

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

GODOLPHIN, VOLUME

3

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
Godolphin, Volume 3

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=35008889

Godolphin, Volume 3:

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Godolphin, Volume 3

CHAPTER XXII

**THE BRIDE ALONE.—A DIALOGUE
POLITICAL AND MATRIMONIAL.—
CONSTANCWE GENIUS FOR DIPLOMACY.
—THE CHARACTER OF HER ASSBMBLIES.
—HER CONQUEST OVER LADY DELVILLE**

"Bring me that book; place that table nearer; and leave me."

The Abigail obeyed the orders, and the young Countess of Erpingham was alone. Alone! what a word for a young and beautiful bride in the first months of her marriage! Alone! and in the heart of that mighty city in which rank and wealth—and they were hers—are the idols adored by millions.

It was a room fancifully and splendidly decorated. Flowers and perfumes were, however, its chief luxury; and from the open window you might see the trees in the old Mall deepening into the rich verdure of June. That haunt, too—a classical haunt for London—was at the hour I speak of full of gay and idle life; and

there was something fresh and joyous in the air, the sun, and the crowd of foot and horse that swept below.

Was the glory gone from your brow, Constance?—or the proud gladness from your eye? Alas! are not the blessings of the world like the enchanted bullets?—that which pierces our heart is united with the gift which our heart desired!

Lord Erpingham entered the room. "Well, Constance," said he, "shall you ride on horseback to-day?"

"I think not."

"Then I wish you would call on Lady Delville. You see Delville is of my party: we sit together. You should be very civil to her, and I did not think you were so the other night."

"You wish Lady Delville to support your political interest; and, if I mistake not, you think her at present lukewarm?"

"Precisely."

"Then, my dear lord, will you place confidence in my discretion? I promise you, if you will leave me undisturbed in my own plans, that Lady Delville shall be the most devoted of your party before the season is half over: but then, the means will not be those you advise."

"Why, I advised none."

"Yes—civility; a very poor policy."

"D—n it, Constance! why, you would not frown a great person like Lady Delville into affection for us?"

"Leave it to me."

"Nonsense!"

"My dear lord, only try. Three months is all I ask. You will leave the management of politics to me ever afterwards! I was born a schemer. Am I not John Vernon's daughter?"

"Well, well, do as you will," said Lord Erpingham; "but I see how it will end. However, you will call on Lady Delville to-day?"

"If you wish it, certainly."

"I do."

Lady Delville was a proud, great lady; not very much liked and not so often invited by her equals as if she had been agreeable and a flirt.

Constance knew with whom she had to treat. She called on Lady Delville that day. Lady Delville was at home: a pretty and popular Mrs. Trevor was with her.

Lady Delville received her coolly—Constance was haughtiness itself.

"You go to the Duchess of Daubigny's to-night?" said Lady Delville in the course of their broken conversation.

"Indeed I do not. I like agreeable society. It shall be my object to form a circle that not one displeasing person shall obtain access to. Will you assist me, my dear Mrs. Trevor?"—and Constance turned, with her softest smile, to the lady she addressed.

Mrs. Trevor was flattered: Lady Delville drew herself up.

"It is a small party at the duchess's," said the latter; "merely to meet the Duke and Duchess of C—."

"Ah, few people are capable of giving a suitable entertainment to the royal family."

But surely none more so than the Duchess of Daubigny—her house so large, her rank so great!"

"These are but poor ingredients towards the forming of an agreeable party," said Constance, coldly. "The mistake made by common minds is to suppose titles the only rank. Royal dukes love, above all other persons, to be amused; and amusement is the last thing generally provided for them."

The conversation fell into other channels. Constance rose to depart. She warmly pressed the hand of Mrs. Trevor, whom she had only seen once before.

"A few persons come to me to-morrow evening," said she; "*do* waive ceremony, and join us. I can promise you that not one disagreeable person shall be present; and that the Duchess of Daubigny shall write for an invitation and be refused."

Mrs. Trevor accepted the invitation.

Lady Delville was enraged beyond measure. Never was female tongue more bitter than hers at the expense of that insolent Lady Erpingham! Yet Lady Delville was secretly in grief; for the first time in her life, she was hurt at not having been asked to a party: and being hurt because she was not going, she longed most eagerly to go.

The next evening came. Erpingham House was not large, but it was well adapted to the description of assembly its beautiful owner had invited. Statues, busts, pictures, books, scattered or arranged about the apartments, furnished matter for intellectual conversation, or gave at least an intellectual air to the meeting.

About a hundred persons were present. They were selected from the most distinguished ornaments of the time. Musicians, painters, authors, orators, fine gentlemen, dukes, princes, and beauties. One thing, however, was imperatively necessary in order to admit them—the profession of liberal opinions. No Tory, however wise, eloquent or beautiful, could, that evening, have obtained the sesame to those apartments.

Constance never seemed more lovely, and never before was she so winning. The coldness and the arrogance of her manner had wholly vanished. To every one she spoke; and to every one her voice, her manner, were kind, cordial, familiar, but familiar with a soft dignity that heightened the charm. Ambitious not only to please but to dazzle, she breathed into her conversation all the grace and culture of her mind. They who admired her the most were the most accomplished themselves.

Now exchanging with foreign nobles that brilliant trifling of the world in which there is often so much penetration, wisdom, and research into character; now with a kindling eye and animated cheek commenting, with poets and critics, on literature and the arts; now, in a more remote and quiet corner, seriously discussing, with hoary politicians, those affairs in which even they allowed her shrewdness and her grasp of intellect; and combining with every grace and every accomplishment a rare and dazzling order of beauty—we may readily imagine the sensation she created, and the sudden and novel zest which so splendid an Armida must have given to the tameness of society.

The whole of the next week, the party at Erpingham House was the theme of every conversation. Each person who had been there had met the lion he had been most anxious to see. The beauty had conversed with the poet, who had charmed her; the young debutant in science had paid homage to the great professor of its loftiest mysteries; the statesman had thanked the author who had defended his measures; the author had been delighted with the compliment of the statesman. Every one then agreed that, while the highest rank in the kingdom had been there, rank had been the least attraction; and those who before had found Constance repellent, were the very persons who now expatiated with the greatest rapture on the sweetness of her manners. Then, too, every one who had been admitted to the coterie dwelt on the rarity of the admission; and thus, all the world were dying for an introduction to Erpingham House—partly, because it was agreeable—principally, because it was difficult.

It soon became a compliment to the understanding to say of a person, "He goes to Lady Erpingham's!" They who valued themselves on their understandings moved heaven and earth to become popular with the beautiful countess. Lady Delville was not asked; Lady Delville was furious: she affected disdain, but no one gave her credit for it. Lord Erpingham teased Constance on this point.

"You see I was right; for you have affronted Lady Delville. She has made Delville look coolly on me; in a few weeks he will be a Tory; think of that, Lady Erpingham!"

"One month more," answered Constance, with a smile, "and you shall see."

One night, Lady Delville and Lady Erpingham met at a large party. The latter seated herself by her haughty enemy; not seeming to heed Lady Delville's coolness, Constance entered into conversation with her. She dwelt upon books, pictures, music: her manner was animated, and her wit playful. Pleased, in spite of herself, Lady Delville warmed from her reserve.

"My dear Lady Delville," said Constance, suddenly turning her bright countenance on the countess with an expression of delighted surprise, "will you forgive me?—I never dreamed before that you were so charming a person! I never conceal my sentiments: and I own with regret and shame that, till this moment, I had never seen in your mind—whatever I might in your person—those claims to admiration which were constantly dinned into my ear."

Lady Delville actually coloured.

"Pray," continued Constance, "condescend to permit me to a nearer acquaintance. Will you dine with us on Thursday?—we shall have only nine persons beside yourself: but they are the nine persons whom I most esteem and admire."

Lady Delville accepted the invitation. From that hour, Lady Delville—who had at first resented, from the deepest recess of her heart, Constance Vernon's accession to rank and wealth,—who, had Constance deferred to her early acquaintance, would have always found something in her she could have affected to

despise; from that hour, Lady Delville was the warmest advocate, and a little time after, the sincerest follower, of the youthful countess.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN INSIGHT INTO THE REAL GRANDE MONDE;—BEING A SEARCH BEHIND THE ROSE-COLOURED CURTAINS

The time we now speak of was the most brilliant the English world, during the last half century, has known. Lord Byron was in his brief and dazzling zenith; De Stael was in London; the Peace had turned the attention of rich idlers to social enjoyment and to letters. There was an excitement, and a brilliancy, and a spirituality, about our circles, which we do not recognise now. Never had a young and ambitious woman—a beauty and a genius—a finer moment for the commencement of her power. It was Constance's early and bold resolution to push to the utmost—even to exaggeration—a power existing in all polished states, but now mostly in this,—the power of fashion! This mysterious and subtle engine she was eminently skilled to move according to her will. Her intuitive penetration into character, her tact, and her grace, were exactly the talents Fashion most demands; and they were at present devoted only to that sphere. The rudeness that she mingled, at times, with the bewitching softness and ease of manner she could command at others, increased the effect

of her power. It is much to intimidate as well as to win. And her rudeness in a very little while grew popular; for it was never exercised but on those whom the world loves to see humbled. Modest merit in any rank; and even insolence, if accompanied with merit, were always safe from her satire. It was the hauteur of foolish duchesses or purse-proud roturiers that she loved, and scrupled not, to abase.

And the independence of her character was mixed with extraordinary sweetness of temper. Constance could not be in a passion: it was out of her nature. If she was stung, she could utter a sarcasm; but she could not frown or raise her voice. There was that magic in her, that she was always feminine. She did not stare young men out of countenance; she never addressed them by their Christian names; she never flirted—never coquetted: the bloom and flush of modesty was yet all virgin upon her youth. She, the founder of a new dynasty, avoided what her successors and contemporaries have deemed it necessary to incur. She was the leader of fashion; but—it is a miraculous union—she was respectable!

At this period, some new dances were brought into England. These dances found much favour in the eyes of several great ladies young enough to dance them. They met at each other's houses in the morning to practise the steps. Among these was Lady Erpingham; her house became the favourite rendezvous.

The young Marquis of Dartington was one of the little knot. Celebrated for his great fortune, his personal beauty, and his

general success, he resolved to fall in love with Lady Erpingham. He devoted himself exclusively to her; he joined her in the morning in her rides—in the evening in her gaities. He had fallen in love with her?—yes!—did he love her?—not the least. But he was excessively idle!—what else could he do?

Constance early saw the attentions and designs of Lord Dartington. There is one difficulty in repressing advances in great society—one so easily becomes ridiculous by being a prude. But Constance dismissed Lord Dartington with great dexterity. This was the occasion:—

One of the apartments in Erpingham House communicated with a conservatory. In this conservatory Constance was alone one morning, when Lord Dartington, who had entered the house with Lord Erpingham, joined her. He was not a man who could ever become sentimental; he was rather the gay lover—rather the Don Gaolor than the Amadis; but he was a little abashed before Constance. He trusted, however, to his fine eyes and his good complexion—plucked up courage; and, picking a flower from the same plant Constance was tending, said,—

"I believe there is a custom in some part of the world to express love by flowers. May I, dear Lady Erpingham, trust to this flower to express what I dare not utter?"

Constance did not blush, nor look confused, as Lord Dartington had hoped and expected. One who had been loved by Godolphin was not likely to feel much agitation at the gallantry of Lord Dartington; but she looked gravely in his face, paused a little

before she answered, and then said, with a smile that abashed the suitor more than severity could possibly have done:—

"My dear Lord Dartington, do not let us mistake each other. I live in the world like other women, but I am not altogether like them. Not another word of gallantry to me alone, as you value my friendship. In a crowded room pay me as many compliments as you like. It will flatter my vanity to have you in my train. And now, just do me the favour to take these scissors and cut the dead leaves off that plant."

Lord Dartington, to use a common phrase, "hummed and hawed." He looked, too, a little angry. An artful and shrewd politician, it was not Constance's wish to cool the devotion, though she might the attachment, of a single member of her husband's party. With a kind look—but a look so superior, so queen-like, so free from the petty and coquettish condescension of the sex, that the gay lord wondered from that hour how he could ever have dreamed of Constance as of certain other ladies—she stretched her hand to him.

"We are friends, Lord Dartington?—and now we know each other, we shall be so always."

Lord Dartington bowed confusedly over the beautiful hand he touched; and Constance, walking into the drawing-room, sent for Lord Erpingham on business—Dartington took his leave.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MARRIED STATE OF CONSTANCE

Constance, Countess of Erpingham, was young, rich, lovely as a dream, worshipped as a goddess. Was she happy? and was her whole heart occupied with the trifles that surrounded her?

Deep within her memory was buried one fatal image that she could not exorcise. The reproaching and mournful countenance of Godolphin rose before her at all times and seasons. The charm of his presence no other human being could renew. His eloquent and noble features, living, and glorious with genius and with passion, his sweet deep voice, his conversation, so rich with mind and knowledge, and the subtle delicacy with which he applied its graces to some sentiment dedicated to her, (delicious flattery, of all flatteries the most attractive to a sensitive and intellectual woman!)—these occurred to her again and again, and rendered all she saw around her flat, wearisome, insipid. Nor was this deep-seated and tender weakness the only serpent—if I may use so confused a metaphor—in the roses of her lot.

And here I invoke the reader's graver attention. The fate of women in all the more polished circles of society is eminently unnatural and unhappy. The peasant and his dame are on terms

of equality—equality even of ambition: no career is open to one and shut to the other;—equality even of hardship, and hardship is employment: no labour occupies the whole energies of the man, but leaves those of the woman unemployed. Is this the case with the wives in a higher station?—the wives of the lawyer, the merchant, the senator, the noble? There, the men have their occupations; and the women (unless, like poor Fanny, work-bags and parrots can employ them) none. They are idle. They employ the imagination and the heart. They fall in love and are wretched; or they remain virtuous, and are either wearied by an eternal monotony or they fritter away intellect, mind, character, in the minutest frivolities—frivolities being their only refuge from stagnation. Yes! there is one very curious curse for the sex which men don't consider! Once married, the more aspiring of them have no real scope for ambition: the ambition gnaws away their content, and never find elsewhere wherewithal to feed on.

This was Constance's especial misfortune. Her lofty, and restless, and soaring spirit pined for a sphere of action, and ballrooms and boudoirs met it on every side. One hope she did indeed cherish; that hope was the source of her intrigues and schemes, of her care for seeming trifles, the waste of her energies on seeming frivolities. This hope, this object, was to diminish—to crush, not only the party which had forsaken her father, but the power of that order to which she belonged herself; which she had entered only to humble. But this hope was a distant and chill vision. She was too rational to anticipate an early and effectual

change in our social state, and too rich in the treasures of mind to be the creature of one idea. Satiety—the common curse of the great;—crept over her day by day. The powers within her lay stagnant—the keen intellect rusted in its sheath.

"How is it," said she to the beautiful Countess of —, "that you seem always so gay and so animated; that with all your vivacity and tenderness, you are never at a loss for occupation? You never seem weary—ennuyee—why is this?"

"I will tell you," said the pretty countess, archly; "I change my lovers every month." Constance blushed, and asked no more.

Many women in her state, influenced by contagious example, wearied by a life in which the heart had no share; without children, without a guide; assailed and wooed on all sides, in all shapes;—many women might have ventured, if not into love, at least into coquetry. But Constance remained as bright and cold as ever—"the unsunned snow!" It might be, indeed, that the memory of Godolphin preserved her safe from all lesser dangers. The asbestos once conquered by fire can never be consumed by it; but there was also another cause in Constance's very nature—it was pride!

Oh! if men could but dream of what a proud woman endures in those caresses which humble her, they would not wonder why proud women are so difficult to subdue. This is a matter on which we all ponder much, but we dare not write honestly upon it. But imagine a young, haughty, guileless beauty, married to a man whom she neither loves nor honours; and so far from that want

of love rendering her likely to fall hereafter, it is more probable that it will make her recoil from the very name of love.

About this time the Dowager Lady Erpingham died; an event sincerely mourned by Constance, and which broke the strongest tie that united the young countess to her lord. Lord Erpingham and Constance, indeed, now saw but little of each other. Like most men six feet high, with large black whiskers, the earl was vain of his person; and, like most rich noblemen, he found plenty of ladies who assured him he was irresistible. He had soon grown angry at the unadmiring and calm urbanity of Constance; and, living a great deal with single men, he formed liaisons of the same order as they do. He was, however, sensible that he had been fortunate in the choice of a wife. His political importance the wisdom of Constance had quadrupled; at the least; his house she had rendered the most brilliant in London, and his name the most courted in the lists of the peerage. Though munificent, she was not extravagant; though a beauty, she did not intrigue; neither, though his inconstancy was open, did she appear jealous; nor, whatever the errors of his conduct, did she ever disregard his interest, disobey his wishes, or waver from the smooth and continuous sweetness of her temper. Of such a wife Lord Erpingham could not complain: he esteemed her, praised her, asked her advice, and stood a little in awe of her.

Ah, Constance! had you been the daughter of a noble or a peasant—had you been the daughter of any man but John Vernon—what a treasure beyond price, without parallel, would that

heart, that beauty, that genius have been!

CHAPTER XXV

THE PLEASURE OF RETALIATING HUMILIATION.—CONSTANCE'S DEFENCE OF FASHION.—REMARKS ON FASHION. —GODOLPHIN'S WHEREABOUT.—FANNY MILLINGER'S CHARACTER OF HERSELF. —WANT OF COURAGE IN MORALISTS

It was a proud moment for Constance when the Duchess of Winstoun and Lady Margaret Midgecombe wrote to her, worried her, beset her, for a smile, a courtesy, an invitation, or a ticket to Almack's.

They had at first thought to cry her down; to declare that she was plebeian, mad, bizarre, and a blue. It was all in vain. Constance rose every hour. They struggled against the conviction, but it would not do. The first person who confounded them with a sense of their error was the late King, then Regent; he devoted himself to Lady Erpingham for a whole evening, at a ball given by himself. From that hour they were assured they had been wrong; they accordingly called on her the next day. Constance received them with the same coldness she had always evinced; but they went away declaring they never saw any one whose

manners were so improved. They then sent her an invitation! she refused it; a second! she refused; a third, begging her to fix the day!!! she fixed the day, and disappointed them. Lord bless us!—how sorry they were, how alarmed, how terrified!—their dear Lady Erpingham must be ill!—they sent every day for the next week to know how she was!

"Why," said Mrs. Trevor to Lady Erpingham,— "why do you continue so cruel to these poor people? I know they were very impertinent, and so forth, once; but it is surely wiser and more dignified now to forgive; to appear unconscious of the past: people of the world ought not to quarrel with each other."

"You are right, and yet you are mistaken," said Constance: "I do forgive, and I don't quarrel; but my opinion, my contempt, remain the same, or are rather more disdainful than ever. These people are not worth losing the luxury we all experience in expressing contempt. I continue, therefore, but quietly and without affectation, to indulge that luxury. Besides, I own to you, my dear Mrs. Trevor, I do think that the mere insolence of titles must fairly and thoroughly be put down, if we sincerely wish to render society agreeable; and where can we find a better example for punishment than the Duchess of Winstoun?"

"But, my dear Lady Erpingham, you are thought insolent: your friend, Lady —, is called insolent, too;—are you sure the charge is not merited?"

"I allow the justice of the charge; but you will observe, ours is not the insolence of rank: we have made it a point to protect,

to the utmost, the poor and unfriended of all circles. Are we ever rude to governesses or companions, or poor writers, or musicians? When a man marries below him, do we turn our backs on the poor wife? Do we not, on the contrary, lavish our attention on her, and throw round her equivocal and joyless state the protection of Fashion? No, no! *our* insolence is Justice! it is the chalice returned to the lips which prepared it; it is insolence to the insolent; reflect, and you will allow it."

The fashion that Constance set and fostered was of a generous order; but it was not suited to the majority; it was corrupted by her followers into a thousand basenesses. In vain do we make a law, if the general spirit is averse to the law. Constance could humble the great; could loosen the links of extrinsic rank; could undermine the power of titles; but that was all! She could abase the proud, but not elevate the general tone: for one slavery she only substituted another,—people hugged the chains of Fashion, as before they hugged those of Titular Arrogance.

Amidst the gossip of the day Constance heard much of Godolphin, and all spoke of him with interest—even those who could not comprehend his very intricate and peculiar character. Separated from her by lands and seas, there seemed no danger in allowing herself the sweet pleasure of hearing his actions and his mind discussed. She fancied she did not permit herself to *love* him; she was too pure not to start at such an idea; but her mind was not so regulated, so trained and educated in sacred principle, that she forbade herself the luxury to *remember*. Of his present

mode of life she heard little. He was traced from city to city; from shore to shore; from the haughty noblesse of Vienna to the gloomy shrines of Memphis, by occasional report, and seemed to tarry long in no place. This roving and unsettled life, which secretly assured her of her power, suffused his image in all tender and remorseful dyes. Ah! where is that one person to be vied, could we read the heart?

The actress had heard incidentally from Saville of Godolphin's attachment to the beautiful countess. She longed to see her; and when, one night at the theatre, she was informed that Lady Erpingham was in the Lord Chamberlain's box close before her, she could scarcely command her self-possession sufficiently to perform with her wonted brilliancy of effect.

She was greatly struck by the singular nobleness of Lady Erpingham's face and person: and Godolphin rose in her estimation, from the justice of the homage he had rendered to so fair a shrine. What a curious trait, by the by, that is in women;—their exaggerated anxiety to see one who has been loved by the man in whom they themselves take interest: and the manner which the said man rises or falls in their estimation, according as they admire, or are disappointed in, the object of his love.

"And so," said Saville, supping one night with the actress, "you think the world does not overlaud Lady Erpingham?"

"No: she is what Medea would have been, if innocent—full of majesty, and yet of sweetness. It is the face of a queen of some three thousand years back. I could have worshipped her."

"My little Fanny, you are a strange creature. Methinks you have a dash of poetry in you."

"Nobody who has not written poetry could ever read my character," answered Fanny, with naivete, yet with truth. "Yet you have not much of the ideal about you, pretty one."

"No; because I was so early thrown on myself, that I was forced to make independence my chief good. I soon saw that if I followed my heart to and fro, wherever it led me, I should be the creature of every breath—the victim of every accident: I should have been the very soul of romance; lived on a smile; and died, perhaps, in a ditch at last. Accordingly, I set to work with my feelings, and pared and cut them down to a convenient compass. Happy for me that I did so! What would have become of me if, years go, when I loved Godolphin, I had thrown the whole world of my heart upon him?"

"Why, he has generosity; he would not have deserted you."

"But I should have wearied him," answered Fanny; "and that would have been quite enough for me. But I did love him well, and purely—(ah! you may smile!)—and disinterestedly. I was only fortified in my resolution not to love any one too much, by perceiving that he had *affection* but no *sympathy* for me. His nature was different from mine. I am *woman* in everything, and Godolphin is always sighing for a *goddess!*"

"I should like to sketch your character, Fanny. It is original, though not strongly marked. I never met with it in any book; yet it is true to your sex, and to the world."

"Few people could paint me exactly," answered Fanny. "The danger is that they would make too much or too little of me. But such as I am, the world ought to know what is so common, and, as you think, so undescribed."

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