

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

LUCRETIA – VOLUME

05

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

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CHAPTER VII

THE RAPE OF THE MATTRESS

That Mr. Grabman slept calmly that night is probable enough, for his gin-bottle was empty the next morning; and it was with eyes more than usually heavy that he dozily followed the movements of Beck, who, according to custom, opened the shutters of the little den adjoining his sitting-room, brushed his clothes, made his fire, set on the kettle to boil, and laid his breakfast things, preparatory to his own departure to the duties of the day. Stretching himself, however, and shaking off slumber, as the remembrance of the enterprise he had undertaken glanced pleasantly across him, Grabman sat up in his bed and said, in a voice that, if not maudlin, was affectionate, and if not affectionate, was maudlin,—

"Beck, you are a good fellow. You have faults, you are human,—humanism est errare; which means that you some times scorch my muffins. But, take you all in all, you are a kind creature. Beck, I am going into the country for some days. I shall leave my key in the hole in the wall,— you know; take care of it when you come in. You were out late last night, my poor fellow. Very wrong! Look well to yourself, or who knows? You may be clutched by that blackguard resurrection-man, No. 7. Well, well, to think of that Jason's foolhardiness! But he's the worse devil of the two. Eh! what was I saying? And always give a look into my room every night before you go to roost. The place swarms with cracksmen, and one can't be too cautious. Lucky dog, you, to have nothing to be robbed of!"

Beck winced at that last remark. Grabman did not seem to notice his confusion, and proceeded, as he put on his stockings: "And, Beck, you are a good fellow, and have served me faithfully; when I come back, I will bring you something handsome,—a backey-box or—who knows?—a beautiful silver watch. Meanwhile, I think—let me see—yes, I can give you this elegant pair of small-clothes. Put out my best,—the black ones. And now, Beck, I'll not keep you any longer."

The poor sweep, with many pulls at his forelock, acknowledged the munificent donation; and having finished all his preparations, hastened first to his room, to examine at leisure, and with great admiration, the drab small-clothes. "Room," indeed, we can scarcely style the wretched enclosure which Beck called his own. It was at the top of the house, under the roof, and hot—oh, so hot—in the summer! It had one small begrimed window, through which the light of heaven never came, for the parapet, beneath which ran the choked gutter, prevented that; but the rain and the wind came in. So sometimes, through four glassless frames, came a fugitive tom-cat. As for the rats, they held the place as their own. Accustomed to Beck, they cared nothing for him.

They were the Mayors of that Palace; he only le roi faineant. They ran over his bed at night; he often felt them on his face, and was convinced they would have eaten him, if there had been anything worth eating upon his bones; still, perhaps out of precaution rather than charity, he generally left them a potato or two, or a crust of bread, to take off the edge of their appetites. But Beck was far better off than most who occupied the various settlements in that Alsatia,—he had his room to himself. That was necessary to his sole luxury,—the inspection of his treasury, the safety of his mattress; for it he paid, without grumbling, what he thought was a very high rent. To this hole in the roof there was no lock,—for a very good reason, there was no door to it. You went up a ladder, as you would go into a loft. Now, it had often been matter of much intense cogitation to Beck whether or not he should have a door to his chamber; and the result of the cogitation was invariably the same,— he dared not!

What should he want with a door,—a door with a lock to it? For one followed as a consequence to the other. Such a novel piece of grandeur would be an ostentatious advertisement that he had something to guard. He could have no pretence for it on the ground that he was intruded on by neighbours; no step but his own was ever caught by him ascending that ladder; it led to no other room. All the offices required for the lodgment he performed himself. His supposed poverty was a better safeguard than doors of iron. Besides this, a door, if dangerous, would be superfluous; the moment it was suspected that Beck had something worth guarding, that moment all the picklocks and skeleton keys in the neighbourhood would be in a jingle. And a cracksman of high repute lodged already on the ground-floor. So Beck's treasure, like the bird's nest, was deposited as much out of sight as his instinct could contrive; and the locks and bolts of civilized men were equally dispensed with by bird and Beck.

On a rusty nail the sweep suspended the drab small-clothes, stroked them down lovingly, and murmured, "They be 's too good for I; I should like to pop 'em! But would n't that be a shame? Beck, be n't you be a hungrateful beast to go for to think of nothin' but the tin, ven your 'art ought to varm with hemotion? I vill veer 'em ven I waits on him. Ven he sees his own smalls bringing in the muffins, he will say, 'Beck, you becomes 'em!'"

Fraught with this noble resolution, the sweep caught up his broom, crept down the ladder, and with a furtive glance at the door of the room in which the cracksman lived, let himself out and shambled his way to his crossing. Grabman, in the mean while, dressed himself with more care than usual, shaved his beard from a four days' crop, and while seated at his breakfast, read attentively over the notes which Varney had left to him, pausing at times to make his own pencil memoranda. He then packed up such few articles as so moderate a worshipper of the Graces might require, deposited them in an old blue brief-bag, and this done, he opened his door, and creeping to the threshold, listened carefully. Below, a few sounds might be heard,—here, the wail of a child; there, the shrill scold of a woman in that accent above all others adapted to scold,—the Irish. Farther down still, the deep bass oath of the choleric resurrection-man; but above, all was silent. Only one floor intervened between Grabman's apartment and the ladder that led to Beck's loft. And the inmates of that room gave no sound of life. Grabman took courage, and shuffling off his shoes, ascended the stairs; he passed the closed door of the room above; he seized the ladder with a shaking hand; he mounted, step after step; he stood in Beck's room.

Now, O Nicholas Grabman! some moralists may be harsh enough to condemn thee for what thou art doing,—kneeling yonder in the dim light, by that curtainless pallet, with greedy fingers feeling here and there, and a placid, self-hugging smile upon thy pale lips. That poor vagabond whom thou art about to despoil has served thee well and faithfully, has borne with thine ill-humours, thy sarcasms, thy swearings, thy kicks, and buffets; often, when in the bestial sleep of drunkenness he has found thee stretched helpless on thy floor, with a kindly hand he has moved away the sharp fender, too near that knavish head, now bent on his ruin, or closed the open window, lest the keen air, that thy breath tainted, should visit thee with rheum and fever. Small has been his guerdon for uncomplaining sacrifice of the few hours spared to this weary drudge from his daily toil,—small, but gratefully received. And if Beck had been taught to pray, he would have prayed for thee as for a good man, O miserable sinner! And thou art going now, Nicholas Grabman, upon an enterprise which promises thee large gains, and thy purse is filled; and thou wantest nothing for thy wants or thy swinish luxuries. Why should those shaking fingers itch for the poor beggar-man's hoards?

But hadst thou been bound on an errand that would have given thee a million, thou wouldst not have left unrifled that secret store which thy prying eye had discovered, and thy hungry heart had coveted. No; since one night,—fatal, alas! to the owner of loft and treasure, when, needing Beck for some service, and fearing to call aloud (for the resurrection-man in the floor below thee, whose oaths even now ascend to thine ear, sleeps ill, and has threatened to make thee mute forever if thou disturbest him in the few nights in which his dismal calling suffers him to sleep at all), thou didst creep up the ladder, and didst see the unconscious miser at his nightly work, and after the sight didst

steal down again, smiling,—no; since that night, no schoolboy ever more rootedly and ruthlessly set his mind upon nest of linnet than thine was set upon the stores in Beck's mattress.

And yet why, O lawyer, should rigid moralists blame thee more than such of thy tribe as live, honoured and respectable, upon the frail and the poor? Who among them ever left loft or mattress while a rap could be wrung from either? Matters it to Astraea whether the spoliation be made thus nakedly and briefly, or by all the acknowledged forms in which, item on item, six-and-eightpence on six-and-eightpence, the inexorable hand closes at length on the last farthing of duped despair? Not—Heaven forbid!—that we make thee, foul Nicholas Grabman, a type for all the class called attorneys-at-law! Noble hearts, liberal minds, are there amongst that brotherhood, we know and have experienced; but a type art thou of those whom want and error and need have proved—alas! too well—the lawyers of the poor. And even while we write, and even while ye read, many a Grabman steals from helpless toil the savings of a life.

Ye poor hoards,—darling delights of your otherwise joyless owner,—how easily has his very fondness made ye the prey of the spoiler! How gleefully, when the pence swelled into a shilling, have they been exchanged into the new bright piece of silver, the newest and brightest that could be got; then the shillings into crowns, then the crowns into gold,—got slyly and at a distance, and contemplated with what rapture; so that at last the total lay manageable and light in its radiant compass. And what a total! what a surprise to Grabman! Had it been but a sixpence, he would have taken it; but to grasp sovereigns by the handful, it was too much for him; and as he rose, he positively laughed, from a sense of fun.

But amongst his booty there was found one thing that specially moved his mirth: it was a child's coral, with its little bells. Who could have given Beck such a bauble, or how Beck could have refrained from turning it into money, would have been a fit matter for speculation. But it was not that at which Grabman chuckled; he laughed, first because it was an emblem of the utter childishness and folly of the creature he was leaving penniless, and secondly, because it furnished his ready wit with a capital contrivance to shift Beck's indignation from his own shoulders to a party more liable to suspicion. He left the coral on the floor near the bed, stole down the ladder, reached his own room, took up his brief-bag, locked his door, slipped the key in the rat-hole, where the trusty, plundered Beck alone could find it, and went boldly downstairs; passing successively the doors within which still stormed the resurrection-man, still wailed the child, still shrieked the Irish shrew, he paused at the ground-floor occupied by Bill the cracksman and his long-fingered, slender, quick-eyed imps, trained already to pass through broken window-panes, on their precocious progress to the hulks.

The door was open, and gave a pleasant sight of the worthy family within. Bill himself, a stout-looking fellow with a florid, jolly countenance, and a pipe in his mouth, was sitting at his window, with his brawny legs lolling on a table covered with the remains of a very tolerable breakfast. Four small Bills were employed in certain sports which, no doubt, according to the fashionable mode of education, instilled useful lessons under the artful guise of playful amusement. Against the wall, at one corner of the room, was affixed a row of bells, from which were suspended exceedingly tempting apples by slender wires. Two of the boys were engaged in the innocent entertainment of extricating the apples without occasioning any alarm from the bells; a third was amusing himself at a table, covered with mock rings and trinkets, in a way that seemed really surprising; with the end of a finger, dipped probably in some glutinous matter, he just touched one of the gewgaws, and lo, it vanished!—vanished so magically that the quickest eye could scarcely trace whither; sometimes up a cuff, sometimes into a shoe,—here, there, anywhere, except back again upon the table. The fourth, an urchin apparently about five years old,—he might be much younger, judging from his stunted size; somewhat older, judging from the vicious acuteness of his face,—on the floor under his father's chair, was diving his little hand into the paternal pockets in search for a marble sportively hidden in those capacious recesses. On the rising geniuses around him Bill the cracksman looked, and his father's

heart was proud. Pausing at the threshold, Grabman looked in and said cheerfully, "Good-day to you; good-day to you all, my little dears."

"Ah, Grabman," said Bill, rising, and making a bow,—for Bill valued himself much on his politeness,—"come to blow a cloud, eh? Bob," this to the eldest born, "manners, sir; wipe your nose, and set a chair for the gent."

"Many thanks to you, Bill, but I can't stay now; I have a long journey to take. But, bless my soul, how stupid I am! I have forgotten my clothes-brush. I knew there was some thing on my mind all the way I was coming downstairs. I was saying, 'Grabman, there is something forgotten!'"

"I know what that 'ere feelin' is," said Bill, thoughtfully; "I had it myself the night afore last; and sure enough, when I got to the ——. But that's neither here nor there. Bob, run upstairs and fetch down Mr. Grabman's clothes-brush. 'T is the least you can do for a gent who saved your father from the fate of them 'ere innocent apples. Your fist, Grabman. I have a heart in my buzzom; cut me open, and you will find there 'Halibi, and Grabman!' Give Bob your key."

"The brush is not in my room," answered Grabman; "it is at the top of the house, up the ladder, in Beck's loft,—Beck, the sweeper. The stupid dog always keeps it there, and forgot to give it me. Sorry to occasion my friend Bob so much trouble."

"Bob has a soul above trouble; his father's heart beats in his buzzom.

Bob, track the dancers. Up like a lark, and down like a dump."

Bob grinned, made a mow at Mr. Grabman, and scampered up the stairs.

"You never attends our free-and-easy," said Bill; "but we toasts you with three times three, and up standing. "'T is a hungrateful world! But some men has a heart; and to those who has a heart, Grabman is a trump!"

"I am sure, whenever I can do you a service, you may reckon on me. Meanwhile, if you could get that cursed bullying fellow who lives under me to be a little more civil, you would oblige me."

"Under you? No. 7? No. 7, is it? Grabman, h-am I a man? Is this a h- arm, and this a bunch of fives? I dares do all that does become a man; but No. 7 is a body-snatcher! No. 7 has bullied me, and I bore it! No. 7 might whop me, and this h-arm would let him whop! He lives with graves and churchyards and stiff 'uns, that damnable No. 7! Ask some'at else, Grabman. I dares not touch No. 7 any more than the ghostesses."

Grabman sneered as he saw that Bill, stout rogue as he was, turned pale while he spoke; but at that moment Bob reappeared with the clothes-brush, which the ex-attorney thrust into his pocket, and shaking Bill by the hand, and patting Bob on the head, he set out on his journey.

Bill reseated himself, muttering, "Bully a body-snatcher! Drot that Grabman, does he want to get rid of poor Bill?"

Meanwhile Bob exhibited slyly, to his second brother, the sight of Beck's stolen coral. The children took care not to show it to their father. They were already inspired by the laudable ambition to set up in business on their own account.

CHAPTER VIII

PERCIVAL VISITS LUCRETIA

Having once ascertained the house in which Helen lived, it was no difficult matter for St. John to learn the name of the guardian whom Beck had supposed to be her mother. No common delight mingled with Percival's amaze when in that name he recognized one borne by his own kinswoman. Very little indeed of the family history was known to him. Neither his father nor his mother ever willingly conversed of the fallen heiress,—it was a subject which the children had felt to be proscribed; but in the neighbourhood, Percival had of course heard some mention of Lucretia as the haughty and accomplished Miss Clavering, who had, to the astonishment of all, stooped to a mesalliance with her uncle's French librarian. That her loss of the St. John property, the succession of Percival's father, were unexpected by the villagers and squires around, and perhaps set down to the caprice of Sir Miles, or to an intellect impaired by apoplectic attacks, it was not likely that he should have heard. The rich have the polish of their education, and the poor that instinctive tact, so wonderful amongst the agricultural peasantry, to prevent such unmannerly disclosures or unwelcome hints; and both by rich and poor, the Vernon St. Johns were too popular and respected for wanton allusions to subjects calculated to pain them. All, therefore, that Percival knew of his relation was that she had resided from infancy with Sir Miles; that after their uncle's death she had married an inferior in rank, of the name of Dalibard, and settled abroad; that she was a person of peculiar manners, and, he had heard somewhere, of rare gifts. He had been unable to learn the name of the young lady staying with Madame Dalibard; he had learned only that she went by some other name, and was not the daughter of the lady who rented the house. Certainly it was possible that this last might not be his kinswoman, after all. The name, though strange to English ears, and not common in France, was no sufficient warrant for Percival's high spirits at the thought that he had now won legitimate and regular access to the house; still, it allowed him to call, it furnished a fair excuse for a visit.

How long he was at his toilet that day, poor boy! How sedulously, with comb and brush, he sought to smooth into straight precision that luxuriant labyrinth of jetty curls, which had never cost him a thought before! Gil Blas says that the toilet is a pleasure to the young, though a labour to the old; Percival St. John's toilet was no pleasure to him that anxious morning.

At last he tore himself, dissatisfied and desperate, from the glass, caught his hat and his whip, threw himself on his horse, and rode, at first very fast, and at last very slowly, to the old, decayed, shabby, neglected house that lay hid, like the poverty of fallen pride, amidst the trim villas and smart cottages of fair and flourishing Brompton.

The same servant who had opened the gate to Ardworth appeared to his summons, and after eying him for some moments with a listless, stupid stare, said: "You'll be after some mistake!" and turned away.

"Stop, stop!" cried Percival, trying to intrude himself through the gate; but the servant blocked up the entrance sturdily. "It is no mistake at all, my good lady. I have come to see Madame Dalibard, my—my relation!"

"Your relation!" and again the woman stared at Percival with a look through the dull vacancy of which some distrust was dimly perceptible. "Bide a bit there, and give us your name."

Percival gave his card to the servant with his sweetest and most persuasive smile. She took it with one hand, and with the other turned the key in the gate, leaving Percival outside. It was five minutes before she returned; and she then, with the same prim, smileless expression of countenance, opened the gate and motioned him to follow.

The kind-hearted boy sighed as he cast a glance at the desolate and poverty-stricken appearance of the house, and thought within himself: "Ah, pray Heaven she may be my relation; and then I shall have the right to find her and that sweet girl a very different home!" The old woman threw open the drawing-room door, and Percival was in the presence of his deadliest foe! The armchair was turned towards the entrance, and from amidst the coverings that hid the form, the remarkable countenance of Madame Dalibard emerged, sharp and earnest, directly fronting the intruder.

"So," she said slowly, and, as it were, devouring him with her keen, steadfast eyes,— "so you are Percival St. John! Welcome! I did not know that we should ever meet. I have not sought you, you seek me! Strange— yes, strange—that the young and the rich should seek the suffering and the poor!"

Surprised and embarrassed by this singular greeting, Percival halted abruptly in the middle of the room; and there was something inexpressibly winning in his shy, yet graceful confusion. It seemed, with silent eloquence, to apologize and to deprecate. And when, in his silvery voice, scarcely yet tuned to the fulness of manhood, he said feelingly, "Forgive me, madam, but my mother is not in England," the excuse evinced such delicacy of idea, so exquisite a sense of high breeding, that the calm assurance of worldly ease could not have more attested the chivalry of the native gentleman.

"I have nothing to forgive, Mr. St. John," said Lucretia, with a softened manner. "Pardon me rather that my infirmities do not allow me to rise to receive you. This seat,—here,—next to me. You have a strong likeness to your father."

Percival received this last remark as a compliment, and bowed. Then, as he lifted his ingenuous brow, he took for the first time a steady view of his new-found relation. The peculiarities of Lucretia's countenance in youth had naturally deepened with middle age. The contour, always too sharp and pronounced, was now strong and bony as a man's; the line between the eyebrows was hollowed into a furrow. The eye retained its old uneasy, sinister, sidelong glance, or at rare moments (as when Percival entered), its searching penetration and assured command; but the eyelids themselves, red and injected, as with grief or vigil, gave something haggard and wild, whether to glance or gaze. Despite the paralysis of the frame, the face, though pale and thin, showed no bodily decay. A vigour surpassing the strength of woman might still be seen in the play of the bold muscles, the firmness of the contracted lips. What physicians call "vitality," and trace at once (if experienced) on the physiognomy as the prognostic of long life, undulated restlessly in every aspect of the face, every movement of those thin, nervous hands, which, contrasting the rest of that motionless form, never seemed to be at rest. The teeth were still white and regular, as in youth; and when they shone out in speaking, gave a strange, unnatural freshness to a face otherwise so worn.

As Percival gazed, and, while gazing, saw those wandering eyes bent down, and yet felt they watched him, a thrill almost of fear shot through his heart. Nevertheless, so much more impressionable was he to charitable and trustful than to suspicious and timid emotions that when Madame Dalibard, suddenly looking up and shaking her head gently, said, "You see but a sad wreck, young kinsman," all those instincts, which Nature itself seemed to dictate for self-preservation, vanished into heavenly tenderness and pity.

"Ah!" he said, rising, and pressing one of those deadly hands in both his own, while tears rose to his eyes,— "Ah! since you call me kinsman, I have all a kinsman's privileges. You must have the best advice, the most skilful surgeons. Oh, you will recover; you must not despond."

Lucretia's lips moved uneasily. This kindness took her by surprise. She turned desperately away from the human gleam that shot across the sevenfold gloom of her soul. "Do not think of me," she said, with a forced smile; "it is my peculiarity not to like allusion to myself, though this time I provoked it. Speak to me of the old cedar-trees at Laughton,—do they stand still? You are the master of Laughton now! It is a noble heritage!"

Then St. John, thinking to please her, talked of the old manor-house, described the improvements made by his father, spoke gayly of those which he himself contemplated; and as he

ran on, Lucretia's brow, a moment ruffled, grew smooth and smoother, and the gloom settled back upon her soul.

All at once she interrupted him. "How did you discover me? Was it through Mr. Varney? I bade him not mention me: yet how else could you learn?" As she spoke, there was an anxious trouble in her tone, which increased while she observed that St. John looked confused.

"Why," he began hesitatingly, and brushing his hat with his hand, "why— perhaps you may have heard from the—that is—I think there is a young ——. Ah, it is you, it is you! I see you once again!" And springing up, he was at the side of Helen, who at that instant had entered the room, and now, her eyes downcast, her cheeks blushing, her breast gently heaving, heard, but answered not that passionate burst of joy.

Startled, Madame Dalibard (her hands firmly grasping the sides of her chair) contemplated the two. She had heard nothing, guessed nothing of their former meeting. All that had passed before between them was unknown to her. Yet there was evidence unmistakable, conclusive: the son of her despoiler loved the daughter of her rival; and—if the virgin heart speaks by the outward sign—those downcast eyes, those blushing cheeks, that heaving breast, told that he did not love in vain!

Before her lurid and murderous gaze, as if to defy her, the two inheritors of a revenge unglutted by the grave stood, united mysteriously together. Up, from the vast ocean of her hate, rose that poor isle of love; there, unconscious of the horror around them, the victims found their footing! How beautiful at that hour their youth; their very ignorance of their own emotions; their innocent gladness; their sweet trouble! The fell gazer drew a long breath of fiendlike complacency and glee, and her hands opened wide, and then slowly closed, as if she felt them in her grasp.

CHAPTER IX

THE ROSE BENEATH THE UPAS

And from that day Percival had his privileged entry into Madame Dalibard's house. The little narrative of the circumstances connected with his first meeting with Helen, partly drawn from Percival, partly afterwards from Helen (with blushing and faltered excuses from the latter for not having mentioned before an incident that might, perhaps needlessly, vex or alarm her aunt in so delicate a state of health), was received by Lucretia with rare graciousness. The connection, not only between herself and Percival, but between Percival and Helen, was allowed and even dwelt upon by Madame Dalibard as a natural reason for permitting the artless intimacy which immediately sprang up between these young persons. She permitted Percival to call daily, to remain for hours, to share in their simple meals, to wander alone with Helen in the garden, assist her to bind up the ragged flowers, and sit by her in the old ivy-grown arbour when their work was done. She affected to look upon them both as children, and to leave to them that happy familiarity which childhood only sanctions, and compared to which the affection of maturer years seems at once coarse and cold.

As they grew more familiar, the differences and similarities in their characters came out, and nothing more delightful than the harmony into which even the contrasts blended ever invited the guardian angel to pause and smile. As flowers in some trained parterre relieve each other, now softening, now heightening, each several hue, till all unite in one concord of interwoven beauty, so these two blooming natures, brought together, seemed, where varying still, to melt and fuse their affluences into one wealth of innocence and sweetness. Both had a native buoyancy and cheerfulness of spirit, a noble trustfulness in others, a singular candour and freshness of mind and feeling. But beneath the gayety of Helen there was a soft and holy under-stream of thoughtful melancholy, a high and religious sentiment, that vibrated more exquisitely to the subtle mysteries of creation, the solemn unison between the bright world without and the grave destinies of that world within (which is an imperishable soul), than the lighter and more vivid youthfulness of Percival had yet conceived. In him lay the germs of the active mortal who might win distinction in the bold career we run upon the surface of the earth. In her there was that finer and more spiritual essence which lifts the poet to the golden atmosphere of dreams, and reveals in glimpses to the saint the choral Populace of Heaven. We do not say that Helen would ever have found the utterance of the poet, that her reveries, undefined and unanalyzed, could have taken the sharp, clear form of words; for to the poet practically developed and made manifest to the world, many other gifts besides the mere poetic sense are needed,—stern study, and logical generalization of scattered truths, and patient observation of the characters of men, and the wisdom that comes from sorrow and passion, and a sage's experience of things actual, embracing the dark secrets of human infirmity and crime. But despite all that has been said in disparagement or disbelief of "mute, inglorious Miltons," we maintain that there are natures in which the divinest element of poetry exists, the purer and more delicate for escaping from bodily form and evaporating from the coarser vessels into which the poet, so called, must pour the ethereal fluid. There is a certain virtue within us, comprehending our subtlest and noblest emotions, which is poetry while untold, and grows pale and poor in proportion as we strain it into poems. Nay, it may be said of this airy property of our inmost being that, more or less, it departs from us according as we give it forth into the world, even, as only by the loss of its particles, the rose wastes its perfume on the air. So this more spiritual sensibility dwelt in Helen as the latent mesmerism in water, as the invisible fairy in an enchanted ring. It was an essence or divinity, shrined and shrouded in herself, which gave her more intimate and vital union with all the influences of the universe, a companion to her loneliness, an angel hymning

low to her own listening soul. This made her enjoyment of Nature, in its merest trifles, exquisite and profound; this gave to her tenderness of heart all the delicious and sportive variety love borrows from imagination; this lifted her piety above the mere forms of conventional religion, and breathed into her prayers the ecstasy of the saint.

But Helen was not the less filled with the sweet humanities of her age and sex; her very gravity was tinged with rosy light, as a western cloud with the sun. She had sportiveness and caprice, and even whim, as the butterfly, though the emblem of the soul, still flutters wantonly over every wild-flower, and expands its glowing wings on the sides of the beaten road. And with a sense of weakness in the common world (growing out of her very strength in nobler atmospheres), she leaned the more trustfully on the strong arm of her young adorer, not fancying that the difference between them arose from superiority in her; but rather as a bird, once tamed, flies at the sight of the hawk to the breast of its owner, so from each airy flight into the loftier heaven, let but the thought of danger daunt her wing, and, as in a more powerful nature, she took refuge on that fostering heart.

The love between these children—for so, if not literally in years, in their newness to all that steals the freshness and the dew from maturer life they may be rightly called—was such as befitted those whose souls have not forfeited the Eden. It was more like the love of fairies than of human beings. They showed it to each other innocently and frankly; yet of love as we of the grosser creation call it, with its impatient pains and burning hopes, they never spoke nor dreamed. It was an unutterable, ecstatic fondness, a clinging to each other in thought, desire, and heart, a joy more than mortal in each other's presence; yet, in parting, not that idle and empty sorrow which unfits the weak for the homelier demands on time and life, and this because of the wondrous trust in themselves and in the future, which made a main part of their credulous, happy natures. Neither felt fear nor jealousy, or if jealousy came, it was the pretty, childlike jealousies which have no sting,—of the bird, if Helen listened to its note too long; of the flower, if Percival left Helen's side too quickly to tie up its drooping petals or refresh its dusty leaves. Close by the stir of the great city, with all its fret and chafe and storm of life, in the desolate garden of that sombre house, and under the withering eyes of relentless Crime, revived the Arcady of old,—the scene vocal to the reeds of idyllist and shepherd; and in the midst of the iron Tragedy, harmlessly and unconsciously arose the strain of the Pastoral Music.

It would be a vain effort to describe the state of Lucretia's mind while she watched the progress of the affection she had favoured, and gazed on the spectacle of the fearless happiness she had promoted. The image of a felicity at once so great and so holy wore to her gloomy sight the aspect of a mocking Fury. It rose in contrast to her own ghastly and crime-stained life; it did not upbraid her conscience with guilt so loudly as it scoffed at her intellect for folly. These children, playing on the verge of life, how much more of life's true secret did they already know than she, with all her vast native powers and wasted realms of blackened and charred experience! For what had she studied, and schemed, and calculated, and toiled, and sinned? As a conqueror stricken unto death would render up all the regions vanquished by his sword for one drop of water to his burning lips, how gladly would she have given all the knowledge bought with blood and fire, to feel one moment as those children felt! Then, from out her silent and grim despair, stood forth, fierce and prominent, the great fiend, Revenge.

By a monomania not uncommon to those who have made self the centre of being, Lucretia referred to her own sullen history of wrong and passion all that bore analogy to it, however distant. She had never been enabled, without an intolerable pang of hate and envy, to contemplate courtship and love in others. From the rudest shape to the most refined, that master-passion in the existence, at least of woman,—reminding her of her own brief episode of human tenderness and devotion,—opened every wound and wrung every fibre of a heart that, while crime had indurated it to most emotions, memory still left morbidly sensitive to one. But if tortured by the sight of love in those who had had no connection with her fate, who stood apart from her lurid orbit and were gazed upon only afar (as a lost soul, from the abyss, sees the gleam of angels' wings within some planet it never has explored), how

ineffably more fierce and intolerable was the wrath that seized her when, in her haunted imagination, she saw all Susan's rapture at the vows of Mainwaring mantling in Helen's face! All that might have disarmed a heart as hard, but less diseased, less preoccupied by revenge, only irritated more the consuming hate of that inexorable spirit. Helen's seraphic purity, her exquisite, overflowing kindness, ever forgetting self, her airy cheerfulness, even her very moods of melancholy, calm and seemingly causeless as they were, perpetually galled and blistered that writhing, preternatural susceptibility which is formed by the consciousness of infamy, the dreary egotism of one cut off from the charities of the world, with whom all mirth is sardonic convulsion, all sadness rayless and unresigned despair.

Of the two, Percival inspired her with feelings the most akin to humanity. For him, despite her bitter memories of his father, she felt something of compassion, and shrank from the touch of his frank hand in remorse. She had often need to whisper to herself that his life was an obstacle to the heritage of the son of whom, as we have seen, she was in search, and whom, indeed, she believed she had already found in John Ardworth; that it was not in wrath and in vengeance that this victim was to be swept into the grave, but as an indispensable sacrifice to a cherished object, a determined policy. As, in the studies of her youth, she had adopted the Machiavelism of ancient State-craft as a rule admissible in private life, so she seemed scarcely to admit as a crime that which was but the removal of a barrier between her aim and her end. Before she had become personally acquainted with Percival she had rejected all occasion to know him. She had suffered Varney to call upon him as the old protege of Sir Miles, and to wind into his intimacy, meaning to leave to her accomplice, when the hour should arrive, the dread task of destruction. This not from cowardice, for Gabriel had once rightly described her when he said that if she lived with shadows she could quell them, but simply because, more intellectually unsparing than constitutionally cruel (save where the old vindictive memories thoroughly unsexed her), this was a victim whose pangs she desired not to witness, over whose fate it was no luxury to gloat and revel. She wished not to see nor to know him living, only to learn that he was no more, and that Helen alone stood between Laughton and her son. Now that he had himself, as if with predestined feet, crossed her threshold, that he, like Helen, had delivered himself into her toils, the hideous guilt, before removed from her hands, became haunting, fronted her face to face, and filled her with a superstitious awe.

Meanwhile, her outward manner to both her meditated victims, if moody and fitful at times, was not such as would have provoked suspicion even in less credulous hearts. From the first entry of Helen under her roof she had been formal and measured in her welcome,—kept her, as it were, aloof, and affected no prodigal superfluity of dissimulation; but she had never been positively harsh or unkind in word or in deed, and had coldly excused herself for the repulsiveness of her manner.

"I am irritable," she said, "from long suffering, I am unsocial from habitual solitude; do not expect from me the fondness and warmth that should belong to our relationship. Do not harass yourself with vain solicitude for one whom all seeming attention but reminds more painfully of infirmity, and who, even thus stricken down, would be independent of all cares not bought and paid for. Be satisfied to live here in all reasonable liberty, to follow your own habits and caprices uncontrolled. Regard me but as a piece of necessary furniture. You can never displease me but when you notice that I live and suffer."

If Helen wept bitterly at these hard words when first spoken, it was not with anger that her loving heart was so thrown back upon herself. On the contrary, she became inspired with a compassion so great that it took the character of reverence. She regarded this very coldness as a mournful dignity. She felt grateful that one who could thus dispense with, should yet have sought her. She had heard her mother say that she had been under great obligations to Lucretia; and now, when she was forbidden to repay them even by a kiss on those weary eyelids, a daughter's hand to that sleepless pillow; when she saw that the barrier first imposed was irremovable, that no time diminished the distance her aunt set between them, that the least approach to the tenderness of service beyond the most casual offices really seemed but to fret those excitable nerves, and fever the hand that she ventured timorously to

clasp,—she retreated into herself with a sad amaze that increased her pity and heightened her respect. To her, love seemed so necessary a thing in the helplessness of human life, even when blessed with health and youth, that this rejection of all love in one so bowed and crippled, struck her imagination as something sublime in its dreary grandeur and stoic pride of independence. She regarded it as of old a tender and pious nun would have regarded the asceticism of some sanctified recluse,—as Theresa (had she lived in the same age) might have regarded Saint Simeon Stylites existing aloft from human sympathy on the roofless summit of his column of stone; and with this feeling she sought to inspire Percival. He had the heart to enter into her compassion, but not the imagination to sympathize with her reverence. Even the repugnant awe that he had first conceived for Madame Dalibard, so bold was he by temperament, he had long since cast off; he recognized only the moroseness and petulance of an habitual invalid, and shook playfully his glossy curls when Helen, with her sweet seriousness, insisted on his recognizing more.

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