

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

GODOLPHIN, VOLUME

5

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

Godolphin, Volume 5

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Содержание

CHAPTER XLII	5
CHAPTER XLIII	8
CHAPTER XLIV	10
CHAPTER XLV	11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	13

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Godolphin, Volume 5

CHAPTER XLII

JOY AND DESPAIR

It was approaching towards the evening as Lucilla paused for a few seconds at the door which led to Godolphin's apartments. At length she summoned courage. The servant who admitted her was Godolphin's favorite domestic; and he was amazed, but overjoyed, to see her; for Lucilla was the idol of all who knew her,—save of him, whose love only she cared and lived for.

His master, he said, was gone out for a short time, but the next day they were to have returned home. Lucilla coloured with vivid delight to hear that her letter had produced an effect she had not hoped so expeditiously to accomplish. She passed on into Godolphin's apartment. The room bore evident signs of approaching departure; the trunks lay half-packed on the floor; there was all that importance of confusion around which makes to the amateur traveller a luxury out of discomfort. Lucilla sat down, and waited, anxious and trembling, for her lover. Her woman, who had accompanied her, thinking of more terrestrial concerns than love, left her, at her desire. She could not rest long; she walked, agitating and expecting, to and fro the long and half-furnished chamber which characterises the Italian palace. At length, her eye fell on an open letter on a writing-table at one corner of the room. She glanced over it mechanically,—certain words suddenly arrested her attention. Were those words—words of passion—addressed to her? If not, O Heaven! to whom? She obeyed, as she ever did, the impulse of the moment, and read what follows:

"Constance—As I write that word how many remembrances rush upon me!—for how many years has that name been a talisman to my heart, waking its emotions at will! You are the first woman I ever really loved: you rejected me, yet I could not disdain you. You became another's but my love could not desert you. Your hand wrote the history of my life after the period when we met,—my habits—my thoughts—you influenced and coloured them all! And now, Constance, you are free; and I love you more fervently than ever! And you—yes, you would not reject me now; you have grown wiser, and learned the value of a heart. And yet the same Fate that divided us hitherto will divide us now; all obstacles but one are passed away—of that one you shall hear and judge.

"When we parted, Constance, years ago, I did not submit tamely to the burning remembrance you bequeathed me; I sought to dissipate your image, and by wooing others to forget yourself. Need I say, that to know another was only to remember you the more? But among the other and far less worthy objects of my pursuit was one whom, had I not seen you first, I might have loved as ardently as I do you; and in the first flush of emotion, and the heat of sudden events, I imagined that I did so love her. She was an orphan, a child in years and in the world; and I was all to her—I am, all to her. She is not mine by the ties of the Church; but I have pledged a faith to her equally sacred and as strong. Shall I break that faith? shall I betray that trust? shall I crush a heart that has always been mine—mine more tenderly than yours, rich in a thousand gifts and resources, ever was or ever can be? Shall I,—sworn to protect her—I, who have already robbed her of fame and friends, rob her now of father, brother, lover, husband, the world itself,—for I am all to her? Never—never! I shall be wretched throughout life: I shall know that you are free that you—oh! Constance! you might be mine!—but she shall never dream what she has cost me! I have been too cold, too ungrateful to her already—I will make her amends. My heart may break in the effort, but it shall reward her. You, Constance, in the pride of your lofty station, your strengthened mind, your regulated virtue (fenced in by the

hundred barriers of custom), you cannot, perhaps, conceive how pure and devoted the soul of this poor girl is! She is not one whom I could heap riches upon and leave:—my love is all the riches she knows. Earth has not a consolation or a recompense for the loss of my affection: and even Heaven itself she has never learned to think of, except as a place in which we shall be united for ever. As I write this I know that she is sitting afar off and alone, and thinking only of one whose whole soul, fated and accursed as he is, is maddened by the love of another. My letters, her only comfort, have been cold and few of late; I know how they have wrung her heart. I picture to myself her solitude—her sadness—her unfriended youth—her ardent mind, which, not enriched by culture, clings, feeds, lives only on one idea. Before you receive this, I shall be on the road to her. Never again will I risk the temptation I have under gone. I am not a vain man; I do not deceive myself; I do not imagine, I do not insult you by believing, that you will long or bitterly feel my loss. I have loved you far better than you have loved me, and you have uncounted channels for your bright hopes and your various ambition. You love the world, and the world is at your feet! And in remembering me now, you may think you have cause for indignation. Why, with the knowledge of a tie that forbade me to hope for you, why did I linger round you? why did I give vent to any word, or license to any look, that told you I loved you still? Why, above all, on that fated yesterday, when we stood alone surrounded by the waters,—why did I dare forget myself—why clasp you to my breast—why utter the assurance of that love which was a mockery, if I were not about solemnly to record it?

"This you will ask; and if you are not satisfied with the answer, your pride will clothe my memory with resentment. Be it so—yet hear me. Constance, when, in my first youth, at the time when the wax was yet soft, and the tree might yet be bent—when I laid my heart and my future lot at your feet—when you, at the dictates of a worldly and cold ambition (disguise the name as you will, the reality is the same), threw me back on the solitary desert of life; when you rejected—forsook me;—do you think that, although I loved you still, there was no anger mingled with the love! We met again: but what years of wasted existence—of dimmed hope—of deadened emotion—had passed over me since then! And who had thus marked them? You! Do you wonder, then, that something of human pride asked for human vengeance? Yes! I pined for some triumph in my turn: I longed to try whether I was yet forgotten—whether the heart which stung me had been stung also in the wound that it inflicted. Was not this natural? Ask yourself, and blame me if you can. But by degrees, as I gazed upon a beauty, and listened to a voice, softer in their character than of old,—as I felt that you would not deny me retribution, this selfish desire for revenge died away, and, by degrees, all emotions were merged in one—unconquered, unconquerable love. And can you blame me, if then—traitor to myself as to you—I lingered on the spot?—if I had many struggles to endure before I could resolve on the sacrifice I now make? Alas! it has cost me much to be just. Can you blame me if at all times I could not control my words and looks? Nay, even in our last meeting, when I was maddened by the thought that we were about to part for ever—when we stood alone—when no eye was near—when you clung to me in a delicious timidity—when your breath was on my cheek—when the heaving of your heart was heard by mine—when my hand touched that which could give me all the world in itself—when my arm encircled that glorious and divine shape—O Heaven! can you blame me—can you wonder if I was transported beyond myself;—if conscience, reason, all were forgotten, and I thought—felt—lived—but for the moment and for you? No, you will feel for the weakness of nature; you will not judge me harshly.

"And why should you rob me of the remembrance of that brief moment—that wild embrace? How often shall I recall it!—How often when the light step of her to whom I return glides around me, shall I cheat myself, and think it yours; when I feel her breath at night, shall I not start—and dream it comes from your lips? and in returning her unconscious caress, let me fancy it is you whispers me the assurances of unutterable love! Forgive me, Constance, my yet adored Constance, whom I shall never see more, for these wild words—this momentary weakness. Farewell! Whatever becomes of me, may God give you all His blessings!

"One word more—no, I will not close this letter yet! You remember that you once gave me a flower—years ago. I have preserved its leaves to this day; but I will give no indulgence to a folly that will now wrong you, and be unworthy of myself. I will send you back those leaves: let them plead for me, as the memories of former days. I must break off now, for I can literally write no more. I must go forth and recover my self-command. And oh! may she whom I seek to-morrow—whose unsuspecting heart admonished by temptation, I will watch over, guide, and shield far, far more zealously than I have yet done—never know what it has cost me, not to abandon and betray her."

And Lucilla read over every word of this letter! How wholly impossible it is for language to express the agony, the hopeless, irremediable despair that deepened within her as she proceeded to the end! Everything that life had, or could ever have had for her, of common peace or joy, was blasted for ever! As she came to the last word, she bowed her head in silence over the writing, and felt as if some mighty rock had fallen upon her heart, and crushed it to dust. Had the letter breathed but one unkind—one slighting expression of her, it would have been some comfort—some rallying point, however forlorn and wretched; but this cruel tenderness—this bitter generosity!

And before she had read that letter, how joyously, how breathlessly she had anticipated rushing to her lover's breast! It seems incredible that the space of a few minutes should suffice to blight a whole existence—blacken without a ray of hope an entire future!

She was aroused by the sound of steps, though in another apartment; she would not now have met Godolphin for worlds; the thought of his return alone gave her the power of motion. She thrust the fatal letter into her bosom; and then, in characters surprisingly distinct and clear, she wrote her name, and placed that writing in the stead of the epistle she took away. She judged rightly, that that single name would suffice to say all she could not then say. Having done this, she rose, left the room, and stole softly and unperceived into the open street.

Unconscious and careless whither she went, she hurried on, her eyes bent on the ground, and concealing her form and face with her long mantle. The streets at Rome are not thronged as with us; nor does there exist, in a city consecrated by so many sublime objects, that restless and vulgar curiosity which torments the English public. Each lives in himself, not in his neighbour. The moral air of Rome is Indifference.

Lucilla, therefore, hurried along unmolested and unobserved, until at length her feet failed her, and she sank exhausted, but still unconscious of her movements and of all around, upon one of the scattered fragments of ancient pride that at every turn are visible in the streets of Rome. The place was quiet and solitary, and darkened by the shadows of a palace that reared itself close beside. She sat down; and shrouding her face as it drooped over her breast, endeavoured to collect her thoughts. Presently the sound of a guitar was heard; and along the street came a little group of the itinerant musicians who invest modern Italy with its yet living air of poetry: the reality is gone, but the spirit lingers. They stopped opposite a small house; and Lucilla, looking up, saw the figure of a young girl placing a light at the window as a signal well known, and then she glided away. Meanwhile, the lover (who had accompanied the musicians, and seemed in no very elevated rank of life) stood bare-headed beneath; and in his upward look there was a devotion, a fondness, a respect, that brought back to Lucilla all the unsparing bitterness of contrast and recollection. And now the serenade began. The air was inexpressibly soft and touching, and the words were steeped in that vague melancholy which is inseparable from the tenderness, if not from the passion, of love. Lucilla listened involuntarily, and the charm slowly wrought its effect. The hardness and confusion of her mind melted gradually away, and as the song ended she turned aside and burst into tears. "Happy, happy girl!" she murmured; "she is loved!"

Here let us drop the curtain upon Lucilla. Often, O Reader! shalt thou recall this picture; often shalt thou see her before thee—alone and broken-hearted—weeping in the twilight streets of Rome!

CHAPTER XLIII

LOVE STRONG AS DEATH, AND NOT LESS BITTER

When Godolphin returned home the door was open, as Lucilla had left it, and he went at once into his apartment. He hastened to the table on which he had left, with the negligence arising from the emotions of the moment, the letter to Constance,—the paper on which Lucilla had written her name alone met his eye. While yet stunned and amazed, his servant and Lucilla's entered: in a few moments he had learned all they had to tell him; the rest Lucilla's handwriting did indeed sufficiently explain. He comprehended all; and, in a paroxysm of alarm and remorse, he dispersed his servants, and hurried himself in search of her. He went to the house of her relations; they had not seen or heard of her. It was now night, and every obstacle in the way of his search presented itself. Not a clue could be traced; or, sometimes following a description that seemed to him characteristic, he chased, and found some wanderer—how unlike Lucilla! Towards daybreak he returned home, after a vain and weary search; and his only comfort was in learning from her attendant that she had about her a sum of money which he knew would in Italy always purchase safety and attention. Yet, alone, at night, in the streets,—so utter a stranger as she was to the world,—so young and so lovely—he shuddered, he gasped for breath at the idea. Might she destroy herself? That hideous question forced itself upon him; he could not exclude it: he trembled when he recalled her impassioned and keen temper; and when, in remembering the tone and words of his letter to Constance, he felt how desperate a pang every sentence must have inflicted upon her. And, indeed, even his imagination could not equal the truth, when it attempted to sound the depths of her wounded feelings. He only returned home to sally out again. He now employed the police, and those most active and vigilant agents that at Rome are willing to undertake all enterprises;—he could not but feel assured of discovering her.

Still, however, noon—evening came on, and no tidings. As he once more returned home, in the faint hope that some intelligence might await him there, his servant hurried eagerly out to him with a letter—it was from Lucilla, and it was worthy of her: give it to the reader.

LUCILLA'S LETTER

"I have read your letter to another! Are not these words sufficient to tell you all? All? no! you never, never, never can tell how crushed and broken my heart is. Why?—because you are a man, and because you have never loved as I loved. Yes, Godolphin, I knew that I was not one whom you could love. I am a poor, ignorant, untutored girl, with nothing at my heart but a great world of love which I could never tell. Thou saidst I could not comprehend thee: alas! how much was there—is there—in my nature—in my feelings, which have been, and ever will be, unfathomable to thy sight!

"But all this matters not; the tie between us is eternally broken. Go, dear, dear Godolphin! link thyself to that happier other one—seemingly so much more thine equal than the lowly and uncultivated Lucilla. Grieve not for me; you have been kind, most kind, to me. You have taken away hope, but you have given me pride in its stead;—the blow which has crushed my heart has given strength to my mind. Were you and I left alone on the earth, we must still be apart; I could never, never live with you again; my world is not your world; when our hearts have ceased to be in common, what of union is there left to us? Yet it would be something if, since the future is shut out from me, you had not also deprived me of the past: I have not even the privilege of looking back! What! all the while my heart was lavishing itself upon thee—all the while I had no other thought, no other dream but thee—all the while I sat by thy side, and watched thee, hanging on thy wish, striving to foresee

thy thoughts—all the while I was the partner of thy days, and at night my bosom was thy pillow, and I could not sleep from the bliss of thinking thee so near me: thy heart was then indeed away from me: thy thoughts estranged; I was to thee only an encumbrance—a burthen, from which thy sigh was to be free! Can I ever look back, then, to those hours we spent together? All that vast history of the past is but one record of bitterness and shame. And yet I cannot blame thee; it were something if I could: in proportion as you loved me not, you were kind and generous; and God will bless you for that kindness to the poor orphan. A harsh word, a threatening glance, I never had the affliction to feel from thee. Tracing the blighted past, I am only left to sadden at that gentleness which never came from love!

"Go, Godolphin—I repeat the prayer in all humbleness and sincerity—go to her whom thou lovest, perhaps as I loved thee; go, and in your happiness I shall feel at last something of happiness myself. We part for ever, but there is no unkindness between us; there is no reproach that one can make against the other. If I have sinned, it has been against Heaven and not thee; and thou—why, even against Heaven mine was all the fault—the rashness the madness! You will return to your native land; to that proud England, of which I have so often questioned you, and which, even in your answers, seems to me so cold and desolate a spot,—a land so hostile to love. There, in your new ties, you will learn new objects, and you will be too busy, and too happy, for your thoughts to turn to me again. Too happy?—No, I wish I could think you would be; but I whom you deny to possess sympathies with you—I have at least penetrated so far into your heart as to fear that, come what may, you will never find the happiness you ask. You exact too much, you dream too fondly, not to be discontented with the truth. What has happened to me must happen to my rival—will happen to you throughout life. Your being is in one world, your soul is in another. Alas! how foolishly I run on, as if seeking in your nature and not circumstances, the blow that separates its.

"I shall hasten to a conclusion. I have gained a refuge in this convent; seek me not, follow me not, I implore, I adjure thee; it can serve no purpose. I would not see thee; the veil is already drawn between thy world and me, and it only remains, in kindness and in charity, to bid each other farewell. Farewell, then! I think I am now with thee; I think my lips have breathed aside thy long hair, and cling to thy fair temples with a sister's—that word, at least, is left me—a sister's kiss. As we stood together, at the grey dawn, when we last parted—as then, in sorrow and in tears, I hid my face in thy bosom—as then, unconscious of what was to come, I poured forth my assurances of faithful unswerving thought—as thrice thou didst tear thyself from me and didst thrice return—and as, through the comfortless mists of morn I gazed after thee, and fancied for hours that thy last words yet rang in my ear; so now, but with different feelings, I once more bid thee farewell—farewell for ever!"

CHAPTER XLIV

GODOLPHIN

"No, signor, she will not see you!"

"You have given my note—given that ring?"

"I have, and she still refuses."

"Refuses?—and is that all the answer? no line to—to soften the reply?"

"Signor, I have spoken all my message."

"Cruel, hard-hearted! May I call again, think you, with a better success?"

"The convent, at stated times, is open to strangers, signor; but so far as the young signora is concerned I feel assured, from her manner, that your visits will be in vain."

"Ay—ay, I understand you, madam; you wish to entice her from the wicked world,—to suffer not human friendships to disturb her thoughts. Good Heavens! and can she, so young, so ardent, dream of taking the veil?"

"She does not dream of it," said the nun, coolly; "she has no intention of remaining here long."

"Befriend me, I beseech you!" cried Godolphin, eagerly "restore her to me; let me only come once to her within these walls and I will enrich your—"

"Signor, good-day."

Dejected, melancholy, and yet enraged amidst all his sorrow, Godolphin returned to Rome. Lucilla's letter rankled in his heart like the barb of a broken arrow; but the stern resolve with which she had refused to see him appeared to the pride that belongs to manhood a harsh and unfeeling insult. He knew not that poor Lucilla's eyes had watched him from the walls of the convent, and that while, for his sake more than her own, she had refused the meeting he prayed for, she had not the resolution to deny herself the luxury of gazing on him once more.

He reached Rome; he found a note on his table from Lady Charlotte Deerham, saying she had heard it was his intention to leave Rome, and begging him to receive from her that evening her adieux. "Lady Erpingham will be with me," concluded the note.

This brought a new train of ideas. Since Lucilla's flight, all thought but of Lucilla had been expelled from Godolphin's mind. We have seen how his letter to Lady Erpingham miscarried: he had written no other. How strange to Constance must seem his conduct, after the scene of the avowal in the Siren's Cave: no excuse on the one hand, no explanation on the other; and now what explanation should he give? There was no longer a necessity, for it was no longer honesty and justice to fly from the bliss that might await him—the love of his early—worshipped Constance. But could he, with a heart yet bleeding from the violent rupture of one tie, form a new one? Agitated, restless, self-reproachful, bewildered, and uncertain, he could not bear thoughts that demanded answers to a thousand questions; he flung from his cheerless room, and hastened, with a feverish pulse and burning temples, to Lady Charlotte Deerham's.

"Good Heavens! how ill you look, Mr. Godolphin!" cried the hostess, involuntarily.

"Ill!—ha! ha! I never was better; but I have just returned from a long journey: I have not touched food nor felt sleep for three days and nights! I—ha, ha! no, I'm not ill;" and, with an eye bright with gathering delirium, Godolphin glared around him.

Lady Charlotte drew back and shuddered; Godolphin felt a cool, soft hand laid on his; he turned and the face of Constance, full of anxious and wondering pity, was bent upon him. He stood arrested for one moment, and then, seizing that hand, pressed it to his lips—his heart, and burst suddenly into tears. That paroxysm saved his life; for days afterwards he was insensible.

CHAPTER XLV

THE DECLARATION.—THE APPROACHING NUPTIALS.—IS THE IDEALIST CONTENTED?

As Godolphin returned to health, and, day after day, the presence of Constance, her soft tones, her deep eyes, grew on him, renewing their ancient spells, the reader must perceive that bourne to which events necessarily tended. For some weeks not a word that alluded to the Siren's Cave was uttered by either; but when that allusion came at last from Godolphin's lips, the next moment he was kneeling beside Constance, her hand surrendered to his, and her proud cheek all bathed in the blushes of sixteen.

"And so," said Saville, "you, Percy Godolphin, are at last the accepted lover of Constance, Countess of Erpingham. When is the wedding to be?"

"I know not," replied Godolphin, musingly.

"Well, I almost envy you; you will be very happy for six weeks, and that's something in this disagreeable world. Yet now, I look on you, I grow reconciled to myself again; you do not seem so happy as that I, Augustus Saville, should envy you while my digestion lasts. What are you thinking of?"

"Nothing," replied Godolphin, vacantly; the words of Lucilla were weighing at his heart, like a prophecy working towards its fulfilment: "Come what may, you will never find the happiness you ask: you exact too much."

At that moment Lady Erpingham's page entered with a note from Constance, and a present of flowers. No one ever wrote half so beautifully, so spiritually as Constance, and to Percy the wit was so intermingled with the tenderness!

"No," said he, burying his lips among the flowers; "no! I discard the foreboding; with you I must be happy!" But conscience, still unsilenced, whispered Lucilla!

The marriage was to take place at Rome. The day was fixed; and, owing to Constance's rank, beauty and celebrity, the news of the event created throughout "the English in Italy" no small sensation. There was a great deal of gossip, of course, on the occasion; and some of this gossip found its way to the haughty ears of Constance. It was said that she had made a strange match—that it was a curious weakness in one so proud and brilliant, to look no loftier than a private and not very wealthy gentleman; handsome, indeed, and reputed clever; but one who had never distinguished himself in anything—who never would!

Constance was alarmed and stung, not at the vulgar accusation, the paltry sneer, but at the prophecy relating to Godolphin: "he had never distinguished himself in anything—he never would." Rank, wealth, power, Constance felt these she wanted not, these she could command of herself; but she felt also that a nobler vanity of her nature required that the man of her mature and second choice should not be one, in repute, of that mere herd, above whom, in reality, his genius so eminently exalted him. She deemed it essential to her future happiness that Godolphin's ambition should be aroused, that he should share her ardour for those great objects that she felt would for ever be dear to her.

"I love Rome!" said she, passionately, one day, as accompanied by Godolphin, she left the Vatican; "I feel my soul grow larger amidst its ruins. Elsewhere, through Italy, we live in the present, but here in the past."

"Say not that that is the better life, dear Constance; the present—can we surpass it?"

Constance blushed, and thanked her lover with a look that told him he was understood.

"Yet," said she, returning to the subject, "who can breathe the air that is rife with glory, and not be intoxicated with emulation? Ah, Percy!"

"Ah, Constance! and what wouldst thou have of me? Is it not glory enough to be thy lover?"

"Let the world be as proud of my choice as I am." Godolphin frowned; he penetrated in those words to Constance's secret meaning. Accustomed to be an idol from his boyhood, he resented the notion that he had need of exertion to render him worthy even of Constance; and sensible that it might be thought he made an alliance beyond his just pretensions, he was doubly tenacious as to his own claims. Godolphin frowned, then, and turned away in silence. Constance sighed; she felt that she might not renew the subject. But, after a pause, Godolphin himself continued it.

"Constance," said he, in a low firm voice, "let us understand each other. You are all to me in the world; fame, and honor, and station and happiness. Am I, also, that all to you? If there be any thought at your heart which whispers you, 'You might have served your ambition better; you have done wrong in yielding to love and love only,'—then, Constance, pause; it is not too late."

"Do I deserve this, Percy?"

"You drop words sometimes," answered Godolphin, "that seem to indicate that you think the world may cavil at your choice, and that some exertion on my part is necessary to maintain your dignity. Constance, need I say, again and again, that I adore the very dust you tread on? But I have a pride, a self-respect, beneath which I cannot stoop; if you really think or feel this, I will not condescend to receive even happiness from you: let us part."

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