

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**THE PARISIANS —
VOLUME 04**

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
The Parisians — Volume 04

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BOOK IV

CHAPTER I

FROM ISAURA CICOGNA TO MADAME DE GRANTMESNIL

It is many days since I wrote to you, and but for your delightful note just received, reproaching me for silence, I should still be under the spell of that awe which certain words of M. Savarin were well fitted to produce. Chancing to ask him if he had written to you lately, he said, with that laugh of his, good-humouredly ironical, "No, Mademoiselle, I am not one of the *Facheux* whom Moliere has immortalized. If the meeting of lovers should be sacred from the intrusion of a third person, however amiable, more sacred still should be the parting between an author and his work. Madame de Grantmesnil is in that moment so solemn to a genius earnest as hers,—she is bidding farewell to a companion with whom, once dismissed into the world, she can never converse familiarly again; it ceases to be her companion when it becomes ours. Do not let us disturb the last hours they will pass together."

These words struck me much. I suppose there is truth in them. I can comprehend that a work which has long been all in all to its author, concentrating his thoughts, gathering round it the hopes and fears of his inmost heart, dies, as it were, to him when he has completed its life for others, and launched it into a world estranged from the solitude in which it was born and formed. I can almost conceive that, to a writer like you, the very fame which attends the work thus sent forth chills your own love for it. The characters you created in a fairyland, known but to yourself, must lose something of their mysterious charm when you hear them discussed and cavilled at, blamed or praised, as if they were really the creatures of streets and salons.

I wonder if hostile criticism pains or enrages you as it seems to do such other authors as I have known. M. Savarin, for instance, sets down in his tablets as an enemy to whom vengeance is due the smallest scribbler who wounds his self-love, and says frankly, "To me praise is food, dispraise is poison. Him who feeds me I pay; him who poisons me I break on the wheel." M. Savarin is, indeed, a skilful and energetic administrator to his own reputation. He deals with it as if it were a kingdom,—establishes fortifications for its defence, enlists soldiers to fight for it. He is the soul and centre of a confederation in which each is bound to defend the territory of the others, and all those territories united constitute the imperial realm of M. Savarin. Don't think me an ungracious satirist in what I am thus saying of our brilliant friend. It is not I who here speak; it is himself. He avows his policy with the *naivete* which makes the charm of his style as writer. "It is the greatest mistake," he said to me yesterday, "to talk of the Republic of Letters. Every author who wins a name is a sovereign in his own domain, be it large or small. Woe to any republican who wants to dethrone me!" Somehow or other, when M. Savarin thus talks I feel as if he were betraying the cause of, genius. I cannot bring myself to regard literature as a craft,—to me it is a sacred mission; and in hearing this "sovereign" boast of the tricks by which he maintains his state, I seem to listen to a priest who treats as imposture the religion he professes to teach. M. Savarin's favourite *eleve* now is a young contributor to his journal, named

Gustave Rameau. M. Savarin said the other day in my hearing, "I and my set were Young France; Gustave Rameau and his set are New Paris."

"And what is the distinction between the one and the other?" asked my American friend, Mrs. Morley.

"The set of 'Young France,'" answered M. Savarin, "had in it the hearty consciousness of youth; it was bold and vehement, with abundant vitality and animal spirits; whatever may be said against it in other respects, the power of thews and sinews must be conceded to its chief representatives. But the set of 'New Paris' has very bad health, and very indifferent spirits. Still, in its way, it is very clever; it can sting and bite as keenly as if it were big and strong. Rameau is the most promising member of the set. He will be popular in his time, because he represents a good deal of the mind of his time, —namely, the mind and the time of 'New Paris.'"

Do you know anything of this young Rameau's writings? You do not know himself, for he told me so, expressing a desire, that was evidently very sincere, to find some occasion on which to render you his homage. He said this the first time I met him at M. Savarin's, and before he knew how dear to me are yourself and your fame. He came and sat by me after dinner, and won my interest at once by asking me if I had heard that you were busied on a new work; and then, without waiting for my answer, he launched forth into praises of you, which made a notable contrast to the scorn with which he spoke of all your contemporaries,—except indeed M. Savarin, who, however, might not have been pleased to hear his favourite pupil style him "a great writer in small things." I spare you his epigrams on Dumas and Victor Hugo and my beloved Lamartine. Though his talk was showy, and dazzled me at first, I soon got rather tired of it, even the first time we met. Since then I have seen him very often, not only at M. Savarin's, but he calls here at least every other day, and we have become quite good friends. He gains on acquaintance so far that one cannot help feeling how much he is to be pitied. He is so envious! and the envious must be so unhappy. And then he is at once so near and so far from all the things that he envies. He longs for riches and luxury, and can only as yet earn a bare competence by his labours. Therefore he hates the rich and luxurious. His literary successes, instead of pleasing him, render him miserable by their contrast with the fame of the authors whom he envies and assails. He has a beautiful head, of which he is conscious, but it is joined to a body without strength or grace. He is conscious of this too,—but it is cruel to go on with this sketch. You can see at once the kind of person who, whether he inspire affection or dislike, cannot fail to create an interest, painful but compassionate.

You will be pleased to hear that Dr. C. considers my health so improved that I may next year enter fairly on the profession for which I was intended and trained. Yet I still feel hesitating and doubtful. To give myself wholly up to the art in which I am told I could excel must alienate me entirely from the ambition that yearns for fields in which, alas! it may perhaps never appropriate to itself a rood for culture,—only wander, lost in a vague fairyland, to which it has not the fairy's birthright. O thou great Enchantress, to whom are equally subject the streets of Paris and the realm of Faerie, thou who hast sounded to the deeps that circumfluent ocean called "practical human life," and hast taught the acutest of its navigators to consider how far its courses are guided by orbs in heaven,—canst thou solve this riddle which, if it perplexes me, must perplex so many? What is the real distinction between the rare genius and the commonalty of human souls that feel to the quick all the grandest and divinest things which the rare genius places before them, sighing within themselves, "This rare genius does but express that which was previously familiar to us, so far as thought and sentiment extend"? Nay, the genius itself, however eloquent, never does, never can, express the whole of the thought or the sentiment it interprets; on the contrary, the greater the genius is, the more it leaves a something of incomplete satisfaction on our minds,—it promises so much more than it performs; it implies so much more than it announces. I am impressed with the truth of what I thus say in proportion as I re-peruse and re-study the greatest writers that have come within my narrow range of reading; and by the greatest writers I mean those who are not exclusively reasoners (of such I cannot judge), nor mere

poets (of whom, so far as concerns the union of words with music, I ought to be able to judge), but the few who unite reason and poetry, and appeal at once to the common-sense of the multitude and the imagination of the few. The highest type of this union to me is Shakspeare; and I can comprehend the justice of no criticism on him which does not allow this sense of incomplete satisfaction augmenting in proportion as the poet soars to his highest. I ask again, In what consists this distinction between the rare genius and the commonalty of minds that exclaim, "He expresses what we feel, but never the whole of what we feel"? Is it the mere power over language, a larger knowledge of dictionaries, a finer ear for period and cadence, a more artistic craft in casing our thoughts and sentiments in well-selected words? Is it true what Buffon says, "that the style is the man"? Is it true what I am told Goethe said, "Poetry is form"? I cannot believe this; and if you tell me it is true, then I no longer pine to be a writer. But if it be not true, explain to me how it is that the greatest genius is popular in proportion as it makes itself akin to us by uttering in better words than we employ that which was already within us, brings to light what in our souls was latent, and does but correct, beautify, and publish the correspondence which an ordinary reader carries on privately every day between himself and his mind or his heart. If this superiority in the genius be but style and form, I abandon my dream of being something else than a singer of words by another to the music of another. But then, what then? My knowledge of books and art is wonderfully small. What little I do know I gather from very few books and from what I hear said by the few worth listening to whom I happen to meet; and out of these, in solitude and reverie, not by conscious effort, I arrive at some results which appear to my inexperience original. Perhaps, indeed, they have the same kind of originality as the musical compositions of amateurs who effect a cantata or a quartette made up of borrowed details from great masters, and constituting a whole so original that no real master would deign to own it. Oh, if I could get you to understand how unsettled, how struggling my whole nature at this moment is! I wonder what is the sensation of the chrysalis which has been a silkworm, when it first feels the new wings stirring within its shell,—wings, alas! they are but those of the humblest and shortest-lived sort of moth, scarcely born into daylight before it dies. Could it reason, it might regret its earlier life, and say, "Better be the silkworm than the moth."

FROM THE SAME TO THE SAME

Have you known well any English people in the course of your life? I say well, for you must have had acquaintance with many. But it seems to me so difficult to know an Englishman well. Even I, who so loved and revered Mr. Selby,—I, whose childhood was admitted into his companionship by that love which places ignorance and knowledge, infancy and age, upon ground so equal that heart touches heart, cannot say that I understand the English character to anything like the extent to which I fancy I understand the Italian and the French. Between us of the Continent and them of the island the British Channel always flows. There is an Englishman here to whom I have been introduced, whom I have met, though but seldom, in that society which bounds the Paris world to me. Pray, pray tell me, did you ever know, ever meet him? His name is Graham Vane. He is the only son, I am told, of a man who was a *celebrite* in England as an orator and statesman, and on both sides he belongs to the haute aristocratic. He himself has that indescribable air and mien to which we apply the epithet 'distinguished.' In the most crowded salon the eye would fix on him, and involuntarily follow his movements. Yet his manners are frank and simple, wholly without the stiffness or reserve which are said to characterize the English. There is an inborn dignity in his bearing which consists in the absence of all dignity assumed. But what strikes me most in this Englishman is an expression of countenance which the English depict by the word 'open,'—that expression which inspires you with a belief in the existence of sincerity. Mrs. Morley said of him, in that poetic extravagance of phrase by which the Americans startle the English, "That man's forehead would light up the Mammoth Cave." Do you not know, Eulalie, what it is to us cultivators of art—art being the expression of truth through fiction—

to come into the atmosphere of one of those souls in which Truth stands out bold and beautiful in itself, and needs no idealization through fiction? Oh, how near we should be to heaven could we live daily, hourly, in the presence of one the honesty of whose word we could never doubt, the authority of whose word we could never disobey! Mr. Vane professes not to understand music, not even to care for it, except rarely, and yet he spoke of its influence over others with an enthusiasm that half charmed me once more back to my destined calling; nay, might have charmed me wholly, but that he seemed to think that I—that any public singer—must be a creature apart from the world,—the world in which such men live. Perhaps that is true.

CHAPTER II

It was one of those lovely noons towards the end of May in which a rural suburb has the mellow charm of summer to him who escapes awhile from the streets of a crowded capital. The Londoner knows its charm when he feels his tread on the softening swards of the Vale of Health, or, pausing at Richmond under the budding willow, gazes on the river glittering in the warmer sunlight, and hears from the villa-gardens behind him the brief trill of the blackbird. But the suburbs round Paris are, I think, a yet more pleasing relief from the metropolis; they are more easily reached, and I know not why, but they seem more rural,—perhaps because the contrast of their repose with the stir left behind, of their redundance of leaf and blossom compared with the prim efflorescence of trees in the Boulevards and Tuileries, is more striking. However that may be, when Graham reached the pretty suburb in which Isaura dwelt, it seemed to him as if all the wheels of the loud busy life were suddenly smitten still. The hour was yet early; he felt sure that he should find Isaura at home. The garden-gate stood unfastened and ajar; he pushed it aside and entered. I think I have before said that the garden of the villa was shut out from the road and the gaze of neighbours by a wall and thick belts of evergreens; it stretched behind the house somewhat far for the garden of a suburban villa. He paused when he had passed the gateway, for he heard in the distance the voice of one singing,—singing low, singing plaintively. He knew it was the voice of Isaura—he passed on, leaving the house behind him, and tracking the voice till he reached the singer.

Isaura was seated within an arbour towards the farther end of the garden,—an arbour which, a little later in the year, must indeed be delicate and dainty with lush exuberance of jessamine and woodbine; now into its iron trelliswork leaflets and flowers were insinuating their gentle way. Just at the entrance one white rose—a winter rose that had mysteriously survived its relations—opened its pale hues frankly to the noonday sun. Graham approached slowly, noiselessly, and the last note of the song had ceased when he stood at the entrance of the arbour. Isaura did not perceive him at first, for her face was bent downward musingly, as was often her wont after singing, especially when alone; but she felt that the place was darkened, that something stood between her and the sunshine. She raised her face, and a quick flush mantled over it as she uttered his name, not loudly, not as in surprise, but inwardly and whisperingly, as in a sort of fear.

"Pardon me, Mademoiselle," said Graham, entering; "but I heard your voice as I came into the garden, and it drew me onward involuntarily. What a lovely air! and what simple sweetness in such of the words as reached me! I am so ignorant of music that you must not laugh at me if I ask whose is the music and whose are the words? Probably both are so well known as to convict me of a barbarous ignorance."

"Oh, no," said Isaura, with a still heightened colour, and in accents embarrassed and hesitating. "Both the words and music are by an unknown and very humble composer, yet not, indeed, quite original,—they have not even that merit; at least they were suggested by a popular song in the Neapolitan dialect which is said to be very old."

"I don't know if I caught the true meaning of the words, for they seemed to me to convey a more subtle and refined sentiment than is common in the popular songs of southern Italy."

"The sentiment in the original is changed in the paraphrase, and not, I fear, improved by the change."

"Will you explain to me the sentiment in both, and let me judge which I prefer?"

"In the Neapolitan song a young fisherman, who has moored his boat under a rock on the shore, sees a beautiful face below the surface of the waters; he imagines it to be that of a Nereid, and casts in his net to catch this supposed nymph of the ocean. He only disturbs the water, loses the image, and brings up a few common fishes. He returns home disappointed, and very much enamoured of the supposed Nereid. The next day he goes again to the same place, and discovers that the face which had

so charmed him was that of a mortal girl reflected on the waters from the rock behind him, on which she had been seated, and on which she had her home. The original air is arch and lively; just listen to it." And Isaura warbled one of those artless and somewhat meagre tunes to which light-stringed instruments are the fitting accompaniment.

"That," said Graham, "is a different music indeed from the other, which is deep and plaintive, and goes to the heart."

"But do you not see how the words have been altered? In the song you first heard me singing, the fisherman goes again to the spot, again and again sees the face in the water, again and again seeks to capture the Nereid, and never knows to the last that the face was that of the mortal on the rock close behind him, and which he passed by without notice every day. Deluded by an ideal image, the real one escapes from his eye."

"Is the verse that is recast meant to symbolize a moral in love?"

"In love? nay, I know not; but in life, yes,—at least the life of the artist."

"The paraphrase of the original is yours, Signorina, words and music both. Am I not right? Your silence answers 'Yes.' Will you pardon me if I say that, though there can be no doubt of the new beauty you have given to the old song, I think that the moral of the old was the sounder one, the truer to human life. We do not go on to the last duped by an allusion. If enamoured by the shadow on the waters, still we do look around us and discover the image it reflects."

Isaura shook her head gently, but made no answer. On the table before her there were a few myrtle-sprigs and one or two buds from the last winter rose, which she had been arranging into a simple nosegay; she took up these, and abstractedly began to pluck and scatter the rose-leaves.

"Despise the coming May flowers if you will, they will soon be so plentiful," said Graham; "but do not cast away the few blossoms which winter has so kindly spared, and which even summer will not give again;" and placing his hand on the winter buds, it touched hers,—lightly, indeed, but she felt the touch, shrank from it, coloured, and rose from her seat.

"The sun has left this side of the garden, the east wind is rising, and you must find it chilly here," she said, in an altered tone; "will you not come into the house?"

"It is not the air that I feel chilly," said Graham, with a half-smile; "I almost fear that my prosaic admonitions have displeased you."

"They were not prosaic; and they were kind and very wise," she added, with her exquisite laugh,—laugh so wonderfully sweet and musical. She now had gained the entrance of the arbour; Graham joined her, and they walked towards the house. He asked her if she had seen much of the Savarins since they had met.

"Once or twice we have been there of an evening."

"And encountered, no doubt, the illustrious young minstrel who despises Tasso and Corneille?"

"M. Rameau? Oh, yes; he is constantly at the Savarins. Do not be severe on him. He is unhappy, he is struggling, he is soured. An artist has thorns in his path which lookers-on do not heed."

"All people have thorns in their path, and I have no great respect for those who want lookers-on to heed them whenever they are scratched. But M. Rameau seems to me one of those writers very common nowadays, in France and even in England; writers who have never read anything worth studying, and are, of course, presumptuous in proportion to their ignorance. I should not have thought an artist like yourself could have recognized an artist in a M. Rameau who despises Tasso without knowing Italian."

Graham spoke bitterly; he was once more jealous.

"Are you not an artist yourself? Are you not a writer? M. Savarin told me you were a distinguished man of letters."

"M. Savarin flatters me too much. I am not an artist, and I have a great dislike to that word as it is now hackneyed and vulgarized in England and in France. A cook calls himself an artist; a tailor does the same; a man writes a gaudy melodrama, a spasmodic song, a sensational novel, and straightway

he calls Himself an artist, and indulges in a pedantic jargon about 'essence' and 'form,' assuring us that a poet we can understand wants essence, and a poet we can scan wants form. Thank heaven, I am not vain enough to call myself artist. I have written some very dry lucubrations in periodicals, chiefly political, or critical upon other subjects than art. But why, a propos of M. Rameau, did you ask me that question respecting myself?"

"Because much in your conversation," answered Isaura, in rather a mournful tone, "made me suppose you had more sympathies with art and its cultivators than you cared to avow; and if you had such sympathies, you would comprehend what a relief it is to a poor aspirant to art like myself to come into communication with those who devote themselves to any art distinct from the common pursuits of the world, what a relief it is to escape from the ordinary talk of society. There is a sort of instinctive freemasonry among us, including masters and disciples; and one art has a fellowship with other arts. Mine is but song and music, yet I feel attracted towards a sculptor, a painter, a romance-writer, a poet, as much as towards a singer, a musician. Do you understand why I cannot condemn M. Rameau as you do? I differ from his tastes in literature; I do not much admire such of his writings as I have read; I grant that he overestimates his own genius, whatever that be,—yet I like to converse with him. He is a struggler upwards, though with weak wings, or with erring footsteps, like myself."

"Mademoiselle," said Graham, earnestly, "I cannot say how I thank you for this candour. Do not condemn me for abusing it, if—" he paused.

"If what?"

"If I, so much older than yourself,—I do not say only in years, but in the experience of life, I whose lot is cast among those busy and 'positive' pursuits, which necessarily quicken that unromantic faculty called common-sense,—if, I say, the deep interest with which you must inspire all whom you admit into an acquaintance even as unfamiliar as that now between us makes me utter one caution, such as might be uttered by a friend or brother. Beware of those artistic sympathies which you so touchingly confess; beware how, in the great events of life, you allow fancy to misguide your reason. In choosing friends on whom to rely, separate the artist from the human being. Judge of the human being for what it is in itself. Do not worship the face on the waters, blind to the image on the rock. In one word, never see in an artist like a M. Rameau the human being to whom you could intrust the destinies of your life. Pardon me, pardon me; we may meet little hereafter, but you are a creature so utterly new to me, so wholly unlike any woman I have ever before encountered and admired, and to me seem endowed with such wealth of mind and soul, exposed to such hazard, that—that—" again he paused, and his voice trembled as he concluded—"that it would be a deep sorrow to me if, perhaps years hence, I should have to say, 'Alas!' by what mistake has that wealth been wasted!"

While they had thus conversed, mechanically they had turned away from the house, and were again standing before the arbour.

Graham, absorbed in the passion of his adjuration, had not till now looked into the face of the companion by his side. Now, when he had concluded, and heard no reply, he bent down and saw that Isaura was weeping silently.

His heart smote him.

"Forgive me," he exclaimed, drawing her hand into his; "I have had no right to talk thus; but it was not from want of respect; it was— it was—"

The hand which was yielded to his pressed it gently, timidly, chastely.

"Forgive!" murmured Isaura; "do you think that I, an orphan, have never longed for a friend who would speak to me thus?" And so saying, she lifted her eyes, streaming still, to his bended countenance,—eyes, despite their tears, so clear in their innocent limpid beauty, so ingenuous, so frank, so virgin-like, so unlike the eyes of 'any other woman he had encountered and admired.'

"Alas!" he said, in quick and hurried accents, "you may remember, when we have before conversed, how I, though so uncultured in your art, still recognized its beautiful influence upon human breasts; how I sought to combat your own depreciation of its rank among the elevating agencies of

humanity; how, too, I said that no man could venture to ask you to renounce the boards, the lamps,— resign the fame of actress, of singer. Well, now that you accord to me the title of friend, now that you so touchingly remind me that you are an orphan, thinking of all the perils the young and the beautiful of your sex must encounter when they abandon private life for public, I think that a true friend might put the question, 'Can you resign the fame of actress, of singer?'"

"I will answer you frankly. The profession which once seemed to me so alluring began to lose its charms in my eyes some months ago. It was your words, very eloquently expressed, on the ennobling effects of music and song upon a popular audience, that counteracted the growing distaste to rendering up my whole life to the vocation of the stage; but now I think I should feel grateful to the friend whose advice interpreted the voice of my own heart, and bade me relinquish the career of actress."

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