ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

GODOLPHIN, VOLUME 1

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

Godolphin, Volume 1

Бульвер-Литтон Э. Д.

Godolphin, Volume 1 / Э. Д. Бульвер-Литтон — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
Godolphin, Volume 1

TO COUNT ALFRED D'ORSAY

MY DEAR COUNT D'ORSAY,

When the parentage of Godolphin was still unconfessed and unknown, you were pleased to encourage his first struggles with the world: Now, will you permit the father he has just discovered to re-introduce him to your notice? I am sorry to say, however, that my unfilial offspring, having been so long disowned, is not sufficiently grateful for being acknowledged at last: he says that he belongs to a very numerous family, and, wishing to be distinguished from his brothers, desires not only to reclaim your acquaintance, but to borrow your name. Nothing less will content his ambition than the most public opportunity in his power of parading his obligations to the most accomplished gentleman of our time. Will you, then, allow him to make his new appearance in the world under your wing, and thus suffer the son as well as the father to attest the kindness of your heart and to boast the honour of your friendship?

Believe me,
My dear Count d'Orsay,
With the sincerest regard,
Yours, very faithfully and truly,

E. B. L.

PREFACE TO GODOLPHIN

In the Prefaces to this edition of my works, I have occasionally so far availed myself of that privilege of self-criticism which the French comic writer, Mons. Picord, maintains or exemplifies in the collection of his plays,—as, if not actually to sit in judgment on my own performances, still to insinuate some excuse for their faults by extenuatory depositions as to their character and intentions. Indeed, a writer looking back to the past is unconsciously inclined to think that he may separate himself from those children of his brain which have long gone forth to the world; and though he may not expatiate on the merits his paternal affection would ascribe to them, that he may speak at least of the mode in which they were trained and reared—of the hopes he cherished, or the objects he entertained, when he finally dismissed them to the opinions of others and the ordeal of Fate or Time.

For my part, I own that even when I have thought but little of the value of a work, I have always felt an interest in the author's account of its origin and formation, and, willing to suppose that what thus affords a gratification to my own curiosity, may not be wholly unattractive to others, I shall thus continue from time to time to play the Showman to my own machinery, and explain the principle of the mainspring and the movement of the wheels.

This novel was begun somewhere in the third year of my authorship, and completed in the fourth. It was, therefore, composed almost simultaneously with Eugene Aram, and afforded to me at least some relief from the gloom of that village tragedy. It is needless to observe how dissimilar in point of scene, character, and fable, the one is from the other; yet they are alike in this—that both attempt to deal with one of the most striking problems in the spiritual history of man, viz., the frustration or abuse of power in a superior intellect originally inclined to good. Perhaps there is no problem that more fascinates the attention of a man of some earnestness at that period of his life, when his eye first disengages itself from the external phenomena around him, and his curiosity leads him to examine the cause and account for the effect;—when, to cite reverently the words of the wisest, "He applies his heart to know and to search, and to seek out wisdom and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness."

In Eugene Aram, the natural career of genius is arrested by a single crime; in Godolphin, a mind of inferior order, but more fanciful colouring, is wasted away by the indulgence of those morbid sentiments which are the nourishment of egotism, and the gradual influence of the frivolities which make the business of the idle. Here the Demon tempts or destroys the hermit in his solitary cell. There, he glides amidst the pomps and vanities of the world, and whispers away the soul in the voice of his soft familiars, Indolence and Pleasure.

Of all my numerous novels, Pelham and Godolphin are the only ones which take their absolute groundwork in what is called "The Fashionable World." I have sought in each to make the general composition in some harmony with the principal figure in the foreground. Pelham is represented as almost wholly unsusceptible to the more poetical influences. He has the physical compound, which, versatile and joyous, amalgamates easily with the world—he views life with the lenient philosophy that Horace commends in Aristippus: he laughs at the follies he shares; and is ever ready to turn into uses ultimately (if indirectly) serious, the frivolities that only serve to sharpen his wit, and augment that peculiar expression which we term "knowledge of the world." In a word, dispel all his fopperies, real or assumed, he is still the active man of crowds and cities, determined to succeed, and gifted with the ordinary qualities of success. Godolphin, on the contrary, is the man of poetical temperament, out of his place alike among the trifling idlers and the bustling actors of the world—wanting the stimulus of necessity—or the higher motive which springs from benevolence, to give energy to his powers, or definite purpose to his fluctuating desires; not strong enough to break the bonds that confine his genius —not supple enough to accommodate its movements to their purpose. He is the moral antipodes to Pelham. In evading the struggles of the world, he grows indifferent to its duties—he strives with no

obstacles—he can triumph in no career. Represented as possessing mental qualities of a higher and a richer nature than those to which Pelham can pretend, he is also represented as very inferior to him in constitution of character, and he is certainly a more ordinary type of the intellectual trifler.

The characters grouped around Godolphin are those with which such a man usually associates his life. They are designed to have a certain grace—a certain harmony with one form or the other of his twofold temperament:—viz., either its conventional elegance of taste, or its constitutional poetry of idea. But all alike are brought under varying operations of similar influences; or whether in Saville, Constance, Fanny, or Lucilla—the picture presented is still the picture of gifts misapplied—of life misunderstood. The Preacher who exclaimed, "Vanity of vanities! all is vanity," perhaps solved his own mournful saying, when he added elsewhere, "This only have I found, that God made men upright —but they have sought out many inventions."

This work was first published anonymously, and for that reason perhaps it has been slow in attaining to its rightful station amongst its brethren—whose parentage at first was openly acknowledged. If compared with Pelham, it might lose, at the first glance, but would perhaps gain on any attentive reperusal.

For although it must follow from the inherent difference in the design of the two works thus referred to, that in Godolphin there can be little of the satire or vivacity which have given popularity to its predecessor, yet, on the other hand, in Godolphin there ought to be a more faithful illustration of the even polish that belongs to luxurious life,—of the satiety that pleasure inflicts upon such of its votaries as are worthy of a higher service. The subject selected cannot adroit the same facility for observation of things that lie on the surface—but it may well lend itself to subtler investigation of character—allow more attempt at pathos, and more appeal to reflection.

Regarded as a story, the defects of Godolphin most apparent to myself, are in the manner in which Lucilla is re-introduced in the later chapters, and in the final catastrophe of the hero. There is an exaggerated romance in the one, and the admission of accident as a crowning agency in the other, which my maturer judgment would certainly condemn, and which at all events appear to me out of keeping with the natural events, and the more patient investigation of moral causes and their consequences, from which the previous interest of the tale is sought to be attained. On the other hand, if I may presume to conjecture the most probable claim to favour which the work, regarded as a whole, may possess—it may possibly be found in a tolerably accurate description of certain phases of modern civilisation, and in the suggestion of some truths that may be worth considering in our examination of social influences or individual conduct.

CHAPTER I

THE DEATH-BED OF JOHN VERNON.—HIS DYING WORDS.—DESCRIPTION OF HIS DAUGHTER, THE HEROINE.—THE OATH

"Is the night calm, Constance?"

"Beautiful! the moon is up."

"Open the shutters wider, there. It *is* a beautiful night. How beautiful! Come hither, my child."

The rich moonlight that now shone through the windows streamed on little that it could invest with poetical attraction. The room was small, though not squalid in its character and appliances. The bed-curtains, of a dull chintz, were drawn back, and showed the form of a man, past middle age, propped by pillows, and bearing on his countenance the marks of approaching death. But what a countenance it still was! The broad, pale, lofty brow; the fine, straight, Grecian nose; the short, curved lip; the full, dimpled chin; the stamp of genius in every line and lineament;—these still defied disease, or rather borrowed from its very ghastliness a more impressive majesty. Beside the bed was a table spread with books of a motley character. Here an abstruse system of Calculations on Finance; there a volume of wild Bacchanalian Songs; here the lofty aspirations of Plato's Phoedon; and there the last speech of some County Paris on a Malt Tax: old newspapers and dusty pamphlets completed the intellectual litter; and above them rose, mournfully enough, the tall, spectral form of a half-emptied phial, and a chamber-candlestick, crested by its extinguisher.

A light step approached the bedside, and opposite the dying man now stood a girl, who might have seen her thirteenth year. But her features—of an exceeding, and what may be termed a regal beauty—were as fully developed as those of one who had told twice her years; and not a trace of the bloom or the softness of girlhood could be marked on her countenance. Her complexion was pale as the whitest marble, but clear, and lustrous; and her raven hair, parted over her brow in a fashion then uncommon, increased the statue-like and classic effect of her noble features. The expression of her countenance seemed cold, sedate, and somewhat stern; but it might, in some measure, have belied her heart; for, when turned to the moonlight, you might see that her eyes were filled with tears, though she did not weep; and you might tell by the quivering of her lip, that a little hesitation in replying to any remark from the sufferer arose from her difficulty in commanding her emotions.

"Constance," said the invalid, after a pause, in which he seemed to have been gazing with a quiet heart on the soft skies, that, blue and eloquent with stars, he beheld through the unclosed windows:—"Constance, the hour is coming; I feel it by signs which I cannot mistake. I shall die this night."

"Oh, God!—my father!—my dear, dear father!" broke from Constance's lips; "do not speak thus—do not—I will go to Doctor –"

"No, child, no!—I loathe—I detest the thought of help. They denied it me while it was yet time. They left me to starve or to rot in gaol, or to hang myself! They left me like a dog, and like a dog I will die! I would not have one iota taken from the justice—the deadly and dooming weight of my dying curse." Here violent spasms broke on the speech of the sufferer; and when, by medicine and his daughter's attentions, he had recovered, he said, in a lower and calmer key:—"Is all quiet below, Constance? Are all in bed? The landlady—the servants—our fellow-lodgers?"

"All, my father."

"Ay; then I shall die happy. Thank Heaven, you are my only nurse and attendant. I remember the day when I was ill after one of their rude debauches. Ill!—a sick headache—a fit of the spleen—a spoiled lapdog's illness! Well: they wanted me that night to support one of their paltry measures—their parliamentary measures. And I had a prince feeling my pulse, and a duke mixing my draught,

and a dozen earls sending their doctors to me. I was of use to them then! Poor me! Read me that note, Constance—Flamborough's note. Do you hesitate? Read it, I say!"

Constance trembled and complied.

"My dear Vernon, "I am really au desespoir to hear of your melancholy state;—so sorry I cannot assist you: but you know my embarrassed circumstances. By the by, I saw his Royal Highness yesterday. 'Poor Vernon!' said he; 'would a hundred pounds do him any good?' So we don't forget you, mon cher. Ah! how we missed you at the Beefsteak! Never shall we know again so glorious a bona vivant. You would laugh to hear L– attempting to echo your old jokes. But time presses: I must be off to the House. You know what a motion it is! Would to Heaven you were to bring it on instead of that ass T–. Adieu! I wish I could come and see you; but it would break my heart. Can I send you any books from Hookham's? "Yours ever, "FLAMBOROUGH."

"This is the man whom I made Secretary of State," said Vernon. "Very well!—oh, it's very well, —very well indeed. Let me kiss thee, my girl. Poor Constance! You will have good friends when I am dead! they will be proud enough to be kind to Vernon's daughter, when Death has shown them that Vernon is a loss. You are very handsome. Your poor mother's eyes and hair—my father's splendid brow and lip; and your figure, even now so stately! They will court you: you will have lords and great men enough at your feet; but you will never forget this night, nor the agony of your father's death-bed face, and the brand they have burned in his heart. And now, Constance, give me the Bible in which you read to me this morning: that will do:—stand away from the light and fix your eyes on mine, and listen as if your soul were in your ears.

"When I was a young man, toiling my way to fortune through the labours of the Bar,—prudent, cautious, indefatigable, confident of success,—certain lords, who heard I possessed genius, and thought I might become their tool, came to me, and besought me to enter parliament. I told them I was poor—was lately married—that my public ambition must not be encouraged at the expense of my private fortunes. They answered, that they pledged themselves those fortunes should be their care. I yielded; I deserted my profession; I obeyed their wishes; I became famous—and a ruined man! They could not dine without me; they could not sup without me; they could not get drunk without me; no pleasure was sweet but in my company. What mattered it that, while I ministered to their amusement, I was necessarily heaping debt upon debt—accumulating miseries for future years —laying up bankruptcy, and care, and shame, and a broken heart, and an early death? But listen, Constance! Are you listening?—attentively?—Well! note now, I am a just man. I do not blame my noble friends, my gentle patrons, for this. No: if I were forgetful of my interests, if I preferred their pleasure to my happiness and honour, that was any crime, and I deserve the punishment! But, look you,—time went by, and my constitution was broken; debts came upon me; I could not pay; men mistrusted my word; my name in the country fell: With my health, my genius deserted me; I was no longer useful to my party; I lost my seat in parliament; and when I was on a sick-bed—you remember it, Constancy—the bailiffs came, and tore me away for a paltry debt—the value of one of those suppers the Prince used to beg me to give him. From that time my familiars forsook me!—not a visit, not a kind act, not a service for him whose day of work was over! 'Poor Vernon's character was gone! Shockingly involved—could not perform his promises to his creditors—always so extravagant —quite unprincipled—must give him up!'

"In those sentences lies the secret of their conduct. They did not remember that *for* them, *by* them, the character was gone, the promises broken, the ruin incurred! They thought not how I had served them; how my best years had been devoted to advance them—to ennoble their cause in the lying page of History! All this was not thought of: my life was reduced to two epochs—that of use to them—that not. During the first, I was honoured; during the last, I was left to starve—to rot! Who freed me from prison?—who protects me now? One of my 'party'—my 'noble friends'—my 'honourable, right honourable friends'? No! a tradesman whom I once served in my holyday, and who

alone, of all the world, forgets me not in my penance. You see gratitude, friendship, spring up only in middle life; they grow not in high stations!

"And now, come nearer, for my voice falters, and I would have these words distinctly heard. Child, girl as you are—you I consider pledged to record, to fulfil my desire—my curse! Lay your hand on mine: swear that through life to death,—swear! You speak not! repeat my words after me:"—Constance obeyed:—"through life to death; through good, through ill, through weakness, through power, you will devote yourself to humble, to abase that party from whom your father received ingratitude, mortification, and death! Swear that you will not marry a poor and powerless man, who cannot minister to the ends of that solemn retribution I invoke! Swear that you will seek to marry from amongst the great; not through love, not through ambition, but through hate, and for revenge! You will seek to rise that you may humble those who have betrayed me! In the social walks of life you will delight to gall their vanities in state intrigues, you will embrace every measure that can bring them to their eternal downfall. For this great end you will pursue all means. What! you hesitate? Repeat, repeat, repeat!—You will lie, cringe, fawn, and think vice not vice, if it bring you one jot nearer to Revenge! With this curse on my foes, I entwine my blessing, dear, dear Constance, on you,—you, who have nursed, watched, all but saved me! God, God bless you, my child!" And Vernon burst into tears.

It was two hours after this singular scene, and exactly in the third hour of morning, that Vernon woke from a short and troubled sleep. The grey dawn (for the time was the height of summer) already began to labour through the shades and against the stars of night. A raw and comfortless chill crept over the earth, and saddened the air in the death-chamber. Constance sat by her father's bed, her eyes fixed upon him, and her cheek more wan than ever by the pale light of that crude and cheerless dawn. When Vernon woke, his eyes, glazed with death, rolled faintly towards her, fixing and dimming in their sockets as they gazed;—his throat rattled. But for one moment his voice found vent; a ray shot across his countenance as he uttered his last words—words that sank at once and eternally to the core of his daughter's heart—words that ruled her life, and sealed her destiny: "Constance, remember—the Oath—Revenge!"

CHAPTER II

REMARK ON THE TENURE OF LIFE.—THE COFFINS OF GREAT MEN SELDOM NEGLECTED.—CONSTANCE TAKES REFUGE WITH LADY ERPINGHAM.—THE HEROINE'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CHARACTER.-THE MANOEUVRING TEMPERAMENT

What a strange life this is! what puppets we are! How terrible an enigma is Fate! I never set my foot without my door, but what the fearful darkness that broods over the next moment rushes upon me. How awful an event may hang over our hearts! The sword is always above us, seen or invisible!

And with this life—this scene of darkness and dreadsome men would have us so contented as to desire, to ask for no other!

Constance was now without a near relation in the world. But her father predicted rightly: vanity supplied the place of affection. Vernon, who for eighteen months preceding his death had struggled with the sharpest afflictions of want—Vernon, deserted in life by all, was interred with the insulting ceremonials of pomp and state. Six nobles bore his pall: long trains of carriages attended his funeral: the journals were filled with outlines of his biography and lamentations at his decease. They buried him in Westminster Abbey, and they made subscriptions for a monument in the very best sort of marble. Lady Erpingham, a distant connection of the deceased, invited Constance to live with her; and Constance of course consented, for she had no alternative.

On the day that she arrived at Lady Erpingham's house, in Hill Street, there were several persons present in the drawing-room.

"I fear, poor girl," said Lady Erpingham,—for they were talking of Constance's expected arrival,—"I fear that she will be quite abashed by seeing so many of us, and under such unhappy circumstances."

"How old is she?" asked a beauty.

"About thirteen, I believe."

"Handsome?"

"I have not seen her since she was seven years old. She promised then to be very beautiful: but she was a remarkably shy, silent child."

"Miss Vernon," said the groom of the chambers, throwing open the door.

With the slow step and self-possessed air of womanhood, but with a far haughtier and far colder mien than women commonly assume, Constance Vernon walked through the long apartment, and greeted her future guardian. Though every eye was on her, she did not blush; though the Queens of the London World were round her, her gait and air were more royal than all. Every one present experienced a revulsion of feeling. They were prepared for pity; this was no case in which pity could be given. Even the words of protection died on Lady Erpingham's lip, and she it was who felt bashful and disconcerted.

I intend to pass rapidly over the years that elapsed till Constance became a woman. Let us glance at her education. Vernon had not only had her instructed in the French and Italian; but, a deep and impassioned scholar himself, he had taught her the elements of the two great languages of the ancient world. The treasures of those languages she afterwards conquered of her own accord.

Lady Erpingham had one daughter, who married when Constance had reached the age of sixteen. The advantages Lady Eleanor Erpingham possessed in her masters and her governess Constance shared. Miss Vernon drew well, and sang divinely; but she made no very great proficiency

in the science of music. To say truth, her mind was somewhat too stern, and somewhat too intent on other subjects, to surrender to that most jealous of accomplishments the exclusive devotion it requires.

But of all her attractions, and of all the evidences of her cultivated mind, none equalled the extraordinary grace of her conversation. Wholly disregarding the conventional leading-strings in which the minds of young ladies are accustomed to be held—leading-strings, disguised by the name of "proper diffidence" and "becoming modesty,"—she never scrupled to share, nay, to lead, discussions even of a grave and solid nature. Still less did she scruple to adorn the common trifles that make the sum of conversation with the fascinations of a wit, which, playful, yet deep, rivalled even the paternal source from which it was inherited.

It seems sometimes odd enough to me, that while young ladies are so sedulously taught the accomplishments that a husband disregards, they are never taught the great one he would prize. They are taught to be *exhibitors*; he wants a *companion*. He wants neither a singing animal, nor a drawing animal, nor a dancing animal: he wants a talking animal. But to talk they are never taught; all they know of conversation is slander, and that "comes by nature."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.