

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**A STRANGE STORY —
VOLUME 03**

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
A Strange Story — Volume 03

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

A Strange Story — Volume 03

CHAPTER XXV

My intercourse with Margrave grew habitual and familiar. He came to my house every morning before sunrise; in the evenings we were again brought together: sometimes in the houses to which we were both invited, sometimes at his hotel, sometimes in my own home.

Nothing more perplexed me than his aspect of extreme youthfulness, contrasted with the extent of the travels, which, if he were to be believed, had left little of the known world unexplored. One day I asked him bluntly how old he was.

"How old do I look? How old should you suppose me to be?"

"I should have guessed you to be about twenty, till you spoke of having come of age some years ago."

"Is it a sign of longevity when a man looks much younger than he is?"

"Conjoined with other signs, certainly!"

"Have I the other signs?"

"Yes, a magnificent, perhaps a matchless, constitutional organization. But you have evaded my question as to your age; was it an impertinence to put it?"

"No. I came of age—let me see—three years ago."

"So long since? Is it possible? I wish I had your secret!"

"Secret! What secret?"

"The secret of preserving so much of boyish freshness in the wear and tear of man-like passions and man-like thoughts."

"You are still young yourself,—under forty?"

"Oh, yes! some years under forty."

"And Nature gave you a grander frame and a finer symmetry of feature than she bestowed on me."

"Pooh! pooh! You have the beauty that must charm the eyes of woman, and that beauty in its sunny forenoon of youth. Happy man! if you love and wish to be sure that you are loved again."

"What you call love—the unhealthy sentiment, the feverish folly—left behind me, I think forever, when—"

"Ay, indeed,—when?"

"I came of age!"

"Hoary cynic! and you despise love! So did I once. Your time may come."

"I think not. Does any animal, except man, love its fellow she-animal as man loves woman?"

"As man loves woman? No, I suppose not."

"And why should the subject animals be wiser than their king? But to return: you would like to have my youth and my careless enjoyment of youth?"

"Can you ask,—who would not?" Margrave looked at me for a moment with unusual seriousness, and then, in the abrupt

changes common to his capricious temperament, began to sing softly one of his barbaric chants,—a chant different from any I had heard him sing before, made, either by the modulation of his voice or the nature of the tune, so sweet that, little as music generally affected me, this thrilled to my very heart's core. I drew closer and closer to him, and murmured when he paused,—

"Is not that a love-song?"

"No;" said he, "it is the song by which the serpent-charmer charms the serpent."

CHAPTER XXVI

Increased intimacy with my new acquaintance did not diminish the charm of his society, though it brought to light some startling defects, both in his mental and moral organization. I have before said that his knowledge, though it had swept over a wide circuit and dipped into curious, unfrequented recesses, was desultory and erratic. It certainly was not that knowledge, sustained and aspiring, which the poet assures us is "the wing on which we mount to heaven." So, in his faculties themselves there were singular inequalities, or contradictions. His power of memory in some things seemed prodigious, but when examined it was seldom accurate; it could apprehend, but did not hold together with a binding grasp what metaphysicians call "complex ideas." He thus seemed unable to put it to any steadfast purpose in the sciences of which it retained, vaguely and loosely, many recondite principles. For the sublime and beautiful in literature he had no taste whatever. A passionate lover of nature, his imagination had no response to the arts by which nature is expressed or idealized; wholly unaffected by poetry or painting. Of the fine arts, music alone attracted and pleased him. His conversation was often eminently suggestive, touching on much, whether in books or mankind, that set one thinking; but I never remember him to have uttered any of those lofty or tender sentiments which form the connecting links between youth and

genius; for if poets sing to the young, and the young hail their own interpreters in poets, it is because the tendency of both is to idealize the realities of life,—finding everywhere in the real a something that is noble or fair, and making the fair yet fairer, and the noble nobler still.

In Margrave's character there seemed no special vices, no special virtues; but a wonderful vivacity, joyousness, animal good-humour. He was singularly temperate, having a dislike to wine, perhaps from that purity of taste which belongs to health absolutely perfect. No healthful child likes alcohol; no animal, except man, prefers wine to water.

But his main moral defect seemed to me in a want of sympathy, even where he professed attachment. He who could feel so acutely for himself, be unmanned by the bite of a squirrel, and sob at the thought that he should one day die, was as callous to the sufferings of another as a deer who deserts and butts from him a wounded comrade.

I give an instance of this hardness of heart where I should have least expected to find it in him.

He had met and joined me as I was walking to visit a patient on the outskirts of the town, when we fell in with a group of children, just let loose for an hour or two from their day-school. Some of these children joyously recognized him as having played with them at their homes; they ran up to him, and he seemed as glad as themselves at the meeting.

He suffered them to drag him along with them, and became

as merry and sportive as the youngest of the troop.

"Well," said I, laughing, "if you are going to play at leap-frog, pray don't let it be on the high road, or you will be run over by carts and draymen; see that meadow just in front to the left,—off with you there!"

"With all my heart," cried Margrave, "while you pay your visit. Come along, boys."

A little urchin, not above six years old, but who was lame, began to cry; he could not run,—he should be left behind.

Margrave stooped. "Climb on my shoulder, little one, and I'll be your horse."

The child dried its tears, and delightedly obeyed. "Certainly," said I to myself, "Margrave, after all, must have a nature as gentle as it is simple. What other young man, so courted by all the allurements that steal innocence from pleasure, would stop in the thoroughfares to play with children?"

The thought had scarcely passed through my mind when I heard a scream of agony. Margrave had leaped the railing that divided the meadow from the road, and, in so doing, the poor child, perched on his shoulder, had, perhaps from surprise or fright, loosened its hold and fallen heavily; its cries were piteous. Margrave clapped his hands to his ears, uttered an exclamation of anger, and not even stopping to lift up the boy, or examine what the hurt was, called to the other children to come on, and was soon rolling with them on the grass, and pelting them with daisies. When I came up, only one child remained by

the sufferer,—his little brother, a year older than himself. The child had fallen on his arm, which was not broken, but violently contused. The pain must have been intense. I carried the child to his home, and had to remain there some time. I did not see Margrave till the next morning. When he then called, I felt so indignant that I could scarcely speak to him. When at last I rebuked him for his inhumanity, he seemed surprised; with difficulty remembered the circumstance, and then merely said, as if it were the most natural confession in the world,

"Oh, nothing so discordant as a child's wail. I hate discords. I am pleased with the company of children; but they must be children who laugh and play. Well, why do you look at me so sternly? What have I said to shock you?"

"Shock me! you shock manhood itself! Go; I cannot talk to you now. I am busy."

But he did not go; and his voice was so sweet, and his ways so winning, that disgust insensibly melted into that sort of forgiveness one accords (let me repeat the illustration) to the deer that forsakes its comrade. The poor thing knows no better. And what a graceful beautiful thing this was!

The fascination—I can give it no other name—which Margrave exercised, was not confined to me; it was universal,—old, young, high, low, man, woman, child, all felt it. Never in Low Town had stranger, even the most distinguished by fame, met with a reception so cordial, so flattering. His frank confession that he was a natural son, far from being to his injury,

served to interest people more in him, and to prevent all those inquiries in regard to his connections and antecedents which would otherwise have been afloat. To be sure, he was evidently rich,—at least he had plenty of money. He lived in the best rooms in the principal hotel; was very hospitable; entertained the families with whom he had grown intimate; made them bring their children,—music and dancing after dinner. Among the houses in which he had established familiar acquaintance was that of the mayor of the town, who had bought Dr. Lloyd's collection of subjects in natural history. To that collection the mayor had added largely by a very recent purchase. He had arranged these various specimens, which his last acquisitions had enriched by the interesting carcasses of an elephant and a hippopotamus, in a large wooden building contiguous to his dwelling, which had been constructed by a former proprietor (a retired fox-hunter) as a riding-house; and being a man who much affected the diffusion of knowledge, he proposed to open this museum to the admiration of the general public, and, at his death, to bequeath it to the Athenaeum or Literary Institute of his native town. Margrave, seconded by the influence of the mayor's daughters, had scarcely been three days at L—— before he had persuaded this excellent and public-spirited functionary to inaugurate the opening of his museum by the popular ceremony of a ball. A temporary corridor should unite the drawing-rooms, which were on the ground floor, with the building that contained the collection; and thus the fete would be elevated

above the frivolous character of a fashionable amusement, and consecrated to the solemnization of an intellectual institute. Dazzled by the brilliancy of this idea, the mayor announced his intention to give a ball that should include the surrounding neighbourhood, and be worthy, in all expensive respects, of the dignity of himself and the occasion. A night had been fixed for the ball,—a night that became memorable indeed to me! The entertainment was anticipated with a lively interest, in which even the Hill condescended to share. The Hill did not much patronize mayors in general; but when a Mayor gave a ball for a purpose so patriotic, and on a scale so splendid, the Hill liberally acknowledged that Commerce was, on the whole, a thing which the Eminence might, now and then, condescend to acknowledge without absolutely derogating from the rank which Providence had assigned to it amongst the High Places of earth. Accordingly, the Hill was permitted by its Queen to honour the first magistrate of Low Town by a promise to attend his ball. Now, as this festivity had originated in the suggestion of Margrave, so, by a natural association of ideas, every one, in talking of the ball, talked also of Margrave.

The Hill had at first affected to ignore a stranger whose debut had been made in the mercantile circle of Low Town. But the Queen of the Hill now said, sententiously, "This new man in a few days has become a Celebrity. It is the policy of the Hill to adopt Celebrities, if the Celebrities pay respect to the Proprieties. Dr. Fenwick is requested to procure Mr. Margrave the advantage

of being known to the Hill."

I found it somewhat difficult to persuade Margrave to accept the Hill's condescending overture. He seemed to have a dislike to all societies pretending to aristocratic distinction,—a dislike expressed with a fierceness so unwonted, that it made one suppose he had, at some time or other, been subjected to mortification by the supercilious airs that blow upon heights so elevated. However, he yielded to my instances, and accompanied me one evening to Mrs. Poyntz's house. The Hill was encamped there for the occasion. Mrs. Poyntz was exceedingly civil to him, and after a few commonplace speeches, hearing that he was fond of music, consigned him to the caressing care of Miss Brabazon, who was at the head of the musical department in the Queen of the Hill's administration.

Mrs. Poyntz retired to her favourite seat near the window, inviting me to sit beside her; and while she knitted in silence, in silence my eye glanced towards Margrave, in the midst of the group assembled round the piano.

Whether he was in more than usually high spirits, or whether he was actuated by a malign and impish desire to upset the established laws of decorum by which the gayeties of the Hill were habitually subdued into a serene and somewhat pensive pleasantness, I know not; but it was not many minutes before the orderly aspect of the place was grotesquely changed.

Miss Brabazon having come to the close of a complicated and dreary sonata, I heard Margrave abruptly ask her if she could

play the Tarantella, that famous Neapolitan air which is founded on the legendary belief that the bite of the tarantula excites an irresistible desire to dance. On that highbred spinster's confession that she was ignorant of the air, and had not even heard of the legend, Margrave said, "Let me play it to you, with variations of my own." Miss Brabazon graciously yielded her place at the instrument. Margrave seated himself,—there was great curiosity to hear his performance. Margrave's fingers rushed over the keys, and there was a general start, the prelude was so unlike any known combination of harmonious sounds. Then he began a chant—song I can scarcely call it—words certainly not in Italian, perhaps in some uncivilized tongue, perhaps in impromptu gibberish. And the torture of the instrument now commenced in good earnest: it shrieked, it groaned, wilder and noisier. Beethoven's Storm, roused by the fell touch of a German pianist, were mild in comparison; and the mighty voice, dominating the anguish of the cracking keys, had the full diapason of a chorus. Certainly I am no judge of music, but to my ear the discord was terrific,—to the ears of better informed amateurs it seemed ravishing. All were spellbound; even Mrs. Poyntz paused from her knitting, as the Fates paused from their web at the lyre of Orpheus. To this breathless delight, however, soon succeeded a general desire for movement. To my amazement, I beheld these formal matrons and sober fathers of families forming themselves into a dance, turbulent as a children's ball at Christmas; and when, suddenly desisting from his music, Margrave started up,

caught the skeleton hand of lean Miss Brabazon, and whirled her into the centre of the dance, I could have fancied myself at a witch's sabbat. My eye turned in scandalized alarm towards Mrs. Poyntz. That great creature seemed as much astounded as myself. Her eyes were fixed on the scene in a stare of positive stupor. For the first time, no doubt, in her life, she was overcome, deposed, dethroned. The awe of her presence was literally whirled away. The dance ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Darting from the galvanized mummy whom he had selected as his partner, Margrave shot to Mrs. Poyntz's side, and said, "Ten thousand pardons for quitting you so soon, but the clock warns me that I have an engagement elsewhere." In another moment he was gone.

The dance halted, people seemed slowly returning to their senses, looking at each other bashfully and ashamed.

"I could not help it, dear," sighed Miss Brabazon at last, sinking into a chair, and casting her deprecating, fainting eyes upon the hostess.

"It is witchcraft," said fat Mrs. Bruce, wiping her forehead.

"Witchcraft!" echoed Mrs. Poyntz; "it does indeed look like it. An amazing and portentous exhibition of animal spirits, and not to be endured by the Proprietaries. Where on earth can that young savage have come from?"

"From savage lands," said I,— "so he says."

"Do not bring him here again," said Mrs. Poyntz. "He would soon turn the Hill topsy-turvy. But how charming! I should like

to see more of him," she added, in an under voice, "if he would call on me some morning, and not in the presence of those for whose Proprieties I am responsible. Jane must be out in her ride with the colonel."

Margrave never again attended the patrician festivities of the Hill. Invitations were poured upon him, especially by Miss Brabazon and the other old maids, but in vain.

"Those people," said he, "are too tamed and civilized for me; and so few young persons among them. Even that girl Jane is only young on the surface; inside, as old as the World or her mother. I like youth, real youth,—I am young, I am young!"

And, indeed, I observed he would attach himself to some young person, often to some child, as if with cordial and special favour, yet for not more than an hour or so, never distinguishing them by the same preference when he next met them. I made that remark to him, in rebuke of his fickleness, one evening when he had found me at work on my Ambitious Book, reducing to rule and measure the Laws of Nature.

"It is not fickleness," said he,—"it is necessity."

"Necessity! Explain yourself."

"I seek to find what I have not found," said he; it is my necessity to seek it, and among the young; and disappointed in one, I turn to the other. Necessity again. But find it at last I must."

"I suppose you mean what the young usually seek in the young; and if, as you said the other day, you have left love behind you, you now wander back to re-find it."

"Tush! If I may judge by the talk of young fools, love may be found every day by him who looks out for it. What I seek is among the rarest of all discoveries. You might aid me to find it, and in so doing aid yourself to a knowledge far beyond all that your formal experiments can bestow."

"Prove your words, and command my services," said I, smiling somewhat disdainfully.

"You told me that you had examined into the alleged phenomena of animal magnetism, and proved some persons who pretend to the gift which the Scotch call second sight to be bungling impostors. You were right. I have seen the clairvoyants who drive their trade in this town; a common gipsy could beat them in their own calling. But your experience must have shown you that there are certain temperaments in which the gift of the Pythoness is stored, unknown to the possessor, undetected by the common observer; but the signs of which should be as apparent to the modern physiologist, as they were to the ancient priest."

"I at least, as a physiologist, am ignorant of the signs: what are they?"

"I should despair of making you comprehend them by mere verbal description. I could guide your observation to distinguish them unerringly were living subjects before us. But not one in a million has the gift to an extent available for the purposes to which the wise would apply it. Many have imperfect glimpses; few, few indeed, the unveiled, lucent sight. They who have but the imperfect glimpses mislead and dupe the minds that consult

them, because, being sometimes marvellously right, they excite a credulous belief in their general accuracy; and as they are but translators of dreams in their own brain, their assurances are no more to be trusted than are the dreams of commonplace sleepers. But where the gift exists to perfection, he who knows how to direct and to profit by it should be able to discover all that he desires to know for the guidance and preservation of his own life. He will be forewarned of every danger, forearmed in the means by which danger is avoided. For the eye of the true Pythoness matter has no obstruction, space no confines, time no measurement."

"My dear Margrave, you may well say that creatures so gifted are rare; and, for my part, I would as soon search for a unicorn, as, to use your affected expression, for a Pythoness."

"Nevertheless, whenever there come across the course of your practice some young creature to whom all the evil of the world is as yet unknown, to whom the ordinary cares and duties of the world are strange and unwelcome; who from the earliest dawn of reason has loved to sit apart and to muse; before whose eyes visions pass unsolicited; who converses with those who are not dwellers on the earth, and beholds in the space landscapes which the earth does not reflect—"

"Margrave, Margrave! of whom do you speak?"

"Whose frame, though exquisitely sensitive, has still a health and a soundness in which you recognize no disease; whose mind has a truthfulness that you know cannot deceive you, and a

simple intelligence too clear to deceive itself; who is moved to a mysterious degree by all the varying aspects of external nature,—innocently joyous, or unaccountably sad,—when, I say, such a being comes across your experience, inform me; and the chances are that the true Pythoness is found."

I had listened with vague terror, and with more than one exclamation of amazement, to descriptions which brought Lilian Ashleigh before me; and I now sat mute, bewildered, breathless, gazing upon Margrave, and rejoicing that, at least, Lilian he had never seen.

He returned my own gaze steadily, searchingly, and then, breaking into a slight laugh, resumed:—

"You call my word 'Pythoness' affected. I know of no better. My recollections of classic anecdote and history are confused and dim; but somewhere I have read or heard that the priests of Delphi were accustomed to travel chiefly into Thrace or Thessaly, in search of the virgins who might fitly administer their oracles, and that the oracles gradually ceased in repute as the priests became unable to discover the organization requisite in the priestesses, and supplied by craft and imposture, or by such imperfect fragmentary developments as belong now to professional clairvoyants, the gifts which Nature failed to afford. Indeed, the demand was one that must have rapidly exhausted so limited a supply. The constant strain upon faculties so wearying to the vital functions in their relentless exercise, under the artful stimulants by which the priests heightened their power, was

mortal, and no Pythoness ever retained her life more than three years from the time that her gift was elaborately trained and developed."

"Pooh! I know of no classical authority for the details you so confidently cite. Perhaps some such legends may be found in the Alexandrian Platonists, but those mystics are no authority on such a subject. "After all;" I added, recovering from my first surprise, or awe, "the Delphic oracles were proverbially ambiguous, and their responses might be read either way,—a proof that the priests dictated the verses, though their arts on the unhappy priestess might throw her into real convulsions, and the real convulsions, not the false gift, might shorten her life. Enough of such idle subjects! Yet no! one question more. If you found your Pythoness, what then?"

"What then? Why, through her aid I might discover the process of an experiment which your practical science would assist me to complete."

"Tell me of what kind is your experiment; and precisely because such little science as I possess is exclusively practical, I may assist you without the help of the Pythoness."

Margrave was silent for some minutes, passing his hand several times across his forehead, which was a frequent gesture of his, and then rising, he answered, in listless accents,—

"I cannot say more now, my brain is fatigued; and you are not yet in the right mood to hear me. By the way, how close and reserved you are with me!"

"How so?"

"You never told me that you were engaged to be married. You leave me, who thought to have won your friendship, to hear what concerns you so intimately from a comparative stranger."

"Who told you?"

"That woman with eyes that pry and lips that scheme, to whose house you took me."

"Mrs. Poyntz! is it possible? When?"

"This afternoon. I met her in the street; she stopped me, and, after some unmeaning talk, asked if I had seen you lately; if I did not find you very absent and distracted: no wonder;—you were in love. The young lady was away on a visit, and wooed by a dangerous rival."

"Wooed by a dangerous rival!"

"Very rich, good-looking, young. Do you fear him? You turn pale."

"I do not fear, except so far as he who loves truly, loves humbly, and fears not that another may be preferred, but that another may be worthier of preference than himself. But that Mrs. Poyntz should tell you all this does amaze me. Did she mention the name of the young lady?"

"Yes; Lilian Ashleigh. Henceforth be more frank with me. Who knows? I may help you. Adieu!"

CHAPTER XXVII

When Margrave had gone, I glanced at the clock,—not yet nine. I resolved to go at once to Mrs. Poyntz. It was not an evening on which she received, but doubtless she would see me. She owed me an explanation. How thus carelessly divulge a secret she had been enjoined to keep; and this rival, of whom I was ignorant? It was no longer a matter of wonder that Hargrave should have described Lilian's peculiar idiosyncrasies in his sketch of his fabulous Pythoness. Doubtless Mrs. Poyntz had, with unpardonable levity of indiscretion, revealed all of which she disapproved in my choice. But for what object? Was this her boasted friendship for me? Was it consistent with the regard she professed for Mrs. Ashleigh and Lilian? Occupied by these perplexed and indignant thoughts, I arrived at Mrs. Poyntz's house, and was admitted to her presence. She was fortunately alone; her daughter and the colonel had gone to some party on the Hill. I would not take the hand she held out to me on entrance; seated myself in stern displeasure, and proceeded at once to inquire if she had really betrayed to Mr. Margrave the secret of my engagement to Lilian.

"Yes, Allen Fenwick; I have this day told, not only Mr. Margrave, but every person I met who is likely to tell it to some one else, the secret of your engagement to Lilian Ashleigh. I never promised to conceal it; on the contrary, I wrote word to

Anne Ashleigh that I would therein act as my own judgment counselled me. I think my words to you were that 'public gossip was sometimes the best security for the completion of private engagements.'"

"Do you mean that Mrs. or Miss Ashleigh recoils from the engagement with me, and that I should meanly compel them both to fulfil it by calling in the public to censure them—if—if—Oh, madam, this is worldly artifice indeed!"

"Be good enough to listen to me quietly. I have never yet showed you the letter to Mrs. Ashleigh, written by Lady Haughton, and delivered by Mr. Vigors. That letter I will now show to you; but before doing so I must enter into a preliminary explanation. Lady Haughton is one of those women who love power, and cannot obtain it except through wealth and station,—by her own intellect never obtain it. When her husband died she was reduced from an income of twelve thousand a year to a jointure of twelve hundred, but with the exclusive guardianship of a young son, a minor, and adequate allowances for the charge; she continued, therefore, to preside as mistress over the establishments in town and country; still had the administration of her son's wealth and rank. She stinted his education, in order to maintain her ascendancy over him. He became a brainless prodigal, spendthrift alike of health and fortune. Alarmed, she saw that, probably, he would die young and a beggar; his only hope of reform was in marriage. She reluctantly resolved to marry him to a penniless, well-born, soft-minded young lady

whom she knew she could control; just before this marriage was to take place he was killed by a fall from his horse. The Haughton estate passed to his cousin, the luckiest young man alive,—the same Ashleigh Sumner who had already succeeded, in default of male issue, to poor Gilbert Ashleigh's landed possessions. Over this young man Lady Haughton could expect no influence. She would be a stranger in his house. But she had a niece! Mr. Vigors assured her the niece was beautiful. And if the niece could become Mrs. Ashleigh Sumner, then Lady Haughton would be a less unimportant Nobody in the world, because she would still have her nearest relation in a Somebody at Haughton Park. Mr. Vigors has his own pompous reasons for approving an alliance which he might help to accomplish. The first step towards that alliance was obviously to bring into reciprocal attraction the natural charms of the young lady and the acquired merits of the young gentleman. Mr. Vigors could easily induce his ward to pay a visit to Lady Haughton, and Lady Haughton had only to extend her invitations to her niece; hence the letter to Mrs. Ashleigh, of which Mr. Vigors was the bearer, and hence my advice to you, of which you can now understand the motive. Since you thought Lilian Ashleigh the only woman you could love, and since I thought there were other women in the world who might do as well for Ashleigh Sumner, it seemed to me fair for all parties that Lilian should not go to Lady Haughton's in ignorance of the sentiments with which she had inspired you. A girl can seldom be sure that she loves until she is sure that she is loved. And

now," added Mrs. Poyntz, rising and walking across the room to her bureau,— "now I will show you Lady Haughton's invitation to Mrs. Ashleigh. Here it is!"

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