ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

"MY NOVEL" — VOLUME 08

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

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Содержание

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
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BOOK EIGHTH

INITIAL CHAPTER

THE ABUSE OF INTELLECT

There is at present so vehement a flourish of trumpets, and so prodigious a roll of the drum, whenever we are called upon to throw up our hats, and cry "Huzza" to the "March of Enlightenment," that, out of that very spirit of contradiction natural to all rational animals, one is tempted to stop one's ears, and say, "Gently, gently; LIGHT is noiseless: how comes 'Enlightenment' to make such a clatter? Meanwhile, if it be not impertinent, pray, where is Enlightenment marching to?" Ask that question of any six of the loudest bawlers in the procession, and I'll wager tenpence to California that you get six very unsatisfactory answers. One respectable gentleman, who, to our great astonishment, insists upon calling himself "a slave," but has a remarkably free way of expressing his opinions, will reply, "Enlightenment is marching towards the seven points of the Charter." Another, with his hair /a la jeune France/, who has taken a fancy to his friend's wife, and is rather embarrassed with his own, asserts that Enlightenment is proceeding towards the Rights of Women, the reign of Social Love, and the annihilation of Tyrannical Prejudice. A third, who has the air of a man well-to-do in the middle class, more modest in his hopes, because he neither wishes to have his head broken by his errand-boy, nor his wife carried off to an Agapemone by his apprentice, does not take Enlightenment a step farther than a siege on Debrett, and a cannonade on the Budget. Illiberal man! the march that he swells will soon trample him under foot. No one fares so ill in a crowd as the man who is wedged in the middle. A fourth, looking wild and dreamy, as if he had come out of the cave of Trophonius, and who is a mesmerizer and a mystic, thinks Enlightenment is in full career towards the good old days of alchemists and necromancers. A fifth, whom one might take for a Quaker, asserts that the march of Enlightenment is a crusade for universal philanthropy, vegetable diet, and the perpetuation of peace by means of speeches, which certainly do produce a very contrary effect from the Philippics of Demosthenes! The sixth—good fellow without a rag on his back—does not care a straw where the march goes. He can't be worse off than he is; and it is quite immaterial to him whether he goes to the dog-star above, or the bottomless pit below. I say nothing, however, against the march, while we take it altogether. Whatever happens, one is in good company; and though I am somewhat indolent by nature, and would rather stay at home with Locke and Burke (dull dogs though they were) than have my thoughts set off helter-skelter with those cursed trumpets and drums, blown and dub-a-dubbed by fellows whom I vow to heaven I would not trust with a five-pound note,—still, if I must march, I must; and so deuce take the hindmost! But when it comes to individual marchers upon their own account,—privateers and condottieri of Enlightenment,—who have filled their pockets with Lucifer matches, and have a sublime contempt for their neighbour's barns and hay-ricks, I don't see why I should throw myself into the seventh heaven of admiration and ecstasy.

If those who are eternally rhapsodizing on the celestial blessings that are to follow Enlightenment, Universal Knowledge, and so forth, would just take their eyes out of their pockets, and look about them, I would respectfully inquire if they have never met any very knowing and enlightened

gentleman, whose acquaintance is by no means desirable. If not, they are monstrous lucky. Every man must judge by his own experience; and the worst rogues I have ever encountered were amazingly well-informed clever fellows. From dunderheads and dunces we can protect ourselves, but from your sharpwitted gentleman, all enlightenment and no prejudice, we have but to cry, "Heaven defend us!" It is true, that the rogue (let him be ever so enlightened) usually comes to no good himself, —though not before he has done harm enough to his neighbours. But that only shows that the world wants something else in those it rewards besides intelligence per se and in the abstract; and is much too old a world to allow any Jack Horner to pick out its plums for his own personal gratification. Hence a man of very moderate intelligence, who believes in God, suffers his heart to beat with human sympathies, and keeps his eyes off your strongbox, will perhaps gain a vast deal more power than knowledge ever gives to a rogue.

Wherefore, though I anticipate an outcry against me on the part of the blockheads, who, strange to say, are the most credulous idolators of Enlightenment, and if knowledge were power, would rot on a dunghill, yet, nevertheless, I think all really enlightened men will agree with me, that when one falls in with detached sharpshooters from the general March of Enlightenment, it is no reason that we should make ourselves a target, because Enlightenment has furnished them with a gun. It has, doubtless, been already remarked by the judicious reader that of the numerous characters introduced into this work, the larger portion belong to that species which we call the INTELLECTUAL,—that through them are analyzed and developed human intellect, in various forms and directions. So that this History, rightly considered, is a kind of humble familiar Epic, or, if you prefer it, a long Serio-Comedy, upon the Varieties of English Life in this our Century, set in movement by the intelligences most prevalent. And where more ordinary and less refined types of the species round and complete the survey of our passing generation, they will often suggest, by contrast, the deficiencies which mere intellectual culture leaves in the human being. Certainly, I have no spite against intellect and enlightenment. Heaven forbid I should be such a Goth! I am only the advocate for common-sense and fair play. I don't think an able man necessarily an angel; but I think if his heart match his head, and both proceed in the Great March under the divine Oriflamine, he goes as near to the angel as humanity will permit: if not, if he has but a penn'orth of heart to a pound of brains, I say, "/Bon jour, mon ange/! I see not the starry upward wings, but the grovelling cloven-hoof." I 'd rather be offuscated by the Squire of Hazeldean than en lightened by Randal Leslie. Every man to his taste. But intellect itself (not in the philosophical but the ordinary sense of the term) is rarely, if ever, one completed harmonious agency; it is not one faculty, but a compound of many, some of which are often at war with each other, and mar the concord of the whole. Few of us but have some predominant faculty, in itself a strength; but which, usurping unseasonably dominion over the rest, shares the lot of all tyranny, however brilliant, and leaves the empire weak against disaffection within, and invasion from without. Hence, intellect may be perverted in a man of evil disposition, and sometimes merely wasted in a man of excellent impulses, for want of the necessary discipline, or of a strong ruling motive. I doubt if there be one person in the world who has obtained a high reputation for talent, who has not met somebody much cleverer than himself, which said somebody has never obtained any reputation at all! Men like Audley Egerton are constantly seen in the great positions of life; while men like Harley L'Estrange, who could have beaten them hollow in anything equally striven for by both, float away down the stream, and, unless some sudden stimulant arouse their dreamy energies, vanish out of sight into silent graves. If Hamlet and Polonius were living now, Polonius would have a much better chance of being a Cabinet Minister, though Hamlet would unquestionably be a much more intellectual character. What would become of Hamlet? Heaven knows! Dr. Arnold said, from his experience of a school, that the difference between one man and another was not mere ability,—it was energy. There is a great deal of truth in that saying.

Submitting these hints to the judgment and penetration of the sagacious, I enter on the fresh division of this work, and see already Randal Leslie gnawing his lips on the background. The German

poet observes that the Cow of Isis is to some the divine symbol of knowledge, to others but the milch cow, only regarded for the pounds of butter she will yield. O tendency of our age, to look on Isis as the milch cow! O prostitution of the grandest desires to the basest uses! Gaze on the goddess, Randal Leslie, and get ready thy churn and thy scales. Let us see what the butter will fetch in the market.

CHAPTER II

A new Reign has commenced. There has been a general election; the unpopularity of the Administration has been apparent at the hustings. Audley Egerton, hitherto returned by vast majorities, has barely escaped defeat—thanks to a majority of five. The expenses of his election are said to have been prodigious. "But who can stand against such wealth as Egerton's,—no doubt backed, too, by the Treasury purse?" said the defeated candidate. It is towards the close of October; London is already full; parliament will meet in less than a fortnight.

In one of the principal apartments of that hotel in which foreigners may discover what is meant by English comfort, and the price which foreigners must pay for it, there sat two persons side by side, engaged in close conversation. The one was a female, in whose pale clear complexion and raven hair, in whose eyes, vivid with a power of expression rarely bestowed on the beauties of the North, we recognize Beatrice, Marchesa di Negra. Undeniably handsome as was the Italian lady, her companion, though a man, and far advanced into middle age, was yet more remarkable for personal advantages. There was a strong family likeness between the two; but there was also a striking contrast in air, manner, and all that stamps on the physiognomy the idiosyncrasies of character. There was something of gravity, of earnestness and passion, in Beatrice's countenance when carefully examined; her smile at times might be false, but it was rarely ironical, never cynical. Her gestures, though graceful, were unrestrained and frequent. You could see she was a daughter of the South. Her companion, on the contrary, preserved on the fair, smooth face, to which years had given scarcely a line or wrinkle, something that might have passed, at first glance, for the levity and thoughtlessness of a gay and youthful nature; but the smile, though exquisitely polished, took at times the derision of a sneer. In his manners he was as composed and as free from gesture as an Englishman. His hair was of that red brown with which the Italian painters produce such marvellous effects of colour; and if here and there a silver thread gleamed through the locks, it was lost at once amidst their luxuriance. His eyes were light, and his complexion, though without much colour, was singularly transparent. His beauty, indeed, would have been rather womanly than masculine, but for the height and sinewy spareness of a frame in which muscular strength was rather adorned than concealed by an admirable elegance of proportion. You would never have guessed this man to be an Italian; more likely you would have supposed him a Parisian. He conversed in French, his dress was of French fashion, his mode of thought seemed French. Not that he was like the Frenchman of the present day,— an animal, either rude or reserved; but your ideal of the marquis of the old regime, the roue of the Regency.

Italian, however, he was, and of a race renowned in Italian history. But, as if ashamed of his country and his birth, he affected to be a citizen of the world. Heaven help the world if it hold only such citizens!

"But, Giulio," said Beatrice di Negra, speaking in Italian, "even granting that you discover this girl, can you suppose that her father will ever consent to your alliance? Surely you know too well the nature of your kinsman?"

"Tu to trompes, ma soeur," replied Giulio Franzini, Count di Peschiera, in French as usual, —"tu to trompes; I knew it before he had gone through exile and penury. How can I know it now? But comfort yourself, my too anxious Beatrice, I shall not care for his consent, till I 've made sure of his daughter's."

"But how win that in despite of the father?"

"Eh, mordieu!" interrupted the count, with true French gayety; "what would become of all the comedies ever written, if marriages were not made in despite of the father? Look you," he resumed, with a very slight compression of his lip, and a still slighter movement in his chair,— "look you, this is no question of ifs and buts! it is a question of must and shall,—a question of existence to you and to me. When Danton was condemned to the guillotine, he said, flinging a pellet of bread at the nose

of his respectable judge, 'Mon individu sera bientot dans le neant.' My patrimony is there already! I am loaded with debts. I see before me, on the one side, ruin or suicide; on the other side, wedlock and wealth."

"But from those vast possessions which you have been permitted to enjoy so long, have you really saved nothing against the time when they might be reclaimed at your hands?"

"My sister," replied the count, "do I look like a man who saved? Besides, when the Austrian Emperor, unwilling to raze from his Lombard domains a name and a House so illustrious as our kinsman's, and desirous, while punishing that kinsman's rebellion, to reward my adherence, forbore the peremptory confiscation of those vast possessions at which my mouth waters while we speak, but, annexing them to the crown during pleasure, allowed me, as the next of male kin, to retain the revenues of one half for the same very indefinite period,—had I not every reason to suppose that before long I could so influence his Imperial Majesty, or his minister, as to obtain a decree that might transfer the whole, unconditionally and absolutely, to myself? And methinks I should have done so, but for this accursed, intermeddling English Milord, who has never ceased to besiege the court or the minister with alleged extenuations of our cousin's rebellion, and proofless assertions that I shared it in order to entangle my kinsman, and betrayed it in order to profit by his spoils. So that, at last, in return for all my services, and in answer to all my claims, I received from the minister himself this cold reply, Count of Peschiera, your aid was important, and your reward has been large. That reward it would not be for your honour to extend, and justify the ill opinion of your Italian countrymen by formally appropriating to yourself all that was forfeited by the treason you denounced. A name so noble as yours should be dearer to you than fortune itself.'"

"Ah Giulio," cried Beatrice, her face lighting up, changed in its whole character, "those were words that might make the demon that tempts to avarice fly from your breast in shame."

The count opened his eyes in great amaze; then he glanced round the room, and said quietly,

"Nobody else hears you, my dear Beatrice; talk commonsense. Heroics sound well in mixed society; but there is nothing less suited to the tone of a family conversation."

Madame di Negra bent down her head abashed, and that sudden change in the expression of her countenance which had seemed to betray susceptibility to generous emotion, faded as suddenly away.

"But still," she said coldly, "you enjoy one half of those ample revenues: why talk, then, of suicide and ruin?"

"I enjoy them at the pleasure of the crown; and what if it be the pleasure of the crown to recall our cousin, and reinstate him in his possessions?"

"There is a probability, then, of that pardon? When you first employed me in your researches you only thought there was a possibility."

"There is a great probability of it, and therefore I am here. I learned some little time since that the question of such recall had been suggested by the emperor, and discussed in Council. The danger to the State, which might arise from our cousin's wealth, his alleged abilities,—abilities! bah! and his popular name, deferred any decision on the point; and, indeed, the difficulty of dealing with myself must have embarrassed the minister. But it is a mere question of time. He cannot long remain excluded from the general amnesty already extended to the other refugees. The person who gave me this information is high in power, and friendly to myself; and he added a piece of advice on which I acted. 'It was intimated,' said he, 'by one of the partisans of your kinsman, that the exile could give a hostage for his loyalty in the person of his daughter and heiress; that she had arrived at marriageable age; that if she were to wed, with the emperor's consent, some one whose attachment to the Austrian crown was unquestionable, there would be a guarantee both for the faith of the father, and for the transmission of so important a heritage to safe and loyal hands. Why not' (continued my friend) 'apply to the emperor for his consent to that alliance for yourself,—you, on whom he can depend; you who, if the daughter should die, would be the legal heir to those lands?' On that hint I spoke."

"You saw the emperor?"

"And after combating the unjust prepossessions against me, I stated that so far from my cousin having any fair cause of resentment against me, when all was duly explained to him, I did not doubt that he would willingly give me the hand of his child."

"You did!" cried the marchesa, amazed.

"And," continued the count, imperturbably, as he smoothed, with careless hand, the snowy plaits of his shirt front,—"and that I should thus have the happiness of becoming myself the guarantee of my kinsman's loyalty, the agent for the restoration of his honours, while, in the eyes of the envious and malignant, I should clear up my own name from all suspicion that I had wronged him."

"And the emperor consented?"

"Pardieu, my dear sister, what else could his Majesty do? My proposition smoothed every obstacle, and reconciled policy with mercy. It remains, therefore, only to find out what has hitherto baffled all our researches, the retreat of our dear kinsfolk, and to make myself a welcome lover to the demoiselle. There is some disparity of years, I own; but—unless your sex and my glass flatter me overmuch—I am still a, match for many a gallant of five-and-twenty."

The count said this with so charming a smile, and looked so pre-eminently handsome, that he carried off the coxcombry of the words as gracefully as if they had been spoken by some dazzling hero of the grand old comedy of Parisian life.

Then interlacing his fingers and lightly leaning his hands, thus clasped, upon his sister's shoulder, he looked into her face, and said slowly, "And now, my sister, for some gentle but deserved reproach. Have you not sadly failed me in the task I imposed on your regard for my interests? Is it not some years since you first came to England on the mission of discovering these worthy relations of ours? Did I not entreat you to seduce into your toils the man whom I new to be my enemy, and who was indubitably acquainted with our cousin's retreat,—a secret he has hitherto locked within his bosom? Did you not tell me, that though he was then in England, you could find no occasion even to meet him, but that you had obtained the friendship of the statesman to whom I directed your attention, as his most intimate associate? And yet you, whose charms are usually so irresistible, learn nothing from the statesman, as you see nothing of Milord. Nay, baffled and misled, you actually suppose that the quarry has taken refuge in France. You go thither, you pretend to search the capital, the provinces, Switzerland, /que sais je/? All in vain,—though—/foi de gentilhomme/—your police cost me dearly. You return to England; the same chase, and the same result. /Palsambleu, ma soeur/, I do too much credit to your talents not to question your zeal. In a word, have you been in earnest,—or have you not had some womanly pleasure in amusing yourself and abusing my trust?"

"Giulio," answered Beatrice, sadly, "you know the influence you have exercised over my character and my fate. Your reproaches are not just. I made such inquiries as were in my power, and I have now cause to believe that I know one who is possessed of this secret, and can guide us to it."

"Ah, you do!" exclaimed the count. Beatrice did not heed the exclamation, and hurried on.

"But grant that my heart shrunk from the task you imposed on me, would it not have been natural? When I first came to England, you informed me that your object in discovering the exiles was one which I could honestly aid. You naturally wished first to know if the daughter lived; if not, you were the heir. If she did, you assured me you desired to effect, through my mediation, some liberal compromise with Alphonso, by which you would have sought to obtain his restoration, provided he would leave you for life in possession of the grant you hold from the crown. While these were your objects, I did my best, ineffectual as it was, to obtain the information required."

"And what made me lose so important, though so ineffectual an ally?" asked the count, still smiling; but a gleam that belied the smile shot from his eye.

"What! when you bade me receive and co-operate with the miserable spies— the false Italians —whom you sent over, and seek to entangle this poor exile, when found, in some rash correspondence to be revealed to the court; when you sought to seduce the daughter of the Count of Peschiera, the descendant of those who had ruled in Italy, into the informer, the corrupter, and the traitress,—no,

Giulio, then I recoiled; and then, fearful of your own sway over me, I retreated into France. I have answered you frankly."

The count removed his hands from the shoulder on which they had reclined so cordially.

"And this," said he, "is your wisdom, and this your gratitude! You, whose fortunes are bound up in mine; you, who subsist on my bounty; you, who—"

"Hold," cried the marchesa, rising, and with a burst of emotion, as if stung to the utmost, and breaking into revolt from the tyranny of years, —"hold! Gratitude! bounty! Brother, brother! what, indeed, do I owe to you? The shame and the misery of a life. While yet a child, you condemned me to marry against my will, against my heart, against my prayers,—and laughed at my tears when I knelt to you for mercy. I was pure then, Giulio,—pure and innocent as the flowers in my virgin crown. And now—now—"

Beatrice stopped abruptly, and clasped her hands before her face.

"Now you upbraid me," said the count, unruffled by her sudden passion, "because I gave you in marriage to a man young and noble?"

"Old in vices, and mean of soul! The marriage I forgave you. You had the right, according to the customs of our country, to dispose of my hand. But I forgave you not the consolations that you whispered in the ear of a wretched and insulted wife."

"Pardon me the remark," replied the count, with a courtly bend of his head, "but those consolations were also conformable to the customs of our country, and I was not aware till now that you had wholly disdained them. And," continued the count," you were not so long a wife that the gall of the chain should smart still. You were soon left a widow,—free, childless, young, beautiful."

"And penniless."

"True, Di Negra was a gambler, and very unlucky; no fault of mine. I could neither keep the cards from his hands, nor advise him how to play them."

"And my own portion? O Giulio, I knew but at his death why you had condemned me to that renegade Genoese. He owed you money, and, against honour, and I believe against law, you had accepted my fortune in discharge of the debt."

"He had no other way to discharge it; a debt of honour must be paid,—old stories these. What matters? Since then my purse has been open to you."

"Yes, not as your sister, but your instrument, your spy! Yes, your purse has been open—with a niggard hand."

"/Un peu de conscience, ma chere/,—you are so extravagant. But come, be plain. What would you?"

"I would be free from you."

"That is, you would form some second marriage with one of these rich island lords. /Ma foi/, I respect your ambition."

"It is not so high. I aim but to escape from slavery,—to be placed beyond dishonourable temptation. I desire," cried Beatrice, with increased emotion,—"I desire to re-enter the life of woman."

"Eno'!" said the count, with a visible impatience; "is there anything in the attainment of your object that should render you indifferent to mine? You desire to marry, if I comprehend you right. And to marry as becomes you, you should bring to your husband not debts, but a dowry. Be it so. I will restore the portion that I saved from the spendthrift clutch of the Genoese,—the moment that it is mine to bestow, the moment that I am husband to my kinsman's heiress. And now, Beatrice, you imply that my former notions revolted your conscience; my present plan should content it, for by this marriage shall our kinsman regain his country, and repossess, at least, half his lands. And if I am not an excellent husband to the demoiselle, it will be her own fault. I have sown my wild oats. /Je suis bon prince/, when I have things a little my own way. It is my hope and my intention, and certainly it will be my interest, to become /digne epoux et irreprochable pere de famille/. I speak

lightly, —'t is my way. I mean seriously. The little girl will be very happy with me, and I shall succeed in soothing all resentment her father may retain. Will you aid me then, yes or no? Aid me, and you shall indeed be free. The magician will release the fair spirit he has bound to his will. Aid me not, /ma chere/, and mark, I do not threaten—I do but warn—aid me not; grant that I become a beggar, and ask yourself what is to become of you,—still young, still beautiful, and still penniless? Nay, worse than penniless; you have done me the honour," and here the count, looking on the table, drew a letter from a portfolio emblazoned with his arms and coronet,—"you have done me the honour to consult me as to your debts."

"You will restore my fortune?" said the marchesa, irresolutely,—and averting her head from an odious schedule of figures.

"When my own, with your aid, is secured."

"But do you not overrate the value of my aid?"

"Possibly," said the count, with a caressing suavity—and he kissed his sister's forehead. "Possibly; but, by my honour, I wish to repair to you any wrong, real or supposed, I may have done you in past times. I wish to find again my own dear sister. I may over-value your aid, but not the affection from which it comes. Let us be friends, /cara Beatrice mia/," added the count, for the first time employing Italian words.

The marchesa laid her head on his shoulder, and her tears flowed softly. Evidently this man had great influence over her,—and evidently, whatever her cause for complaint, her affection for him was still sisterly and strong. A nature with fine flashes of generosity, spirit, honour, and passion was hers; but uncultured, unguided, spoilt by the worst social examples, easily led into wrong, not always aware where the wrong was, letting affections good or bad whisper away her conscience or blind her reason. Such women are often far more dangerous when induced to wrong than those who are thoroughly abandoned,—such women are the accomplices men like the Count of Peschiera most desire to obtain.

"Ah, Giulio," said Beatrice, after a pause, and looking up at him through her tears, "when you speak to me thus, you know you can do with me what you will. Fatherless and motherless, whom had my childhood to love and obey but you?"

"Dear Beatrice," murmured the count, tenderly, and he again kissed her forehead. "So," he continued, more carelessly,—"so the reconciliation is effected, and our interests and our hearts re-allied. Now, alas! to descend to business. You say that you know some one whom you believe to be acquainted with the lurking-place of my father-in-law—that is to be!"

"I think so. You remind me that I have an appointment with him this day: it is near the hour, —I must leave you."

"To learn the secret?—-Quick, quick. I have no fear of your success, if it is by his heart that you lead him!"

"You mistake; on his heart I have no hold. But he has a friend who loves me, and honourably, and whose cause he pleads. I think here that I have some means to control or persuade him. If not—ah, he is of a character that perplexes me in all but his worldly ambition; and how can we foreigners influence him through THAT?"

"Is he poor, or is he extravagant?"

"Not extravagant, and not positively poor, but dependent."

"Then we have him," said the count, composedly. "If his assistance be worth buying, we can bid high for it. /Sur mon ame/, I never yet knew money fail with any man who was both worldly and dependent. I put him and myself in your hands."

Thus saying, the count opened the door, and conducted his sister with formal politeness to her carriage. He then returned, reseated himself, and mused in silence. As he did so, the muscles of his countenance relaxed. The levity of the Frenchman fled from his visage, and in his eye, as it gazed abstractedly into space, there was that steady depth so remarkable in the old portraits of Florentine diplomatist or Venetian Oligarch. Thus seen, there was in that face, despite all its beauty, something

that would have awed back even the fond gaze of love,— something hard, collected, inscrutable, remorseless. But this change of countenance did not last long. Evidently thought, though intense for the moment, was not habitual to the man; evidently he had lived the life which takes all things lightly, —so he rose with a look of fatigue, shook and stretched himself, as if to cast off, or grow out of, an unwelcome and irksome mood. An hour afterwards, the Count of Peschiera was charming all eyes, and pleasing all ears, in the saloon of a high-born beauty, whose acquaintance he had made at Vienna, and whose charms, according to that old and never-truth-speaking oracle, Polite Scandal, were now said to have attracted to London the brilliant foreigner.

CHAPTER III

The marehesa regained her house, which was in Curzon Street, and withdrew to her own room, to readjust her dress, and remove from her countenance all trace of the tears she had shed.

Half an hour afterwards she was seated in her drawing-room, composed and calm; nor, seeing her then, could you have guessed that she was capable of so much emotion and so much weakness. In that stately exterior, in that quiet attitude, in that elaborate and finished elegance which comes alike from the arts of the toilet and the conventional repose of rank, you could see but the woman of the world and the great lady.

A knock at the door was heard, and in a few moments there entered a visitor, with the easy familiarity of intimate acquaintance,—a young man, but with none of the bloom of youth. His hair, fine as a woman's, was thin and scanty, but it fell low over the forehead, and concealed that noblest of our human features. "A gentleman," says Apuleius, "ought to wear his whole mind on his forehead." The young visitor would never have committed so frank an imprudence. His cheek was pale, and in his step and his movements there was a languor that spoke of fatigued nerves or delicate health. But the light of the eye and the tone of the voice were those of a mental temperament controlling the bodily, —vigorous and energetic. For the rest, his general appearance was distinguished by a refinement alike intellectual and social. Once seen, you would not easily forget him; and the reader, no doubt, already recognizes Randal Leslie. His salutation, as I before said, was that of intimate familiarity; yet it was given and replied to with that unreserved openness which denotes the absence of a more tender sentiment.

Seating himself by the marchesa's side, Randal began first to converse on the fashionable topics and gossip of the day; but it was observable that while he extracted from her the current anecdote and scandal of the great world, neither anecdote nor scandal did he communicate in return. Randal Leslie had already learned the art not to commit himself, nor to have quoted against him one ill-natured remark upon the eminent. Nothing more injures the man who would rise beyond the fame of the salons than to be considered backbiter and gossip; "yet it is always useful," thought Randal Leslie, "to know the foibles, the small social and private springs, by which the great are moved. Critical occasions may arise in which such a knowledge may be power." And hence, perhaps (besides a more private motive, soon to be perceived), Randal did not consider his time thrown away in cultivating Madame di Negra's friendship. For, despite much that was whispered against her, she had succeeded in dispelling the coldness with which she had at first been received in the London circles. Her beauty, her grace, and her high birth had raised her into fashion, and the homage of men of the first station, while it perhaps injured her reputation as woman, added to her celebrity as fine lady. So much do we cold English, prudes though we be, forgive to the foreigner what we avenge on the native.

Sliding at last from these general topics into very well-bred and elegant personal compliment, and reciting various eulogies, which Lord this and the Duke of that had passed on the marchesa's charms, Randal laid his hand on hers, with the license of admitted friendship, and said,

"But since you have deigned to confide in me, since when (happily for me, and with a generosity of which no coquette could have been capable) you, in good time, repressed into friendship feelings that might else have ripened into those you are formed to inspire and disdain to return, you told me with your charming smile, 'Let no one speak to me of love who does not offer me his hand, and with it the means to supply tastes that I fear are terribly extravagant,'—since thus you allowed me to divine your natural objects, and upon that understanding our intimacy has been founded, you will pardon me for saying that the admiration you excite amongst these grands seigneurs I have named only serves to defeat your own purpose, and scare away admirers less brilliant, but more in earnest. Most of these gentlemen are unfortunately married; and they who are not belong to those members of

our aristocracy who, in marriage, seek more than beauty and wit,—namely, connections to strengthen their political station, or wealth to redeem a mortgage and sustain a title."

"My dear Mr. Leslie," replied the marchesa,—and a certain sadness might be detected in the tone of the voice and the droop of the eye,—"I have lived long enough in the real world to appreciate the baseness and the falsehood of most of those sentiments which take the noblest names. I see through the hearts of the admirers you parade before me, and know that not one of them would shelter with his ermine the woman to whom he talks of his heart. Ah," continued Beatrice, with a softness of which she was unconscious, but which might have been extremely dangerous to youth less steeled and self-guarded than was Randal Leslie's,—"ah, I am less ambitious than you suppose. I have dreamed of a friend, a companion, a protector, with feelings still fresh, undebased by the low round of vulgar dissipation and mean pleasures,—of a heart so new, that it might restore my own to what it was in its happy spring. I have seen in your country some marriages, the mere contemplation of which has filled my eyes with delicious tears. I have learned in England to know the value of home. And with such a heart as I describe, and such a home, I could forget that I ever knew a less pure ambition."

"This language does not surprise me," said Randal; "yet it does not harmonize with your former answer to me."

"To you," repeated Beatrice, smiling, and regaining her lighter manner; "to you,—true. But I never had the vanity to think that your affection for me could bear the sacrifices it would cost you in marriage; that you, with your ambition, could bound your dreams of happiness to home. And then, too," said she, raising her head, and with a certain grave pride in her air,—"and then, I could not have consented to share my fate with one whom my poverty would cripple. I could not listen to my heart, if it had beat for a lover without fortune, for to him I could then have brought but a burden, and betrayed him into a union with poverty and debt. Now, it may be different. Now I may have the dowry that befits my birth. And now I may be free to choose according to my heart as woman, not according to my necessities, as one poor, harassed, and despairing."

"Ah," said Randal, interested, and drawing still closer towards his fair companion,—"ah, I congratulate you sincerely; you have cause, then, to think that you shall be—rich?"

The marchesa paused before she answered, and during that pause Randal relaxed the web of the scheme which he had been secretly weaving, and rapidly considered whether, if Beatrice di Negra would indeed be rich, she might answer to himself as a wife; and in what way, if so, he had best change his tone from that of friendship into that of love. While thus reflecting, Beatrice answered,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.