

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

SANDRA

BELLONI,

VOLUME 6

George Meredith
Sandra Belloni. Volume 6

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George Meredith

Sandra Belloni – Volume 6

CHAPTER XL

Emilia stretched out her hand and said, "Good-bye." Seeing that the hardened girl, with her dead eyelids, did not appear to feel herself at his mercy, and also that Sir Purcell's forehead looked threatening, Mr. Pericles stopped his sardonic noise. He went straight to the door, which he opened with alacrity, and mimicking very wretchedly her words of adieu, stood prepared to bow her out. She astonished him by passing without another word. Before he could point a phrase bitter enough for expression, Sir Purcell had likewise passed, and in going had given him a quietly admonishing look.

"Zose Poles are beggars!" Mr. Pericles roared after them over the stairs, and slammed his door for emphasis. Almost immediately there was a knock at it. Mr. Pericles stood bent and cat-like as Sir Purcell reappeared. The latter, avoiding all preliminaries, demanded of the Greek that he should promise not to use the names of his friends publicly in such a manner again.

"I require a promise for the future. An apology will be needless from you."

"I shall not give it," said Mr. Pericles, with a sharp lift of his upper lip.

"But you will give me the promise I have returned for."

In answer Mr. Pericles announced that he had spoken what was simply true: that the prosperity of the Poles was fictitious: that he, or any unfavourable chance, could ruin them: and that their friends might do better to protect their interests than by menacing one who had them in his power.

Sir Purcell merely reiterated his demand for the promise, which was ultimately snarled to him; whereupon he retired, joy on his features. For, Cornelia poor, she might be claimed by him fearlessly: that is to say, without the fear of people whispering that the penniless baronet had sued for gold, and without the fear of her father rejecting his suit. At least he might, with this knowledge that he had gained, appoint to meet her now! All the morning Sir Purcell had been combative, owing to that subordinate or secondary post he occupied in a situation of some excitement;—which combativeness is one method whereby men thus placed, imagining that they are acting devotedly for their friends, contrive still to assert themselves. He descended to the foot of the stairs, where he had told Emilia to wait for him, full of kind feelings and ready cheerful counsels; as thus: "Nothing that we possess belongs to us;—All will come round rightly in the end; Be patient, look about for amusement, and improve your mind." And more of this copper coinage of wisdom in the way of proverbs. But Emilia was nowhere visible to receive the administration of comfort. Outside the house the fog appeared to have swallowed her. With some chagrin on her behalf (partly a sense of duty unfulfilled) Sir Purcell made his way to the residence of the Marinis, to report of her there, if she should not have arrived. The punishment he inflicted on himself in keeping his hand an hour from that letter to be written to Cornelia, was almost pleasing; and he was rewarded by it, for the projected sentences grew mellow and rich, condensed and throbbed eloquently. What wonder, that with such a mental occupation, he should pass Emilia and not notice her? She let him go.

But when he was out of sight, all seemed gone. The dimly-lighted city wore a look of Judgement terrible to see. Her brain was slave to her senses: she fancied she had dropped into an underground kingdom, among a mysterious people. The anguish through which action had just hurried her, now fell with a conscious weight upon her heart. She stood a moment, seeing her desolation stretch outwardly into endless labyrinths; and then it narrowed and took hold of her as a force within: changing thus, almost with each breathing of her body.

The fog had thickened. Up and down the groping city went muffled men, few women. Emilia looked for one of her sex who might have a tender face. Desire to be kissed and loved by a creature

strange to her, and to lay her head upon a woman's bosom, moved her to gaze around with a longing once or twice; but no eyes met hers, and the fancy recurred vividly that she was not in the world she had known. Otherwise, what had robbed her of her voice? She played with her fancy for comfort, long after any real vitality in it had oozed out. Her having strength to play at fancies showed that a spark of hope was alive. In truth, firm of flesh as she was, to believe that all worth had departed from her was impossible, and when she reposed simply on her sensations, very little trouble beset her: only when she looked abroad did the aspect of numerous indifferent faces, and the harsh flowing of the world its own way, tell her she had lost her power. Could it be lost? The prospect of her desolation grew so wide to her that she shut her eyes, abandoning herself to feeling; and this by degrees moved her to turn back and throw herself at the feet of Mr. Pericles. For, if he said, "Wait, my child, and all will come round well," she was prepared blindly to think so. The projection of the words in her mind made her ready to weep: but as she neared the house of his office the wish to hear him speak that, became passionate; she counted all that depended on it, and discovered the size of the fabric she had built on so thin a plank. After a while, her steps were mechanically swift. Before she reached the chambers of Mr. Pericles she had walked, she knew not why, once round the little quiet enclosed city-garden, and a cold memory of those men who had looked at her face gave her some wonder, to be quickly kindled into fuller comprehension.

Beholding Emilia once more, Mr. Pericles enjoyed a revival of his taste for vengeance; but, unhappily for her, he found it languid, and when he had rubbed his hands, stared, and by sundry sharp utterances brought her to his feet, his satisfaction was less poignant than he had expected. As a consequence, instead of speaking outrageously, according to his habit, in wrath, he was now frigidly considerate, informing Emilia that it would be good for her if she were dead, seeing that she was of no use whatever; but, as she was alive, she had better go to her father and mother, and learn knitting, or some such industrial employment. "Unless zat man for whom you play fool!—" Mr. Pericles shrugged the rest of his meaning.

"But my voice may not be gone," urged Emilia. "I may sing to you to-morrow—this evening. It must be the fog. Why do you think it lost? It can't be—"

"Cracked!" cried Mr. Pericles.

"It is not! No; do not think it. I may stay here. Don't tell me to go yet. The streets make me wish to die. And I feel I may, perhaps, sing presently. Wait. Will you wait?"

A hideous imitation of her lamentable tones burst from Mr. Pericles.

"Cracked!" he cried again.

Emilia lifted her eyes, and looked at him steadily. She saw the idea grow in the eyes fronting her that she had a pleasant face, and she at once staked this little bit of newly-conceived worth on an immediate chance. Remember; that she was as near despair as a creature constituted so healthily could go. Speaking no longer in a girlish style, but with the grave pleading manner of a woman, she begged Mr. Pericles to take her to Italy, and have faith in the recovery of her voice. He, however, far from being softened, as he grew aware of her sweetness of feature, waxed violent and insulting.

"Take me," she said. "My voice will reward you. I feel that you can cure it."

"For zat man! to go to him again!" Mr. Pericles sneered.

"I never shall do that." There sprang a glitter as of steel in Emilia's eyes. "I will make myself yours for life, if you like. Take my hand, and let me swear. I do not break my word. I will swear, that if I recover my voice to become what you expected,—I will marry you whenever you ask me, and then—"

More she was saying, but Mr. Pericles, sputtering a laugh of "Sanks!" presented a postured supplication for silence.

"I am not a man who marries."

He plainly stated the relations that the woman whom he had distinguished by the honours of selection must hold toward him.

Emilia's cheeks did not redden; but, without any notion of shame at the words she listened to, she felt herself falling lower and lower the more her spirit clung to Mr. Pericles: yet he alone was her visible personification of hope, and she could not turn from him. If he cast her off, it seemed to her that her voice was condemned. She stood there still, and the cold-eyed Greek formed his opinion.

He was evidently undecided as regards his own course of proceeding, for his chin was pressed by thumb and forefinger hard into his throat, while his eyebrows were wrinkled up to their highest elevation. From this attitude, expressive of the accurate balancing of the claims of an internal debate, he emerged into the posture of a cock crowing, and Emilia heard again his bitter mimicry of her miserable broken tones, followed by Ha! dam! Basta! basta!"

"Sit here," cried Mr. Pericles. He had thrown himself into a chair, and pointed to his knee.

Emilia remained where she was standing.

He caught at her hand, but she plucked that from him. Mr. Pericles rose, sounding a cynical "Hein!"

"Don't touch me," said Emilia.

Nothing exasperates certain natures so much as the effort of the visibly weak to intimidate them.

"I shall not touch you?" Mr. Pericles sneered. "Zen, why are you here?"

"I came to my friend," was Emilia's reply.

"Your friend! He is not ze friend of a couac-couac. Once, if you please: but now" (Mr. Pericles shrugged), "now you are like ze rest of women. You are game. Come to me."

He caught once more at her hand, which she lifted; then at her elbow.

"Will you touch me when I tell you not to?"

There was the soft line of an involuntary frown over her white face, and as he held her arm from the doubled elbow, with her clenched hand aloft, she appeared ready to strike a tragic blow.

Anger and every other sentiment vanished from Mr. Pericles in the rapturous contemplation of her admirable artistic pose.

"Mon Dieu! and wiz a voice!" he exclaimed, dashing his fist in a delirium of forgetfulness against the one plastered lock of hair on his shining head. "Little fool! little dam fool!—zat might have been"—(Mr. Pericles figured in air with his fingers to signify the exaltation she was to have attained)—"Mon Dieu! and look at you! Did I not warn you? non a vero? Did I not say 'Ruin, ruin, if you go so? For a man!—a voice! You will not come to me? Zen, hear! you shall go to old Belloni. I do not want you, my pretty dear. Woman is a trouble, a drug. You shall go to old Belloni; and, crack! if ze voice will come back to a whip,—bravo, old Belloni!"

Mr. Pericles turned to reach down his hat from a peg. At the same instant Emilia quitted the room.

Dusk was deepening the yellow atmosphere, and the crowd was now steadily flowing in one direction. The bereaved creature went with the stream, glad to be surrounded and unseen, till it struck her, at last, that she was moving homeward. She stopped with a pang of grief, turned, and met all those people to whom the fireside was a beacon. For some time she bore against the pressure, but her loneliness overwhelmed her. None seemed to go her way. For a refuge, she turned into one of the city side streets, where she was quite alone. Unhappily, the street was of no length, and she soon came to the end of it. There was the choice of retracing her steps, or entering a strange street; and while she hesitated a troop of sheep went by, that made a piteous noise. She followed them, thinking curiously of the something broken that appeared to be in their throats. By-and-by, the thought flashed in her that they were going to be slaughtered. She held her step, looking at them, but without any tender movement of the heart. They came to a butcher's yard, and went in.

When she had passed along a certain distance, a shiver seized her, and her instinct pushed her toward the lighted shops, where there were pictures. In one she saw the portrait of that Queen of Song whom she had heard at Besworth. Two young men, glancing as they walked by arm in arm, pronounced the name of the great enchantress, and hummed one of her triumphant airs. The features

expressed health, humour, power, every fine animal faculty. Genius was on the forehead and the plastic mouth; the forehead being well projected, fair, and very shapely, showing clear balance, as well as capacity to grasp flame, and fling it. The line reaching to a dimple from the upper lip was saved from scornfulness by the lovely gleam, half-challenging, half-consoling, regal, roguish—what you would—that sat between her dark eyelashes, like white sunlight on the fringed smooth roll of water by a weir. Such a dimple, and such a gleam of eyes, would have been keys to the face of a weakling, and it was the more fascinating from the disregard of any minor charm notable upon this grand visage, which could not suffer a betrayal. You saw, and there was no effort to conceal, that the spirit animating it was intensely human; but it was human of the highest chords of humanity, indifferent to finesse and despising subtleties; gifted to speak, to inspire, and to command all great emotions. In fact, it was the masque of a dramatic artist in repose. Tempered by beauty, the robust frame showed that she possessed a royal nature, and could, as a foremost qualification for Art, feel harmoniously. She might have many of the littlenesses of which women are accused; for Art she promised unspotted excellence; and, adorable as she was by attraction of her sex, she was artist over all.

Emilia found herself on one of the bridges, thinking of this aspect. Beneath her was the stealing river, with its red intervals, and the fog had got a wider circle. She could not disengage that face from her mind. It seemed to say to her, boldly, "I live because success is mine;" and to hint, as with a paler voice, "Death the fruit of failure." Could she, Emilia, ever be looked on again by her friends? The dread of it gave her shudders. Then, death was certainly easy! But death took no form in her imagination, as it does to one seeking it. She desired to forget and to hide her intolerable losses; to have the impostor she felt herself to be buried. As she walked along she held out her hands, murmuring, "Helpless! useless!" It came upon her as a surprise that one like herself should be allowed to live. "I don't want to," she said; and the next moment, "I wonder what a drowned woman is like?" She hurried back to the streets and the shops. The shops failed now to give her distraction, for a stiff and dripping image floated across all the windows, and she was glad to see the shutters being closed; though, when the streets were dark, some friendliness seemed to have gone. When the streets were quite dark, save for the row of lamps, she walked fast, fearing she knew not what.

A little Italian boy sat doubled over his organ on a doorstep, while a yet smaller girl at his elbow plied him with questions in English. Emilia stopped before them, and the girl complained to her that the perverse little foreigner would not answer. Two or three words in his native tongue soon brought his face to view. Emilia sat down between them, and listened to the prattle of two languages. The girl said that she never had supper, which was also the case with the boy; so Emilia felt for her purse, and sent the girl with sixpence in search of a shop that sold cafes. The girl came back with her apron full. As they were all about to eat, a policeman commanded them to quit the spot, informing them that he knew both them and their dodges. Emilia stood up, and was taking her little people away, when the policeman, having suddenly changed his accurate opinion of her, said, "You're giving 'em some supper, miss? Oh, they must sit down to their suppers, you know!" and walked away, not to be a witness of this infraction of the law. So, they sat down and ate, and the boy and girl tried to say intelligible things to one another, and laughed. Emilia could not help joining in their laughter. The girl was very anxious to know whether the boy was ever beaten, and hearing that he was, she appeared better satisfied, remarking that she was also, but curious still as to the different forms of chastisement they received. This being partially explained, she wished to know whether he would be beaten that night, Emilia interpreting. A grin, and a rapid whistle and 'cluck,' significant of the application of whips, told the state of his expectations; at which the girl clapped her hands, adding, lamentably, "So shall I, 'cause I am always." Emilia gathered them under each shoulder, when, to her delight and half perplexity, they closed their eyes, leaning against her.

The policeman passed, and for an hour endured this spectacle. At last he felt compelled to explain to Emilia what were the sentiments of gentlefolks with regard to their doorsteps, apart from the law of the matter. He put it to her human nature whether she would like her doorsteps to be

blocked, so that no one could enter, and anyone emerging stood a chance of being precipitated, nose foremost, upon the pavement. Then, again, as gentle-folks had good experience of, the young ones in London were twice as cunning as the old. Emilia pleaded for her sleeping pair, that they might not be disturbed. Her voice gave the keeper of the peace notions of her being one of the eccentric young ladies who are occasionally 'missing,' and have advertizing friends. He uttered a stern *ahem!* preliminary to assent; but the noise wakened the children, who stared, and readily obeyed his gesture, which said, "Be off!" while his words were those of remonstrance. Emilia accompanied them a little way. Both promised eagerly that they would be at the same place the night following and departed—the boy with laughing nods and waving of hands, which the girl imitated. Emilia's feeling of security went with them. She at once feigned a destination in the distance, and set forward to reach it, but the continued exposure of this delusion made it difficult to renew. She fell to counting the hours that were to elapse before she would meet those children, saying to herself, that whatever she did she must keep her engagement to be at the appointed steps. This restriction set her darkly fancying that she wished for her end.

Remembering those men who had looked at her admiringly, "Am I worth looking at?" she said; and it gave her some pleasure to think that she had it still in her power to destroy a thing of value. She was savagely ashamed of going to death empty-handed. By-and-by, great fatigue stiffened her limbs, and she sat down from pure want of rest. The luxury of rest and soothing languor kept hard thoughts away. She felt as if floating, for a space. The fear of the streets left her. But when necessity for rest had gone, she clung to the luxury still, and sitting bent forward, with her hands about her knees, she began to brood over tumbled images of a wrong done to her. She had two distinct visions of herself, constantly alternating and acting like the temptation of two devils. One represented her despicable in feature, and bade her die; the other showed a fair face, feeling which to be her own, Emilia had fits of intolerable rage. This vision prevailed; and this wicked side of her humanity saved her. Active despair is a passion that must be superseded by a passion. Passive despair comes later; it has nothing to do with mental action, and is mainly a corruption or degradation of our blood. The rage in Emilia was blind at first, but it rose like a hawk, and singled its enemy. She fixed her mind to conceive the foolishness of putting out a face that her rival might envy, and of destroying anything that had value. The flattery of beauty came on her like a warm garment. When she opened her eyes, seeing what she was and where, she almost smiled at the silly picture that had given her comfort. Those men had looked on her admiringly, it was true, but would Wilfrid have ceased to love her if she had been beautiful? An extraordinary intuition of Wilfrid's sentiment tormented her now. She saw herself in the light that he would have seen her by, till she stood with the sensations of an exposed criminal in the dark length of the street, and hurried down it, back, as well as she could find her way, to the friendly policeman.

Her question on reaching him, "Are you married?" was prodigiously astonishing, and he administered the rebuff of an affirmative with severity. "Then," said Emilia, "when you go home, let me go with you to your wife. Perhaps she will consent to take care of me for this night." The policeman coughed mildly and replied, "It's plain you know nothing of women—begging your pardon, miss,—for I can see you're a lady." Emilia repeated her petition, and the policeman explained the nature of women. Not to be baffled, Emilia said, "I think your wife must be a good woman." Hereat the policeman laughed, arming "that the best of them knew what bad suspicions was." Ultimately, he consented to take her to his wife, when he was relieved, after the term of so many minutes. Emilia stood at a distance, speculating on the possible choice he would make of a tune to accompany his monotonous walk to and fro, and on the certainty of his wearing any tune to nothing.

She was in a bed, sleeping heavily, a little before dawn.

The day that followed was her day of misery. The blow that had stunned her had become as a loud intrusive pulse in her head. By this new daylight she fathomed the depth, and reckoned the value, of her loss. And her senses had no pleasure in the light, though there was sunshine. The woman

who was her hostess was kind, but full of her first surprise at the strange visit, and too openly ready for any information the young lady might be willing to give with regard to her condition, prospects, and wishes. Emilia gave none. She took the woman's hand, asking permission to remain under her protection. The woman by-and-by named a sum of money as a sum for weekly payment, and Emilia transferred all to her that she had. The policeman and his wife thought her, though reasonable, a trifle insane. She sat at a window for hours watching a 'last man' of the fly species walking up and plunging down a pane of glass. On this transparent solitary field for the most objectless enterprise ever undertaken, he buzzed angrily at times, as if he had another meaning in him, which was being wilfully misinterpreted. Then he mounted again at his leisure, to pitch backward as before. Emilia found herself thinking with great seriousness that it was not wonderful for boys to be always teasing and killing flies, whose thin necks and bobbing heads themselves suggested the idea of decapitation. She said to her hostess: "I don't like flies. They seem never to sing but when they are bothered." The woman replied: "Ah, indeed?" very smoothly, and thought: "If you was to bust out now, which of us two would be strongest?" Emilia grew distantly aware that the policeman and his wife talked of her and watched her with combined observation.

When it was night she went to keep her appointment. The girl was there, but the boy came late. He said he had earned only a few pence that day, and would be beaten. He spoke in a whimpering tone which caused the girl to desire a translation of his words. Emilia told her how things were with him, and the girl expressed a wish that she had an organ, as in that case she would be sure to earn more than sixpence a day; such being the amount that procured her nightly a comfortable reception in the arms of her parents. "Do you like music?" said Emilia. The girl replied that she liked organs; but, as if to avoid committing an injustice, cited parrots as foremost in her affections. Holding them both to her breast, Emilia thought that she would rescue them from this beating by giving them the money they had to offer for kindness: but the restlessness of the children suddenly made her a third party to the thought of cakes. She had no money. Her heart bled for the poor little hungry, apprehensive creatures. For a moment she half fancied she had her voice, and looked up at the windows of the pitiless houses with a bold look; but there was a speedy mockery of her thought "You shall listen: you shall open!" She coughed hoarsely, and then fell into fits of crying. Her friend the policeman came by and took her arm with a force that he meant to be persuasive; so lifting her and handing her some steps beyond the limit of his beat, with stern directions for her to proceed home immediately. She obeyed. Next day she asked her hostess to lend her half-a-crown. The woman snapped shortly in answer: "No; the less you have the better." Emilia was obliged to abandon her little people.

She was to this extent the creature of mania: that she could not conceive of a way being open by which she might return to her father and mother, or any of her friends. It was to her not a matter for her will to decide upon, but simply a black door shut that nothing could displace. When the week, for which term of shelter she had paid, was ended, her hostess spoke upon this point, saying, more to convince Emilia of the necessity for seeking her friends than from any unkindness: "Me and my husband can't go on keepin' you, you know, my dear, however well's our meaning." Emilia drew the woman toward her with both her hands, softly shaking her head. She left the house about noon.

It was now her belief that she had probably no more than another day to live, for she was destitute of money. The thought relieved her from that dreadful fear of the street, and she walked at her own pace, even after dark. The rumble and the rattle of wheels; the cries and grinding noises; the hum of motion and talk; all under the lingering smoky red of a London Winter sunset, were not discord to her animated blood. Her un hunted spirit made a music of them. It was not like the music of other days, nor was the exultation it created at all like happiness: but she at least forgot herself. Voices came in her ear, and hung unheard until long after the speaker had passed. Hunger did not assail her. She was not beset by an animal weakness; and having in her mind no image of death, and with her ties to life cut away;—thus devoid of apprehension or regret, she was what her quick blood made her, for the time. She recognized that, for one near extinction, it was useless to love or to hate:

so Wilfrid and Lady Charlotte were spared. Emilia thought of them both with a sort of equanimity; not that any clear thought filled her brain through that delirious night. The intoxicating music raged there at one level depression, never rising any scale, never undulating ever so little, scarcely changing its barbarous monotony of notes. She had no power over it. Her critical judgement would at another moment have shrieked at it. She was moved by it as by a mechanical force.

The South-west wind blew, and the hours of the night were not evil to outcasts. Emilia saw many lying about, getting rest where they might. She hurried her eye pityingly over little children, but the devil that had seized her sprang contempt for the others—older beggars, who appeared to succumb to their fate when they should have lifted their heads up bravely. On she passed from square to market, market to park; and presently her mind shot an arrow of desire for morning, which was nothing less than hunger beginning to stir. "When will the shops open?" She tried to cheat herself by replying that she did not care when, but pangs of torment became too rapid for the counterfeit. Her imagination raised the roof from those great rich houses, and laid bare a brilliancy of dish-covers; and if any sharp gust of air touched the nerve in her nostril, it seemed instantaneously charged with the smell of old dinners. "No," cried Emilia, "I dislike anything but plain food." She quickly gave way, and admitted a craving for dainty morsels. "One lump of sugar!" she subsequently sighed. But neither sugar nor meat approached her.

Her seat was under trees, between a man and a woman who slanted from her with hidden chins. The chilly dry leaves began to waken, and the sky showed its grey. Hunger had become as a leaden ball in Emilia's chest. She could have eaten eagerly still, but she had no ravenous images of food. Nevertheless, she determined to beg for bread at a baker's shop. Coming into the empty streets again, the dread of exposing her solitary wretchedness and the stains of night upon her, kept her back. When she did venture near the baker's shop, her sensation of weariness, want of washing, and general misery, made her feel a contrast to all other women she saw, that robbed her of the necessary effrontery. She preferred to hide her head.

The morning hours went in this conflict. She was between-whiles hungry and desperate, or stricken with shame. Fatigue, bringing the imperious necessity for rest, intervened as a relief. Emilia moaned at the weary length of the light, but when dusk fell and she beheld flame in the lamps, it seemed to be too sudden and she was alarmed. Passive despair had set in. She felt sick, though not weak, and the thought of asking help had gone.

A street urchin, of the true London species, in whom excess of woollen comforter made up for any marked scantiness in the rest of his attire, came trotting the pavement, pouring one of the favourite tunes of his native metropolis through the tube of a penny-whistle, from which it did not issue so disguised but that attentive ears might pronounce it the royal march of the Cannibal Islands. A placarded post beside a lamp met this musician's eye; and, still piping, he bent his knees and read the notification. Emilia thought of the Hillford and Ipley clubmen, the big drum, the speeches, the cheers, and all the wild strength that lay in her that happy morning. She watched the boy piping as if he were reading from a score, and her sense of humour was touched. "You foolish boy!" she said to herself softly. But when, having evidently come to the last printed line, the boy rose and pocketed his penny-whistle, Emilia was nearly laughing. "That's because he cannot turn over the leaf," she said, and stood by the post till long after the boy had disappeared. The slight emotion of fun had restored to her some of her lost human sensations, and she looked about for a place where to indulge them undisturbed. One of the bridges was in sight She yearned for the solitude of the wharf beside it, and hurried to the steps. To descend she had to pass a street-organ and a small figure bent over it. "Sei buon' Italiano?" she said. The answer was a surly "Si." Emilia cried convulsively "Addio!" Her brain had become on a sudden vacant of a thought, and all she knew was that she descended.

CHAPTER XLI

"Sei buon' Italiana?"

Across what chasm did the words come to her?

It seemed but a minutes and again many hours back, that she had asked that question of a little fellow, who, if he had looked up and nodded would have given her great joy, but who kept his face dark from her and with a sullen "Si" extinguished her last feeling of a desire for companionship with life.

"Si," she replied, quite as sullenly, and without looking up.

But when her hand was taken and other words were uttered, she that had crouched there so long between death and life immovable, loving neither, rose possessed of a passion for the darkness and the void, and struggling bitterly with the detaining hand, crying for instant death. No strength was in her to support the fury.

"Merthyr Powys is with you," said her friend, "and will never leave you."

"Will never take me up there?" Emilia pointed to the noisy level above them.

"Listen, and I will tell you how I have found you," replied Merthyr.

"Don't force me to go up."

She spoke from the end of her breath. Merthyr feared that it was more than misery, even madness, afflicting her. He sat on the wharf-bench silent till she was reassured. But at his first words, the eager question came: "You will not force me to go up there?"

"No; we can stay and talk here," said Merthyr. "And this is how I have found you. Do you suppose you have been hidden from us all this time? Perhaps you fancy you do not belong to your friends? Well, I spoke to all of your 'children,' as you used to call them. Do you remember? The day before yesterday two had seen you. You said to one, 'From Savoy or Piedmont?' He said, 'From Savoy;' and you shook your head: 'Not looking on Italy!' you said. This night I roused one of them, and he stretched his finger down the steps, saying that you had gone down there. 'Sei buon' Italiano?' you said. "And that is how I have found you. Sei buon' Italiana?"

Emilia let her hand rest in Merthyr's, wondering to think that there should be no absolute darkness for a creature to escape into while living. A trembling came on her. "Let me look over at the water," she said; and Merthyr, who trusted her even in that extremity, allowed her to lean forward, and felt her grasp grow moist in his, till she turned back with shudders, giving him both her hands. "A drowned woman looks so dreadful!" Her speech was faint as she begged to be taken away from that place. Merthyr put his hand to her arm-pit, sustaining her steps. As they neared the level where men were, she looked behind her and realized the black terrors she had just been blindly handling. Fright sped her limbs for a second or two, and then her whole weight hung upon Merthyr. He held her in both arms, thinking that she had swooned, but she murmured: "Have you heard that my voice has gone?"

"If you have suffered, I do not wonder," he said.

"I am useless. My voice is dead."

"Useless to your friends? Tush, my little Emilia! Sandra mia! Don't you know that while you love your friends that's all they want of you?"

"Oh!" she moaned; "the gas-lamp hurts me. What a noise there is!"

"We shall soon get away from the noise."

"No; I like it; but not the light. Oh, my feet!—why are you walking still? What friends?"

"For instance, myself."

"You knew of my wandering about London! It makes me believe in heaven.

I can't bear to think of being unseen."

"This morning," said Merthyr, "I saw the policeman in whose house you have been staying."

Emilia bowed her head to the mystery by which this friend was endowed to be cognizant of her actions. "I feel that I have not seen the streets for years. If it were not for you I should fall down.— Oh! do you understand that my voice has quite gone?"

Merthyr perceived her anxiety to be that she might not betaken on doubtful terms. "Your hand hasn't," he said, pressing it, and so gratified her with a concrete image of something that she could still bestow upon a friend. To this she clung while the noisy wheels bore her through London, till her weak body failed to keep courage in her breast, and she wept and came closer to Merthyr. He who supposed that her recent despair and present tears were for the loss of her lover, gave happily more comfort than he took. "When old gentlemen choose to interest themselves about very young ladies," he called upon his humorous philosophy to observe internally, as men do to forestall the possible cynic external;—and the rest of the sentence was acted under his eyes by the figures of three persons. But, there she was, lying within his arm, rescued, the creature whom he had found filling his heart, when lost, and whom he thought one of the most hopeful of the women of earth! He thanked God for bare facts. She lay against him with her eyelids softly joined, and as he felt the breathing of her body, he marvelled to think how matter-of-fact they had both been on the brink of a tragedy, and how naturally she had, as it were, argued herself up to the gates of death. For want of what? "My sister may supply it," thought Merthyr.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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