ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

A STRANGE STORY — VOLUME 07

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
A Strange Story — Volume 07

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Содержание

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
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CHAPTER LXIV

Lilian's wondrous gentleness of nature did not desert her in the suspension of her reason. She was habitually calm,—very silent; when she spoke it was rarely on earthly things, on things familiar to her past, things one could comprehend. Her thought seemed to have quitted the earth, seeking refuge in some imaginary heaven. She spoke of wanderings with her father as if he were living still; she did not seem to understand the meaning we attach to the word "Death." She would sit for hours murmuring to herself: when one sought to catch the words, they seemed in converse with invisible spirits. We found it cruel to disturb her at such times, for if left unmolested, her face was serene,—more serenely beautiful than I had seen it even in our happiest hours; but when we called her back to the wrecks of her real life, her eye became troubled, restless, anxious, and she would sigh—oh, so heavily! At times, if we did not seem to observe her, she would quietly resume her once favourite accomplishments,—drawing, music. And in these her young excellence was still apparent, only the drawings were strange and fantastic: they had a resemblance to those with which the painter Blake, himself a visionary, illustrated the Poems

of the "Night Thoughts" and "The Grave,"—faces of exquisite loveliness, forms of aerial grace, coming forth from the bells of flowers, or floating upwards amidst the spray of fountains, their outlines melting away in fountain or in flower. So with her music: her mother could not recognize the airs she played, for a while so sweetly and with so ineffable a pathos, that one could scarcely hear her without weeping; and then would come, as if involuntarily, an abrupt discord, and, starting, she would cease and look around, disquieted, aghast.

And still she did not recognize Mrs. Ashleigh nor myself as her mother, her husband; but she had by degrees learned to distinguish us both from others. To her mother she gave no name, seemed pleased to see her, but not sensibly to miss her when away; me she called her brother: if longer absent than usual, me she missed. When, after the toils of the day, I came to join her, even if she spoke not, her sweet face brightened. When she sang, she beckoned me to come near to her, and looked at me fixedly, with eyes ever tender, often tearful; when she drew she would pause and glance over her shoulder to see that I was watching her, and point to the drawings with a smile of strange significance, as if they conveyed in some covert allegory messages meant for me; so, at least, I interpreted her smile, and taught myself to say, "Yes, Lilian, I understand!"

And more than once, when I had so answered, she rose, and kissed my forehead. I thought my heart would have broken when I felt that spirit-like melancholy kiss.

And yet how marvellously the human mind teaches itself to extract consolations from its sorrows. The least wretched of my hours were those that I had passed in that saddened room, seeking how to establish fragments of intercourse, invent signs, by which each might interpret each, between the intellect I had so laboriously cultured, so arrogantly vaunted, and the fancies wandering through the dark, deprived of their guide in reason. It was something even of joy to feel myself needed for her guardianship, endeared and yearned for still by some unshattered instinct of her heart; and when, parting from her for the night, I stole the moment in which on her soft face seemed resting least of shadow, to ask, in a trembling whisper, "Lilian, are the angels watching over you?" and she would answer "Yes," sometimes in words, sometimes with a mysterious happy smile—then—then I went to my lonely room, comforted and thankful.

CHAPTER LXV

The blow that had fallen on my hearth effectually, inevitably killed all the slander that might have troubled me in joy. Before the awe of a great calamity the small passions of a mean malignity slink abashed. I had requested Mrs. Ashleigh not to mention the vile letter which Lilian had received. I would not give a triumph to the unknown calumniator, nor wring forth her vain remorse, by the pain of acknowledging an indignity to my darling's honour; yet, somehow or other, the true cause of Lilian's affliction had crept out,—perhaps through the talk of servants,—and the public shock was universal. By one of those instincts of justice that lie deep in human hearts, though in ordinary moments overlaid by many a worldly layer, all felt (all mothers felt especially) that innocence alone could have been so unprepared for reproach. The explanation I had previously given, discredited then, was now accepted without a question. Lilian's present state accounted for all that ill nature had before misconstrued. Her good name was restored to its maiden whiteness, by the fate that had severed the ties of the bride. The formal dwellers on the Hill vied with the franker, warmer-hearted households of Low Town in the nameless attentions by which sympathy and respect are rather delicately indicated than noisily proclaimed. Could Lilian have then recovered and been sensible of its repentant homage, how reverently that petty world would have thronged around her!

And, ah! could fortune and man's esteem have atoned for the blight of hopes that had been planted and cherished on ground beyond their reach, ambition and pride might have been well contented with the largeness of the exchange that courted their acceptance. Patients on patients crowded on me. Sympathy with my sorrow seemed to create and endear a more trustful belief in my skill. But the profession I had once so enthusiastically loved became to me wearisome, insipid, distasteful; the kindness heaped on me gave no comfort,—it but brought before me more vividly the conviction that it came too late to avail me: it could not restore to me the mind, the love, the life of my life, which lay dark and shattered in the brain of my guileless Lilian. Secretly I felt a sullen resentment. I knew that to the crowd the resentment was unjust. The world itself is but an appearance; who can blame it if appearances guide its laws? But to those who had been detached from the crowd by the professions of friendship,—those who, when the slander was yet new, and might have been awed into silence had they stood by my side,—to the pressure of their hands, now, I had no response.

Against Mrs. Poyntz, above all others, I bore a remembrance of unrelaxed, unmitigable indignation. Her schemes for her daughter's marriage had triumphed: Jane was Mrs. Ashleigh Sumner. Her mind was, perhaps, softened now that the object which had sharpened its worldly faculties was accomplished: but in vain, on first hearing of my affliction, had this she-Machiavel owned a humane remorse, and, with all her keen

comprehension of each facility that circumstances gave to her will, availed herself of the general compassion to strengthen the popular reaction in favour of Lilian's assaulted honour; in vain had she written to me with a gentleness of sympathy foreign to her habitual characteristics; in vain besought me to call on her; in vain waylaid and accosted me with a humility that almost implored forgiveness. I vouchsafed no reproach, but I could imply no pardon. I put between her and my great sorrow the impenetrable wall of my freezing silence.

One word of hers at the time that I had so pathetically besought her aid, and the parrot-flock that repeated her very whisper in noisy shrillness would have been as loud to defend as it had been to defame; that vile letter might never have been written. Whoever its writer, it surely was one of the babblers who took their malice itself from the jest or the nod of their female despot; and the writer might have justified herself in saying she did but coarsely proclaim what the oracle of worldly opinion, and the early friend of Lilian's own mother, had authorized her to believe.

By degrees, the bitterness at my heart diffused itself to the circumference of the circle in which my life went its cheerless mechanical round. That cordial brotherhood with his patients, which is the true physician's happiest gift and humanest duty, forsook my breast. The warning words of Mrs. Poyntz had come true. A patient that monopolized my thought awaited me at my own hearth! My conscience became troubled; I felt that my skill

was lessened. I said to myself, "The physician who, on entering the sick-room, feels, while there, something that distracts the finest powers of his intellect from the sufferer's case is unfit for his calling." A year had scarcely passed since my fatal wedding day, before I had formed a resolution to quit L—— and abandon my profession; and my resolution was confirmed, and my goal determined, by a letter I received from Julius Faber.

I had written at length to him, not many days after the blow that had fallen on me, stating all circumstances as calmly and clearly as my grief would allow; for I held his skill at a higher estimate than that of any living brother of my art, and I was not without hope in the efficacy of his advice. The letter I now received from him had been begun, and continued at some length, before my communication reached him; and this earlier portion contained animated and cheerful descriptions of his Australian life and home, which contrasted with the sorrowful tone of the supplement written in reply to the tidings with which I had wrung his friendly and tender heart. In this, the latter part of his letter, he suggested that if time had wrought no material change for the better, it might be advisable to try the effect of foreign travel. Scenes entirely new might stimulate observation, and the observation of things external withdraw the sense from that brooding over images delusively formed within, which characterized the kind of mental alienation I had described. "Let any intellect create for itself a visionary world, and all reasonings built on it are fallacious: the visionary world

vanishes in proportion as we can arouse a predominant interest in the actual."

This grand authority, who owed half his consummate skill as a practitioner to the scope of his knowledge as a philosopher, then proceeded to give me a hope which I had not dared of myself to form. He said:—

> "I distinguish the case you so minutely detail from that insanity which is reason lost; here it seems rather to be reason held in suspense. Where there is hereditary predisposition, where there is organic change of structure in the brain,—nay, where there is that kind of insanity which takes the epithet of moral, whereby the whole character becomes so transformed that the prime element of sound understanding, conscience itself, is either erased or warped into the sanction of what in a healthful state it would most disapprove,—it is only charlatans who promise effectual cure. But here I assume that there is no hereditary taint; here I am convinced, from my own observation, that the nobility of the organs, all fresh as yet in the vigour of youth, would rather submit to death than to the permanent overthrow of their equilibrium in reason; here, where you tell me the character preserves all its moral attributes of gentleness and purity, and but over-indulges its own early habit of estranged contemplation; here, without deceiving you in false kindness, I give you the guarantee of my experience when I bid you 'hope!' I am persuaded that, sooner or later, the mind, thus for a time affected, will right itself; because here, in the cause of the malady, we do but deal with

the nervous system. And that, once righted, and the mind once disciplined in those practical duties which conjugal life necessitates, the malady itself will never return; never be transmitted to the children on whom your wife's restoration to health may permit you to count hereafter. If the course of travel I recommend and the prescriptions I conjoin with that course fail you, let me know; and though I would fain close my days in this land, I will come to you. I love you as my son. I will tend your wife as my daughter."

Foreign travel! The idea smiled on me. Julius Faber's companionship, sympathy, matchless skill! The very thought seemed as a raft to a drowning mariner. I now read more attentively the earlier portions of his letter. They described, in glowing colours, the wondrous country in which he had fixed his home; the joyous elasticity of its atmosphere; the freshness of its primitive, pastoral life; the strangeness of its scenery, with a Flora and a Fauna which have no similitudes in the ransacked quarters of the Old World. And the strong impulse seized me to transfer to the solitudes of that blithesome and hardy Nature a spirit no longer at home in the civilized haunts of men, and household gods that shrank from all social eyes, and would fain have found a wilderness for the desolate hearth, on which they had ceased to be sacred if unveiled. As if to give practical excuse and reason for the idea that seized me, Julius Faber mentioned, incidentally, that the house and property of a wealthy speculator in his immediate neighbourhood were on sale at a price which seemed to me alluringly trivial, and, according to his judgment,

far below the value they would soon reach in the hands of a more patient capitalist. He wrote at the period of the agricultural panic in the colony which preceded the discovery of its earliest gold-fields. But his geological science had convinced him that strata within and around the property now for sale were auriferous, and his intelligence enabled him to predict how inevitably man would be attracted towards the gold, and how surely the gold would fertilize the soil and enrich its owners. He described the house thus to be sold—in case I might know of a purchaser. It had been built at a cost unusual in those early times, and by one who clung to English tastes amidst Australian wilds, so that in this purchase a settler would escape the hardships he had then ordinarily to encounter; it was, in short, a home to which a man more luxurious than I might bear a bride with wants less simple than those which now sufficed for my darling Lilian.

This communication dwelt on my mind through the avocations of the day on which I received it, and in the evening I read all, except the supplement, aloud to Mrs. Ashleigh in her daughter's presence. I desired to see if Faber's descriptions of the country and its life, which in themselves were extremely spirited and striking, would arouse Lilian's interest. At first she did not seem to heed me while I read; but when I came to Faber's loving account of little Amy, Lilian turned her eyes towards me, and evidently listened with attention. He wrote how the child had already become the most useful person in the simple household. How watchful the quickness of the heart had made the service

of the eye; all their associations of comfort had grown round her active, noiseless movements; it was she who bad contrived to monopolize the management, or supervision, of all that added to Home the nameless, interior charm. Under her eyes the rude furniture of the log-house grew inviting with English neatness; she took charge of the dairy; she had made the garden gay with flowers selected from the wild, and suggested the trellised walk, already covered with hardy vine. She was their confidant in every plan of improvement, their comforter in every anxious doubt, their nurse in every passing ailment, her very smile a refreshment in the weariness of daily toil. "How all that is best in womanhood," wrote the old man, with the enthusiasm which no time had reft from his hearty, healthful genius,—"how all that is best in womanhood is here opening fast into flower from the bud of the infant's soul! The atmosphere seems to suit it,—the child-woman in the child-world!"

I heard Lilian sigh; I looked towards her furtively; tears stood in her softened eyes; her lip was quivering. Presently, she began to rub her right hand over the left—over the wedding-ring—at first slowly; then with quicker movement.

"It is not here," she said impatiently; "it is not here!"

"What is not here?" asked Mrs. Ashleigh, hanging over her.

Lilian leaned back her head on her mother's bosom, and answered faintly,—

"The stain! Some one said there was a stain on this hand. I do not see it, do you?"

"There is no stain, never was," said I; "the hand is white as your own innocence, or the lily from which you take your name."

"Hush! you do not know my name. I will whisper it. Soft!—my name is Nightshade! Do you want to know where the lily is now, brother? I will tell you. There, in that letter. You call her Amy,—she is the lily; take her to your breast, hide her. Hist! what are those bells? Marriage-bells. Do not let her hear them; for there is a cruel wind that whispers the bells, and the bells ring out what it whispers, louder and louder,

> "'Stain on lily
> Shame on lily,
> Wither lily.'

"If she hears what the wind whispers to the bells, she will creep away into the dark, and then she, too, will turn to Nightshade."

"Lilian, look up, awake! You have been in a long, long dream: it is passing away. Lilian, my beloved, my blessed Lilian!"

Never till then had I heard from her even so vague an allusion to the fatal calumny and its dreadful effect, and while her words now pierced my heart, it beat, amongst its pangs, with a thrilling hope.

But, alas! the idea that had gleamed upon her had vanished already. She murmured something about Circles of Fire, and a Veiled Woman in black garments; became restless, agitated, and unconscious of our presence, and finally sank into a heavy sleep.

That night (my room was next to hers with the intervening door open) I heard her cry out. I hastened to her side. She was still asleep, but there was an anxious labouring expression on her young face, and yet not an expression wholly of pain—for her lips were parted with a smile,—that glad yet troubled smile with which one who has been revolving some subject of perplexity or fear greets a sudden thought that seems to solve the riddle, or prompt the escape from danger; and as I softly took her hand she returned my gentle pressure, and inclining towards me, said, still in sleep,—

"Let us go."

"Whither?" I answered, under my breath, so as not to awake her; "is it to see the child of whom I read, and the land that is blooming out of the earth's childhood?"

"Out of the dark into the light; where the leaves do not change; where the night is our day, and the winter our summer. Let us go! let us go!"

"We will go. Dream on undisturbed, my bride. Oh, that the dream could tell you that my love has not changed in our sorrow, holier and deeper than on the day in which our vows were exchanged! In you still all my hopes fold their wings; where you are, there still I myself have my dreamland!"

The sweet face grew bright as I spoke; all trouble left the smile; softly she drew her hand from my clasp, and rested it for a moment on my bended head, as if in blessing.

I rose; stole back to my own room, closing the door, lest the

sob I could not stifle should mar her sleep.

CHAPTER LXVI

I unfolded my new prospects to Mrs. Ashleigh. She was more easily reconciled to them than I could have supposed, judging by her habits, which were naturally indolent, and averse to all that disturbed their even tenor. But the great grief which had befallen her had roused up that strength of devotion which lies dormant in all hearts that are capable of loving another more than self. With her full consent I wrote to Faber, communicating my intentions, instructing him to purchase the property he had so commended, and inclosing my banker's order for the amount, on an Australian firm. I now announced my intention to retire from my profession; made prompt arrangements with a successor to my practice; disposed of my two houses at L——; fixed the day of my departure. Vanity was dead within me, or I might have been gratified by the sensation which the news of my design created. My faults became at once forgotten; such good qualities as I might possess were exaggerated. The public regret vented and consoled itself in a costly testimonial, to which even the poorest of my patients insisted on the privilege to contribute, graced with an inscription flattering enough to have served for the epitaph on some great man's tomb. No one who has served an art and striven for a name is a stoic to the esteem of others; and sweet indeed would such honours have been to me had not publicity itself seemed a wrong to the sanctity of that affliction

which set Lilian apart from the movement and the glories of the world.

The two persons most active in "getting up" this testimonial were, nominally, Colonel Poyntz—in truth, his wife—and my old disparager, Mr. Vigors! It is long since my narrative has referred to Mr. Vigors. It is due to him now to state that, in his capacity of magistrate, and in his own way, he had been both active and delicate in the inquiries set on foot for Lilian during the unhappy time in which she had wandered, spellbound, from her home. He, alone, of all the more influential magnates of the town, had upheld her innocence against the gossips that aspersed it; and during the last trying year of my residence at L——, he had sought me, with frank and manly confessions of his regret for his former prejudice against me, and assurances of the respect in which he had held me ever since my marriage—marriage but in rite—with Lilian. He had then, strong in his ruling passion, besought me to consult his clairvoyants as to her case. I declined this invitation so as not to affront him,—declined it, not as I should once have done, but with no word nor look of incredulous disdain. The fact was, that I had conceived a solemn terror of all practices and theories out of the beaten track of sense and science. Perhaps in my refusal I did wrong. I know not. I was afraid of my own imagination. He continued not less friendly in spite of my refusal. And, such are the vicissitudes in human feeling, I parted from him whom I had regarded as my most bigoted foe with a warmer sentiment of kindness than for any of

those on whom I had counted on friendship. He had not deserted Lilian. It was not so with Mrs. Poyntz. I would have paid tenfold the value of the testimonial to have erased, from the list of those who subscribed to it, her husband's name.

The day before I quitted L——, and some weeks after I had, in fact, renounced my practice, I received an urgent entreaty from Miss Brabazon to call on her. She wrote in lines so blurred that I could with difficulty decipher them, that she was very ill, given over by Dr. Jones, who had been attending her. She implored my opinion.

CHAPTER LXVII

On reaching the house, a formal man-servant, with indifferent face, transferred me to the guidance of a hired nurse, who led me up the stairs, and, before I was well aware of it, into the room in which Dr. Lloyd had died. Widely different, indeed, the aspect of the walls, the character of the furniture! The dingy paperhangings were replaced by airy muslins, showing a rose-coloured ground through their fanciful openwork; luxurious fauteuils, gilded wardrobes, full-length mirrors, a toilet-table tricked out with lace and ribbons; and glittering with an array of silver gewgaws and jewelled trinkets,—all transformed the sick chamber of the simple man of science to a boudoir of death for the vain coquette. But the room itself, in its high lattice and heavy ceiling, was the same—as the coffin itself has the same confines, whether it be rich in velvets and bright with blazoning, or rude as a pauper's shell.

And the bed, with its silken coverlet, and its pillows edged with the thread-work of Louvain, stood in the same sharp angle as that over which had flickered the frowning smoke-reek above the dying, resentful foe. As I approached, a man, who was seated beside the sufferer, turned round his face, and gave me a silent kindly nod of recognition. He was Mr. C——, one of the clergy of the town, the one with whom I had the most frequently come into contact wherever the physician resigns to the priest the

language that bids man hope. Mr. C——-, as a preacher, was renowned for his touching eloquence; as a pastor, revered for his benignant piety; as friend and neighbour, beloved for a sweetness of nature which seemed to regulate all the movements of a mind eminently masculine by the beat of a heart tender as the gentlest woman's.

This good man; then whispering something to the sufferer which I did not overhear, stole towards me, took me by the hand, and said, also in a whisper, "Be merciful as Christians are." He led me to the bedside, there left me, went out, and closed the door.

"Do you think I am really dying, Dr. Fenwick?" said a feeble voice. "I fear Dr. Jones has misunderstood my case. I wish I had called you in at the first, but—but I could not—I could not! Will you feel my pulse? Don't you think you could do me good?"

I had no need to feel the pulse in that skeleton wrist; the aspect of the face sufficed to tell me that death was drawing near.

Mechanically, however, I went through the hackneyed formulae of professional questions. This vain ceremony done, as gently and delicately as I could, I implied the expediency of concluding, if not yet settled, those affairs which relate to this world.

"This duty," I said, "in relieving the mind from care for others to whom we owe the forethought of affection, often relieves the body also of many a gnawing pain, and sometimes, to the surprise of the most experienced physician, prolongs life itself."

"Ah," said the old maid, peevishly, "I understand! But it is not my will that troubles me. I should not be left to a nurse from a hospital if my relations did not know that my annuity dies with me; and I forestalled it in furnishing this house, Dr. Fenwick, and all these pretty things will be sold to pay those horrid tradesmen! —very hard!—so hard!—just as I got things about me in the way I always said I would have them if I could ever afford it! I always said I would have my bedroom hung with muslin, like dear Lady L——'s; and the drawing-room in geranium-coloured silk: so pretty. You have not seen it: you would not know the house, Dr. Fenwick. And just when all is finished, to be taken away and thrust into the grave. It is so cruel!" And she began to weep. Her emotion brought on a violent paroxysm, which, when she recovered from it, had produced one of those startling changes of mind that are sometimes witnessed before death,—changes whereby the whole character of a life seems to undergo solemn transformation. The hard will becomes gentle, the proud meek, the frivolous earnest. That awful moment when the things of earth pass away like dissolving scenes, leaving death visible on the background by the glare that shoots up in the last flicker of life's lamp.

And when she lifted her haggard face from my shoulder, and heard my pitying, soothing voice, it was not the grief of a trifler at the loss of fondled toys that spoke in the fallen lines of her lip, in the woe of her pleading eyes.

"So this is death," she said. "I feel it hurrying on. I must speak.

I promised Mr. C—— that I would. Forgive me, can you—can you? That letter—that letter to Lilian Ashleigh, I wrote it! Oh, do not look at me so terribly; I never thought it could do such evil! And am I not punished enough? I truly believed when I wrote that Miss Ashleigh was deceiving you, and once I was silly enough to fancy that you might have liked me. But I had another motive; I had been so poor all my life—I had become rich unexpectedly; I set my heart on this house—I had always fancied it—and I thought if I could prevent Miss Ashleigh marrying you, and scare her and her mother from coming back to L——, I could get the house. And I did get it. What for?—to die. I had not been here a week before I got the hurt that is killing me—a fall down the stairs,—coming out of this very room; the stairs had been polished. If I had stayed in my old lodging, it would not have happened. Oh, say you forgive me! Say, say it, even if you do not feel you can! Say it!" And the miserable woman grasped me by the arm as Dr. Lloyd had grasped me.

I shaded my averted face with my hands; my heart heaved with the agony of my suppressed passion. A wrong, however deep, only to myself, I could have pardoned without effort; such a wrong to Lilian,—no! I could not say "I forgive."

The dying wretch was perhaps more appalled by my silence than she would have been by my reproach. Her voice grew shrill in her despair.

"You will not pardon me! I shall die with your curse on my head! Mercy! mercy! That good man, Mr. C——, assured me

you would be merciful. Have you never wronged another? Has the Evil One never tempted you?"

Then I spoke in broken accents: "Me! Oh, had it been I whom you defamed—but a young creature so harmless, so unoffending, and for so miserable a motive!"

"But I tell you, I swear to you, I never dreamed I could cause such sorrow; and that young man, that Margrave, put it into my head!"

"Margrave! He had left L—— long before that letter was written!"

"But he came back for a day just before I wrote: it was the very day. I met him in the lane yonder. He asked after you,—after Miss Ashleigh; and when he spoke he laughed, and I said, 'Miss Ashleigh had been ill, and was gone away;' and he laughed again. And I thought be knew more than he would tell me, so I asked him if he supposed Mrs. Ashleigh would come back, and said how much I should like to take this house if she did not; and again he laughed, and said, 'Birds never stay in the nest after the young ones are hurt,' and went away singing. When I got home, his laugh and his song haunted me. I thought I saw him still in my room, prompting me to write, and I sat down and wrote. Oh, pardon, pardon me! I have been a foolish poor creature, but never meant to do such harm. The Evil One tempted me! There he is, near me now! I see him yonder! there, at the doorway. He comes to claim me! As you hope for mercy yourself, free me from him! Forgive me!"

I made an effort over myself. In naming Margrave as her tempter, the woman had suggested an excuse, echoed from that innermost cell of my mind, which I recoiled from gazing into, for there I should behold his image. Inexpiable though the injury she had wrought against me and mine, still the woman was human—fellow-creature-like myself;—but he?

I took the pale hand that still pressed my arm, and said, with firm voice,—

"Be comforted. In the name of Lilian, my wife, I forgive you for her and for me as freely and as fully as we are enjoined by Him, against whose precepts the best of us daily sin, to forgive—we children of wrath—to forgive one another!"

"Heaven bless you!—oh, bless you!" she murmured, sinking back upon her pillow.

"Ah!" thought I, "what if the pardon I grant for a wrong far deeper than I inflicted on him whose imprecation smote me in this chamber, should indeed be received as atonement, and this blessing on the lips of the dying annul the dark curse that the dead has left on my path through the Valley of the Shadow!"

I left my patient sleeping quietly,—the sleep that precedes the last. As I went down the stairs into the hall, I saw Mrs. Poyntz standing at the threshold, speaking to the man-servant and the nurse.

I would have passed her with a formal bow, but she stopped me.

"I came to inquire after poor Miss Brabazon," said she.

"You can tell me more than the servants can: is there no hope?"

"Let the nurse go up and watch beside her. She may pass away in the sleep into which she has fallen."

"Allen Fenwick, I must speak with you—nay, but for a few minutes. I hear that you leave L—— to-morrow. It is scarcely among the chances of life that we should meet again." While thus saying, she drew me along the lawn down the path that led towards her own home. "I wish," said she, earnestly, "that you could part with a kindlier feeling towards me; but I can scarcely expect it. Could I put myself in your place, and be moved by your feelings, I know that I should be implacable; but I—"

"But you, madam, are The World! and the World governs itself, and dictates to others, by laws which seem harsh to those who ask from its favour the services which the World cannot tender, for the World admits favourites, but ignores friends. You did but act to me as the World ever acts to those who mistake its favour for its friendship."

"It is true," said Mrs. Poyntz, with blunt candour; and we continued to walk on silently. At length she said abruptly, "But do you not rashly deprive yourself of your only consolation in sorrow? When the heart suffers, does your skill admit any remedy like occupation to the mind? Yet you abandon that occupation to which your mind is most accustomed; you desert your career; you turn aside, in the midst of the race, from the fame which awaits at the goal; you go back from civilization

itself, and dream that all your intellectual cravings can find content in the life of a herdsman, amidst the monotony of a wild! No, you will repent, for you are untrue to your mind!"

"I am sick of the word 'mind'!" said I, bitterly. And therewith I relapsed into musing.

The enigmas which had foiled my intelligence in the unravelled Sibyl Book of Nature were mysteries strange to every man's normal practice of thought, even if reducible to the fraudulent impressions of outward sense; for illusions in a brain otherwise healthy suggest problems in our human organization which the colleges that record them rather guess at than solve. But the blow which had shattered my life had been dealt by the hand of a fool. Here, there were no mystic enchantments. Motives the most commonplace and paltry, suggested to a brain as trivial and shallow as ever made the frivolity of woman a theme for the satire of poets, had sufficed, in devastating the field of my affections, to blast the uses for which I had cultured my mind; and had my intellect been as great as heaven ever gave to man, it would have been as vain a shield as mine against the shaft that bad lodged in my heart. While I had, indeed, been preparing my reason and my fortitude to meet such perils, weird and marvellous, as those by which tales round the winter fireside scare the credulous child, a contrivance—so vulgar and hackneyed that not a day passes but what some hearth is vexed by an anonymous libel—had wrought a calamity more dread than aught which my dark guess into the Shadow-Land unpierced by

Philosophy could trace to the prompting of malignant witchcraft. So, ever this truth runs through all legends of ghost and demon —through the uniform records of what wonder accredits and science rejects as the supernatural—lo! the dread machinery whose wheels roll through Hades! What need such awful engines for such mean results? The first blockhead we meet in our walk to our grocer's can tell us more than the ghost tells us; the poorest envy we ever aroused hurts us more than the demon. How true an interpreter is Genius to Hell as to Earth! The Fiend comes to Faust, the tired seeker of knowledge; Heaven and Hell stake their cause in the Mortal's temptation. And what does the Fiend to astonish the Mortal? Turn wine into fire, turn love into crime. We need no Mephistopheles to accomplish these marvels every day!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.