoughts,—that I do believe no man has ever pursued it, and not gone back to the world a better and a nobler man than he was before. Nay, so deeply must these elevating and refining studies be conned, so largely and sensibly must they enter the intellectual system, that I firmly think that even a sensualist who has only considered the subject with a view to convince himself that he is clay, and has therefore an excuse to the curious conscience for his grosser desires; nay, should he come to his wished-for yet desolate conclusion, from which the abhorrent nature shrinks and recoils, I do nevertheless firmly think, should the study have been long and deep, that he would wonder to find his desires had lost their poignancy and his objects their charm. He would descend from the Alp he had climbed to the low level on which he formerly deemed it a bliss to dwell, with the feeling of one who, having long drawn in high places an empyreal air, has become unable to inhale the smoke and the thick vapour he inhaled of yore. His soul once aroused would stir within him, though he felt it not, and though he grew not a believer, he would cease to be only the voluptuary.

I meant at one time to have here stated the arguments which had perplexed me on one side, and those which afterwards convinced me on the other. I do not do so for many reasons, one of which will suffice; namely, the evident and palpable circumstance that a dissertation of that nature would, in a biography like the present, be utterly out of place and season. Perhaps, however, at a later period of life, I may collect my own opinions on the subject into a separate work, and bequeath that work to future generations, upon the same conditions as the present memoir.

One day I was favoured by a visit from one of the monks at the neighbouring abbey. After some general conversation he asked me if I had yet encountered the Hermit of the Well?

"No," said I, and I was going to add, that I had not even heard of him, "but I now remember that the good people of the house have more than once spoken to me of him as a rigid and self-mortifying recluse."

"Yes," said the holy friar; "Heaven forbid that I should say aught against the practice of the saints and pious men to deny unto themselves the lusts of the flesh, but such penances may be carried too far. However, it is an excellent custom, and the Hermit of the Well is an excellent creature. /Santa Maria!/ what delicious stuff is that Hungary wine your scholarship was pleased to bestow upon our father Abbot. He suffered me to taste it the eve before last. I had been suffering with a pain in the reins, and the wine acted powerfully upon me as an efficacious and inestimable medicine. Do you find, my Son, that it bore the journey to your lodging here as well as to the convent cellars?"

"Why, really, my Father, I have none of it here; but the people of the house have a few flasks of a better wine than ordinary, if you will deign to taste it in lieu of the Hungary wine."

"Oh—oh!" said the monk, groaning, "my reins trouble me much: perhaps the wine may comfort me!" and the wine was brought.

"It is not of so rare a flavour as that which you sent to our reverend father," said the monk, wiping his mouth with his long sleeve. "Hungary must be a charming place; is it far from hence? It joins the heretical,—I pray your pardon, it joins the continent of England, I believe?"

"Not exactly, Father; but whatever its topography, it is a rare country—for those who like it! But tell me of this Hermit of the Well. How long has he lived here? and how came he by his appellation? Of what country is he? and of what birth?"

"You ask me too many questions at once, my Son. The country of the holy man is a mystery to us all. He speaks the Tuscan dialect well, but with a foreign accent. Nevertheless, though the wine is not of Hungary, it has a pleasant flavour. I wonder how the rogues kept it so snugly from the knowledge and comfort of their pious brethren of the monastery!"

"And how long has the Hermit lived in your vicinity?"

"Nearly eight years, my Son. It was one winter's evening that he came to our convent in the dress of a worldly traveller, to seek our hospitality, and a shelter for the night, which was inclement and stormy. He stayed with us a few days, and held some conversation with our father Abbot; and one morning, after roaming in the neighbourhood to look at the old stones and ruins, which is the custom of travellers, he returned, put into our box some alms, and two days afterwards he appeared in the place he now inhabits and in the dress he assumes."

"And of what nature, my Father, is the place, and of what fashion the dress?"

"Holy Saint Francis!" exclaimed the Father, with a surprise so great that I thought at first it related to the wine, "Holy Saint Francis! have you not seen the well yet?"

"No, Father, unless you speak of the fountain about a mile and a quarter distant."

"Tusk—tusk!" said the good man, "what ignoramuses you travellers are! You affect to know what kind of slippers Prester John wears and to have been admitted to the bed-chamber of /the Pagoda of China/; and yet, when one comes to sound you, you are as ignorant of everything a man of real learning knows as an Englishman is of his missal. Why, I thought that every fool in every country had heard of the Holy Well of St. Francis, situated exactly two miles from our famous convent, and that every fool in the neighbourhood had seen it."

"What the fools, my Father, whether in this neighbourhood or any other, may have heard or seen, I, who profess not ostensibly to belong to so goodly an order, cannot pretend to know; but be assured that the Holy Well of St. Francis is as unfamiliar to me as the Pagoda of China—Heaven bless /him/—is to you."

Upon this the learned monk, after expressing due astonishment, offered to show it to me; and as I thought I might by acquiescence get rid of him the sooner, and as, moreover, I wished to see the Abbot, to whom some books for me had been lately sent, I agreed to the offer.

The well, said the monk, lay not above a mile out of the customary way to the monastery; and after /we/ had finished the flask of wine, we sallied out on our excursion,—the monk upon a stately and strong ass, myself on foot.

The Abbot, on granting me his friendship and protection, had observed that I was not the only stranger and recluse on whom his favour was bestowed. He had then mentioned the Hermit of the Well, as an eccentric and strange being, who lived an existence of rigid penance, harmless to others, painful only to himself. This story had been confirmed in the few conversations I had ever interchanged with my host and hostess, who seemed to take a peculiar pleasure in talking of the Solitary; and from them I had heard also many anecdotes of his charity towards the poor and his attention to the sick. All these circumstances came into my mind as the good monk indulged his loquacity upon the subject, and my curiosity became at last somewhat excited respecting my fellow recluse.

I now learned from the monk that the post of Hermit of the Well was an office of which the present anchorite was by no means the first tenant. The well was one of those springs, frequent in Catholic countries, to which a legend and a sanctity are attached; and twice a year—once in the spring, once in the autumn—the neighbouring peasants flocked together, on a stated day, to drink, and lose their diseases. As the spring most probably did possess some medicinal qualities, a few extraordinary cures had occurred, especially among those pious persons who took not biennial, but constant draughts; and to doubt its holiness was downright heresy.

Now, hard by this well was a cavern, which, whether first formed by nature or art, was now, upon the whole, constructed into a very commodious abode; and here, for years beyond the memory

of man, some solitary person had fixed his abode to dispense and to bless the water, to be exceedingly well fed by the surrounding peasants, to wear a long gown of serge or sackcloth, and to be called the Hermit of the Well. So fast as each succeeding anchorite died there were enough candidates eager to supply his place; for it was no bad /metier/ to some penniless impostor to become the quack and patentee of a holy specific. The choice of these candidates always rested with the superior of the neighbouring monastery; and it is not impossible that he made an indifferently good percentage upon the annual advantages of his protection and choice.

At the time the traveller appeared, the former hermit had just departed this life, and it was, therefore, to the vacancy thus occasioned that he had procured himself to be elected. The incumbent appeared quite of a different mould from the former occupants of the hermitage. He accepted, it is true, the gifts laid at regular periods upon a huge stone between the hermitage and the well, but he distributed among the donors alms far more profitable than their gifts. He entered no village, borne upon an ass laden with twin sacks, for the purpose of sanctimoniously robbing the inhabitants; no profane songs were ever heard resounding from his dwelling by the peasant incautiously lingering at a late hour too near its vicinity; my guide, the monk, complained bitterly of his unsociability, and no scandalous legend of nymph-like comforters and damsel visitants haunting the sacred dwelling escaped from the garrulous friar's well-loaded budget.

"Does he study much?" said I, with the interest of a student.

"I fear me not," quoth the monk. "I have had occasion often to enter his abode, and I have examined all things with a close eye,—for, praised be the Lord, I have faculties more than ordinarily clear and observant,—but I have seen no books therein, excepting a missal, and a Latin or Greek Testament, I know not well which; nay, so incurious or unlearned is the holy man that he rejected even a loan of the 'Life of Saint Francis,' notwithstanding it has many and rare pictures, to say nothing of its most interesting and amazing tales."

More might the monk have said, had we not now suddenly entered a thick and sombre wood. A path cut through it was narrow, and only capable of admitting a traveller on foot or horseback; and the boughs overhead were so darkly interlaced that the light scarcely, and only in broken and erratic glimmerings, pierced the canopy.

"It is the wood," said the monk, crossing himself, "wherein the wonderful adventure happened to Saint Francis, which I will one day narrate at length to you."

"And we are near the well, I suppose?" said I.

"It is close at hand," answered the monk.

In effect we had not proceeded above fifty yards before the path brought us into a circular space of green sod, in the midst of which was a small square stone building, of plain but not inelegant shape, and evidently of great antiquity. At one side of this building was an iron handle, for the purpose of raising water, that cast itself into a stone basin, to which was affixed by a strong chain an iron cup. An inscription in monkish Latin was engraved over the basin, requesting the traveller to pause and drink, and importing that what that water was to the body, faith was to the soul; near the cistern was a rude seat, formed by the trunk of a tree. The door of the well-house was of iron, and secured by a chain and lock; perhaps the pump was so contrived that only a certain quantum of the sanctified beverage could be drawn up at a time, without application to some mechanism within; and wayfarers were thereby prevented from helping themselves /ad libitum/, and thus depriving the anchorite of the profit and the necessity of his office.

It was certainly a strange, lonely, and wild place; and the green sward, round as a fairy ring, in the midst of trees, which, black, close, and huge, circled it like a wall; and the solitary gray building in the centre, gaunt and cold, startled the eye with the abruptness of its appearance, and the strong contrast made by its wan hues to the dark verdure and forest gloom around it.

I took a draught of the water, which was very cold and tasteless, and reminded the monk of his disorder in the reins, to which a similar potation might possibly be efficacious. To this suggestion the

monk answered that he would certainly try the water some other time; but that at present the wine he had drunk might pollute its divine properties. So saying, he turned off the conversation by inviting me to follow him to the hermitage.

In our way thither he pointed out a large fragment of stone, and observed that the water would do me evil instead of good if I forgot to remunerate its guardian. I took the hint, and laid a piece of silver on the fragment.

A short journey through the wood brought us to the foot of a hill covered with trees, and having at its base a strong stone door, the entrance to the excavated home of the anchorite. The monk gently tapped thrice at this door, but no answer came. "The holy man is from home," said he, "let us return."

We did so; and the monk, keeping behind me, managed, as he thought unseen, to leave the stone as naked as we had found it! We now struck through another path in the wood, and were soon at the convent. I did not lose the opportunity to question the Abbot respecting his tenant: I learned from him little more than the particulars I have already narrated, save that in concluding his details, he said:—

"I can scarcely doubt but that the Hermit is, like yourself, a person of rank; his bearing and his mien appear to denote it. He has given, and gives yearly, large sums to the uses of the convent: and, though he takes the customary gifts of the pious villagers, it is only by my advice and for the purpose of avoiding suspicion. Should he be considered rich, it might attract cupidity; and there are enough bold hands and sharp knives in the country to place the wealthy and the unguarded in some peril. Whoever he may be—for he has not confided his secret to me—I do not doubt but that he is doing penance for some great crime; and, whatever be the crime, I suspect that its earthly punishment is nearly over. The Hermit is naturally of a delicate and weak frame, and year after year I have marked him sensibly wearing away; so that when I last saw him, three days since, I was shocked at the visible ravages which disease or penance had engraven upon him. If ever Death wrote legibly, its characters are in that brow and cheek."

"Poor man! Know you not even whom to apprise of his decease when he is no more?"

"I do not yet; but the last time I saw him he told me that he found himself drawing near his end, and that he should not quit life without troubling me with one request."

After this the Abbot spoke of other matters, and my visit expired.

Interested in the recluse more deeply than I acknowledged to myself, I found my steps insensibly leading me homeward by the more circuitous road which wound first by the holy well. I did not resist the impulse, but walked musingly onward by the waning twilight, for the day was now over, until I came to the well. As I emerged from the wood, I started involuntarily and drew back. A figure, robed from head to foot in a long sable robe, sat upon the rude seat beside the well; sat so still, so motionless, that coming upon it abruptly in that strange place, the heart beat irregularly at an apparition so dark in hue and so death-like in its repose. The hat, large, broad, and overhanging, which suited the costume, was lying on the ground; and the face, which inclined upward, seemed to woo the gentle air of the quiet and soft skies. I approached a few steps, and saw the profile of the countenance more distinctly than I had done before. It was of a marble whiteness; the features, though sharpened and attenuated by disease, were of surpassing beauty; the hair was exceedingly, almost effeminately, long, and hung in waves of perfect jet on either side; the mouth was closed firmly, and deep lines or rather furrows were traced from its corners to either nostril. The stranger's beard, of a hue equally black as the hair, was dishevelled and neglected, but not very long; and one hand, which lay on the sable robe, was so thin and wan you might have deemed the very starlight could have shone through it. I did not doubt that it was the recluse whom I saw; I drew near and accosted him.

"Your blessing, holy Father, and your permission to taste the healing of your well."

Sudden as was my appearance, and abrupt my voice, the Hermit evinced by no startled gesture a token of surprise. He turned very slowly round, cast upon me an indifferent glance, and said, in a sweet and very low tone,—

"You have my blessing, Stranger: there is water in the cistern; drink, and be healed."

I dipped the bowl in the basin, and took sparingly of the water. In the accent and tone of the stranger, my ear, accustomed to the dialects of many nations, recognized something English; I resolved, therefore, to address him in my native tongue, rather than the indifferent Italian in which I had first accosted him.

"The water is fresh and cooling: would, holy Father, that it could penetrate to a deeper malady than the ills of flesh; that it could assuage the fever of the heart, or lave from the wearied mind the dust which it gathers from the mire and travail of the world."

Now the Hermit testified surprise; but it was slight and momentary. He gazed upon me more attentively than he had done before, and said, after a pause,—

"My countryman! and in this spot! It is not often that the English penetrate into places where no ostentatious celebrity dwells to sate curiosity and flatter pride. My countryman: it is well, and perhaps fortunate. Yes," he said, after a second pause, "yes; it were indeed a boon, had the earth a fountain for the wounds which fester and the disease which consumes the heart."

"The earth has oblivion, Father, if not a cure."

"It is false!" cried the Hermit, passionately, and starting wildly from his seat; "the earth has /no/ oblivion. The grave,—is /that/ forgetfulness? No, no: /there is no grave for the soul!/ The deeds pass; the flesh corrupts: but the memory passes not, and withers not. From age to age, from world to world, through eternity, throughout creation, it is perpetuated; and immortality,—a curse,—/a hell!/"

Surprised by the vehemence of the Hermit, I was still more startled by the agonizing and ghastly expression of his face.

"My Father," said I, "pardon me if I have pressed upon a sore. I also have that within which, did a stranger touch it, would thrill my whole frame with torture, and I would fain ask from your holy, soothing, and pious comfort, something of alleviation or of fortitude."

The Hermit drew near to me; he laid his thin hand upon my arm, and looked long and wistfully in my face. It was then that a suspicion crept through me which after observation proved to be true, that the wanderings of those dark eyes and the meaning of that blanched brow were tintured with insanity.

"Brother and fellow man," said he, mournfully, "hast thou in truth suffered? and dost thou still smart at the remembrance? We are friends then. If thou hast suffered as much as I have, I will fall down and do homage to thee as a superior; for pain has its ranks, and I think at times that none ever climbed the height that I have done. Yet you look not like one who has had nights of delirium, and days in which the heart lay in the breast, as a corpse endowed with consciousness might lie in the grave, feeling the worm gnaw it, and the decay corrupt, and yet incapable of resistance or of motion. Your cheek is thin, but firm; your eye is haughty and bright; you have the air of one who has lived with men, and struggled and not been vanquished in the struggle. Suffered! No, man, no,—/you/ have not suffered!"

"My Father, it is not in the countenance that Fate graves her records. I have, it is true, contended with my fellows; and if wealth and honour be the premium, not in vain: but I have not contended against Sorrow with a like success; and I stand before you, a being who, if passion be a tormentor and the death of the loved a loss, has borne that which the most wretched will not envy."

Again a fearful change came over the face of the recluse: he grasped my arm more vehemently, "You speak my own sorrows; you utter my own curse; I will see you again; you may do my last will better than yon monks. Can I trust you? If you have in truth known misfortune, I will! I will! yea, even to the outpouring—merciful, merciful God, what would I say,—what would I reveal!"

Suddenly changing his voice, he released me, and said, touching his forehead with a meaning gesture and a quiet smile, "You say you are my rival in pain. Have you ever known the rage and despair of the heart mount /here/? It is a wonderful thing to be calm as I am now, when that rising makes itself felt in fire and torture!"

"If there be aught, Father, which a man who cares not what country he visit, or what deed—so it be not of guilt or shame—he commit, can do towards the quiet of your soul, say it, and I will attempt your will."

"You are kind, my Son," said the Hermit, resuming his first melancholy and dignified composure of mien and bearing; "and there is something in your voice which seems to me like a tone that I have heard in youth. Do you live near at hand?"

"In the valley, about four miles hence; I am, like yourself, a fugitive from the world."

"Come to me then to-morrow at eve; to-morrow! No, that is a holy eve, and I must keep it with scourge and prayer. The next at sunset. I shall be collected then, and I would fain know more of you than I do. Bless you, my Son; adieu."

"Yet stay, Father, may I not conduct you home?"

"No; my limbs are weak, but I trust they can carry me to that home, till I be borne thence to my last. Farewell! the night grows, and man fills even these shades with peril. The eve after next, at sunset, we meet again."

So saying, the hermit waved his hand, and I stood apart, watching his receding figure, until the trees cloaked the last glimpse from my view. I then turned homeward, and reached my cottage in safety, despite of the hermit's caution. But I did not retire to rest: a powerful foreboding, rather than suspicion, that, in the worn and wasted form which I had beheld, there was identity with one whom I had not met for years, and whom I had believed to be no more, thrillingly possessed me.

"Can—can it be?" thought I. "Can grief have a desolation, or remembrance an agony, sufficient to create so awful a change? And of all human beings, for that one to be singled out; that one in whom passion and sin were, if they existed, nipped in their earliest germ, and seemingly rendered barren of all fruit! If too, almost against the evidence of sight and sense, an innate feeling has marked in that most altered form the traces of a dread recognition, would not his memory have been yet more vigilant than mine? Am I so changed that he should have looked me in the face so wistfully, and found there naught save the lineaments of a stranger?" And, actuated by this thought, I placed the light by the small mirror which graced my chamber. I recalled, as I gazed, my features as they had been in earliest youth. "No," I said, with a sigh, "there is nothing here that he should recognize."

And I said aright: my features, originally small and delicate, had grown enlarged and prominent. The long locks of my youth (for only upon state occasions did my early vanity consent to the fashion of the day) were succeeded by curls, short and crisped; the hues, alternately pale and hectic, that the dreams of romance had once spread over my cheek, had settled into the unchanging bronze of manhood; the smooth lip and unshaven chin were clothed with a thick hair; the once unfurrowed brow was habitually knit in thought; and the ardent, restless expression that boyhood wore had yielded to the quiet unmoved countenance of one in whom long custom has subdued all outward sign of emotion, and many and various events left no prevalent token of the mind save that of an habitual but latent resolution. My frame, too, once scarcely less slight than a woman's, was become knit and muscular; and nothing was left by which, in the foreign air, the quiet brow, and the athletic form, my very mother could have recognized the slender figure and changeable face of the boy she had last beheld. The very sarcasm of the eye was gone; and I had learned the world's easy lesson,—the dissimulation of composure.

I have noted one thing in others, and it was particularly noticeable in me; namely, that few who mix very largely with men, and with the courtier's or the citizen's design, ever retain the key and tone of their original voice. The voice of a young man is as yet modulated by nature, and expresses the passion of the moment; that of the matured pupil of art expresses rather the customary occupation of his life. Whether he aims at persuading, convincing, or commanding others, his voice irrevocably settles into the key he ordinarily employs; and, as persuasion is the means men chiefly employ in their commerce with each other, especially in the regions of a court, so a tone of artificial blandness and subdued insinuation is chiefly that in which the accents of worldly men are clothed; the artificial

intonation, long continued, grows into nature, and the very pith and basis of the original sound fritter themselves away. The change was great in me, for at that time which I brought in comparison with the present my age was one in which the voice is yet confused and undecided, struggling between the accents of youth and boyhood; so that even this most powerful and unchanging of all claims upon the memory was in a great measure absent in me; and nothing but an occasional and rare tone could have produced even that faint and unconscious recognition which the Hermit had confessed.

I must be pardoned these egotisms, which the nature of my story renders necessary.

With what eager impatience did I watch the hours to the appointed interview with the Hermit languish themselves away! However, before that time arrived and towards the evening of the next day, I was surprised by the rare honour of a visit from Anselmo himself. He came attended by two of the mendicant friars of his order, and they carried between them a basket of tolerable size, which, as mine hostess afterwards informed me, with many a tear, went back somewhat heavier than it came, from the load of certain /receptacula/ of that rarer wine which she had had the evening before the indiscreet hospitality to produce.

The Abbot came to inform me that the Hermit had been with him that morning, making many inquiries respecting me. "I told him," said he, "that I was acquainted with your name and birth, but that I was under a solemn promise not to reveal them, without your consent; and I am now here, my Son, to learn from you whether that consent may be obtained?"

"Assuredly not, holy Father!" said I, hastily; nor was I contented until I had obtained a renewal of his promise to that effect. This seemed to give the Abbot some little chagrin: perhaps the Hermit had offered a reward for my discovery. However, I knew that Anselmo, though a griping was a trustworthy man, and I felt safe in his renewed promise. I saw him depart with great satisfaction, and gave myself once more to conjectures respecting the strange recluse.

As the next evening I prepared to depart towards the hermitage, I took peculiar pains to give my person a foreign and disguised appearance. A loose dress, of rude and simple material, and a high cap of fur, were pretty successful in accomplishing this purpose. And, as I gave the last look at the glass before I left the house, I said inly, "If there be any truth in my wild and improbable conjecture respecting the identity of the anchorite, I think time and this dress are sufficient wizards to secure me from a chance of discovery. I will keep a guard upon my words and tones, until, if my thought be verified, a moment fit for unmasking myself arrives. But would to God that the thought be groundless! In such circumstances, and after such an absence, to meet /him/! No; and yet—Well, this meeting will decide."

CHAPTER IV

THE SOLUTION OF MANY MYSTERIES.—A DARK VIEW OF THE LIFE AND NATURE OF MAN

POWERFUL, though not clearly developed in my own mind, was the motive which made me so strongly desire to preserve the /incognito/ during my interview with the Hermit. I have before said that I could not resist a vague but intense belief that he was a person whom I had long believed in the grave; and I had more than once struggled against a dark but passing suspicion that that person was in some measure—mediately, though not directly—connected with the mysteries of my former life. If both these conjectures were true, I thought it possible that the communication the Hermit wished to make might be made yet more willingly to me as a stranger than if he knew who was in reality his confidant. And, at all events, if I could curb the impetuous gushings of my own heart, which yearned for immediate disclosure, I might by hint and prelude ascertain the advantages and disadvantages of revealing myself.

I arrived at the well: the Hermit was already at the place of rendezvous, seated in the same posture in which I had before seen him. I made my reverence and accosted him.

"I have not failed you, Father."

"That is rarely a true boast with men," said the Hermit, smiling mournfully, but without sarcasm; "and were the promise of greater avail, it might not have been so rigidly kept."

"The promise, Father, seemed to me of greater weight than you would intimate," answered I.

"How mean you?" said the Hermit, hastily.

"Why, that we may perhaps serve each other by our meeting: you, Father, may comfort me by your counsels; I you by my readiness to obey your request."

The Hermit looked at me for some moments, and, as well as I could, I turned away my face from his gaze. I might have spared myself the effort. He seemed to recognize nothing familiar in my countenance; perhaps his mental malady assisted my own alteration.

"I have inquired respecting you," he said, after a pause, "and I hear that you are a learned and wise man, who has seen much of the world, and played the part both of soldier and of scholar in its various theatres: is my information true?"

"Not true with the respect to the learning, Father, but true with regard to the experience. I have been a pilgrim in many countries of Europe."

"Indeed!" said the Hermit, eagerly. "Come with me to my home, and tell me of the wonders you have seen."

I assisted the Hermit to rise, and he walked slowly towards the cavern, leaning upon my arm. Oh, how that light touch thrilled through my frame! How I longed to cry, "Are you not the one whom I have loved, and mourned, and believed buried in the tomb?" But I checked myself. We moved on in silence. The Hermit's hand was on the door of the cavern, when he said, in a calm tone, but with evident effort, and turning his face from me while he spoke:—

"And did your wanderings ever carry you into the farther regions of the north? Did the fame of the great Czar ever lead you to the city he has founded?"

"I am right! I am right!" thought I, as I answered, "In truth, holy Father, I spent not a long time at Petersburg; but I am not a stranger either to its wonders or its inhabitants."

"Possibly, then, you may have met with the English favourite of the Czar of whom I hear in my retreat that men have lately spoken somewhat largely?" The Hermit paused again. We were now in a long, low passage, almost in darkness. I scarcely saw him, yet I heard a convulsed movement in his throat before he uttered the remainder of the sentence. "He is called the Count Devereux."

"Father," said I, calmly, "I have both seen and known the man."

"Ha!" said the Hermit, and he leaned for a moment against the wall; "known him—and—how—how—I mean, where is he at this present time?"

"That, Father, is a difficult question respecting one who has led so active a life. He was ambassador at the court of ——— just before I left it."

We had now passed the passage and gained a room of tolerable size; an iron lamp burned within, and afforded a sufficient but somewhat dim light. The Hermit, as I concluded my reply, sank down on a long stone bench, beside a table of the same substance, and leaning his face on his hand, so that the long, large sleeve he wore perfectly concealed his features, said, "Pardon me; my breath is short, and my frame weak; I am quite exhausted, but will speak to you more anon."

I uttered a short answer, and drew a small wooden stool within a few feet of the Hermit's seat. After a brief silence he rose, placed wine, bread, and preserved fruits before me and bade me eat. I seemed to comply with his request, and the apparent diversion of my attention from himself somewhat relieved the embarrassment under which he evidently laboured.

"May I hope," he said, "that were my commission to this—to the Count Devereux—you would execute it faithfully and with speed? Yet stay: you have a high mien, as of one above fortune, but your garb is rude and poor; and if aught of gold could compensate your trouble, the Hermit has other treasures besides this cell."

"I will do your bidding, Father, without robbing the poor. You wish, then, that I should seek Morton Devereux; you wish that I should summon him hither; you wish to see and to confer with him?"

"God of mercy forbid!" cried the Hermit, and with such a vehemence that I was startled from the design of revealing myself, which I was on the point of executing. "I would rather that these walls would crush me into dust, or that this solid stone would crumble beneath my feet,—ay, even into a bottomless pit, than meet the glance of Morton Devereux!"

"Is it even so?" said I, stooping over the wine-cup; "ye have been foes then, I suspect. Well, it matters not: tell me your errand, and it shall be done."

"Done!" cried the Hermit, and a new and certainly a most natural suspicion darted within him, "done! and—fool that I am!—who or what are you that I should believe you take so keen an interest in the wishes of a man utterly unknown to you? I tell you that my wish is that you should cross seas and traverse lands until you find the man I have named to you. Will a stranger do this, and without hire? No—no—I was a fool, and will trust the monks, and give gold, and then my errand will be sped."

"Father, or rather brother," said I, with a slow and firm voice, "for you are of mine own age, and you have the passion and the infirmity which make brethren of all mankind, I am one to whom all places are alike: it matters not whether I visit a northern or a southern clime; I have wealth, which is sufficient to smooth toil; I have leisure, which makes occupation an enjoyment. More than this, I am one who in his gayest and wildest moments has ever loved mankind, and would have renounced at any time his own pleasure for the advantage of another. But at this time, above all others, I am most disposed to forget myself, and there is a passion in your words which leads me to hope that it may be a great benefit which I can confer upon you."

"You speak well," said the Hermit, musingly, "and I may trust you; I will consider yet a little longer, and to-morrow at this hour you shall have my final answer. If you execute the charge I entrust to you, may the blessing of a dying and most wretched man cleave to you forever! But hush; the clock strikes: it is my hour of prayer."

And, pointing to a huge black clock that hung opposite the door, and indicated the hour of nine (according to our English mode of numbering the hours), the Hermit fell on his knees, and, clasping his hands tightly, bent his face over them in the attitude of humiliation and devotion. I followed his example. After a few minutes he rose: "Once in every three hours," said he, with a ghastly expression,

"for the last twelve years have I bowed my soul in anguish before God, and risen to feel that it was in vain: I am cursed without and within!"

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