

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**KENELM
CHILLINGLY —
VOLUME 05**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

Kenelm Chillingly — Volume 05

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Kenelm Chillingly — Volume 05

BOOK V

CHAPTER I

TWO days after the interview recorded in the last chapter of the previous Book, Travers, chancing to call at Kenelm's lodgings, was told by his servant that Mr. Chillingly had left London, alone, and had given no orders as to forwarding letters. The servant did not know where he had gone, or when he would return.

Travers repeated this news incidentally to Cecilia, and she felt somewhat hurt that he had not written her a line respecting Tom's visit. She, however, guessed that he had gone to see the Somerses, and would return to town in a day or so. But weeks passed, the season drew to its close, and of Kenelm Chillingly she saw or heard nothing: he had wholly vanished from the London world. He had but written a line to his servant, ordering him to repair to Exmundham and await him there, and enclosing him a check to pay outstanding bills.

We must now follow the devious steps of the strange being who has grown into the hero of this story. He had left his apartment at daybreak long before his servant was up, with his knapsack, and a small portmanteau, into which he had thrust—besides such additional articles of dress as he thought he might possibly require, and which his knapsack could not contain—a few of his favourite books. Driving with these in a hack-cab to the Vauxhall station, he directed the portmanteau to be forwarded to Moleswich, and flinging the knapsack on his shoulders, walked slowly along the drowsy suburbs that stretched far into the landscape, before, breathing more freely, he found some evidences of rural culture on either side of the high road. It was not, however, till he had left the roofs and trees of pleasant Richmond far behind him that he began to feel he was out of reach of the metropolitan disquieting influences. Finding at a little inn, where he stopped to breakfast, that there was a path along fields, and in sight of the river, through which he could gain the place of his destination, he then quitted the high road, and traversing one of the loveliest districts in one of our loveliest counties, he reached Moleswich about noon.

CHAPTER II

ON entering the main street of the pretty town, the name of Somers, in gilt capitals, was sufficiently conspicuous over the door of a very imposing shop. It boasted two plate-glass windows, at one of which were tastefully exhibited various articles of fine stationery, embroidery patterns, etc.; at the other, no less tastefully, sundry specimens of ornamental basket-work.

Kenelm crossed the threshold and recognized behind the counter—fair as ever, but with an expression of face more staid, and a figure more rounded and matron-like—his old friend Jessie. There were two or three customers before her, between whom she was dividing her attention. While a handsome young lady, seated, was saying, in a somewhat loud but cheery and pleasant voice, "Do not mind me, Mrs. Somers: I can wait," Jessie's quick eye darted towards the stranger, but too rapidly to distinguish his features, which, indeed, he turned away, and began to examine the baskets.

In a minute or so the other customers were served and had departed; and the voice of the lady was again heard, "Now, Mrs. Somers, I want to see your picture-books and toys. I am giving a little children's party this afternoon, and I want to make them as happy as possible."

"Somewhere or other, on this planet, or before my Monad was whisked away to it, I have heard that voice," muttered Kenelm. While Jessie was alertly bringing forth her toys and picture-books, she said, "I am sorry to keep you waiting, sir; but if it is the baskets you come about, I can call my husband."

"Do," said Kenelm.

"William, William," cried Mrs. Somers; and after a delay long enough to allow him to slip on his jacket, William Somers emerged from the back parlour.

His face had lost its old trace of suffering and ill health; it was still somewhat pale, and retained its expression of intellectual refinement.

"How you have improved in your art!" said Kenelm, heartily.

William started, and recognized Kenelm at once. He sprang forward and took Kenelm's outstretched hand in both his own, and, in a voice between laughing and crying, exclaimed, "Jessie, Jessie, it is he!—he whom we pray for every night. God bless you! God bless and make you as happy as He permitted you to make me!"

Before this little speech was faltered out, Jessie was by her husband's side, and she added, in a lower voice, but tremulous with deep feeling, "And me too!"

"By your leave, Will," said Kenelm, and he saluted Jessie's white forehead with a kiss that could not have been kindlier or colder if it had been her grandfather's.

Meanwhile the lady had risen noiselessly and unobserved, and stealing up to Kenelm, looked him full in the face.

"You have another friend here, sir, who has also some cause to thank you—"

"I thought I remembered your voice," said Kenelm, looking puzzled. "But pardon me if I cannot recall your features. Where have we met before?"

"Give me your arm when we go out, and I will bring myself to your recollection. But no: I must not hurry you away now. I will call again in half an hour. Mrs. Somers, meanwhile put up the things I have selected. I will take them away with me when I come back from the vicarage, where I have left the pony-carriage." So, with a parting nod and smile to Kenelm, she turned away, and left him bewildered.

"But who is that lady, Will?"

"A Mrs. Braefield. She is a new comer."

"She may well be that, Will," said Jessie, smiling, "for she has only been married six months."

"And what was her name before she married?"

"I am sure I don't know, sir. It is only three months since we came here, and she has been very kind to us and an excellent customer. Everybody likes her. Mr. Braefield is a city gentleman and very rich; and they live in the finest house in the place, and see a great deal of company."

"Well, I am no wiser than I was before," said Kenelm. "People who ask questions very seldom are."

"And how did you find us out, sir?" said Jessie. "Oh! I guess," she added, with an arch glance and smile. "Of course, you have seen Miss Travers, and she told you."

"You are right. I first learned your change of residence from her, and thought I would come and see you, and be introduced to the baby,—a boy, I understand? Like you, Will?"

"No, sir, the picture of Jessie."

"Nonsense, Will; it is you all over, even to its little hands."

"And your good mother, Will, how did you leave her?"

"Oh, sir!" cried Jessie, reproachfully; "do you think we could have the heart to leave Mother, —so lone and rheumatic too? She is tending baby now,—always does while I am in the shop."

Here Kenelm followed the young couple into the parlour, where, seated by the window, they found old Mrs. Somers reading the Bible and rocking the baby, who slept peacefully in its cradle.

"Will," said Kenelm, bending his dark face over the infant, "I will tell you a pretty thought of a foreign poet's, which has been thus badly translated:

"Blest babe, a boundless world this bed so narrow seems to thee;
Grow man, and narrower than this bed the boundless world shall be."¹

"I don't think that is true, sir," said Will, simply; "for a happy home is a world wide enough for any man."

Tears started into Jessie's eyes; she bent down and kissed—not the baby, but the cradle. "Will made it." She added blushing, "I mean the cradle, sir."

Time flew past while Kenelm talked with Will and the old mother, for Jessie was soon summoned back to the shop; and Kenelm was startled when he found the half-hour's grace allowed to him was over, and Jessie put her head in at the door and said, "Mrs. Braefield is waiting for you."

"Good-by, Will; I shall come to see you again soon; and my mother gives me a commission to buy I don't know how many specimens of your craft."

¹ Schiller.

CHAPTER III

A SMART pony-phaeton, with a box for a driver in livery equally smart, stood at the shop-door.

"Now, Mr. Chillingly," said Mrs. Braefield, "it is my turn to run away with you; get in!"

"Eh!" murmured Kenelm, gazing at her with large dreamy eyes. "Is it possible?"

"Quite possible; get in. Coachman, home! Yes, Mr. Chillingly, you meet again that giddy creature whom you threatened to thrash; it would have served her right. I ought to feel so ashamed to recall myself to your recollection, and yet I am not a bit ashamed. I am proud to show you that I have turned out a steady, respectable woman, and, my husband tells me, a good wife."

"You have only been six months married, I hear," said Kenelm, dryly.

"I hope your husband will say the same six years hence."

"He will say the same sixty years hence, if we live as long."

"How old is he now?"

"Thirty-eight."

"When a man wants only two years of his hundredth, he probably has learned to know his own mind; but then, in most cases, very little mind is left to him to know."

"Don't be satirical, sir; and don't talk as if you were railing at marriage, when you have just left as happy a young couple as the sun ever shone upon; and owing,—for Mrs. Somers has told me all about her marriage,—owing their happiness to you."

"Their happiness to me! not in the least. I helped them to marry, and in spite of marriage they helped each other to be happy."

"You are still unmarried yourself?"

"Yes, thank Heaven!"

"And are you happy?"

"No; I can't make myself happy: myself is a discontented brute."

"Then why do you say 'thank Heaven'?"

"Because it is a comfort to think I am not making somebody else unhappy."

"Do you believe that if you loved a wife who loved you, you should make her unhappy?"

"I am sure I don't know; but I have not seen a woman whom I could love as a wife. And we need not push our inquiries further. What has become of that ill-treated gray cob?"

"He was quite well, thank you, when I last heard of him."

"And the uncle who would have inflicted me upon you, if you had not so gallantly defended yourself?"

"He is living where he did live, and has married his housekeeper. He felt a delicate scruple against taking that step till I was married myself and out of the way."

Here Mrs. Braefield, beginning to speak very hurriedly, as women who seek to disguise emotion often do, informed Kenelm how unhappy she had felt for weeks after having found an asylum with her aunt,—how she had been stung by remorse and oppressed by a sense of humiliation at the thought of her folly and the odious recollection of Mr. Compton,—how she had declared to herself that she would never marry any one now—never! How Mr. Braefield happened to be on a visit in the neighbourhood, and saw her at church,—how he had sought an introduction to her,—and how at first she rather disliked him than not; but he was so good and so kind, and when at last he proposed—and she had frankly told him all about her girlish flight and infatuation—how generously he had thanked her for a candour which had placed her as high in his esteem as she had been before in his love. "And from that moment," said Mrs. Braefield, passionately, "my whole heart leaped to him. And now you know all; and here we are at the Lodge."

The pony-phaeton went with great speed up a broad gravel-drive, bordered with rare evergreens, and stopped at a handsome house with a portico in front, and a long conservatory at the garden side,

—one of those houses which belong to "city gentlemen," and often contain more comfort and exhibit more luxury than many a stately manorial mansion.

Mrs. Braefield evidently felt some pride as she led Kenelm through the handsome hall, paved with Malvern tiles and adorned with Scagliola columns, and into a drawing-room furnished with much taste and opening on a spacious flower-garden.

"But where is Mr. Braefield?" asked Kenelm.

"Oh, he has taken the rail to his office; but he will be back long before dinner, and of course you dine with us."

"You're very hospitable, but—"

"No buts: I will take no excuse. Don't fear that you shall have only mutton-chops and a rice-pudding; and, besides, I have a children's party coming at two o'clock, and there will be all sorts of fun. You are fond of children, I am sure?"

"I rather think I am not. But I have never clearly ascertained my own inclinations upon that subject."

"Well, you shall have ample opportunity to do so to-day. And oh! I promise you the sight of the loveliest face that you can picture to yourself when you think of your future wife."

"My future wife, I hope, is not yet born," said Kenelm, wearily, and with much effort suppressing a yawn. "But at all events, I will stay till after two o'clock; for two o'clock, I presume, means luncheon."

"Mrs. Braefield laughed. "You retain your appetite?"

"Most single men do, provided they don't fall in love and become doubled up."

At this abominable attempt at a pun, Mrs. Braefield disdained to laugh; but turning away from its perpetrator she took off her hat and gloves and passed her hands lightly over her forehead, as if to smooth back some vagrant tress in locks already sufficiently sheen and trim. She was not quite so pretty in female attire as she had appeared in boy's dress, nor did she look quite as young. In all other respects she was wonderfully improved. There was a serener, a more settled intelligence in her frank bright eyes, a milder expression in the play of her parted lips. Kenelm gazed at her with pleased admiration. And as now, turning from the glass, she encountered his look, a deeper colour came into the clear delicacy of her cheeks, and the frank eyes moistened. She came up to him as he sat, and took his hand in both hers, pressing it warmly. "Ah, Mr. Chillingly," she said, with impulsive tremulous tones, "look round, look round this happy, peaceful home!—the life so free from a care, the husband whom I so love and honour; all the blessings that I might have so recklessly lost forever had I not met with you, had I been punished as I deserved. How often I thought of your words, that 'you would be proud of my friendship when we met again!' What strength they gave me in my hours of humbled self-reproach!" Her voice here died away as if in the effort to suppress a sob.

She released his hand, and, before he could answer, passed quickly through the open sash into the garden.

CHAPTER IV

THE children have come,—some thirty of them, pretty as English children generally are, happy in the joy of the summer sunshine, and the flower lawns, and the feast under cover of an awning suspended between chestnut-trees, and carpeted with sward.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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