

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**"MY NOVEL" —
VOLUME 10**

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон "My Novel" — Volume 10

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=35008153

«My Novel» — Volume 10:

Содержание

BOOK TENTH	4
INITIAL CHAPTER	4
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	24
CHAPTER IV	39
CHAPTER V	43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

«My Novel» — Volume 10

BOOK TENTH

INITIAL CHAPTER

UPON THIS FACT,—THAT THE WORLD IS STILL MUCH THE SAME AS IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN

It is observed by a very pleasant writer, read nowadays only by the brave pertinacious few who still struggle hard to rescue from the House of Pluto the souls of departed authors, jostled and chased as those souls are by the noisy footsteps of the living,—it is observed by the admirable Charron, that "judgment and wisdom is not only the best, but the happiest portion God Almighty hath distributed amongst men; for though this distribution be made with a very uneven hand, yet nobody thinks himself stinted or ill-dealt with, but he that hath never so little is contented in this respect."

And, certainly, the present narrative may serve in notable illustration of the remark so dryly made by the witty and wise preacher. For whether our friend Riccabocca deduce theories for daily life from the great folio of Machiavelli; or that promising young gentleman, Mr. Randal Leslie, interpret the power of knowledge into the art of being too knowing for dull honest folks to cope with him; or acute Dick Avenel push his way up the social ascent with a blow for those before, and a kick for those behind him, after the approved fashion of your strong New Man; or Baron Levy—that cynical impersonation of Gold—compare himself to the Magnetic Rock in the Arabian tale, to which the nails in every ship that approaches the influence of the loadstone fly from the planks, and a shipwreck per day adds its waifs to the Rock,—questionless, at least; it is, that each of those personages believes that Providence has bestowed on him an elder son's inheritance of wisdom. Nor, were we to glance towards the obscurer paths of life, should we find good Parson Dale deem himself worse off than the rest of the world in this precious commodity, —as, indeed, he has signally evinced of late in that shrewd guess of his touching Professor Moss. Even plain Squire Hazeldean takes it for granted that he could teach Audley Egerton a thing or two worth knowing in politics; Mr. Stirn thinks that there is no branch of useful lore on which he could not instruct the squire; while Sprott the tinker, with his bag full of tracts and lucifer matches, regards the whole framework of modern society, from a rick to a constitution, with

the profound disdain of a revolutionary philosopher. Considering that every individual thus brings into the stock of the world so vast a share of intelligence, it cannot but excite our wonder to find that Oxenstiern is popularly held to be right when he said, "See, my son, how little wisdom it requires to govern States,"—that is, Men! That so many millions of persons, each with a profound assurance that he is possessed of an exalted sagacity, should concur in the ascendancy of a few inferior intellects, according to a few stupid, prosy, matter-of-fact rules as old as the hills, is a phenomenon very discreditable to the spirit and energy of the aggregate human species! It creates no surprise that one sensible watch-dog should control the movements of a flock of silly grass-eating sheep; but that two or three silly grass-eating sheep should give the law to whole flocks of such mighty sensible watch-dogs—/Diavolo!/ Dr. Riecabocca, explain that, if you can! And wonderfully strange it is, that notwithstanding all the march of enlightenment, notwithstanding our progressive discoveries in the laws of Nature, our railways, steam-engines, animal magnetism, and electrobiology,—we have never made any improvement that is generally acknowledged, since men ceased to be troglodytes and nomads, in the old-fashioned gamut of flats and sharps, which attunes into irregular social jog-trot all the generations that pass from the cradle to the grave; still, "/the desire for something have have not/" impels all the energies that keep us in movement, for good or for ill, according to the checks or the directions of each favourite desire.

A friend of mine once said to a millionaire, whom he saw forever engaged in making money which he never seemed to have any pleasure in spending, "Pray, Mr ——, will you answer me one question: You are said to have two millions, and you spend £600 a year. In order to rest and enjoy, what will content you?"

"A little more," answered the millionaire. That "little more" is the mainspring of civilization. Nobody ever gets it!

"Philus," saith a Latin writer, "was not so rich as Laelius; Laelius was not so rich as Scipio; Scipio was not so rich as Crassus; and Crassus was not so rich—as he wished to be!" If John Bull were once contented, Manchester might shut up its mills. It is the "little more" that makes a mere trifle of the National Debt!—Long life to it!

Still, mend our law-books as we will, one is forced to confess that knaves are often seen in fine linen, and honest men in the most shabby old rags; and still, notwithstanding the exceptions, knavery is a very hazardous game, and honesty, on the whole, by far the best policy. Still, most of the Ten Commandments remain at the core of all the Pandects and Institutes that keep our hands off our neighbours' throats, wives, and pockets; still, every year shows that the parson's maxim—"non quita movere"—is as prudent for the health of communities as when Apollo recommended his votaries not to rake up a fever by stirring the Lake Camarina; still, people, thank Heaven, decline to reside in parallelograms, and the surest token that we live under a free government is when we are governed by persons whom we have

a full right to imply, by our censure and ridicule, are blockheads compared to ourselves! Stop that delightful privilege, and, by Jove! sir, there is neither pleasure nor honour in being governed at all! You might as well be—a Frenchman!

CHAPTER II

The Italian and his friend are closeted together.

"And why have you left your home in ——shire, and why this new change of name?"

"Peschiera is in England."

"I know it."

"And bent on discovering me; and, it is said, of stealing from me my child."

"He has had the assurance to lay wagers that he will win the hand of your heiress. I know that too; and therefore I have come to England,—first to baffle his design—for I do not think your fears altogether exaggerated,—and next to learn from you how to follow up a clew which, unless I am too sanguine, may lead to his ruin, and your unconditional restoration. Listen to me. You are aware that, after the skirmish with Peschiera's armed hirelings sent in search of you, I received a polite message from the Austrian government, requesting me to leave its Italian domains. Now, as I hold it the obvious duty of any foreigner admitted to the hospitality of a State, to refrain from all participation in its civil disturbances, so I thought my honour assailed at this intimation, and went at once to Vienna, to explain to the minister there (to whom I was personally known), that though I had, as became man to man, aided to protect a refugee, who had taken shelter under my roof, from the infuriated soldiers at the command

of his private foe, I had not only not shared in any attempt at revolt, but dissuaded, as far as I could, my Italian friends from their enterprise; and that because, without discussing its merits, I believed, as a military man and a cool spectator, the enterprise could only terminate in fruitless bloodshed. I was enabled to establish my explanation by satisfactory proof; and my acquaintance with the minister assumed something of the character of friendship. I was then in a position to advocate your cause, and to state your original reluctance to enter into the plots of the insurgents. I admitted freely that you had such natural desire for the independence of your native land, that, had the standard of Italy been boldly hoisted by its legitimate chiefs, or at the common uprising of its whole people, you would have been found in the van, amidst the ranks of your countrymen; but I maintained that you would never have shared in a conspiracy frantic in itself, and defiled by the lawless schemes and sordid ambition of its main projectors, had you not been betrayed and decoyed into it by the misrepresentations and domestic treachery of your kinsman,—the very man who denounced you. Unfortunately, of this statement I had no proof but your own word. I made, however, so far an impression in your favour, and, it may be, against the traitor, that your property was not confiscated to the State, nor handed over, upon the plea of your civil death, to your kinsman."

"How!—I do not understand. Peschiera has the property?"
"He holds the revenues but of one half upon pleasure, and they

would be withdrawn, could I succeed in establishing the case that exists against him. I was forbidden before to mention this to you; the minister, not inexcusably, submitted you to the probation of unconditional exile. Your grace might depend upon your own forbearance from further conspiracies—forgive the word. I need not say I was permitted to return to Lombardy. I found, on my arrival, that—that your unhappy wife had been to my house, and exhibited great despair at hearing of my departure."

Riccabocca knit his dark brows, and breathed hard.

"I did not judge it necessary to acquaint you with this circumstance, nor did it much affect me. I believed in her guilt—and what could now avail her remorse, if remorse she felt? Shortly afterwards, I heard that she was no more."

"Yes," muttered Riccabocca, "she died in the same year that I left Italy. It must be a strong reason that can excuse a friend for reminding me even that she once lived!"

"I come at once to that reason," said L'Estrange, gently. "This autumn I was roaming through Switzerland, and, in one of my pedestrian excursions amidst the mountains, I met with an accident, which confined me for some days to a sofa at a little inn in an obscure village. My hostess was an Italian; and as I had left my servant at a town at some distance, I required her attention till I could write to him to come to me. I was thankful for her cares, and amused by her Italian babble. We became very good friends. She told me she had been servant to a lady of great rank, who had died in Switzerland; and that, being enriched by the generosity of

her mistress, she had married a Swiss innkeeper, and his people had become hers. My servant arrived, and my hostess learned my name, which she did not know before. She came into my room greatly agitated. In brief, this woman had been servant to your wife. She had accompanied her to my villa, and known of her anxiety to see me, as your friend. The Government had assigned to your wife your palace at Milan, with a competent income. She had refused to accept of either. Failing to see me, she had set off towards England, resolved upon seeing yourself; for the journals had stated that to England you had escaped."

"She dared! shameless! And see, but a moment before, I had forgotten all but her grave in a foreign soil,—and these tears had forgiven her," murmured the Italian.

"Let them forgive her still," said Harley, with all his exquisite sweetness of look and tone. "I resume. On entering Switzerland your wife's health, which you know was always delicate, gave way. To fatigue and anxiety succeeded fever, and delirium ensued. She had taken with her but this one female attendant—the sole one she could trust—on leaving home. She suspected Peschiera to have bribed her household. In the presence of this woman she raved of her innocence, in accents of terror and aversion denounced your kinsman, and called on you to vindicate her name and your own."

"Ravings indeed! Poor Paulina!" groaned Riccabocca, covering his face with both hands.

"But in her delirium there were lucid intervals. In one of these

she rose, in spite of all her servants could do to restrain her, took from her desk several letters, and reading them over, exclaimed piteously, 'But how to get them to him; whom to trust? And his friend is gone!' Then an idea seemed suddenly to flash upon her, for she uttered a joyous exclamation, sat down, and wrote long and rapidly, enclosed what she wrote with all the letters, in one packet, which she sealed carefully, and bade her servant carry to the post, with many injunctions to take it with her own hand, and pay the charge on it. 'For oh!' said she (I repeat the words as my informant told them to me),—'for oh! this is my sole chance to prove to my husband that, though I have erred, I am not the guilty thing he believes me; the sole chance, too, to redeem my error, and restore, perhaps, to my husband his country, to my child her heritage.' The servant took the letter to the post; and when she returned, her lady was asleep, with a smile upon her face. But from that sleep she woke again delirious, and before the next morning her soul had fled." Here Riccabocca lifted one hand from his face and grasped Harley's arm, as if mutely beseeching him to pause. The heart of the man struggled hard with his pride and his philosophy; and it was long before Harley could lead him to regard the worldly prospects which this last communication from his wife might open to his ruined fortunes,—not, indeed, till Riccabocca had persuaded himself, and half persuaded Harley (for strong, indeed, was all presumption of guilt against the dead), that his wife's protestations of innocence from all but error had been but ravings.

"Be this as it may," said Harley, "there seems every reason to suppose that the letters enclosed were Peschiera's correspondence, and that, if so, these would establish the proof of his influence over your wife, and of his perfidious machinations against yourself. I resolved, before coming hither, to go round by Vienna. There I heard, with dismay, that Peschiera had not only obtained the imperial sanction to demand your daughter's hand, but had boasted to his profligate circle that he should succeed; and he was actually on his road to England. I saw at once that could this design, by any fraud or artifice, be successful with Violante (for of your consent, I need not say, I did not dream), the discovery of the packet, whatever its contents, would be useless; Peschiera's end would be secured. I saw also that his success would suffice forever to clear his name; for his success must imply your consent (it would be to disgrace your daughter, to assert that she had married without it), and your consent would be his acquittal. I saw, too, with alarm, that to all means for the accomplishment of his project he would be urged by despair; for his debts are great, and his character nothing but new wealth can support. I knew that he was able, bold, determined, and that he had taken with him a large supply of money borrowed upon usury,—in a word, I trembled for you both. I have now seen your daughter, and I tremble no more. Accomplished seducer as Peschiera boasts himself, the first look upon her face so sweet, yet so noble, convinced me that she is proof against a legion of Peschieras. Now, then, return we to this all-important subject,

—to this packet. It never reached you. Long years have passed since then.

"Does it exist still? Into whose hands would it have fallen?"

"Try to summon up all your recollections. The servant could not remember the name of the person to whom it was addressed, she only insisted that the name began with a B, that it was directed to England, and that to England she accordingly paid the postage. Whom then, with a name that begins with B, or (in case the servant's memory here mislead her) whom did you or your wife know, during your visit to England, with sufficient intimacy to make it probable that she would select such a person for her confidant?"

"I cannot conceive," said Riccabocca, shaking his head. "We came to England shortly after our marriage. Paulina was affected by the climate. She spoke not a word of English, and indeed not even French, as might have been expected from her birth, for her father was poor, and thoroughly Italian. She refused all society. I went, it is true, somewhat into the London world,—enough to induce me to shrink from the contrast that my second visit as a beggared refugee would have made to the reception I met with on my first; but I formed no intimate friendships. I recall no one whom she could have written to as intimate with me."

"But," persisted Harley, "think again. Was there no lady well acquainted with Italian, and with whom, perhaps, for that very reason, your wife became familiar?"

"Ah, it is true. There was one old lady of retired habits, but

who had been much in Italy. Lady—Lady—I remember—Lady Jane Horton."

"Horton—Lady Jane!" exclaimed Harley; "again; thrice in one day!— is this wound never to scar over?" Then, noting Riccabocca's look of surprise, he said, "Excuse me, my friend, I listen to you with renewed interest. Lady Jane was a distant relation of my own; she judged me, perhaps, harshly—and I have some painful associations with her name; but she was a woman of many virtues. Your wife knew her?"

"Not, however, intimately; still, better than any one else in London. But Paulina would not have written to her; she knew that Lady Jane had died shortly after her own departure from England. I myself was summoned back to Italy on pressing business; she was too unwell to journey with me as rapidly as I was obliged to travel; indeed, illness detained her several weeks in England. In this interval she might have made acquaintances. Ah, now I see; I guess. You say the name began with B. Paulina, in my absence, engaged a companion,—a Mrs. Bertram. This lady accompanied her abroad. Paulina became excessively attached to her, she knew Italian so well. Mrs. Bertram left her on the road, and returned to England, for some private affairs of her own. I forget why or wherefore; if, indeed, I ever asked or learned. Paulina missed her sadly, often talked of her, wondered why she never heard from her. No doubt it was to this Mrs. Bertram that she wrote!"

"And you don't know the lady's friends, or address?"

"No."

"Nor who recommended her to your wife?"

"No."

"Probably Lady Jane Horton?"

"It may be so.

"Very likely."

"I will follow up this track, slight as it is."

"But if Mrs. Bertram received the communication, how comes it that it never reached myself—Oh, fool that I am, how should it! I, who guarded so carefully my incognito!"

"True. This your wife could not foresee; she would naturally imagine that your residence in England would be easily discovered. But many years must have passed since your wife lost sight of this Mrs. Bertram, if their acquaintance was made so soon after your marriage; and now it is a long time to retrace,—before even your Violante was born."

"Alas! yes. I lost two fair sons in the interval. Violante was born to me as the child of sorrow."

"And to make sorrow lovely! how beautiful she is!" The father smiled proudly.

"Where, in the loftiest houses of Europe, find a husband worthy of such a prize?"

"You forget that I am still an exile, she still dowerless. You forget that I am pursued by Peschiera; that I would rather see her a beggar's wife—than—Pah, the very thought maddens me, it is so foul. /Corpo di Bacco!/ I have been glad to find her a husband

already."

"Already! Then that young man spoke truly?"

"What young man?"

"Randal Leslie. How! You know him?" Here a brief explanation followed. Harley heard with attentive ear, and marked vexation, the particulars of Riccabocca's connection and implied engagement with Leslie.

"There is something very suspicious to me in all this," said he.

"Why should this young man have so sounded me as to Violante's chance of losing fortune if she married, an Englishman?"

"Did he? Oh, pooh! Excuse him. It was but his natural wish to seem ignorant of all about me. He did not know enough of my intimacy with you to betray my secret."

But he knew enough of it—must have known enough—to have made it right that he should tell you I was in England. He does not seem to have done so."

"No; that is strange—yet scarcely strange; for, when we last met, his head was full of other things,—love and marriage. / Basta! youth will be youth."

"He has no youth left in him!" exclaimed Harley, passionately. "I doubt if he ever had any. He is one of those men who come into the world with the pulse of a centenarian. You and I never shall be as old as he was in long clothes. Ah, you may laugh; but I am never wrong in my instincts. I disliked him at the first,—his eye, his smile, his voice, his very footstep. It is madness in

you to countenance such a marriage; it may destroy all chance of your restoration."

"Better that than infringe my word once passed."

"No, no," exclaimed Harley; "your word is not passed, it shall not be passed. Nay, never look so piteously at me. At all events, pause till we know more of this young man. If he be worthy of her without a dower, why, then, let him lose you your heritage. I should have no more to say."

"But why lose me my heritage? There is no law in Austria which can dictate to a father what husband to choose for his daughter."

"Certainly not. But you are out of the pale of law itself just at present; and it would surely be a reason for State policy to withhold your pardon, and it would be to the loss of that favour with your own countrymen, which would now make that pardon so popular, if it were known that the representative of your name were debased by your daughter's alliance with an English adventurer,—a clerk in a public office. Oh, sage in theory, why are you such a simpleton in action?"

Nothing moved by this taunt, Riceabocca rubbed his hands, and then stretched them comfortably over the fire.

"My friend," said he, "the representation of my name would pass to my son."

"But you have no son."

"Hush! I am going to have one; my Jemima informed me of it yesterday morning; and it was upon that information that I

resolved to speak to Leslie. Am I a simpleton now?"

"Going to have a son," repeated Harley, looking very bewildered; "how do you know it is to be a son?"

"Physiologists are agreed," said the sage, positively, "that where the husband is much older than the wife, and there has been a long interval without children before she condescends to increase the population of the world, she (that is, it is at least as nine to four)—she brings into the world a male. I consider that point therefore as settled, according to the calculations of statisticians and the researches of naturalists."

Harley could not help laughing, though he was still angry and disturbed.

"The same man as ever; always the fool of philosophy."

"/Cospetto!/" said Riccabocca. "I am rather the philosopher of fools. And talking of that, shall I present you to my Jemima?"

"Yes; but in turn I must present you to one who remembers with gratitude your kindness, and whom your philosophy, for a wonder, has not ruined. Some time or other you must explain that to me. Excuse me for a moment; I will go for him.

"For him,—for whom? In my position I must be cautious; and —"

"I will answer for his faith and discretion. Meanwhile order dinner, and let me and my friend stay to share it."

"Dinner? /Corpo di Bacco!/"—not that Bacchus can help us here. What will Jemima say?"

"Henpecked man, settle that with your connubial tyrant. But

dinner it must be."

I leave the reader to imagine the delight of Leonard at seeing once more Riccabocca unchanged and Violante so improved, and the kind Jemima too; and their wonder at him and his history, his books and his fame. He narrated his struggles and adventures with a simplicity that removed from a story so personal the character of egotism. But when he came to speak of Helen he was brief and reserved.

Violante would have questioned more closely; but, to Leonard's relief, Harley interposed.

"You shall see her whom he speaks of before long, and question her yourself."

With these words, Harley turned the young man's narrative into new directions; and Leonard's words again flowed freely. Thus the evening passed away happily to all save Riccabocca. For the thought of his dead wife rose ever and anon before the exile; but when it did, and became too painful, he crept nearer to Jemima, and looked in her simple face, and pressed her cordial hand. And yet the monster had implied to Harley that his comforter was a fool,—so she was, to love so contemptible a slanderer of herself and her sex.

Violante was in a state of blissful excitement; she could not analyze her own joy. But her conversation was chiefly with Leonard; and the most silent of all was Harley. He sat listening to Leonard's warm yet unpretending eloquence,—that eloquence which flows so naturally from genius, when thoroughly at its

ease, and not chilled back on itself by hard, unsympathizing hearers; listened, yet more charmed, to the sentiments less profound, yet no less earnest,—sentiments so feminine, yet so noble, with which Violante's fresh virgin heart responded to the poet's kindling soul. Those sentiments of hers were so unlike all he heard in the common world, so akin to himself in his gone youth! Occasionally—at some high thought of her own, or some lofty line from Italian song, that she cited with lighted eyes, and in melodious accents—occasionally he reared his knightly head, and his lip quivered, as if he had heard the sound of a trumpet. The inertness of long years was shaken. The Heroic, that lay deep beneath all the humours of his temperament, was reached, appealed to; and stirred within him, rousing up all the bright associations connected with it, and long dormant. When he arose to take leave, surprised at the lateness of the hour, Harley said, in a tone that bespoke the sincerity of the compliment, "I thank you for the happiest hours I have known for years." His eye dwelt on Violante as he spoke.

But timidity returned to her with his words, at his look; and it was no longer the inspired muse, but the bashful girl that stood before him.

"And when shall I see you again?" asked Riccabocca, disconsolately, following his guest to the door.

"When? Why, of course, to-morrow. Adieu! my friend. No wonder you have borne your exile so patiently,—with such a child!"

He took Leonard's arm, and walked with him to the inn where he had left his horse. Leonard spoke of Violante with enthusiasm. Harley was silent.

CHAPTER III

The next day a somewhat old-fashioned, but exceedingly patrician, equipage stopped at Riccabocca's garden-gate. Giacomo, who, from a bedroom window, had caught sight of its winding towards the house, was seized with undefinable terror when he beheld it pause before their walls, and heard the shrill summons at the portal. He rushed into his master's presence, and implored him not to stir,—not to allow any one to give ingress to the enemies the machine might disgorge. "I have heard," said he, "how a town in Italy—I think it was Bologna—was once taken and given to the sword, by incautiously admitting a wooden horse full of the troops of Barbarossa and all manner of bombs and Congreve rockets."

"The story is differently told in Virgil," quoth Riccabocca, peeping out of the window. "Nevertheless, the machine looks very large and suspicious; unloose Pompey."

"Father," said Violante, colouring, "it is your friend, Lord L'Estrange; I hear his voice."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite. How can I be mistaken?"

"Go, then, Giacomo; but take Pompey with thee,—and give the alarm if we are deceived."

But Violante was right; and in a few moments Lord L'Estrange was seen walking up the garden, and giving the arm to two ladies.

"Ah," said Riccabocca, composing his dressing-robe round him, "go, my child, and summon *Jemima*. Man to man; but, for Heaven's sake, woman to woman."

Harley had brought his mother and Helen, in compliment to the ladies of his friend's household.

The proud countess knew that she was in the presence of Adversity, and her salute to Riccabocca was only less respectful than that with which she would have rendered homage to her sovereign. But Riccabocca, always gallant to the sex that he pretended to despise, was not to be outdone in ceremony; and the bow which replied to the courtesy would have edified the rising generation, and delighted such surviving relics of the old Court breeding as may linger yet amidst the gloomy pomp of the Faubourg St. Germain. These dues paid to etiquette, the countess briefly introduced Helen as Miss Digby, and seated herself near the exile. In a few moments the two elder personages became quite at home with each other; and, really, perhaps Riccabocca had never, since we have known him, showed to such advantage as by the side of his polished, but somewhat formal visitor. Both had lived so little with our modern, ill-bred age! They took out their manners of a former race, with a sort of pride in airing once more such fine lace and superb brocade. Riccabocca gave truce to the shrewd but homely wisdom of his proverbs, perhaps he remembered that Lord Chesterfield denounces proverbs as vulgar; and gaunt though his figure, and far from elegant though his dressing-robe, there was that about

him which spoke undeniably of the grand seigneur,—of one to whom a Marquis de Dangeau would have offered a fauteuil by the side of the Rohans and Montmorencies.

Meanwhile Helen and Harley seated themselves a little apart, and were both silent,—the first, from timidity; the second, from abstraction. At length the door opened, and Harley suddenly sprang to his feet,—Violante and Jemima entered. Lady Lansinere's eyes first rested on the daughter, and she could scarcely refrain from an exclamation of admiring surprise; but then, when she caught sight of Mrs. Riccabocca's somewhat humble, yet not obsequious mien,—looking a little shy, a little homely, yet still thoroughly a gentlewoman (though of your plain, rural kind of that genus), she turned from the daughter, and with the */savoir vivre/* of the fine old school, paid her first respects to the wife; respects literally, for her manner implied respect,—but it was more kind, simple, and cordial than the respect she had shown to Riccabocca; as the sage himself had said, here "it was Woman to Woman." And then she took Violante's hand in both hers, and gazed on her as if she could not resist the pleasure of contemplating so much beauty. "My son," she said softly, and with a half sigh,— "my son in vain told me not to be surprised. This is the first time I have ever known reality exceed description!"

Violante's blush here made her still more beautiful; and as the countess returned to Riccabocca, she stole gently to Helen's side.

"Miss Digby, my ward," said Harley, pointedly, observing

that his mother had neglected her duty of presenting Helen to the ladies. He then reseated himself, and conversed with Mrs. Riccabocca; but his bright, quick eye glanced over at the two girls. They were about the same age—and youth was all that, to the superficial eye, they seemed to have in common. A greater contrast could not well be conceived; and, what is strange, both gained by it. Violante's brilliant loveliness seemed yet more dazzling, and Helen's fair, gentle face yet more winning. Neither had mixed much with girls of her own age; each took to the other at first sight. Violante, as the less shy, began the conversation.

"You are his ward,—Lord L'Estrange's?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you came with him from Italy?"

"No, not exactly; but I have been in Italy for some years."

"Ah! you regret—nay, I am foolish—you return to your native land. But the skies in Italy are so blue,—here it seems as if Nature wanted colours."

"Lord L'Estrange says that you were very young when you left Italy; you remember it well. He, too, prefers Italy to England."

"He! Impossible!"

"Why impossible, fair sceptic?" cried Harley, interrupting himself in the midst of a speech to Jemima.

Violante had not dreamed that she could be overheard—she was speaking low; but, though visibly embarrassed, she answered distinctly,

"Because in England there is the noblest career for noble

minds."

Harley was startled, and replied, with a slight sigh, "At your age I should have said as you do. But this England of ours is so crowded with noble minds that they only jostle each other, and the career is one cloud of dust."

"So, I have read, seems a battle to a common soldier, but not to the chief."

"You have read good descriptions of battles, I see."

Mrs. Riccabocca, who thought this remark a taunt upon her step-daughter's studies, hastened to Violante's relief.

"Her papa made her read the history of Italy, and I believe that is full of battles."

HARLEY.—"All history is, and all women are fond of war and of warriors. I wonder why?"

VIOLANTE (turning to Helen, and in a very low voice, resolved that Harley should not hear this time).—"We can guess why,—can we not?"

HARLEY (hearing every word, as if it had been spoken in St. Paul's Whispering Gallery).—"If you can guess, Helen, pray tell me."

HELEN (shaking her pretty head, and answering with a livelier smile than usual).—"But I am not fond of war and warriors."

HARLEY (to Violante).—"Then I must appeal at once to you, self-convicted Bellona that you are. Is it from the cruelty natural to the female disposition?"

VIOLANTE (with a sweet musical laugh). "From two propensities still more natural to it."

HARLEY.—"YOU puzzle me: what can they be?"

VIOLANTE.—"Pity and admiration; we pity the weak and admire the brave."

Harley inclined his head, and was silent.

Lady Lansmere had suspended her conversation with Riccabocca to listen to this dialogue. "Charming!" she cried.

"You have explained what has often perplexed me. Ah, Harley, I am glad to see that your satire is foiled: you have no reply to that."

"No; I willingly own myself defeated, too glad to claim the signorina's pity, since my cavalry sword hangs on the wall, and I can have no longer a professional pretence to her admiration."

He then rose, and glanced towards the window. "But I see a more formidable disputant for my conqueror to encounter is coming into the field,—one whose profession it is to substitute some other romance for that of camp and siege."

"Our friend Leonard," said Riccabocca, turning his eye also towards the window. "True; as Quevedo says, wittily, 'Ever since there has been so great a demand for type, there has been much less lead to spare for cannon-balls.'"

Here Leonard entered. Harley had sent Lady Lansmere's footman to him with a note, that prepared him to meet Helen. As he came into the room, Harley took him by the hand and led him to Lady Lansmere.

"The friend of whom I spoke. Welcome him now for my sake, ever after for his own;" and then, scarcely allowing time for the countess's elegant and gracious response, he drew Leonard towards Helen. "Children," said he, with a touching voice, that thrilled through the hearts of both, "go and seat yourselves yonder, and talk together of the past. Signorina, I invite you to renewed discussion upon the abstruse metaphysical subject you have started; let us see if we cannot find gentler sources for pity and admiration than war and warriors." He took Violante aside to the window. "You remember that Leonard, in telling you his history last night, spoke, you thought, rather too briefly of the little girl who had been his companion in the rudest time of his trials. When you would have questioned more, I interrupted you, and said, 'You should see her shortly, and question her yourself.' And now what think you of Helen Digby? Hush, speak low. But her ears are not so sharp as mine."

VIOLANTE.—"Ah! that is the fair creature whom Leonard called his child- angel? What a lovely innocent face!—the angel is there still."

HARLEY (pleased both at the praise and with her who gave it).—"You think so; and you are right. Helen is not communicative. But fine natures are like fine poems,—a glance at the first two lines suffices for a guess into the beauty that waits you if you read on."

Violante gazed on Leonard and Helen as they sat apart. Leonard was the speaker, Helen the listener; and though the

former had, in his narrative the night before, been indeed brief as to the episode in his life connected with the orphan, enough had been said to interest Violante in the pathos of their former position towards each other, and in the happiness they must feel in their meeting again,—separated for years on the wide sea of life, now both saved from the storm and shipwreck. The tears came into her eyes. "True," she said, very softly, "there is more here to move pity and admiration than in—" She paused.

HARLEY.—"Complete the sentence. Are you ashamed to retract? Fie on your pride and obstinacy!"

VIOLANTE.—"No; but even here there have been war and heroism,—the war of genius with adversity, and heroism in the comforter who shared it and consoled. Ah, wherever pity and admiration are both felt, something nobler than mere sorrow must have gone before: the heroic must exist."

"Helen does not know what the word 'heroic' means," said Harley, rather sadly; "you must teach her."

"Is it possible," thought he as he spoke, "that a Randal Leslie could have charmed this grand creature? No 'Heroic' surely, in that sleek young placeman.—"Your father," he said aloud, and fixing his eyes on her face, "sees much, he tells me, of a young man about Leonard's age, as to date; but I never estimate the age of men by the parish register, and I should speak of that so-called young man as a contemporary of my great-grandfather,—I mean Mr. Randal Leslie. Do you like him?"

"Like him," said Violante, slowly, and as if sounding her own

mind,— "like him—yes."

"Why?" asked Harley, with dry and curt indignation. "His visits seem to please my dear father. Certainly I like him."

"Hum. He professes to like you, I suppose?"

Violante laughed unsuspiciously. She had half a mind to reply, "Is that so strange?" But her respect for Harley stopped her. The words would have seemed to her pert. "I am told he is clever," resumed Harley.

"Oh, certainly."

"And he is rather handsome. But I like Leonard's face better."

"Better—that is not the word. Leonard's face is as that of one who has gazed so often upon Heaven; and Mr. Leslie's—there is neither sunlight nor starlight reflected there."

"My dear Violante?" exclaimed Harley, overjoyed; and he pressed her hand.

The blood rushed over the girl's cheek and brow; her hand trembled in his. But Harley's familiar exclamation might have come from a father's lips.

At this moment Helen softly approached them, and looking timidly into her guardian's face, said, "Leonard's mother is with him: he asks me to call and see her. May I?"

"May you! A pretty notion the signorina must form of your enslaved state of pupilage, when she hears you ask that question. Of course you may."

"Will you come with us?"

Harley looked embarrassed. He thought of the widow's

agitation at his name; of that desire to shun him, which Leonard had confessed, and of which he thought he divined the cause. And so divining, he too shrank from such a meeting.

"Another time, then," said he, after a pause. Helen looked disappointed, but said no more.

Violante was surprised at this ungracious answer. She would have blamed it as unfeeling in another; but all that Harley did was right in her eyes.

"Cannot I go with Miss Digby?" said she, "and my mother will go too. We both know Mrs. Fairfield. We shall be so pleased to see her again."

"So be it," said Harley; "I will wait here with your father till you come back. Oh, as to my mother, she will excuse the—excuse Madame Riccabocca, and you too. See how charmed she is with your father. I must stay to watch over the conjugal interests of mine."

But Mrs. Riccabocca had too much good old country breeding to leave the countess; and Harley was forced himself to appeal to Lady Lansmere. When he had explained the case in point, the countess rose and said,

"But I will call myself, with Miss Digby."

"No," said Harley, gravely, but in a whisper. "No; I would rather not."

I will explain later."

"Then," said the countess aloud, after a glance of surprise at her son, "I must insist on your performing this visit, my dear

madam, and you, Signorina. In truth, I have something to say confidentially to—"

"To me," interrupted Riccabocca. "Ah, Madame la Comtesse, you restore me to five-and-twenty. Go, quick, O jealous and injured wife; go, both of you, quick; and you, too, Harley."

"Nay," said Lady Lansmere, in the same tone, "Harley must stay, for my design is not at present upon destroying your matrimonial happiness, whatever it may be later. It is a design so innocent that my son will be a partner in it."

Here the countess put her lips to Harley's ear, and whispered. He received her communication in attentive silence; but when she had done, pressed her hand, and bowed his head, as if in assent to a proposal.

In a few minutes the three ladies and Leonard were on their road to the neighbouring cottage.

Violante, with her usual delicate intuition, thought that Leonard and Helen must have much to say to each other; and (ignorant, as Leonard himself was, of Helen's engagement to Harley) began already, in the romance natural to her age, to predict for them happy and united days in the future. So she took her stepmother's arm, and left Helen and Leonard to follow.

"I wonder," she said musingly, "how Miss Digby became Lord L'Estrange's ward. I hope she is not very rich, nor very high-born."

"La, my love," said the good Jemima, "that is not like you; you are not envious of her, poor girl?"

"Envious! Dear mamma, what a word! But don't you think Leonard and Miss Digby seem born for each other? And then the recollections of their childhood—the thoughts of childhood are so deep, and its memories so strangely soft!" The long lashes drooped over Violante's musing eyes as she spoke. "And therefore," she said, after a pause,— "therefore I hoped that Miss Digby might not be very rich nor very high-born."

"I understand you now, Violante," exclaimed Jemima, her own early passion for match-making instantly returning to her; "for as Leonard, however clever and distinguished, is still the son of Mark Fairfield the carpenter, it would spoil all if—Miss Digby was, as you say, rich and high-born. I agree with you,—a very pretty match, a very pretty match, indeed. I wish dear—Mrs. Dale were here now,—she is so clever in settling such matters."

Meanwhile Leonard and Helen walked side by side a few paces in the rear. He had not offered her his arm. They had been silent hitherto since they left Riccabocca's house.

Helen now spoke first. In similar cases it is generally the woman, be she ever so timid, who does speak first. And here Helen was the bolder; for Leonard did not disguise from himself the nature of his feelings, and Helen was engaged to another, and her pure heart was fortified by the trust reposed in it.

"And have you ever heard more of the good Dr. Morgan, who had powders against sorrow, and who meant to be so kind to us,—though," she added, colouring, "we did not think so then?"

"He took my child-angel from me," said Leonard, with visible

emotion; "and if she had not returned, where and what should I be now? But I have forgiven him. No, I have never met him since."

"And that terrible Mr. Burley?"

"Poor, poor Burley! He, too, is vanished out of my present life. I have made many inquiries after him; all I can hear is that he went abroad, supposed as a correspondent to some journal. I should like so much to see him again, now that perhaps I could help him as he helped me."

"Helped you—ah!"

Leonard smiled with a beating heart, as he saw again the dear prudent, warning look, and involuntarily drew closer to Helen. She seemed more restored to him and to her former self.

"Helped me much by his instructions; more, perhaps, by his very faults. You cannot guess, Helen,—I beg pardon, Miss Digby, but I forgot that we are no longer children,—you cannot guess how much we men, and more than all, perhaps, we writers whose task it is to unravel the web of human actions, owe even to our own past errors; and if we learned nothing by the errors of others, we should be dull indeed. We must know where the roads divide, and have marked where they lead to, before we can erect our sign-post; and books are the sign-posts in human life."

"Books! and I have not yet read yours. And Lord L'Estrange tells me you are famous now. Yet you remember me still,—the poor orphan child, whom you first saw weeping at her father's grave, and with whom you burdened your own young life, over-

burdened already. No, still call me Helen—you must always be to me a brother! Lord L'Estrange feels that; he said so to me when he told me that we were to meet again. He is so generous, so noble. Brother!" cried Helen, suddenly, and extending her hand, with a sweet but sublime look in her gentle face,—“brother, we will never forfeit his esteem; we will both do our best to repay him! Will we not? —say so!”

Leonard felt overpowered by contending and unanalyzed emotions. Touched almost to tears by the affectionate address, thrilled by the hand that pressed his own, and yet with a vague fear, a consciousness that something more than the words themselves was implied,—something that checked all hope. And this word “brother,” once so precious and so dear, why did he shrink from it now; why could he not too say the sweet word “sister”?

“She is above me now and evermore!” he thought mournfully; and the tones of his voice, when he spoke again, were changed. The appeal to renewed intimacy but made him more distant, and to that appeal itself he made no direct answer; for Mrs. Riccabocca, now turning round, and pointing to the cottage which came in view, with its picturesque gable-ends, cried out,

“But is that your house, Leonard? I never saw anything so pretty.”

“You do not remember it then,” said Leonard to Helen, in accents of melancholy reproach,—“there where I saw you last? I doubted whether to keep it exactly as it was, and I said, ‘—

No! the association is not changed because we try to surround it with whatever beauty we can create; the dearer the association, the more the Beautiful becomes to it natural.' Perhaps you don't understand this,—perhaps it is only we poor poets who do."

"I understand it," said Helen, gently. She looked wistfully at the cottage.

"So changed! I have so often pictured it to myself, never, never like this; yet I loved it, commonplace as it was to my recollection; and the garret, and the tree in the carpenter's yard."

She did not give these thoughts utterance. And they now entered the garden.

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Fairfield was a proud woman when she received Mrs. Riccabocca and Violante in her grand house; for a grand house to her was that cottage to which her boy Lenny had brought her home. Proud, indeed, ever was Widow Fairfield; but she thought then in her secret heart, that if ever she could receive in the drawing-room of that grand house the great Mrs. Hazeldean, who had so lectured her for refusing to live any longer in the humble, tenement rented of the squire, the cup of human bliss would be filled, and she could content edly die of the pride of it. She did not much notice Helen,—her attention was too absorbed by the ladies who renewed their old acquaintance with her, and she carried them all over the house, yea, into the very kitchen; and so, somehow or other, there was a short time when Helen and Leonard found themselves alone. It was in the study. Helen had unconsciously seated herself in Leonard's own chair, and she was gazing with anxious and wistful interest on the scattered papers, looking so disorderly (though, in truth, in that disorder there was method, but method only known to the owner), and at the venerable well-worn books, in all languages, lying on the floor, on the chairs—anywhere. I must confess that Helen's first tidy womanlike idea was a great desire to arrange the litter. "Poor Leonard," she thought to herself, "the rest of the house so neat, but no one to take care of his own room and of him!"

As if he divined her thought, Leonard smiled and said, "It would be a cruel kindness to the spider, if the gentlest band in the world tried to set its cobweb to rights."

HELEN.—"You were not quite so bad in the old days."

LEONARD.—"Yet even then you were obliged to take care of the money. I have more books now, and more money. My present housekeeper lets me take care of the books, but she is less indulgent as to the money."

HELEN (archly).—"Are you as absent as ever?"

LEONARD.—"Much more so, I fear. The habit is incorrigible, Miss Digby—"

HELEN.—"Not Miss Digby; sister, if you like."

LEONARD (evading the word that implied so forbidden an affinity).—"Helen, will you grant me a favour? Your eyes and your smile say 'yes.' Will you lay aside, for one minute, your shawl and bonnet? What! can you be surprised that I ask it? Can you not understand that I wish for one minute to think that you are at home again under this roof?"

Helen cast down her eyes, and seemed troubled; then she raised them, with a soft angelic candour in their dovelike blue, and, as if in shelter from all thoughts of more warm affection, again murmured "brother," and did as he asked her.

So there she sat, amongst the dull books, by his table, near the open window, her fair hair parted on her forehead, looking so good, so calm, so happy! Leonard wondered at his own self-command. His heart yearned to her with such inexpressible love,

his lips so longed to murmur, "Ah, as now so could it be forever! Is the home too mean?" But that word "brother" was as a talisman between her and him. Yet she looked so at home—perhaps so at home she felt!—more certainly than she had yet learned to do in that stiff stately house in which she was soon to have a daughter's rights. Was she suddenly made aware of this, that she so suddenly arose, and with a look of alarm and distress on her face.

"But—we are keeping Lady Lansmere too long," she said falteringly. "We must go now," and she hastily took up her shawl and bonnet.

Just then Mrs. Fairfield entered with the visitors, and began making excuses for inattention to Miss Digby, whose identity with Leonard's child-angel she had not yet learned.

Helen received these apologies with her usual sweetness. "Nay," she said, "your son and I are such old friends, how could you stand on ceremony with me?"

"Old friends!" Mrs. Fairfield stared amazed, and then surveyed the fair speaker more curiously than she had yet done. "Pretty, nice-spoken thing," thought the widow; "as nice-spoken as Miss Violante, and humbler- looking like,—though, as to dress, I never see anything so elegant out of a pichter."

Helen now appropriated Mrs. Riccabocca's arm; and, after a kind leave-taking with the widow, the ladies returned towards Riccabocca's house.

Mrs. Fairfield, however, ran after them with Leonard's hat and gloves, which he had forgotten.

"Deed, boy," she said, kindly, yet scoldingly, "but there'd be no more fine books, if the Lord had not fixed your head on your shoulders. You would not think it, marm," she added to Mrs. Riccabocca, "but sin' he has left you, he's not the 'cute lad he was; very helpless at times, marm!"

Helen could not resist turning round, and looking at Leonard, with a sly smile.

The widow saw the smile, and catching Leonard by the arm, whispered,

"But where before have you seen that pretty young lady? Old friends!"

"Ah, Mother," said Leonard, sadly, "it is a long tale; you have heard the beginning, who can guess the end?" and he escaped. But Helen still leaned on the arm of Mrs. Riccabocca, and, in the walk back, it seemed to Leonard as if the winter had re-settled in the sky.

Yet he was by the side of Violante, and she spoke to him with such praise of Helen! Alas! it is not always so sweet as folks say to hear the praises of one we love. Sometimes those praises seem to ask ironically, "And what right hast thou to hope because thou lovest? All love her."

CHAPTER V

No sooner had Lady Lansmere found herself alone with Riccabocca and Harley than she laid her hand on the exile's arm, and, addressing him by a title she had not before given him, and from which he appeared to shrink nervously, said, "Harley, in bringing me to visit you, was forced to reveal to me your incognito, for I should have discovered it. You may not remember me, in spite of your gallantry; but I mixed more in the world than I do now, during your first visit to England, and once sat next to you at dinner at Carlton House. Nay, no compliments, but listen to me. Harley tells me you have cause for some alarm respecting the designs of an audacious and unprincipled adventurer, I may call him; for adventurers are of all ranks. Suffer your daughter to come to me on a visit, as long as you please. With me, at least, she will be safe; and if you, too, and the——"

"Stop, my dear madam," interrupted Riccabocca, with great vivacity; "your kindness overpowers me. I thank you most gratefully for your invitation to my child; but——"

"Nay," in his turn interrupted Harley, "no buts. I was not aware of my mother's intention when she entered this room. But since she whispered it to me, I have reflected on it, and am convinced that it is but a prudent precaution. Your retreat is known to Mr. Leslie, he is known to Peschiera. Grant that no indiscretion of Mr. Leslie's betray the secret; still I have reason to believe

that the count guesses Randal's acquaintance with you. Audley Egerton this morning told me he had gathered that, not from the young man himself, but from questions put to himself by Madame di Negra; and Peschiera might and would set spies to track Leslie to every house that he visits,—might and would, still more naturally, set spies to track myself. Were this man an Englishman, I should laugh at his machinations; but he is an Italian, and has been a conspirator. What he could do I know not; but an assassin can penetrate into a camp, and a traitor can creep through closed walls to one's hearth. With my mother, Violante must be safe; that you cannot oppose. And why not come yourself?"

Riccabocca had no reply to these arguments, so far as they affected Violante; indeed, they awakened the almost superstitious terror with which he regarded his enemy, and he consented at once that Violante should accept the invitation proffered. But he refused it for himself and Jemima.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.