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Содержание

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
Lucretia — Volume 06

CHAPTER XVIII

RETROSPECT

We have now arrived at that stage in this history when it is necessary to look back on the interval in Lucretia's life,—between the death of Dalibard, and her reintroduction in the second portion of our tale.

One day, without previous notice or warning, Lucretia arrived at William Mainwaring's house; she was in the deep weeds of widowhood, and that garb of mourning sufficed to add Susan's tenderest commiseration to the warmth of her affectionate welcome. Lucretia appeared to have forgiven the past, and to have conquered its more painful recollections; she was gentle to Susan, though she rather suffered than returned her caresses; she was open and frank to William. Both felt inexpressibly grateful for her visit, the forgiveness it betokened, and the confidence it implied. At this time no condition could be more promising and prosperous than that of the young banker. From the first the most active partner in the bank, he had now virtually almost monopolized the business. The senior partner was old and infirm; the second had a bucolic turn, and was much taken up by the care of a large farm he had recently purchased; so that Mainwaring, more and more trusted and honoured, became the sole managing administrator of the firm. Business throve in his able hands; and with patient and steady perseverance there was little doubt but that, before middle age was attained, his competence would have swelled into a fortune sufficient to justify him in realizing the secret dream of his heart,— the parliamentary representation of the town, in which he had already secured the affection and esteem of the inhabitants.

It was not long before Lucretia detected the ambition William's industry but partially concealed; it was not long before, with the ascendency natural to her will and her talents, she began to exercise considerable, though unconscious, influence over a man in whom a thousand good qualities and some great talents were unhappily accompanied by infirm purpose and weak resolutions. The ordinary conversation of Lucretia unsettled his mind and inflamed his vanity,—a conversation able, aspiring, full both of knowledge drawn from books and of that experience of public men which her residence in Paris (whereon, with its new and greater Charlemagne, the eyes of the world were turned) had added to her acquisitions in the lore of human life. Nothing more disturbs a mind like William Mainwaring's than that species of eloquence which rebukes its patience in the present by inflaming all its hopes in the future. Lucretia had none of the charming babble of women, none of that tender interest in household details, in the minutiae of domestic life, which relaxes the intellect while softening the heart. Hard and vigorous, her sentences came forth in eternal appeal to the reason, or address to the sterner passions in which love has no share. Beside this strong thinker, poor Susan's sweet talk seemed frivolous and inane. Her soft hold upon Mainwaring loosened. He ceased to consult her upon business; he began to repine that the partner of his lot could have little sympathy with his dreams. More often and more bitterly now did his discontented glance, in his way homeward, rove to the rooftops of the rural member for the town; more eagerly did he read the parliamentary debates; more heavily did he sigh at the thought of eloquence denied a vent, and ambition delayed in its career.

When arrived at this state of mind, Lucretia's conversation took a more worldly, a more practical turn. Her knowledge of the speculators of Paris instructed her pictures of bold ingenuity creating sudden wealth; she spoke of fortunes made in a day,—of parvenus bursting into

millionnaires; of wealth as the necessary instrument of ambition, as the arch ruler of the civilized world. Never once, be it observed, in these temptations, did Lucretia address herself to the heart; the ordinary channels of vulgar seduction were disdained by her. She would not have stooped so low as Mainwaring's love, could she have commanded or allured it; she was willing to leave to Susan the husband reft from her own passionate youth, but leave him with the brand on his brow and the worm at his heart,—a scoff and a wreck.

At this time there was in that market-town one of those adventurous, speculative men, who are the more dangerous impostors because imposed upon by their own sanguine chimeras, who have a plausibility in their calculations, an earnestness in their arguments, which account for the dupes they daily make in our most sober and wary of civilized communities. Unscrupulous in their means, yet really honest in the belief that their objects can be attained, they are at once the rogues and fanatics of Mammon. This person was held to have been fortunate in some adroit speculations in the corn trade, and he was brought too frequently into business with Mainwaring not to be a frequent visitor at the house. In him Lucretia saw the very instrument of her design. She led him on to talk of business as a game, of money as a realizer of cent per cent; she drew him into details, she praised him, she admired. In his presence she seemed only to hear him; in his absence, musingly, she started from silence to exclaim on the acuteness of his genius and the accuracy of his figures. Soon the tempter at Mainwaring's heart gave signification to these praises, soon this adventurer became his most intimate friend. Scarcely knowing why, never ascribing the change to her sister, poor Susan wept, amazed at Mainwaring's transformation. No care now for the new books from London, or the roses in the garden; the music on the instrument was unheeded. Books, roses, music,—what are those trifles to a man thinking upon cent per cent? Mainwaring's very countenance altered; it lost its frank, affectionate beauty: sullen, abstracted, morose, it showed that some great care was at the core. Then Lucretia herself began grievingly to notice the change to Susan; gradually she altered her tone with regard to the speculator, and hinted vague fears, and urged Susan's remonstrance and warning. As she had anticipated, warning and remonstrance came in vain to the man who, comparing Lucretia's mental power to Susan's, had learned to despise the unlearned, timid sense of the latter.

It is unnecessary to trace this change in Mainwaring step by step, or to measure the time which sufficed to dazzle his reason and blind his honour. In the midst of schemes and hopes which the lust of gold now pervaded came a thunderbolt. An anonymous letter to the head partner of the bank provoked suspicions that led to minute examination of the accounts. It seemed that sums had been irregularly advanced (upon bills drawn by men of straw) to the speculator by Mainwaring; and the destination of these sums could be traced to gambling operations in trade in which Mainwaring had a private interest and partnership. So great, as we have said, had been the confidence placed in William's abilities and honour that the facilities afforded him in the disposal of the joint stock far exceeded those usually granted to the partner of a firm, and the breach of trust appeared the more flagrant from the extent of the confidence misplaced. Meanwhile, William Mainwaring, though as yet unconscious of the proceedings of his partners, was gnawed by anxiety and remorse, not unmixed with hope. He depended upon the result of a bold speculation in the purchase of shares in a Canal Company, a bill for which was then before parliament, with (as he was led to believe) a certainty of success. The sums he had, on his own responsibility, abstracted from the joint account were devoted to this adventure. But, to do him justice, he never dreamed of appropriating the profits anticipated to himself. Though knowing that the bills on which the moneys had been advanced were merely nominal deposits, he had confidently calculated on the certainty of success for the speculations to which the proceeds so obtained were devoted, and he looked forward to the moment when he might avow what he had done, and justify it by doubling the capital withdrawn. But to his inconceivable horror, the bill of the Canal Company was rejected in the Lords; the shares bought at a premium went down to zero; and to add to his perplexity, the speculator abruptly disappeared from the town. In this crisis he was summoned to meet his indignant associates.

The evidence against him was morally damning, if not legally conclusive. The unhappy man heard all in the silence of despair. Crushed and bewildered, he attempted no defence. He asked but an hour to sum up the losses of the bank and his own; they amounted within a few hundreds to the 10,000 pounds he had brought to the firm, and which, in the absence of marriage-settlements, was entirely at his own disposal. This sum he at once resigned to his associates, on condition that they should defray from it his personal liabilities. The money thus repaid, his partners naturally relinquished all further inquiry. They were moved by pity for one so gifted and so fallen,—they even offered him a subordinate but lucrative situation in the firm in which he had been partner; but Mainwaring wanted the patience and resolution to work back the redemption of his name,—perhaps, ultimately, of his fortunes. In the fatal anguish of his shame and despair, he fled from the town; his flight confirmed forever the rumours against him,—rumours worse than the reality. It was long before he even admitted Susan to the knowledge of the obscure refuge he had sought; there, at length, she joined him. Meanwhile, what did Lucretia? She sold nearly half of her own fortune, constituted principally of the moiety of her portion which, at Dalibard's death, had passed to herself as survivor, and partly of the share in her deceased husband's effects which the French law awarded to her, and with the proceeds of this sum she purchased an annuity for her victims. Was this strange generosity the act of mercy, the result of repentance? No; it was one of the not least subtle and delicious refinements of her revenge. To know him who had rejected her, the rival who had supplanted, the miserable pensioners of her bounty, was dear to her haughty and disdainful hate. The lust of power, ever stronger in her than avarice, more than reconciled her to the sacrifice of gold. Yes, here she, the despised, the degraded, had power still; her wrath had ruined the fortunes of her victim, blasted the repute, embittered and desolated evermore the future,—now her contemptuous charity fed the wretched lives that she spared in scorn. She had no small difficulty, it is true, in persuading Susan to accept this sacrifice, and she did so only by sustaining her sister's belief that the past could yet be retrieved, that Mainwaring's energies could yet rebuild their fortunes, and that as the annuity was at any time redeemable, the aid therefore was only temporary. With this understanding, Susan, overwhelmed with gratitude, weeping and broken-hearted, departed to join the choice of her youth. As the men deputed by the auctioneer to arrange and ticket the furniture for sale entered the desolate house, Lucretia then, with the step of a conqueror, passed from the threshold.

"Ah!" she murmured, as she paused, and gazed on the walls, "ah, they were happy when I first entered those doors,—happy in each other's tranquil love; happier still when they deemed I had forgiven the wrong and abjured the past! How honoured was then their home! How knew I then, for the first time, what the home of love can be! And who had destroyed for me, upon all the earth, a home like theirs? They on whom that home smiled with its serene and taunting peace! I—I, the guest! I—I, the abandoned, the betrayed,—what dark memories were on my soul, what a hell boiled within my bosom! Well might those memories take each a voice to accuse them; well, from that hell, might rise the Alecto! Their lives were in my power, my fatal dowry at my command,—rapid death, or slow, consuming torture; but to have seen each cheer the other to the grave, lighting every downward step with the eyes of love,—vengeance so urged would have fallen only on myself! Ha! deceiver, didst thou plume thyself, forsooth, on spotless reputation? Didst thou stand, me by thy side, amongst thy perjured household gods and talk of honour? Thy home, it is reft from thee; thy reputation, it is a, scoff; thine honour, it is a ghost that shall haunt thee! Thy love, can it linger yet? Shall the soft eyes of thy wife not burn into thy heart, and shame turn love into loathing? Wrecks of my vengeance, minions of my bounty, I did well to let ye live; I shake the dust from my feet on your threshold. Live on, homeless, hopeless, and childless! The curse is fulfilled!"

From that hour Lucretia never paused from her career to inquire further of her victims; she never entered into communication with either. They knew not her address nor her fate, nor she theirs. As she had reckoned, Mainwaring made no effort to recover himself from his fall. All the high objects that had lured his ambition were gone from him evermore. No place in the State, no authority in the

senate, awaits in England the man with a blighted name. For the lesser objects of life he had no heart and no care. They lived in obscurity in a small village in Cornwall till the Peace allowed them to remove to France; the rest of their fate is known.

Meanwhile, Lucretia removed to one of those smaller Londons, resorts of pleasure and idleness, with which rich England abounds, and in which widows of limited income can make poverty seem less plebeian. And now, to all those passions that had hitherto raged within her, a dismal apathy succeeded. It was the great calm in her sea of life. The winds fell, and the sails drooped. Her vengeance satisfied, that which she had made so preternaturally the main object of existence, once fulfilled, left her in youth objectless.

She strove at first to take pleasure in the society of the place; but its frivolities and pettiness of purpose soon wearied that masculine and grasping mind, already made insensible to the often healthful, often innocent, excitement of trifles, by the terrible ordeal it had passed. Can the touch of the hand, scorched by the burning iron, feel pleasure in the softness of silk, or the light down of the cygnet's plume? She next sought such relief as study could afford; and her natural bent of thought, and her desire to vindicate her deeds to herself, plunged her into the fathomless abyss of metaphysical inquiry with the hope to confirm into positive assurance her earlier scepticism,—with the atheist's hope to annihilate the soul, and banish the presiding God. But no voice that could satisfy her reason came from those dreary deeps; contradiction on contradiction met her in the maze. Only when, wearied with book-lore, she turned her eyes to the visible Nature, and beheld everywhere harmony, order, system, contrivance, art, did she start with the amaze and awe of instinctive conviction, and the natural religion revolted from her cheerless ethics. Then came one of those sudden reactions common with strong passions and exploring minds, but more common with women, however manlike, than with men. Had she lived in Italy then, she had become a nun; for in this woman, unlike Varney and Dalibard, the conscience could never be utterly silenced. In her choice of evil, she found only torture to her spirit in all the respites afforded to the occupations it indulged. When employed upon ill, remorse gave way to the zest of scheming; when the ill was done, remorse came with the repose.

It was in this peculiar period of her life that Lucretia, turning everywhere, and desperately, for escape from the past, became acquainted with some members of one of the most rigid of the sects of Dissent. At first she permitted herself to know and commune with these persons from a kind of contemptuous curiosity; she desired to encourage, in contemplating them, her experience of the follies of human nature: but in that crisis of her mind, in those struggles of her reason, whatever showed that which she most yearned to discover,—namely, earnest faith, rooted and genuine conviction, whether of annihilation or of immortality, a philosophy that might reconcile her to crime by destroying the providence of good, or a creed that could hold out the hope of redeeming the past and exorcising sin by the mystery of a Divine sacrifice,—had over her a power which she had not imagined or divined. Gradually the intense convictions of her new associates disturbed and infected her. Their affirmations that as we are born in wrath, so sin is our second nature, our mysterious heritage, seemed, to her understanding, willing to be blinded, to imply excuses for her past misdeeds. Their assurances that the worst sinner may become the most earnest saint; that through but one act of the will, resolute faith, all redemption is to be found,— these affirmations and these assurances, which have so often restored the guilty and remodelled the human heart, made a salutary, if brief, impression upon her. Nor were the lives of these Dissenters (for the most part austerely moral), nor the peace and self-complacency which they evidently found in the satisfaction of conscience and fulfilment of duty, without an influence over her that for a while both chastened and soothed.

Hopeful of such a convert, the good teachers strove hard to confirm the seeds springing up from the granite and amidst the weeds; and amongst them came one man more eloquent, more seductive, than the rest,—Alfred Braddell. This person, a trader at Liverpool, was one of those strange living paradoxes that can rarely be found out of a commercial community. He himself had been a convert to the sect, and like most converts, he pushed his enthusiasm into the bigotry of the zealot; he saw

no salvation out of the pale into which he had entered. But though his belief was sincere, it did not genially operate on his practical life; with the most scrupulous attention to forms, he had the worldliness and cunning of the carnal. He had abjured the vices of the softer senses, but not that which so seldom wars on the decorums of outer life. He was essentially a money-maker,—close, acute, keen, overreaching. Good works with him were indeed as nothing,—faith the all in all. He was one of the elect, and could not fall. Still, in this man there was all the intensity which often characterizes a mind in proportion to the narrowness of its compass; that intensity gave fire to his gloomy eloquence, and strength to his obstinate will. He saw Lucretia, and his zeal for her conversion soon expanded into love for her person; yet that love was secondary to his covetousness. Though ostensibly in a flourishing business, he was greatly distressed for money to carry on operations which swelled beyond the reach of his capital; his fingers itched for the sum which Lucretia had still at her disposal. But the seeming sincerity of the man, the persuasion of his goodness, his reputation for sanctity, deceived her; she believed herself honestly and ardently beloved, and by one who could guide her back, if not to happiness, at least to repose. She herself loved him not,—she could love no more. But it seemed to her a luxury to find some one she could trust, she could honour. If you had probed into the recesses of her mind at that time, you would have found that no religious belief was there settled,—only the desperate wish to believe; only the disturbance of all previous infidelity; only a restless, gnawing desire to escape from memory, to emerge from the gulf. In this troubled, impatient disorder of mind and feeling, she hurried into a second marriage as fatal as the first.

For a while she bore patiently all the privations of that ascetic household, assisted in all those external formalities, centred all her intellect within that iron range of existence. But no grace descended on her soul,—no warm ray unlocked the ice of the well. Then, gradually becoming aware of the niggardly meanness, of the harsh, uncharitable judgments, of the decorous frauds that, with unconscious hypocrisy, her husband concealed beneath the robes of sanctity, a weary disgust stole over her,—it stole, it deepened, it increased; it became intolerable when she discovered that Braddell had knowingly deceived her as to his worldly substance. In that mood in which she had rushed into these ominous nuptials, she had had no thought for vulgar advantages; had Braddell been a beggar, she had married him as rashly. But he, with the inability to comprehend a nature like hers,—dim not more to her terrible vices than to the sinister grandeur which made their ordinary atmosphere,—had descended cunningly to address the avarice he thought as potent in others as himself, to enlarge on the worldly prosperity with which Providence had blessed him; and now she saw that her dowry alone had saved the crippled trader from the bankrupt list. With this revolting discovery, with the scorn it produced, vanished all Lucretia's unstable visions of reform. She saw this man a saint amongst his tribe, and would not believe in the virtues of his brethren, great and unquestionable as they might have been proved to a more dispassionate and humbler inquirer. The imposture she detected she deemed universal in the circle in which she dwelt; and Satan once more smiled upon the subject he regained. Lucretia became a mother; but their child formed no endearing tie between the ill-assorted pair,—it rather embittered their discord. Dimly even then, as she bent over the cradle, that vision, which now, in the old house at Brompton, haunted her dreams and beckoned her over seas of blood into the fancied future, was foreshadowed in the face of her infant son. To be born again in that birth, to live only in that life, to aspire as man may aspire, in that future man whom she would train to knowledge and lead to power,—these were the feelings with which that sombre mother gazed upon her babe. The idea that the low-born, grovelling father had the sole right over that son's destiny, had the authority to cabin his mind in the walls of form, bind him down to the sordid apprenticeship, debased, not dignified, by the solemn mien, roused her indignant wrath; she sickened when Braddell touched her child. All her pride of intellect, that had never slept, all her pride of birth, long dormant, woke up to protect the heir of her ambition, the descendant of her race, from the defilement of the father's nurture. Not long after her confinement, she formed a plan for escape; she disappeared from the house with her child. Taking refuge in a cottage, living on the sale of the few jewels she possessed, she was for some weeks almost

happy. But Braddell, less grieved by the loss than shocked by the scandal, was indefatigable in his researches,—he discovered her retreat. The scene between them was terrible. There was no resisting the power which all civilized laws give to the rights of husband and father. Before this man, whom she scorned so unutterably, Lucretia was impotent. Then all the boiling passions long suppressed beneath that command of temper. which she owed both to habitual simulation and intense disdain, rushed forth. Then she appalled the impostor with her indignant denunciations of his hypocrisy, his meanness, and his guile. Then, throwing off the mask she had worn, she hurled her anathema on his sect, on his faith, with the same breath that smote his conscience and left it wordless. She shocked all the notions he sincerely entertained, and he stood awed by accusations from a blasphemer whom he dared not rebuke. His rage broke at length from his awe. Stung, maddened by the scorn of himself, his blood fired into juster indignation by her scoff at his creed, he lost all self-possession and struck her to the ground. In the midst of shame and dread at disclosure of his violence, which succeeded the act so provoked, he was not less relieved than amazed when Lucretia, rising slowly, laid her hand gently on his arm and said, "Repent not, it is passed; fear not, I will be silent! Come, you are the stronger,—you prevail. I will follow my child to your home."

In this unexpected submission in one so imperious, Braddell's imperfect comprehension of character saw but fear, and his stupidity exulted in his triumph. Lucretia returned with him. A few days afterwards Braddell became ill; the illness increased,—slow, gradual, wearying. It broke his spirit with his health; and then the steadfast imperiousness of Lucretia's stern will ruled and subjugated him. He cowered beneath her haughty, searching gaze, he shivered at her sidelong, malignant glance; but with this fear came necessarily hate, and this hate, sometimes sufficing to vanquish the fear, spitefully evinced itself in thwarting her legitimate control over her infant. He would have it (though he had little real love for children) constantly with him, and affected to contradict all her own orders to the servants, in the sphere in which mothers arrogate most the right. Only on these occasions sometimes would Lucretia lose her grim self-control, and threaten that her child yet should be emancipated from his hands, should yet be taught the scorn for hypocrites which he had taught herself. These words sank deep, not only in the resentment, but in the conscience, of the husband. Meanwhile, Lucretia scrupled not to evince her disdain of Braddell by markedly abstaining from all the ceremonies she had before so rigidly observed. The sect grew scandalized. Braddell did not abstain from making known his causes of complaint. The haughty, imperious woman was condemned in the community, and hated in the household.

It was at this time that Walter Ardworth, who was then striving to eke out his means by political lectures (which in the earlier part of the century found ready audience) in our great towns, came to Liverpool. Braddell and Ardworth had been schoolfellows, and even at school embryo politicians of congenial notions; and the conversion of the former to one of the sects which had grown out of the old creeds, that, under Cromwell, had broken the sceptre of the son of Belial and established the Commonwealth of Saints, had only strengthened the republican tenets of the sour fanatic. Ardworth called on Braddell, and was startled to find in his schoolfellow's wife the niece of his benefactor, Sir Miles St. John. Now, Lucretia had never divulged her true parentage to her husband. In a union so much beneath her birth, she had desired to conceal from all her connections the fall of the once-honoured heiress. She had descended, in search of peace, to obscurity; but her pride revolted from the thought that her low-born husband might boast of her connections and parade her descent to his level. Fortunately, as she thought, she received Ardworth before he was admitted to her husband, who now, growing feebler and feebler, usually kept his room. She stooped to beseech Ardworth not to reveal her secret; and he, comprehending her pride, as a man well-born himself, and pitying her pain, readily gave his promise. At the first interview, Braddell evinced no pleasure in the sight of his old schoolfellow. It was natural enough that one so precise should be somewhat revolted by one so careless of all form. But when Lucretia imprudently evinced satisfaction at his surly remarks on his visitor; when he perceived that it would please her that he should not cultivate the acquaintance offered him,

—he was moved, by the spirit of contradiction, and the spiteful delight even in frivolous annoyance, to conciliate and court the intimacy he had at first disdained: and then, by degrees, sympathy in political matters and old recollections of sportive, careless boyhood cemented the intimacy into a more familiar bond than the sectarian had contracted really with any of his late associates.

Lucretia regarded this growing friendship with great uneasiness; the uneasiness increased to alarm when one day, in the presence of Ardworth, Braddell, writhing with a sudden spasm, said: "I cannot account for these strange seizures; I think verily I am poisoned!" and his dull eye rested on Lucretia's pallid brow. She was unusually thoughtful for some days after this remark; and one morning she informed her husband that she had received the intelligence that a relation, from whom she had pecuniary expectations, was dangerously ill, and requested his permission to visit this sick kinsman, who dwelt in a distant county. Braddell's eyes brightened at the thought of her absence; with little further questioning he consented; and Lucretia, sure perhaps that the barb was in the side of her victim, and reckoning, it may be, on greater freedom from suspicion if her husband died in her absence, left the house. It was, indeed, to the neighbourhood of her kindred that she went. In a private conversation with Ardworth, when questioning him of his news of the present possessor of Laughton, he had informed her that he had heard accidentally that Vernon's two sons (Percival was not then born) were sickly; and she went into Hampshire secretly and unknown, to see what were really the chances that her son might yet become the lord of her lost inheritance.

During this absence, Braddell, now gloomily aware that his days were numbered, resolved to put into practice the idea long contemplated, and even less favoured by his spite than justified by the genuine convictions of his conscience. Whatever his faults, sincere at least in his religious belief, he might well look with dread to the prospect of the training and education his son would receive from the hands of a mother who had blasphemed his sect and openly proclaimed her infidelity. By will, it is true, he might create a trust, and appoint guardians to his child. But to have lived under the same roof with his wife,—nay, to have carried her back to that roof when she had left it,—afforded tacit evidence that whatever the disagreement between them, her conduct could hardly have merited her exclusion from the privileges of a mother. The guardianship might therefore avail little to frustrate Lucretia's indirect contamination, if not her positive control. Besides, where guardians are appointed, money must be left; and Braddell knew that at his death his assets would be found insufficient for his debts. Who would be guardian to a penniless infant? He resolved, therefore, to send his child from his roof to some place where, if reared humbly, it might at least be brought up in the right faith,—some place which might defy the search and be beyond the perversion of the unbelieving mother. He looked round, and discovered no instrument for his purpose that seemed so ready as Walter Ardworth; for by this time he had thoroughly excited the pity and touched the heart of that good-natured, easy man. His representations of the misconduct of Lucretia were the more implicitly believed by one who had always been secretly prepossessed against her; who, admitted to household intimacy, was an eye-witness to her hard indifference to her husband's sufferings; who saw in her very request not to betray her gentle birth, the shame she felt in her election; who regarded with indignation her unfeeling desertion of Braddell in his last moments, and who, besides all this, had some private misfortunes of his own which made him the more ready listener to themes on the faults of women; and had already, by mutual confidences, opened the hearts of the two ancient schoolfellows to each other's complaints and wrongs. The only other confidant in the refuge selected for the child was a member of the same community as Braddell, who kindly undertook to search for a pious, godly woman, who, upon such pecuniary considerations as Braddell, by robbing his creditors, could afford to bestow, would permanently offer to the poor infant a mother's home and a mother's care. When this woman was found, Braddell confided his child to Ardworth, with such a sum as he could scrape together for its future maintenance. And to Ardworth, rather than to his fellow-sectarian, this double trust was given, because the latter feared scandal and misrepresentation if he should be ostensibly mixed up in so equivocal a charge. Poor and embarrassed as Walter Ardworth was, Braddell did

not for once misinterpret character when he placed the money in his hands; and this because the characters we have known in transparent boyhood we have known forever. Ardworth was reckless, and his whole life had been wrecked, his whole nature materially degraded, by the want of common thrift and prudence. His own money slipped through his fingers and left him surrounded by creditors, whom, rigidly speaking, he thus defrauded; but direct dishonesty was as wholly out of the chapter of his vices as if he had been a man of the strictest principles and the steadiest honour.

The child was gone, the father died, Lucretia returned, as we have seen in Grabman's letter, to the house of death, to meet suspicion, and cold looks, and menial accusations, and an inquest on the dead; but through all this the reft tigress mourned her stolen whelp. As soon as all evidence against her was proved legally groundless, and she had leave to depart, she searched blindly and frantically for her lost child; but in vain. The utter and penniless destitution in which she was left by her husband's decease did not suffice to terminate her maddening chase. On foot she wandered from village to village, and begged her way wherever a false clew misled her steps.

At last, in reluctant despair, she resigned the pursuit, and found herself one day in the midst of the streets of London, half-famished and in rags; and before her suddenly, now grown into vigorous youth,— blooming, sleek, and seemingly prosperous,—stood Gabriel Varney. By her voice, as she approached and spoke, he recognized his stepmother; and after a short pause of hesitation, he led her to his home. It is not our purpose (for it is not necessary to those passages of their lives from which we have selected the thread of our tale) to follow these two, thus united, through their general career of spoliation and crime. Birds of prey, they searched in human follies and human errors for their food: sometimes severed, sometimes together, their interests remained one. Varney profited by the mightier and subtler genius of evil to which he had leashed himself; for, caring little for luxuries, and dead to the softer senses, she abandoned to him readily the larger share of their plunder. Under a variety of names and disguises, through a succession of frauds, some vast and some mean, but chiefly on the Continent, they had pursued their course, eluding all danger and baffling all law.

Between three and four years before this period, Varney's uncle, the painter, by one of those unexpected caprices of fortune which sometimes find heirs to a millionnaire at the weaver's loom or the labourer's plough, had suddenly, by the death of a very distant kinsman whom he had never seen, come into possession of a small estate, which he sold for 6,000 pounds. Retiring from all his profession, he lived as comfortably as his shattered constitution permitted upon the interest of this sum; and he wrote to his nephew, then at Paris, to communicate the good news and offer the hospitality of his hearth. Varney hastened to London. Shortly afterwards a nurse, recommended as an experienced, useful person in her profession, by Nicholas Grabman, who in many a tortuous scheme had been Gabriel's confederate, was installed in the poor painter's house. From that time his infirmities increased. He died, as his doctor said, "by abstaining from the stimulants to which his constitution had been so long accustomed;" and Gabriel Varney was summoned to the reading of the will. To his inconceivable disappointment, instead of bequeathing to his nephew the free disposal of his 6,000 pounds, that sum was assigned to trustees for the benefit of Gabriel and his children yet unborn,—"An inducement," said the poor testator, tenderly, "for the boy to marry and reform!" So that the nephew could only enjoy the interest, and had no control over the capital. The interest of 6,000 pounds invested in the Bank of England was flocci nauci to the voluptuous spendthrift, Gabriel Varney.

Now, these trustees were selected from the painter's earlier and more respectable associates, who had dropped him, it is true, in his days of beggary and disrepute, but whom the fortune that made him respectable had again conciliated. One of these trustees had lately retired to pass the remainder of his days at Boulogne; the other was a hypochondriacal valetudinarian,—neither of them, in short, a man of business. Gabriel was left to draw out the interest of the money as it became periodically due at the Bank of England. In a few months the trustee settled at Boulogne died; the trust, of course, lapsed to Mr. Stubmore, the valetudinarian survivor. Soon pinched by extravagances, and emboldened

by the character and helpless state of the surviving trustee, Varney forged Mr. Stubmore's signature to an order on the bank to sell out such portion of the capital as his wants required. The impunity of one offence begot courage for others, till the whole was well-nigh expended. Upon these sums Varney had lived very pleasantly, and he saw with a deep sigh the approaching failure of so facile a resource.

In one of the melancholy moods engendered by this reflection, Varney happened to be in the very town in France in which the Mainwarings, in their later years, had taken refuge, and from which Helen had been removed to the roof of Mr. Fielden. By accident he heard the name, and, his curiosity leading to further inquiries, learned that Helen was made an heiress by the will of her grandfather. With this knowledge came a thought of the most treacherous, the most miscreant, and the vilest crime that even he yet had perpetrated; so black was it that for a while he absolutely struggled against it. But in guilt there seems ever a Necessity that urges on, step after step, to the last consummation. Varney received a letter to inform him that the last surviving trustee was no more, that the trust was therefore now centred in his son and heir, that that gentleman was at present very busy in settling his own affairs and examining into a very mismanaged property in Devonshire which had devolved upon him, but that he hoped in a few months to discharge, more efficiently than his father had done, the duties of trustee, and that some more profitable investment than the Bank of England would probably occur.

This new trustee was known personally to Varney,—a contemporary of his own, and in earlier youth a pupil to his uncle. But, since then, he had made way in life, and retired from the profession of art. This younger Stubmore he knew to be a bustling, officious man of business, somewhat greedy and covetous, but withal somewhat weak of purpose, good-natured in the main, and with a little lukewarm kindness for Gabriel, as a quondam fellow-pupil. That Stubmore would discover the fraud was evident; that he would declare it, for his own sake, was evident also; that the bank would prosecute, that Varney would be convicted, was no less surely to be apprehended. There was only one chance left to the forger: if he could get into his hands, and in time, before Stubmore's bustling interference, a sum sufficient to replace what had been fraudulently taken, he might easily manage, he thought, to prevent the forgery ever becoming known. Nay, if Stubmore, roused into strict personal investigation by the new power of attorney which a new investment in the bank would render necessary, should ascertain what had occurred, his liabilities being now indemnified, and the money replaced, Varney thought he could confidently rely on his ci-devant fellow-pupil's assent to wink at the forgery and hush up the matter. But this was his only chance. How was the money to be gained? He thought of Helen's fortune, and the last scruple gave way to the imminence of his peril and the urgency of his fears.

With this decision, he repaired to Lucretia, whose concurrence was necessary to his designs. Long habits of crime had now deepened still more the dark and stern colour of that dread woman's sombre nature. But through all that had ground the humanity from her soul, one human sentiment, fearfully tainted and adulterated as it was, still struggled for life,—the memory of the mother. It was by this, her least criminal emotion, that Varney led her to the worst of her crimes. He offered to sell out the remainder of the trust-money by a fresh act of forgery, to devote such proceeds to the search for her lost Vincent; he revived the hopes she had long since gloomily relinquished, till she began to conceive the discovery easy and certain. He then brought before her the prospect of that son's succession to Laughton: but two lives now between him and those broad lands,—those two lives associated with just cause of revenge. Two lives! Lucretia till then did not know that Susan had left a child, that a pledge of those nuptials, to which she imputed all her infamy, existed to revive a jealousy never extinguished, appeal to the hate that had grown out of her love. More readily than Varney had anticipated, and with fierce exultation, she fell into his horrible schemes.

Thus had she returned to England and claimed the guardianship of her niece. Varney engaged a dull house in the suburb, and looking out for a servant not likely to upset and betray, found the nurse who had watched over his uncle's last illness; but Lucretia, according to her invariable practice, rejected all menial accomplices, reposed no confidence in the tools of her black deeds. Feigning an

infirmity that would mock all suspicion of the hand that mixed the draught, and the step that stole to the slumber, she defied the justice of earth, and stood alone under the omniscience of Heaven.

Various considerations had delayed the execution of the atrocious deed so coldly contemplated. Lucretia herself drew back, perhaps more daunted by conscience than she herself was distinctly aware, and disguising her scruples in those yet fouler refinements of hoped revenge which her conversations with Varney have betrayed to the reader. The failure of the earlier researches for the lost Vincent, the suspended activity of Stubmore, left the more impatient murderer leisure to make the acquaintance of St. John, steal into the confidence of Helen, and render the insurances on the life of the latter less open to suspicion than if effected immediately on her entrance into that shamble-house, and before she could be supposed to form that affection for her aunt which made probable so tender a forethought. These causes of delay now vanished, the Parcae closed the abrupt woof, and lifted the impending shears.

Lucretia had long since dropped the name of Braddell. She shrank from proclaiming those second spousals, sullied by the degradation to which they had exposed her, and the suspicions implied in the inquest on her husband, until the hour for acknowledging her son should arrive. She resumed, therefore, the name of Dalibard, and by that we will continue to call her. Nor was Varney uninfluential in dissuading her from proclaiming her second marriage till occasion necessitated. If the son were discovered, and proofs of his birth in the keeping of himself and his accomplice, his avarice naturally suggested the expediency of wringing from that son some pledge of adequate reward on succession to an inheritance which they alone could secure to him; out of this fancied fund not only Grabman, but his employer, was to be paid. The concealment of the identity between Mrs. Braddell and Madame Dalibard might facilitate such an arrangement. This idea Varney locked as yet in his own breast. He did not dare to speak to Lucretia of the bargain he ultimately meditated with her son.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.