Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

Lucretia — Volume 01

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
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Содержание

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
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PREFACE TO THE EDITION OF 1853

"Lucretia; or, The Children of Night," was begun simultaneously with "The Caxtons: a Family Picture." The two fictions were intended as pendants; both serving, amongst other collateral aims and objects, to show the influence of home education, of early circumstance and example, upon after character and conduct. "Lucretia" was completed and published before "The Caxtons." The moral design of the first was misunderstood and assailed; that of the last was generally acknowledged and approved: the moral design in both was nevertheless precisely the same. But in one it was sought through the darker side of human nature; in the other through the more sunny and cheerful: one shows the evil, the other the salutary influences, of early circumstance and training. Necessarily, therefore, the first resorts to the tragic elements of awe and distress,—the second to the comic elements of humour and agreeable emotion. These differences serve to explain the different reception that awaited the two, and may teach us how little the real conception of an author is known, and how little it is cared for; we judge, not by the purpose he conceives, but according as the impressions he effects are pleasurable or painful. But while I cannot acquiesce in much of the hostile criticism this fiction produced at its first appearance, I readily allow that as a mere question of art the story might have been improved in itself, and rendered more acceptable to the reader, by diminishing the gloom of the catastrophe. In this edition I have endeavoured to do so; and the victim whose fate in the former cast of the work most revolted the reader, as a violation of the trite but amiable law of Poetical Justice, is saved from the hands of the Children of Night. Perhaps, whatever the faults of this work, it equals most of its companions in the sustainment of interest, and in that coincidence between the gradual development of motive or passion, and the sequences of external events constituting plot, which mainly distinguish the physical awe of tragedy from the coarse horrors of melodrama. I trust at least that I shall now find few readers who will not readily acknowledge that the delineation of crime has only been employed for the grave and impressive purpose which brings it within the due province of the poet,—as an element of terror and a warning to the heart.

LONDON, December 7.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

It is somewhere about four years since I appeared before the public as the writer of a fiction, which I then intimated would probably be my last; but bad habits are stronger than good intentions. When Fabricio, in his hospital, resolved upon abjuring the vocation of the Poet, he was, in truth, recommencing his desperate career by a Farewell to the Muses,— I need not apply the allusion.

I must own, however, that there had long been a desire in my mind to trace, in some work or other, the strange and secret ways through which that Arch-ruler of Civilization, familiarly called "Money," insinuates itself into our thoughts and motives, our hearts and actions; affecting those who undervalue as those who overestimate its importance; ruining virtues in the spendthrift no less than engendering vices in the miser. But when I half implied my farewell to the character of a novelist, I had imagined that this conception might be best worked out upon the stage. After some unpublished and imperfect attempts towards so realizing my design, I found either that the subject was too wide for the limits of the Drama, or that I wanted that faculty of concentration which alone enables the dramatist to compress multiform varieties into a very limited compass. With this design, I desired to unite some exhibition of what seems to me a principal vice in the hot and emulous chase for happiness or fame, fortune or knowledge, which is almost synonymous with the cant phrase of "the March of Intellect," in that crisis of society to which we have arrived. The vice I allude to is Impatience. That eager desire to press forward, not so much to conquer obstacles as to elude them; that gambling with the solemn destinies of life, seeking ever to set success upon the chance of a die; that hastening from the wish conceived to the end accomplished; that thirst after quick returns to ingenious toil, and breathless spurrings along short cuts to the goal, which we see everywhere around us, from the Mechanics' Institute to the Stock Market,- -beginning in education with the primers of infancy, deluging us with "Philosophies for the Million" and "Sciences made Easy;" characterizing the books of our writers, the speeches of our statesmen, no less than the dealings of our speculators,—seem, I confess, to me to constitute a very diseased and very general symptom of the times. I hold that the greatest friend to man is labour; that knowledge without toil, if possible, were worthless; that toil in pursuit of knowledge is the best knowledge we can attain; that the continuous effort for fame is nobler than fame itself; that it is not wealth suddenly acquired which is deserving of homage, but the virtues which a man exercises in the slow pursuit of wealth,—the abilities so called forth, the self-denials so imposed; in a word, that Labour and Patience are the true schoolmasters on earth. While occupied with these ideas and this belief, whether right or wrong, and slowly convinced that it was only in that species of composition with which I was most familiar that I could work out some portion of the plan that I began to contemplate, I became acquainted with the histories of two criminals existing in our own age,—so remarkable, whether from the extent and darkness of the guilt committed, whether from the glittering accomplishments and lively temper of the one, the profound knowledge and intellectual capacities of the other, that the examination and analysis of characters so perverted became a study full of intense, if gloomy, interest.

In these persons there appear to have been as few redeemable points as can be found in Human Nature, so far as such points may be traced in the kindly instincts and generous passions which do sometimes accompany the perpetration of great crimes, and, without excusing the individual, vindicate the species. Yet, on the other hand, their sanguinary wickedness was not the dull ferocity of brutes; it was accompanied with instruction and culture,—nay, it seemed to me, on studying their lives and pondering over their own letters, that through their cultivation itself we could arrive at the secret of the ruthless and atrocious pre-eminence in evil these Children of Night had attained; that here the monster vanished into the mortal, and the phenomena that seemed aberrations from Nature were explained.

I could not resist the temptation of reducing to a tale the materials which had so engrossed my interest and tasked my inquiries. And in this attempt, various incidental opportunities have occurred, if not of completely carrying out, still of incidentally illustrating, my earlier design,—of showing the influence of Mammon upon our most secret selves, of reproving the impatience which is engendered by a civilization that, with much of the good, brings all the evils of competition, and of tracing throughout, all the influences of early household life upon our subsequent conduct and career. In such incidental bearings the moral may doubtless be more obvious than in the delineation of the darker and rarer crime which forms the staple of my narrative. For in extraordinary guilt we are slow to recognize ordinary warnings,—we say to the peaceful conscience, "This concerns thee not!" whereas at each instance of familiar fault and commonplace error we own a direct and sensible admonition. Yet in the portraiture of gigantic crime, poets have rightly found their sphere and fulfilled their destiny of teachers. Those terrible truths which appall us in the guilt of Macbeth or the villany of Iago, have their moral uses not less than the popular infirmities of Tom Jones, or the every-day hypocrisy of Blifil. Incredible as it may seem, the crimes herein related took place within the last seventeen years. There has been no exaggeration as to their extent, no great departure from their details; the means employed, even that which seems most far- fetched,—the instrument of the poisoned ring,—have their foundation in literal facts. Nor have I much altered the social position of the criminals, nor in the least overrated their attainments and intelligence. In those more salient essentials which will most, perhaps, provoke the Reader's incredulous wonder, I narrate a history, not invent a fiction [These criminals were not, however, in actual life, as in the novel, intimates and accomplices. Their crimes were of similar character, effected by similar agencies, and committed at dates which embrace their several careers of guilt within the same period; but I have no authority to suppose that the one was known to the other.]. All that Romance which our own time affords is not more the romance than the philosophy of the time. Tragedy never quits the world,—it surrounds us everywhere. We have but to look, wakeful and vigilant, abroad, and from the age of Pelops to that of Borgia, the same crimes, though under different garbs, will stalk on our paths. Each age comprehends in itself specimens of every virtue and every vice which has ever inspired our love or mowed our horror.

LONDON, November 1, 1846.

PART THE FIRST

PROLOGUE TO PART THE FIRST

In an apartment at Paris, one morning during the Reign of Terror, a man, whose age might be somewhat under thirty, sat before a table covered with papers, arranged and labelled with the methodical precision of a mind fond of order and habituated to business. Behind him rose a tall bookcase surmounted with a bust of Robespierre, and the shelves were filled chiefly with works of a scientific character, amongst which the greater number were on chemistry and medicine. There were to be seen also many rare books on alchemy, the great Italian historians, some English philosophical treatises, and a few manuscripts in Arabic. The absence from this collection of the stormy literature of the day seemed to denote that the owner was a quiet student, living apart from the strife and passions of the Revolution. This supposition was, however, disproved by certain papers on the table, which were formally and laconically labelled "Reports on Lyons," and by packets of letters in the handwritings of Robespierre and Couthon. At one of the windows a young boy was earnestly engaged in some occupation which appeared to excite the curiosity of the person just described; for this last, after examining the child's movements for a few moments with a silent scrutiny that betrayed but little of the half-complacent, half-melancholy affection with which busy man is apt to regard childhood, rose noiselessly from his seat, approached the boy, and looked over his shoulder unobserved. In a crevice of the wood by the window, a huge black spider had formed his web; the child had just discovered another spider, and placed it in the meshes: he was watching the result of his operations. The intrusive spider stood motionless in the midst of the web, as if fascinated. The rightful possessor was also quiescent; but a very fine ear might have caught a low, humming sound, which probably augured no hospitable intentions to the invader. Anon, the stranger insect seemed suddenly to awake from its amaze; it evinced alarm, and turned to fly; the huge spider darted forward; the boy uttered a chuckle of delight. The man's pale lip curled into a sinister sneer, and he glided back to his seat. There, leaning his face on his hand, he continued to contemplate the child. That child might have furnished to an artist a fitting subject for fair and blooming infancy. His light hair, tinged deeply, it is true, with red, hung in sleek and glittering abundance down his neck and shoulders. His features, seen in profile, were delicately and almost femininely proportioned; health glowed on his cheek, and his form, slight though it was, gave promise of singular activity and vigour. His dress was fantastic, and betrayed the taste of some fondly foolish mother; but the fine linen, trimmed with lace, was rumpled and stained, the velvet jacket unbrushed, the shoes soiled with dust,—slight tokens these of neglect, but serving to show that the foolish fondness which had invented the dress had not of late presided over the toilet.

"Child," said the man, first in French; and observing that the boy heeded him not,—"child," he repeated in English, which he spoke well, though with a foreign accent, "child!"

The boy turned quickly.

"Has the great spider devoured the small one?"

"No, sir," said the boy, colouring; "the small one has had the best of it."

The tone and heightened complexion of the child seemed to give meaning to his words,—at least, so the man thought, for a slight frown passed over his high, thoughtful brow.

"Spiders, then," he said, after a short pause, "are different from men; with us, the small do not get the better of the great. Hum! do you still miss your mother?"

"Oh, yes!" and the boy advanced eagerly to the table.

"Well, you will see her once again."

"When?"

The man looked towards a clock on the mantelpiece, —"Before that clock strikes. Now, go back to your spiders." The child looked irresolute and disinclined to obey; but a stern and terrible expression gathered slowly over the man's face, and the boy, growing pale as he remarked it, crept back to the window.

The father—for such was the relation the owner of the room bore to the child—drew paper and ink towards him, and wrote for some minutes rapidly. Then starting up, he glanced at the clock, took his hat and cloak, which lay on a chair beside, drew up the collar of the mantle till it almost concealed his countenance, and said, "Now, boy, come with me; I have promised to show you an execution: I am going to keep my promise. Come!"

The boy clapped his hands with joy; and you might see then, child as he was, that those fair features were capable of a cruel and ferocious expression. The character of the whole face changed. He caught up his gay cap and plume, and followed his father into the streets.

Silently the two took their way towards the Barriere du Trone. At a distance they saw the crowd growing thick and dense as throng after throng hurried past them, and the dreadful guillotine rose high in the light blue air. As they came into the skirts of the mob, the father, for the first time, took his child's hand. "I must get you a good place for the show," he said, with a quiet smile.

There was something in the grave, staid, courteous, yet haughty bearing of the man that made the crowd give way as he passed. They got near the dismal scene, and obtained entrance into a wagon already crowded with eager spectators.

And now they heard at a distance the harsh and lumbering roll of the tumbril that bore the victims, and the tramp of the horses which guarded the procession of death. The boy's whole attention was absorbed in expectation of the spectacle, and his ear was perhaps less accustomed to French, though born and reared in France, than to the language of his mother's lips,—and she was English; thus he did not hear or heed certain observations of the bystanders, which made his father's pale cheek grow paler.

"What is the batch to-day?" quoth a butcher in the wagon. "Scarce worth the baking,—only two; but one, they say, is an aristocrat,—a ci-devant marquis," answered a carpenter. "Ah, a marquis! Bon! And the other?"

"Only a dancer, but a pretty one, it is true; I could pity her, but she is English." And as he pronounced the last word, with a tone of inexpressible contempt, the butcher spat, as if in nausea.

"Mort diable! a spy of Pitt's, no doubt. What did they discover?"

A man, better dressed than the rest, turned round with a smile, and answered: "Nothing worse than a lover, I believe; but that lover was a proscrit. The ci-devant marquis was caught disguised in her apartment. She betrayed for him a good, easy friend of the people who had long loved her, and revenge is sweet."

The man whom we have accompanied, nervously twitched up the collar of his cloak, and his compressed lips told that he felt the anguish of the laugh that circled round him.

"They are coming! There they are!" cried the boy, in ecstatic excitement.

"That's the way to bring up citizens," said the butcher, patting the child's shoulder, and opening a still better view for him at the edge of the wagon.

The crowd now abruptly gave way. The tumbril was in sight. A man, young and handsome, standing erect and with folded arms in the fatal vehicle, looked along the mob with an eye of careless scorn. Though he wore the dress of a workman, the most unpractised glance could detect, in his mien and bearing, one of the hated noblesse, whose characteristics came out even more forcibly at the hour of death. On the lip was that smile of gay and insolent levity, on the brow that gallant if reckless contempt of physical danger, which had signalized the hero-coxcombs of the old regime. Even the rude dress was worn with a certain air of foppery, and the bright hair was carefully adjusted, as if for the holiday of the headsman. As the eyes of the young noble wandered over the fierce faces of that horrible assembly, while a roar of hideous triumph answered the look, in which for the last time the gentilhomme spoke his scorn of the canaille, the child's father lowered the collar of his cloak, and slowly raised his hat from his brow. The eye of the marquis rested upon the countenance thus abruptly shown to him, and which suddenly became individualized amongst the crowd,—that eye instantly lost its calm contempt. A shudder passed visibly over his frame, and his cheek grew blanched with terror. The mob saw the change, but not the cause, and loud and louder rose their triumphant yell. The sound recalled the pride of the young noble; he started, lifted his crest erect, and sought again to meet the look which had appalled him. But he could no longer single it out among the crowd. Hat and cloak once more hid the face of the foe, and crowds of eager heads intercepted the view. The young marquis's lips muttered; he bent down, and then the crowd caught sight of his companion, who was being lifted up from the bottom of the tumbril, where she had flung herself in horror and despair. The crowd grew still in a moment as the pale face of one, familiar to most of them, turned wildly from place to place in the dreadful scene, vainly and madly through its silence imploring life and pity. How often had the sight of that face, not then pale and haggard, but wreathed with rosy smiles, sufficed to draw down the applause of the crowded theatre; how, then, had those breasts, now fevered by the thirst of blood, held hearts spellbound by the airy movements of that exquisite form writhing now in no stage-mime agony! Plaything of the city, minion to the light amusement of the hour, frail child of Cytherea and the Graces, what relentless fate has conducted thee to the shambles? Butterfly of the summer, why should a nation rise to break thee upon the wheel? A sense of the mockery of such an execution, of the horrible burlesque that would sacrifice to the necessities of a mighty people so slight an offering, made itself felt among the crowd. There was a low murmur of shame and indignation. The dangerous sympathy of the mob was perceived by the officer in attendance. Hastily he made the sign to the headsman, and as he did so, a child's cry was heard in the English tongue,—"Mother! Mother!" The father's hand grasped the child's arm with an iron pressure; the crowd swam before the boy's eyes; the air seemed to stifle him, and become blood-red; only through the hum and the tramp and the roll of the drums he heard a low voice hiss in his ear "Learn how they perish who betray me!"

As the father said these words, again his face was bare, and the woman, whose ear amidst the dull insanity of fear had caught the cry of her child's voice, saw that face, and fell back insensible in the arms of the headsman.

CHAPTER I

A FAMILY GROUP

One July evening, at the commencement of the present century, several persons were somewhat picturesquely grouped along an old-fashioned terrace which skirted the garden-side of a manor-house that had considerable pretensions to baronial dignity. The architecture was of the most enriched and elaborate style belonging to the reign of James the First: the porch, opening on the terrace, with its mullion window above, was encased with pilasters and reliefs at once ornamental and massive; and the large square tower in which it was placed was surmounted by a stone falcon, whose talons griped fiercely a scutcheon blazoned with the five-pointed stars which heralds recognize as the arms of St. John. On either side this tower extended long wings, the dark brickwork of which was relieved with noble stone casements and carved pediments; the high roof was partially concealed by a balustrade perforated not inelegantly into arabesque designs; and what architects call "the sky line" was broken with imposing effect by tall chimney-shafts of various form and fashion. These wings terminated in angular towers similar to the centre, though kept duly subordinate to it both in size and decoration, and crowned with stone cupolas. A low balustrade, of later date than that which adorned the roof, relieved by vases and statues, bordered the terrace, from which a double flight of steps descended to a smooth lawn, intersected by broad gravel-walks, shadowed by vast and stately cedars, and gently and gradually mingling with the wilder scenery of the park, from which it was only divided by a ha-ha.

Upon the terrace, and under cover of a temporary awning, sat the owner, Sir Miles St. John of Laughton, a comely old man, dressed with faithful precision to the costume which he had been taught to consider appropriate to his rank of gentleman, and which was not yet wholly obsolete and eccentric. His hair, still thick and luxuriant, was carefully powdered, and collected into a club behind; his nether man attired in gray breeches and pearl-coloured silk stockings; his vest of silk, opening wide at the breast, and showing a profusion of frill, slightly sprinkled with the pulvilio of his favourite Martinique; his three-cornered hat, placed on a stool at his side, with a gold-headed crutch-cane (hat made rather to be carried in the hand than worn on the head), the diamond in his shirt- breast, the diamond on his finger, the ruffles at his wrist,—all bespoke the gallant who had chatted with Lord Chesterfield and supped with Mrs. Clive. On a table before him were placed two or three decanters of wine, the fruits of the season, an enamelled snuff-box in which was set the portrait of a female (perhaps the Chloe or Phyllis of his early love-ditties), a lighted taper, a small china jar containing tobacco, and three or four pipes of homely clay,—for cherry-sticks and meerschaums were not then in fashion, and Sir Miles St. John, once a gay and sparkling beau, now a popular country gentleman, great at county meetings and sheep-shearing festivals, had taken to smoking, as in harmony with his bucolic transformation. An old setter lay dozing at his feet; a small spaniel—old, too—was sauntering lazily in the immediate neighbourhood, looking gravely out for such stray bits of biscuit as had been thrown forth to provoke him to exercise, and which hitherto had escaped his attention. Half seated, half reclined on the balustrade, apart from the baronet, but within reach of his conversation, lolled a man in the prime of life, with an air of unmistakable and sovereign elegance and distinction. Mr. Vernon was a guest from London; and the London man,—the man of clubs and dinners and routs, of noon loungings through Bond Street, and nights spent with the Prince of Wales,—seemed stamped not more upon the careful carelessness of his dress, and upon the worn expression of his delicate features, than upon the listless ennui, which, characterizing both his face and attitude, appeared to take pity on himself for having been entrapped into the country.

Yet we should convey an erroneous impression of Mr. Vernon if we designed, by the words "listless ennui," to depict the slumberous insipidity of more modern affectation; it was not the ennui of a man to whom ennui is habitual, it was rather the indolent prostration that fills up the intervals of excitement. At that day the word blast was unknown; men had not enough sentiment for satiety. There was a kind of Bacchanalian fury in the life led by those leaders of fashion, among whom Mr. Vernon was not the least distinguished; it was a day of deep drinking, of high play, of jovial, reckless dissipation, of strong appetite for fun and riot, of four-in-hand coachmanship, of prize- fighting, of a strange sort of barbarous manliness that strained every nerve of the constitution,—a race of life in which three fourths of the competitors died half-way in the hippodrome. What is now the Dandy was then the Buck; and something of the Buck, though subdued by a chaster taste than fell to the ordinary members of his class, was apparent in Mr. Vernon's costume as well as air. Intricate folds of muslin, arranged in prodigious bows and ends, formed the cravat, which Brummell had not yet arisen to reform; his hat, of a very peculiar shape, low at the crown and broad at the brim, was worn with an air of devil-me-care defiance; his watch-chain, garnished with a profusion of rings and seals, hung low from his white waistcoat; and the adaptation of his nankeen inexpressibles to his well-shaped limbs was a masterpiece of art. His whole dress and air was not what could properly be called foppish, it was rather what at that time was called "rakish." Few could so closely approach vulgarity without being vulgar: of that privileged few, Mr. Vernon was one of the elect.

Farther on, and near the steps descending into the garden, stood a man in an attitude of profound abstraction, his arms folded, his eyes bent on the ground, his brows slightly contracted; his dress was a plain black surtout, and pantaloons of the same colour. Something both in the fashion of the dress, and still more in the face of the man, bespoke the foreigner.

Sir Miles St. John was an accomplished person for that time of day. He had made the grand tour; he had bought pictures and statues; he spoke and wrote well in the modern languages; and being rich, hospitable, social, and not averse from the reputation of a patron, he had opened his house freely to the host of emigrants whom the French Revolution had driven to our coasts. Olivier Dalibard, a man of considerable learning and rare scientific attainments, had been tutor in the house of the Marquis de G——, a French nobleman known many years before to the old baronet. The marquis and his family had been among the first emigres at the outbreak of the Revolution. The tutor had remained behind; for at that time no danger appeared to threaten those who pretended to no other aristocracy than that of letters. Contrary, as he said, with repentant modesty, to his own inclinations, he had been compelled, not only for his own safety, but for that of his friends, to take some part in the subsequent events of the Revolution,—a part far from sincere, though so well had he simulated the patriot that he had won the personal favour and protection of Robespierre; nor till the fall of that virtuous exterminator had he withdrawn from the game of politics and effected in disguise his escape to England. As, whether from kindly or other motives, he had employed the power of his position in the esteem of Robespierre to save certain noble heads from the guillotine,—amongst others, the two brothers of the Marquis de G——, he was received with grateful welcome by his former patrons, who readily pardoned his career of Jacobinism from their belief in his excuses and their obligations to the services which that very career had enabled him to render to their kindred. Olivier Dalibard had accompanied the marquis and his family in one of the frequent visits they paid to Laughton; and when the marquis finally quitted England, and fixed his refuge at Vienna, with some connections of his wife's, he felt a lively satisfaction at the thought of leaving his friend honourably, if unambitiously, provided for as secretary and librarian to Sir Miles St. John. In fact, the scholar, who possessed considerable powers of fascination, had won no less favour with the English baronet than he had with the French dictator. He played well both at chess and backgammon; he was an extraordinary accountant; he had a variety of information upon all points that rendered him more convenient than any cyclopaedia in Sir Miles's library; and as he spoke both English and Italian with a correctness and fluency extremely rare in a Frenchman, he was of considerable service in teaching languages to, as well as directing the general literary education of, Sir Miles's favourite niece, whom we shall take an early opportunity to describe at length.

Nevertheless, there had been one serious obstacle to Dalibard's acceptance of the appointment offered to him by Sir Miles. Dalibard had under his charge a young orphan boy of some ten or twelve years old,—a boy whom Sir Miles was not long in suspecting to be the scholar's son. This child had come from France with Dalibard, and while the marquis's family were in London, remained under the eye and care of his guardian or father, whichever was the true connection between the two. But this superintendence became impossible if Dalibard settled in Hampshire with Sir Miles St. John, and the boy remained in London; nor, though the generous old gentleman offered to pay for the child's schooling, would Dalibard consent to part with him. At last the matter was arranged: the boy was invited to Laughton on a visit, and was so lively, yet so well mannered, that he became a favourite, and was now fairly quartered in the house with his reputed father; and not to make an unnecessary mystery of this connection, such was in truth the relationship between Olivier Dalibard and Honore Gabriel Varney,—a name significant of the double and illegitimate origin: a French father, an English mother. Dropping, however, the purely French appellation of Honore, he went familiarly by that of Gabriel. Half-way down the steps stood the lad, pencil and tablet in hand, sketching. Let us look over his shoulder: it is his father's likeness,—a countenance in itself not very remarkable at the first glance, for the features were small; but when examined, it was one that most persons, women especially, would have pronounced handsome, and to which none could deny the higher praise of thought and intellect. A native of Provence, with some Italian blood in his veins,—for his grandfather, a merchant of Marseilles, had married into a Florentine family settled at Leghorn,—the dark complexion common with those in the South had been subdued, probably by the habits of the student, into a bronze and steadfast paleness which seemed almost fair by the contrast of the dark hair which he wore unpowdered, and the still darker brows which hung thick and prominent over clear gray eyes. Compared with the features, the skull was disproportionally large, both behind and before; and a physiognomist would have drawn conclusions more favourable to the power than the tenderness of the Provencal's character from the compact closeness of the lips and the breadth and massiveness of the iron jaw. But the son's sketch exaggerated every feature, and gave to the expression a malignant and terrible irony not now, at least, apparent in the quiet and meditative aspect. Gabriel himself, as be stood, would have been a more tempting study to many an artist. It is true that he was small for his years; but his frame had a vigour in its light proportions which came from a premature and almost adolescent symmetry of shape and muscular development. The countenance, however, had much of effeminate beauty: the long hair reached the shoulders, but did not curl,—straight, fine, and glossy as a girl's, and in colour of the pale auburn, tinged with red, which rarely alters in hue as childhood matures to man; the complexion was dazzlingly clear and fair. Nevertheless, there was something so hard in the lip, so bold, though not open, in the brow, that the girlishness of complexion, and even of outline, could not leave, on the whole, an impression of effeminacy. All the hereditary keenness and intelligence were stamped upon his face at that moment; but the expression had also a large share of the very irony and malice which he had conveyed to his caricature. The drawing itself was wonderfully vigorous and distinct; showing great artistic promise, and done with the rapidity and ease which betrayed practice. Suddenly his father turned, and with as sudden a quickness the boy concealed his tablet in his vest; and the sinister expression of his face smoothed into a timorous smile as his eye encountered Dalibard's. The father beckoned to the boy, who approached with alacrity. "Gabriel," whispered the Frenchman, in his own tongue, "where are they at this moment?"

The boy pointed silently towards one of the cedars. Dalibard mused an instant, and then, slowly descending the steps, took his noiseless way over the smooth turf towards the tree. Its boughs drooped low and spread wide; and not till he was within a few paces of the spot could his eye perceive two forms seated on a bench under the dark green canopy. He then paused and contemplated them.

The one was a young man whose simple dress and subdued air strongly contrasted the artificial graces and the modish languor of Mr. Vernon; but though wholly without that nameless distinction which sometimes characterizes those conscious of pure race and habituated to the atmosphere of courts, he had at least Nature's stamp of aristocracy in a form eminently noble, and features of manly, but surpassing beauty, which were not rendered less engaging by an expression of modest timidity. He seemed to be listening with thoughtful respect to his companion, a young female by his side, who was speaking to him with an earnestness visible in her gestures and her animated countenance. And though there was much to notice in the various persons scattered over the scene, not one, perhaps,—not the graceful Vernon, not the thoughtful scholar, nor his fair-haired, hard-lipped son, not even the handsome listener she addressed,—no, not one there would so have arrested the eye, whether of a physiognomist or a casual observer, as that young girl, Sir Miles St. John's favourite niece and presumptive heiress.

But as at that moment the expression of her face differed from that habitual to it, we defer its description.

"Do not," such were her words to her companion,—"do not alarm yourself by exaggerating the difficulties; do not even contemplate them: those be my care. Mainwaring, when I loved you; when, seeing that your diffidence or your pride forbade you to be the first to speak, I overstepped the modesty or the dissimulation of my sex; when I said, 'Forget that I am the reputed heiress of Laughton, see in me but the faults and merits of the human being, of the wild unregulated girl, see in me but Lucretia Clavering'" (here her cheeks blushed, and her voice sank into a lower and more tremulous whisper) "'and love her if you can!'—when I went thus far, do not think I had not measured all the difficulties in the way of our union, and felt that I could surmount them."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.