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LUCRETIA — VOLUME 03

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Lucretia — Volume 03

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Содержание

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
Lucretia — Volume 03

CHAPTER VIII

THE DISCOVERY

Dalibard had undertaken to get Lucretia from the house, —in fact, her approaching marriage rendered necessary a communication with Mr. Parchmount, as executor to her uncle's will, relative to the transfer of her portion; and she had asked Dalibard to accompany her thither; for her pride shrank from receiving the lawyer in the shabby parlour of the shabby lodging-house; she therefore, that evening, fixed the next day, before noon, for the visit. A carriage was hired for the occasion, and when it drove off, Mr. Fielden took his children a walk to Primrose Hill, and called, as was agreed, on Mainwaring by the way.

The carriage had scarcely rattled fifty yards through the street when Dalibard fixed his eyes with deep and solemn commiseration on Lucretia. Hitherto, with masterly art, he had kept aloof from direct explanations with his pupil; he knew that she would distrust no one like himself. The plot was now ripened,

and it was time for the main agent to conduct the catastrophe. The look was so expressive that Lucretia felt a chill at her heart, and could not, help exclaiming, "What has happened? You have some terrible tidings to communicate!"

"I have indeed to say that which may, perhaps, cause you to hate me forever; as we hate those who report our afflictions. I must endure this; I have struggled long between my indignation and my compassion. Rouse up your strong mind, and hear me. Mainwaring loves your sister!"

Lucretia uttered a cry that seemed scarcely to come from a human voice,—

"No, no!" she gasped out; "do not tell me. I will hear no more; I will not believe you!"

With an inexpressible pity and softness in his tone, this man, whose career had given him such profound experience in the frailties of the human heart, continued: "I do not ask you to believe me, Lucretia; I would not now speak, if you had not the opportunity to convince yourself. Even those with whom you live are false to you; at this moment they have arranged all, for Mainwaring to steal, in your absence, to your sister. In a few moments more he will be with her; if you yourself would learn what passes between them, you have the power."

"I have—I have not—not—the courage; drive on—faster—faster."

Dalibard again was foiled. In this strange cowardice there was something so terrible, yet so touching, that it became sublime,—

it was the grasp of a drowning soul at the last plank.

"You are right perhaps," he said, after a pause; and wisely forbearing all taunt and resistance, he left the heart to its own workings.

Suddenly, Lucretia caught at the check-string. "Stop," she exclaimed,— "stop! I will not, I cannot, endure this suspense to last through a life! I will learn the worst. Bid him drive back."

"We must descend and walk; you forget we must enter unsuspected;" and Dalibard, as the carriage stopped, opened the door and let down the steps.

Lucretia recoiled, then pressing one hand to her heart, she descended, without touching the arm held out to her. Dalibard bade the coachman wait, and they walked back to the house.

"Yes, he may see her," exclaimed Lucretia, her face brightening. "Ah, there you have not deceived me; I see your stratagem,—I despise it; I know she loves him; she has sought this interview. He is so mild and gentle, so fearful to give pain; he has consented, from pity,—that is all. Is he not pledged to me? He, so candid, so ingenuous! There must be truth somewhere in the world. If he is false, where find truth? Dark man, must I look for it in you,— you?"

"It is not my truth I require you to test; I pretend not to truth universal; I can be true to one, as you may yet discover. But I own your belief is not impossible; my interest in you may have made me rash and unjust,—what you may overhear, far from destroying, may confirm forever your happiness. Would that it

may be so!"

"It must be so," returned Lucretia, with a fearful gloom on her brow and in her accent; "I will interpret every word to my own salvation."

Dalibard's countenance changed, despite his usual control over it. He had set all his chances upon this cast, and it was more hazardous than he had deemed. He had counted too much upon the jealousy of common natures. After all, how little to the ear of one resolved to deceive herself might pass between these two young persons, meeting not to avow attachment, but to take courage from each other! What restraint might they impose on their feelings! Still, the game must be played out.

As they now neared the house, Dalibard looked carefully round, lest they should encounter Mainwaring on his way to it. He had counted on arriving before the young man could get there.

"But," said Lucretia, breaking silence, with an ironical smile, —"but— for your tender anxiety for me has, no doubt, provided all means and contrivance, all necessary aids to baseness and eavesdropping, that can assure my happiness—how am I to be present at this interview?"

"I have provided, as you say," answered Dalibard, in the tone of a man deeply hurt, "those means which I, who have found the world one foe and one traitor, deemed the best to distinguish falsehood from truth. I have arranged that we shall enter the house unsuspected. Mainwaring and your sister will be in the drawing-room; the room next to it will be vacant, as Mr.

Fielden is from home: there is but a glass-door between the two chambers."

"Enough, enough!" and Lucretia turned round and placed her hand lightly on the Provencal's arm. "The next hour will decide whether the means you suggest to learn truth and defend safety will be familiar or loathsome to me for life,—will decide whether trust is a madness; whether you, my youth's teacher, are the wisest of men, or only the most dangerous."

"Believe me, or not, when I say I would rather the decision should condemn me; for I, too, have need of confidence in men."

Nothing further was said; the dull street was quiet and desolate as usual. Dalibard had taken with him the key of the house-door. The door opened noiselessly; they were in the house. Mainwaring's cloak was in the hall; he had arrived a few moments before them. Dalibard pointed silently to that evidence in favour of his tale. Lucretia bowed her head. but with a look that implied defiance; and (still without a word) she ascended the stairs, and entered the room appointed for concealment. But as she entered, at the farther corner of the chamber she saw Mrs. Fielden seated, —seated, remote and out of hearing. The good-natured woman had yielded to Mainwaring's prayer, and Susan's silent look that enforced it, to let their interview be unwitnessed. She did not perceive Lucretia till the last walked glidingly, but firmly, up to her, placed a burning hand on her lips, and whispered: "Hush, betray me not; my happiness for life—Susan's—his—are at stake; I must hear what passes: it is my fate that is deciding.

Hush! I command; for I have the right."

Mrs. Fielden was awed and startled; and before she could recover even breath, Lucretia had quitted her side and taken her post at the fatal door. She lifted the corner of the curtain from the glass panel, and looked in.

Mainwaring was seated at a little distance from Susan, whose face was turned from her. Mainwaring's countenance was in full view. But it was Susan's voice that met her ear; and though sweet and low, it was distinct, and even firm. It was evident from the words that the conference had but just begun.

"Indeed, Mr. Mainwaring, you have nothing to explain, nothing of which to accuse yourself. It was not for this, believe me,"—and here Susan turned her face, and its aspect of heavenly innocence met the dry, lurid eye of the unseen witness,—"not for this, believe me, that I consented to see you. If I did so, it was only because I thought, because I feared from your manner, when we met at times, still more from your evident avoidance to meet me at all, that you were unhappy (for I know you kind and honest),—unhappy at the thought that you had wounded me, and my heart could not bear that, nor, perhaps, my pride either. That you should have forgotten me—"

"Forgotten you!"

"That you should have been captivated," continued Susan, in a more hurried tone, "by one so superior to me in all things as Lucretia, is very natural. I thought, then—thought only—that nothing could cloud your happiness but some reproach of

a conscience too sensitive. For this I have met you,—met you without a thought which Lucretia would have a right to blame, could she read my heart; met you," and the voice for the first time faltered, "that I might say, 'Be at peace; it is your sister that addresses you. Requite Lucretia's love,—it is deep and strong; give her, as she gives to you, a whole heart; and in your happiness I, your sister—sister to both—I shall be blest.'" With a smile inexpressibly touching and ingenuous, she held out her hand as she ceased. Mainwaring sprang forward, and despite her struggle, pressed it to his lips, his heart.

"Oh," he exclaimed, in broken accents, which gradually became more clear and loud, "what—what have I lost!—lost forever! No, no, I will be worthy of you! I do not, I dare not, say that I love you still! I feel what I owe to Lucretia. How I became first ensnared, infatuated; how, with your image graven so deeply here—"

"Mainwaring—Mr. Mainwaring—I must not hear you. Is this your promise?"

"Yes, you must hear me yet. How I became engaged to your sister,—so different indeed from you,—I start in amaze and bewilderment when I seek to conjecture. But so it was. For me she has forfeited fortune, rank, all which that proud, stern heart so prized and coveted. Heaven is my witness how I have struggled to repay her affection with my own! If I cannot succeed, at least all that faith and gratitude can give are hers. Yes, when I leave you, comforted by your forgiveness, your prayers, I shall have

strength to tear you from my heart; it is my duty, my fate. With a firm step I will go to these abhorred nuptials. Oh, shudder not, turn not away. Forgive the word; but I must speak,—my heart will out; yes, abhorred nuptials! Between my grave and the altar, would—would that I had a choice!"

From this burst, which in vain from time to time Susan had sought to check, Mainwaring was startled by an apparition which froze his veins, as a ghost from the grave. The door was thrown open, and Lucretia stood in the aperture,—stood, gazing on him, face to face; and her own was so colourless, so rigid, so locked in its livid and awful solemnity of aspect that it was, indeed, as one risen from the dead.

Dismayed by the abrupt cry and the changed face of her lover, Susan turned and beheld her sister. With the impulse of the pierced and loving heart, which divined all the agony inflicted, she sprang to Lucretia's side, she fell to the ground and clasped her knees.

"Do not heed, do not believe him; it is but the frenzy of a moment. He spoke but to deceive me,—me, who loved him once! Mine alone, mine is the crime. He knows all your worth. Pity—pity—pity on yourself, on him, on me!"

Lucretia's eyes fell with the glare of a fiend upon the imploring face lifted to her own. Her lips moved, but no sound was audible. At length she drew herself from her sister's clasp, and walked steadily up to Mainwaring. She surveyed him with a calm and cruel gaze, as if she enjoyed his shame and terror. Before,

however, she spoke, Mrs. Fielden, who had watched, as one spellbound, Lucretia's movements, and, without hearing what had passed, had the full foreboding of what would ensue, but had not stirred till Lucretia herself terminated the suspense and broke the charm of her awe,—before she spoke, Mrs. Fielden rushed in, and giving vent to her agitation in loud sobs, as she threw her arms round Susan, who was still kneeling on the floor, brought something of grotesque to the more tragic and fearful character of the scene.

"My uncle was right; there is neither courage nor honour in the low-born! He, the schemer, too, is right. All hollow,—all false!" Thus said Lucretia, with a strange sort of musing accent, at first scornful, at last only quietly abstracted. "Rise, sir," she then added, with her most imperious tone; "do you not hear your Susan weep? Do you fear in my presence to console her? Coward to her, as forsworn to me! Go, sir, you are free!"

"Hear me," faltered Mainwaring, attempting to seize her hand; "I do not ask you to forgive; but—"

"Forgive, sir!" interrupted Lucretia, rearing her head, and with a look of freezing and unspeakable majesty. "There is only one person here who needs a pardon; but her fault is inexpiable: it is the woman who stooped beneath her—"

With these words, hurled from her with a scorn which crushed while it galled, she mechanically drew round her form her black mantle; her eye glanced on the deep mourning of the garment, and her memory recalled all that love had cost her; but she added

no other reproach. Slowly she turned away. Passing Susan, who lay senseless in Mrs. Fielden's arms, she paused, and kissed her forehead.

"When she recovers, madam," she said to Mrs. Fielden, who was moved and astonished by this softness, "say that Lucretia Clavering uttered a vow when she kissed the brow of William Mainwaring's future wife!"

Olivier Dalibard was still seated in the parlour below when Lucretia entered. Her face yet retained its almost unearthly rigidity and calm; but a sort of darkness had come over its ashen pallor,—that shade so indescribable, which is seen in the human face, after long illness, a day or two before death. Dalibard was appalled; for he had too often seen that hue in the dying not to recognize it now. His emotion was sufficiently genuine to give more than usual earnestness to his voice and gesture, as he poured out every word that spoke sympathy and soothing. For a long time Lucretia did not seem to hear him; at last her face softened,—the ice broke.

"Motherless, friendless, lone, alone forever, undone, undone!" she murmured. Her head sank upon the shoulder of her fearful counsellor, unconscious of its resting-place, and she burst into tears,—tears which perhaps saved her reason or her life.

CHAPTER IX

A SOUL WITHOUT HOPE

When Mr. Fielden returned home, Lucretia had quitted the house. She left a line for him in her usual bold, clear handwriting, referring him to his wife for explanation of the reasons that forbade a further residence beneath his roof. She had removed to an hotel until she had leisure to arrange her plans for the future. In a few months she should be of age; and in the meanwhile, who now living claimed authority over her? For the rest, she added, "I repeat what I told Mr. Mainwaring: all engagement between us is at an end; he will not insult me either by letter or by visit. It is natural that I should at present shrink from seeing Susan Mivers. Hereafter, if permitted, I will visit Mrs. Mainwaring."

Though all had chanced as Mr. Fielden had desired (if, as he once half meditated, he had spoken to Lucretia herself); though a marriage that could have brought happiness to none, and would have made the misery of two, was at an end,—he yet felt a bitter pang, almost of remorse, when be learned what had occurred. And Lucretia, before secretly disliked (if any one he could dislike), became dear to him at once, by sorrow and compassion. Forgetting every other person, he hurried to the

hotel Lucretia had chosen; but her coldness deceived and her pride repelled him. She listened dryly to all he said, and merely replied: "I feel only gratitude at my escape. Let this subject now close forever."

Mr. Fielden left her presence with less anxious and commiserating feelings,—perhaps all had chanced for the best. And on returning home, his whole mind became absorbed in alarm for Susan. She was delirious, and in great danger; it was many weeks before she recovered. Meanwhile, Lucretia had removed into private apartments, of which she withheld the address. During this time, therefore, they lost sight of her.

If amidst the punishments with which the sombre imagination of poets has diversified the Realm of the tortured Shadows, it had depicted some soul condemned to look evermore down into an abyss, all change to its gaze forbidden, chasm upon chasm yawning deeper and deeper, darker and darker, endless and infinite, so that, eternally gazing, the soul became, as it were, a part of the abyss,—such an image would symbol forth the state of Lucretia's mind.

It was not the mere desolation of one whom love has abandoned and betrayed. In the abyss were mingled inextricably together the gloom of the past and of the future,—there, the broken fortunes, the crushed ambition, the ruin of the worldly expectations long inseparable from her schemes; and amidst them, the angry shade of the more than father, whose heart she had wrung, and whose old age she had speeded to the grave.

These sacrifices to love, while love was left to her, might have haunted her at moments; but a smile, a word, a glance, banished the regret and the remorse. Now, love being razed out of life, the ruins of all else loomed dismal amidst the darkness; and a voice rose up, whispering: "Lo, fool, what thou hast lost because thou didst believe and love!" And this thought grasped together the two worlds of being,—the what has been, and the what shall be. All hope seemed stricken from the future, as a man strikes from the calculations of his income the returns from a property irrevocably lost. At her age but few of her sex have parted with religion; but even such mechanical faith as the lessons of her childhood, and the constrained conformities with Christian ceremonies, had instilled, had long since melted away in the hard scholastic scepticism of her fatal tutor,—a scepticism which had won, with little effort, a reason delighting in the maze of doubt, and easily narrowed into the cramped and iron logic of disbelief by an intellect that scorned to submit where it failed to comprehend. Nor had faith given place to those large moral truths from which philosophy has sought to restore the proud statue of Pagan Virtue as a substitute for the meek symbol of the Christian cross. By temperament unsocial, nor readily moved to the genial and benevolent, that absolute egotism in which Olivier Dalibard centred his dreary ethics seemed sanctioned to Lucretia by her studies into the motives of man and the history of the world. She had read the chronicles of States and the memoirs of statesmen, and seen how craft carries on the movements of an

age. Those Viscontis, Castruccios, and Medici; those Richelieus and Mazarins and De Retzs; those Loyolas and Mohammeds and Cromwells; those Monks and Godolphins; those Markboroughs and Walpoles; those founders of history and dynasties and sects; those leaders and dupers of men, greater or lesser, corrupters or corrupt, all standing out prominent and renowned from the guiltless and laurelless obscure,—seemed to win, by the homage of posterity, the rewards that attend the deceivers of their time. By a superb arrogance of generalization, she transferred into private life, and the rule of commonplace actions, the policy that, to the abasement of honour, has so often triumphed in the guidance of States. Therefore, betimes, the whole frame of society was changed to her eye, from the calm aspect it wears to those who live united with their kind; she viewed all seemings with suspicion; and before she had entered the world, prepared to live in it as a conspirator in a city convulsed, spying and espied, schemed against and scheming,—here the crown for the crafty, there the axe for the outwitted.

But her love—for love is trust—had led her half way forth from this maze of the intellect. That fair youth of inexperience and candour which seemed to bloom out in the face of her betrothed; his very shrinking from the schemes so natural to her that to her they seemed even innocent; his apparent reliance on mere masculine ability, with the plain aids of perseverance and honesty,—all had an attraction that plucked her back from herself. If she clung to him firmly, blindly, credulously, it was

not as the lover alone. In the lover she beheld the good angel. Had he only died to her, still the angel smile would have survived and warned. But the man had not died; the angel itself had deceived; the wings could uphold her no more,—they had touched the mire, and were sullied with the soil; with the stain, was forfeited the strength. All was deceit and hollowness and treachery. Lone again in the universe rose the eternal I. So down into the abyss she looked, depth upon depth, and the darkness had no relief, and the deep had no end.

Olivier Dalibard alone, of all she knew, was admitted to her seclusion. He played his part as might be expected from the singular patience and penetration which belonged to the genius of his character. He forbore the most distant allusion to his attachment or his hopes. He evinced sympathy rather by imitating her silence, than attempts to console. When he spoke, he sought to interest her mind more than to heal directly the deep wounds of her heart. There is always, to the afflicted, a certain charm in the depth and bitterness of eloquent misanthropy. And Dalibard, who professed not to be a man-hater, but a world-scorner, had powers of language and of reasoning commensurate with his astute intellect and his profound research. His society became not only a relief, it grew almost a want, to that stern sorrower. But whether alarmed or not by the influence she felt him gradually acquiring, or whether, through some haughty desire to rise once more aloft from the state of her rival and her lover, she made one sudden effort to grasp at the rank from which

she had been hurled. The only living person whose connection could re-open to her the great world, with its splendours and its scope to ambition, was Charles Vernon. She scarcely admitted to her own mind the idea that she would now accept, if offered, the suit she had before despised; she did not even contemplate the renewal of that suit,—though there was something in the gallant and disinterested character of Vernon which should have made her believe he would regard their altered fortunes rather as a claim on his honour than a release to his engagements. But hitherto no communication had passed between them; and this was strange if he retained the same intentions which he had announced at Laughton. Putting aside, we say, however, all such considerations, Vernon had sought her friendship, called her "cousin," enforced the distant relationship between them. Not as lover, but as kinsman,—the only kinsman of her own rank she possessed,—his position in the world, his connections, his brilliant range of acquaintance, made his counsel for her future plans, his aid in the re-establishment of her consequence (if not —as wealthy, still as well-born), and her admission amongst her equals, of price and value. It was worth sounding the depth of the friendship he had offered, even if his love had passed away with the fortune on which doubtless it had been based.

She took a bold step,—she wrote to Vernon: not even to allude to what had passed between them; her pride forbade such unwomanly vulgarity. The baseness that was in her took at least a more delicate exterior. She wrote to him simply and

distantly, to state that there were some books and trifles of hers left at Laughton, which she prized beyond their trivial value, and to request, as she believed him to be absent from the Hall, permission to call at her old home, in her way to a visit in a neighbouring county, and point out to whomsoever he might appoint to meet her, the effects she deemed herself privileged to claim. The letter was one merely of business, but it was a sufficient test of the friendly feelings of her former suitor.

She sent this letter to Vernon's house in London, and the next day came the answer.

Vernon, we must own, entirely sympathized with Sir Miles in the solemn injunctions the old man had bequeathed. Immediately after the death of one to whom we owe gratitude and love, all his desires take a sanctity irresistible and ineffable; we adopt his affection, his dislikes, his obligations, and his wrongs. And after he had read the copy of Lucretia's letter, inclosed to him by Sir Miles, the conquest the poor baronet had made over resentment and vindictive emotion, the evident effort at passionless justice with which he had provided becomingly for his niece, while he cancelled her claims as his heiress, had filled Vernon with a reverence for his wishes and decisions that silenced all those inclinations to over-generosity which an unexpected inheritance is apt to create towards the less fortunate expectants. Nevertheless, Lucretia's direct application, her formal appeal to his common courtesy as host and kinsman, perplexed greatly a man ever accustomed to a certain chivalry

towards the sex; the usual frankness of his disposition suggested, however, plain dealing as the best escape from his dilemma, and therefore he answered thus:—

MADAM,—Under other circumstances it would have given me no common pleasure to place the house that you so long inhabited again at your disposal; and I feel so painfully the position which my refusal of your request inflicts upon me, that rather than resort to excuses and pretexts, which, while conveying an impression of my sincerity, would seem almost like an insult to yourself, I venture frankly to inform you that it was the dying wish of my lamented kinsman, in consequence of a letter which came under his eye, that the welcome you had hitherto received at Laughton should be withdrawn. Pardon me, Madam, if I express myself thus bluntly; it is somewhat necessary to the vindication of my character in your eyes, both as regards the honour of your request and my tacit resignation of hopes fervently but too presumptuously entertained. In this most painful candour, Heaven forbid that I should add wantonly to your self-reproaches for the fault of youth and inexperience, which I should be the last person to judge rigidly, and which, had Sir Miles's life been spared, you would doubtless have amply repaired. The feelings which actuated Sir Miles in his latter days might have changed; but the injunction those feelings prompted I am bound to respect.

For the mere matter of business on which you have done me the honour to address me, I have only to say that any orders you may give to the steward, or transmit through any person you may

send to the Hall, with regard to the effects you so naturally desire to claim, shall be implicitly obeyed.

And believe me, Madam (though I do not presume to add those expressions which might rather heighten the offence I fear this letter will give you), that the assurance of your happiness in the choice you have made, and which now no obstacle can oppose, will considerably—lighten the pain with which I shall long recall my ungracious reply to your communication.

I have the honour to be, etc., C. VERNON ST. JOHN.
BROOK STREET, Dec. 28, 18—.

The receipt of such a letter could hardly add to the profounder grief which preyed in the innermost core of Lucretia's heart; but in repelling the effort she had made to distract that grief by ambition, it blackened the sullen despondency with which she regarded the future. As the insect in the hollow snare of the ant-lion, she felt that there was no footing up the sides of the cave into which she had fallen; the sand gave way to the step. But despondency in her brought no meekness; the cloud did not descend in rain; resting over the horizon, its darkness was tinged with the fires which it fed. The heart, already so embittered, was stung and mortified into intolerable shame and wrath. From the home that should have been hers, in which, as acknowledged heiress, she had smiled down on the ruined Vernon, she was banished by him who had supplanted her, as one worthless and polluted. Though, from motives of obvious delicacy, Vernon had not said expressly that he had seen the letter to Mainwaring, the

unfamiliar and formal tone which he assumed indirectly declared it, and betrayed the impression it had made, in spite of his reserve. A living man then was in possession of a secret which justified his disdain, and that man was master of Laughton! The suppressed rage which embraced the lost lover extended darkly over this witness to that baffled and miserable love. But what availed rage against either? Abandoned and despoiled, she was powerless to avenge. It was at this time, when her prospects seemed most dark, her pride was most crushed, and her despair of the future at its height, that she turned to Dalibard as the only friend left to her under the sun. Even the vices she perceived in him became merits, for they forbade him to despise her. And now, this man rose suddenly into another and higher aspect of character. Of late, though equally deferential to her, there had been something more lofty in his mien, more assured on his brow; gleams of a secret satisfaction, even of a joy, that he appeared anxious to suppress, as ill in harmony with her causes for dejection, broke out in his looks and words. At length, one day, after some preparatory hesitation, he informed her that he was free to return to France; that even without the peace between England and France, which (known under the name of the Peace of Amiens) had been just concluded, he should have crossed the Channel. The advocacy and interest of friends whom he had left at Paris had already brought him under the special notice of the wonderful man who then governed France, and who sought to unite in its service every description and variety of intellect. He

should return to France, and then—why, then, the ladder was on the walls of Fortune and the foot planted on the step! As he spoke, confidently and sanguinely, with the verve and assurance of an able man who sees clear the path to his goal, as he sketched with rapid precision the nature of his prospects and his hopes, all that subtle wisdom which had before often seemed but vague and general, took practical shape and interest, thus applied to the actual circumstances of men; the spirit of intrigue, which seemed mean when employed on mean things, swelled into statesmanship and masterly genius to the listener when she saw it linked with the large objects of masculine ambition. Insensibly, therefore, her attention became earnest, her mind aroused. The vision of a field, afar from the scenes of her humiliation and despair,—a field for energy, stratagem, and contest,—invited her restless intelligence. As Dalibard had profoundly calculated, there was no new channel for her affections,—the source was dried up, and the parched sands heaped over it; but while the heart lay dormant, the mind rose sleepless, chafed, and perturbed. Through the mind, he indirectly addressed and subtly wooed her.

"Such," he said, as he rose to take leave, "such is the career to which I could depart with joy if I did not depart alone!"

"Alone!" that word, more than once that day, Lucretia repeated to herself—"alone!" And what career was left to her?—she, too, alone!

In certain stages of great grief our natures yearn for excitement. This has made some men gamblers; it has made

even women drunkards,—it had effect over the serene calm and would-be divinity of the poet-sage. When his son dies, Goethe does not mourn, he plunges into the absorption of a study uncultivated before. But in the great contest of life, in the whirlpool of actual affairs, the stricken heart finds all,—the gambling, the inebriation, and the study.

We pause here. We have pursued long enough that patient analysis, with all the food for reflection that it possibly affords, to which we were insensibly led on by an interest, dark and fascinating, that grew more and more upon us as we proceeded in our research into the early history of a person fated to pervert no ordinary powers into no commonplace guilt.

The charm is concluded, the circle closed round; the self-guided seeker after knowledge has gained the fiend for the familiar.

CHAPTER X

THE RECONCILIATION BETWEEN FATHER AND SON

We pass over an interval of some months.

A painter stood at work at the easel, his human model before him. He was employed on a nymph,—the Nymph Galatea. The subject had been taken before by Salvator, whose genius found all its elements in the wild rocks, gnarled, fantastic trees, and gushing waterfalls of the landscape; in the huge ugliness of Polyphemus the lover; in the grace and suavity and unconscious abandonment of the nymph, sleeking her tresses dripping from the bath. The painter, on a larger canvas (for Salvator's picture, at least the one we have seen, is among the small sketches of the great artistic creator of the romantic and grotesque), had transferred the subject of the master; but he had left subordinate the landscape and the giant, to concentrate all his art on the person of the nymph. Middle- aged was the painter, in truth; but he looked old. His hair, though long, was gray and thin; his face was bloated by intemperance; and his hand trembled much, though, from habit, no trace of the tremor was visible in his work.

A boy, near at hand, was also employed on the same subject,

with a rough chalk and a bold freedom of touch. He was sketching his design of a Galatea and Polyphemus on the wall; for the wall was only whitewashed, and covered already with the multiform vagaries whether of master or pupils,—caricatures and demigods, hands and feet, torsos and monsters, and Venuses. The rude creations, all mutilated, jarring, and mingled, gave a cynical, mocking, devil-may-care kind of aspect to the sanctum of art. It was like the dissection-room of the anatomist. The boy's sketch was more in harmony with the walls of the studio than the canvas of the master. His nymph, accurately drawn, from the undressed proportions of the model, down to the waist, terminated in the scales of a fish. The forked branches of the trees stretched weird and imp-like as the hands of skeletons. Polyphemus, peering over the rocks, had the leer of a demon; and in his gross features there was a certain distorted, hideous likeness of the grave and symmetrical lineaments of Olivier Dalibard.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.