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LUCRETIA — VOLUME 04

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Содержание

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
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PART THE SECOND

PROLOGUE TO PART THE SECOND

The century has advanced. The rush of the deluge has ebbed back; the old landmarks have reappeared; the dynasties Napoleon willed into life have crumbled to the dust; the plough has passed over Waterloo; autumn after autumn the harvests have glittered on that grave of an empire. Through the immense ocean of universal change we look back on the single track which our frail boat has cut through the waste. As a star shines impartially over the measureless expanse, though it seems to gild but one broken line into each eye, so, as our memory gazes on the past, the light spreads not over all the breadth of the waste where nations have battled and argosies gone down,—it falls narrow and confined along the single course we have taken; we lean over the small raft on which we float, and see the sparkles but reflected from the waves that it divides.

On the terrace at Laughton but one step paces slowly. The bride clings not now to the bridegroom's arm. Though pale and worn, it is still the same gentle face; but the blush of woman's love has gone from it evermore.

Charles Vernon (to call him still by the name in which he is best known to us) sleeps in the vault of the St. Johns. He had lived longer than he himself had expected, than his physician had hoped, —lived, cheerful and happy, amidst quiet pursuits and innocent excitements. Three sons had blessed his hearth, to mourn over his grave. But the two elder were delicate and sickly. They did not long survive him, and died within a few months of each other. The third seemed formed of a different mould and constitution from his brethren. To him descended the ancient heritage of Laughton, and he promised to enjoy it long.

It is Vernon's widow who walks alone in the stately terrace; sad still, for she loved well the choice of her youth, and she misses yet the children in the grave. From the date of Vernon's death, she wore mourning without and within; and the sorrows that came later broke more the bruised reed, —sad still, but resigned. One son survives, and earth yet has the troubled hopes and the holy fears of affection. Though that son be afar, in sport or in earnest, in pleasure or in toil, working out his destiny as man, still that step is less solitary than it seems. When does the son's image not walk beside the mother? Though she lives in seclusion, though the gay world tempts no more, the gay world is yet linked to her thoughts. From the distance she hears its murmurs in music. Her fancy still mingles with the crowd, and follows on, to her eye, outshining all the rest. Never vain in herself, she is vain now of another; and the small triumphs of the young and well-born seem trophies of renown to the eyes so tenderly deceived.

In the old-fashioned market-town still the business goes on, still the doors of the bank open and close every moment on the great day of the week; but the names over the threshold are partially changed. The junior partner is busy no more at the desk; not wholly forgotten, if his name still is spoken, it is not with thankfulness and praise. A something rests on the name,—that something which dims and attaints; not proven, not certain, but suspected and dubious. The head shakes, the voice whispers; and the attorney now lives in the solid red house at the verge of the town.

In the vicarage, Time, the old scythe-bearer, has not paused from his work. Still employed on Greek texts, little changed, save that his hair is gray and that some lines in his kindly face tell of sorrows as of years, the vicar sits in his parlour; but the children no longer, blithe- voiced and rose-

cheeked, dart through the rustling espaliers. Those children, grave men or staid matrons (save one whom Death chose, and therefore now of all best beloved!) are at their posts in the world. The young ones are flown from the nest, and, with anxious wings, here and there, search food in their turn for their young. But the blithe voice and rose-cheek of the child make not that loss which the hearth misses the most. From childhood to manhood, and from manhood to departure, the natural changes are gradual and prepared. The absence most missed is that household life which presided, which kept things in order, and must be coaxed if a chair were displaced. That providence in trifles, that clasp of small links, that dear, bustling agency,—now pleased, now complaining,—dear alike in each change of its humour; that active life which has no self of its own; like the mind of a poet, though its prose be the humblest, transferring self into others, with its right to be cross, and its charter to scold; for the motive is clear,—it takes what it loves too anxiously to heart. The door of the parlour is open, the garden-path still passes before the threshold; but no step now has full right to halt at the door and interrupt the grave thought on Greek texts; no small talk on details and wise sayings chimes in with the wrath of "Medea." The Prudent Genius is gone from the household; and perhaps as the good scholar now wearily pauses, and looks out on the silent garden, he would have given with joy all that Athens produced, from Aeschylus to Plato, to hear again from the old familiar lips the lament on torn jackets, or the statistical economy of eggs.

But see, though the wife is no more, though the children have departed, the vicar's home is not utterly desolate. See, along the same walk on which William soothed Susan's fears and won her consent,—see, what fairy advances? Is it Susan returned to youth? How like! Yet look again, and how unlike! The same, the pure, candid regard; the same, the clear, limpid blue of the eye; the same, that fair hue of the hair,—light, but not auburn; more subdued, more harmonious than that equivocal colour which too nearly approaches to red. But how much more blooming and joyous than Susan's is that exquisite face in which all Hebe smiles forth; how much airier the tread, light with health; how much rounder, if slighter still, the wave of that undulating form! She smiles, her lips move, she is conversing with herself; she cannot be all silent, even when alone, for the sunny gladness of her nature must have vent like a bird's. But do not fancy that that gladness speaks the levity which comes from the absence of thought; it is rather from the depth of thought that it springs, as from the depth of a sea comes its music. See, while she pauses and listens, with her finger half-raised to her lip, as amidst that careless jubilee of birds she hears a note more grave and sustained,—the nightingale singing by day (as sometimes, though rarely, he is heard,—perhaps because he misses his mate; perhaps because he sees from his bower the creeping form of some foe to his race),—see, as she listens now to that plaintive, low-chanted warble, how quickly the smile is sobered, how the shade, soft and pensive, steals over the brow. It is but the mystic sympathy with Nature that bestows the smile or the shade. In that heart lightly moved beats the fine sense of the poet. It is the exquisite sensibility of the nerves that sends its blithe play to those spirits, and from the clearness of the atmosphere comes, warm and ethereal, the ray of that light.

And does the roof of the pastor give shelter to Helen Mainwaring's youth? Has Death taken from her the natural protectors? Those forms which we saw so full of youth and youth's heart in that very spot, has the grave closed on them yet? Yet! How few attain to the age of the Psalmist! Twenty-seven years have passed since that date: how often, in those years, have the dark doors opened for the young as for the old! William Mainwaring died first, careworn and shamebowed; the blot on his name had cankered into his heart. Susan's life, always precarious, had struggled on, while he lived, by the strong power of affection and will; she would not die, for who then could console him? But at his death the power gave way. She lingered, but lingered dyingly, for three years; and then, for the first time since William's death, she smiled: that smile remained on the lips of the corpse. They had had many trials, that young couple whom we left so prosperous and happy. Not till many years after their marriage had one sweet consoler been born to them. In the season of poverty and shame and grief it came; and there was no pride on Mainwaring's brow when they placed his first-born in

his arms. By her will, the widow consigned Helen to the joint guardianship of Mr. Fielden and her sister; but the latter was abroad, her address unknown, so the vicar for two years had had sole charge of the orphan. She was not unprovided for. The sum that Susan brought to her husband had been long since gone, it is true,—lost in the calamity which had wrecked William Mainwaring's name and blighted his prospects; but Helen's grandfather, the landagent, had died some time subsequent to that event, and, indeed, just before William's death. He had never forgiven his son the stain on his name,—never assisted, never even seen him since that fatal day; but he left to Helen a sum of about 8,000 pounds; for she, at least, was innocent. In Mr. Fielden's eyes, Helen was therefore an heiress. And who amongst his small range of acquaintance was good enough for her?—not only so richly portioned, but so lovely,—accomplished, too; for her parents had of late years lived chiefly in France, and languages there are easily learned, and masters cheap. Mr. Fielden knew but one, whom Providence had also consigned to his charge,—the supposed son of his old pupil Ardworth; but though a tender affection existed between the two young persons, it seemed too like that of brother and sister to afford much ground for Mr. Fielden's anxiety or hope.

From his window the vicar observed the still attitude of the young orphan for a few moments; then he pushed aside his books, rose, and approached her. At the sound of his tread she woke from her revery and bounded lightly towards him.

"Ah, you would not see me before!" she said, in a voice in which there was the slightest possible foreign accent, which betrayed the country in which her childhood had been passed; "I peeped in twice at the window. I wanted you so much to walk to the village. But you will come now, will you not?" added the girl, coaxingly, as she looked up at him under the shade of her straw hat.

"And what do you want in the village, my pretty Helen?"

"Why, you know it is fair day, and you promised Bessie that you would buy her a fairing,—to say nothing of me."

"Very true, and I ought to look in; it will help to keep the poor people from drinking. A clergyman should mix with his parishioners in their holidays. We must not associate our office only with grief and sickness and preaching. We will go. And what fairing are you to have?"

"Oh, something very brilliant, I promise you! I have formed grand notions of a fair. I am sure it must be like the bazaars we read of last night in that charming 'Tour in the East.'"

The vicar smiled, half benignly, half anxiously. "My dear child, it is so like you to suppose a village fair must be an Eastern bazaar. If you always thus judge of things by your fancy, how this sober world will deceive you, poor Helen!"

"It is not my fault; ne me grondez pas, mechant," answered Helen, hanging her head. "But come, sir, allow, at least, that if I let my romance, as you call it, run away with me now and then, I can still content myself with the reality. What, you shake your head still? Don't you remember the sparrow?"

"Ha! ha! yes,—the sparrow that the pedlar sold you for a goldfinch; and you were so proud of your purchase, and wondered so much why you could not coax the goldfinch to sing, till at last the paint wore away, and it was only a poor little sparrow!"

"Go on! Confess: did I fret then? Was I not as pleased with my dear sparrow as I should have been with the prettiest goldfinch that ever sang? Does not the sparrow follow me about and nestle on my shoulder, dear little thing? And I was right after all; for if I had not fancied it a goldfinch, I should not have bought it, perhaps. But now I would not change it for a goldfinch,—no, not even for that nightingale I heard just now. So let me still fancy the poor fair a bazaar; it is a double pleasure, first to fancy the bazaar, and then to be surprised at the fair."

"You argue well," said the vicar, as they now entered the village; "I really think, in spite of all your turn for poetry and Goldsmith and Cowper, that you would take as kindly to mathematics as your cousin John Ardworth, poor lad!

"Not if mathematics have made him so grave, and so churlish, I was going to say; but that word does him wrong, dear cousin, so kind and so rough!"

"It is not mathematics that are to blame if he is grave and absorbed," said the vicar, with a sigh; "it is the two cares that gnaw most,— poverty and ambition."

"Nay, do not sigh; it must be such a pleasure to feel, as he does, that one must triumph at last!"

"Umph! John must have nearly reached London by this time," said Mr. Fielden, "for he is a stout walker, and this is the third day since he left us. Well, now that he is about fairly to be called to the Bar, I hope that his fever will cool, and he will settle calmly to work. I have felt great pain for him during this last visit."

"Pain! But why?"

"My dear, do you remember what I read to you both from Sir William Temple the night before John left us?"

Helen put her hand to her brow, and with a readiness which showed a memory equally quick and retentive, replied, "Yes; was it not to this effect? I am not sure of the exact words: 'To have something we have not, and be something we are not, is the root of all evil.'"

"Well remembered, my darling!"

"Ah, but," said Helen, archly, "I remember too what my cousin replied: 'If Sir William Temple had practised his theory, he would not have been ambassador at the Hague, or—"

"Pshaw! the boy's always ready enough with his answers," interrupted Mr. Fielden, rather petulantly. "There's the fair, my dear,—more in your way, I see, than Sir William Temple's philosophy."

And Helen was right; the fair was no Eastern bazaar, but how delighted that young, impressionable mind was, notwithstanding,—delighted with the swings and the roundabouts, the shows, the booths, even down to the gilt gingerbread kings and queens! All minds genuinely poetical are peculiarly susceptible to movement,—that is, to the excitement of numbers. If the movement is sincerely joyous, as in the mirth of a village holiday, such a nature shares insensibly in the joy; but if the movement is a false and spurious gayety, as in a state ball, where the impassive face and languid step are out of harmony with the evident object of the scene, then the nature we speak of feels chilled and dejected. Hence it really is that the more delicate and ideal order of minds soon grow inexpressibly weary of the hack routine of what are called fashionable pleasures. Hence the same person most alive to a dance on the green, would be without enjoyment at Almack's. It was not because one scene is a village green, and the other a room in King Street, nor is it because the actors in the one are of the humble, in the others of the noble class; but simply because the enjoyment in the first is visible and hearty, because in the other it is a listless and melancholy pretence. Helen fancied it was the swings and the booths that gave her that innocent exhilaration,—it was not so; it was the unconscious sympathy with the crowd around her. When the poetical nature quits its own dreams for the actual world, it enters and transfuses itself into the hearts and humours of others. The two wings of that spirit which we call Genius are revery and sympathy. But poor little Helen had no idea that she had genius. Whether chasing the butterfly or talking fond fancies to her birds, or whether with earnest, musing eyes watching the stars come forth, and the dark pine-trees gleam into silver; whether with airy daydreams and credulous wonder poring over the magic tales of Mirglip or Aladdin, or whether spellbound to awe by the solemn woes of Lear, or following the blind great bard into "the heaven of heavens, an earthly guest, to draw empyreal air,"—she obeyed but the honest and varying impulse in each change of her pliant mood, and would have ascribed with genuine humility to the vagaries of childhood that prompt gathering of pleasure, that quick-shifting sport of the fancy by which Nature binds to itself, in chains undulating as melody, the lively senses of genius.

While Helen, leaning on the vicar's arm, thus surrendered herself to the innocent excitement of the moment, the vicar himself smiled and nodded to his parishioners, or paused to exchange a friendly word or two with the youngest or the eldest loiterers (those two extremes of mortality which the Church so tenderly unites) whom the scene drew to its tempting vortex, when a rough-haired lad,

with a leather bag strapped across his waist, turned from one of the gingerbread booths, and touching his hat, said, "Please you, sir, I was a coming to your house with a letter."

The vicar's correspondence was confined and rare, despite his distant children, for letters but a few years ago were costly luxuries to persons of narrow income, and therefore the juvenile letter-carrier who plied between the post-town and the village failed to excite in his breast that indignation for being an hour or more behind his time which would have animated one to whom the post brings the usual event of the day. He took the letter from the boy's hand, and paid for it with a thrifty sigh as he glanced at a handwriting unfamiliar to him,—perhaps from some clergyman poorer than himself. However, that was not the place to read letters, so he put the epistle into his pocket, until Helen, who watched his countenance to see when he grew tired of the scene, kindly proposed to return home. As they gained a stile half-way, Mr. Fielden remembered his letter, took it forth, and put on his spectacles. Helen stooped over the bank to gather violets; the vicar seated himself on the stile. As he again looked at the address, the handwriting, before unfamiliar, seemed to grow indistinctly on his recollection. That bold, firm hand—thin and fine as woman's, but large and regular as man's—was too peculiar to be forgotten. He uttered a brief exclamation of surprise and recognition, and hastily broke the seal. The contents ran thus:—

DEAR SIR,—So many years have passed since any communication has taken place between us that the name of Lucretia Dalibard will seem more strange to you than that of Lucretia Clavering. I have recently returned to England after long residence abroad. I perceive by my deceased sister's will that she has confided her only daughter to my guardianship, conjointly with yourself. I am anxious to participate in that tender charge. I am alone in the world,—an habitual sufferer; afflicted with a partial paralysis that deprives me of the use of my limbs. In such circumstances, it is the more natural that I should turn to the only relative left me. My journey to England has so exhausted my strength, and all movement is so painful, that I must request you to excuse me for not coming in person for my niece. Your benevolence, however, will, I am sure, prompt you to afford me the comfort of her society, and as soon as you can, contrive some suitable arrangement for her journey. Begging you to express to Helen, in my name, the assurance of such a welcome as is due from me to my sister's child, and waiting with great anxiety your reply, I am, dear Sir, Your very faithful servant, LUCRETIA DALIBARD.

P. S. I can scarcely venture to ask you to bring Helen yourself to town, but I should be glad if other inducements to take the journey afforded me the pleasure of seeing you once again. I am anxious, in addition to such details of my late sister as you may be enabled to give me, to learn something of the history of her connection with Mr. Ardworth, in whom I felt much interested years ago, and who, I am recently informed, left an infant, his supposed son, under your care. So long absent from England, how much have I to learn, and how little the mere gravestones tell us of the dead!

While the vicar is absorbed in this letter, equally unwelcome and unexpected; while, unconscious as the daughter of Ceres, gathering flowers when the Hell King drew near, of the change that awaited her and the grim presence that approached on her fate, Helen bends still over the bank odorous with shrinking violets,—we turn where the new generation equally invites our gaze, and make our first acquaintance with two persons connected with the progress of our tale.

The britzska stopped. The servant, who had been gradually accumulating present dust and future rheumatisms on the "bad eminence" of a rumble- tumble, exposed to the nipping airs of an English sky, leaped to the ground and opened the carriage-door.

"This is the best place for the view, sir,—a little to the right."

Percival St. John threw aside his book (a volume of Voyages), whistled to a spaniel dozing by his side, and descended lightly. Light was the step of the young man, and merry was the bark of the dog, as it chased from the road the startled sparrow, rising high into the clear air,— favourites of Nature both, man and dog. You had but to glance at Percival St. John to know at once that he was

of the race that toils not; the assured step spoke confidence in the world's fair smile. No care for the morrow dimmed the bold eye and the radiant bloom.

About the middle height,—his slight figure, yet undeveloped, seemed not to have attained to its full growth,—the darkening down only just shaded a cheek somewhat sunburned, though naturally fair, round which locks black as jet played sportively in the fresh air; about him altogether there was the inexpressible charm of happy youth. He scarcely looked sixteen, though above four years older; but for his firm though careless step, and the open fearlessness of his frank eye, you might have almost taken him for a girl in men's clothes,—not from effeminacy of feature, but from the sparkling bloom of his youth, and from his unmistakable newness to the cares and sins of man. A more delightful vision of ingenuous boyhood opening into life under happy auspices never inspired with pleased yet melancholy interest the eye of half-envious, half- pitying age.

"And that," mused Percival St. John,—"that is London! Oh for the Diable Boiteux to unroof me those distant houses, and show me the pleasures that lurk within! Ah, what long letters I shall have to write home! How the dear old captain will laugh over them, and how my dear good mother will put down her work and sigh! Home!—um, I miss it already. How strange and grim, after all, the huge city seems!"

His glove fell to the ground, and his spaniel mumbled it into shreds. The young man laughed, and throwing himself on the grass, played gayly with the dog.

"Fie, Beau, sir, fie! gloves are indigestible. Restrain your appetite, and we'll lunch together at the Clarendon."

At this moment there arrived at the same patch of greensward a pedestrian some years older than Percival St. John,—a tall, muscular, raw-boned, dust-covered, travel-stained pedestrian; one of your pedestrians in good earnest,—no amateur in neat gambroon manufactured by Inkson, who leaves his carriage behind him and walks on with his fishing-rod by choice, but a sturdy wanderer, with thick shoes and strapless trousers, a threadbare coat and a knapsack at his back. Yet, withal, the young man had the air of a gentleman,—not gentleman as the word is understood in St. James's, the gentleman of the noble and idle class, but the gentleman as the title is accorded, by courtesy, to all to whom both education and the habit of mixing with educated persons gives a claim to the distinction and imparts an air of refinement. The new-comer was strongly built, at once lean and large,—far more strongly built than Percival St. John, but without his look of cheerful and comely health. His complexion had not the florid hues that should have accompanied that strength of body; it was pale, though not sickly; the expression grave, the lines deep, the face strongly marked. By his side trotted painfully a wiry, yellowish, footsore Scotch terrier. Beau sprang from his master's caress, cocked his handsome head on one side, and suspended in silent halt his right fore-paw. Percival cast over his left shoulder a careless glance at the intruder. The last heeded neither Beau nor Percival. He slipped his knapsack to the ground, and the Scotch terrier sank upon it, and curled himself up into a ball. The wayfarer folded his arms tightly upon his breast, heaved a short, unquiet sigh, and cast over the giant city, from under deep-pent, lowering brows, a look so earnest, so searching, so full of inexpressible, dogged, determined power, that Percival, roused out of his gay indifference, rose and regarded him with curious interest.

In the mean while Beau had very leisurely approached the bilious-looking terrier; and after walking three times round him, with a stare and a small sniff of superb impertinence, halted with great composure, and lifting his hind leg— O Beau, Beau, Beau! your historian blushes for your breeding, and, like Sterne's recording angel, drops a tear upon the stain which washes it from the register—but not, alas, from the back of the bilious terrier! The space around was wide, Beau; you had all the world to choose: why select so specially for insult the single spot on which reposed the wornout and unoffending? O dainty Beau! O dainty world! Own the truth, both of ye. There is something irresistibly provocative of insult in the back of a shabby-looking dog! The poor terrier, used to affronts, raised its heavy eyelids, and shot the gleam of just indignation from its dark eyes.

But it neither stirred nor growled, and Beau, extremely pleased with his achievement, wagged his tail in triumph and returned to his master,—perhaps, in parliamentary phrase, to "report proceedings and ask leave to sit again."

"I wonder," soliloquized Percival St. John, "what that poor fellow is thinking of? Perhaps he is poor; indeed, no doubt of it, now I look again. And I so rich! I should like to— Hem! let's see what he's made of."

Herewith Percival approached, and with all a boy's half-bashful, half- saucy frankness, said: "A fine prospect, sir." The pedestrian started, and threw a rapid glance over the brilliant figure that accosted him. Percival St. John was not to be abashed by stern looks; but that glance might have abashed many a more experienced man. The glance of a squire upon a corn-law missionary, of a Crockford dandy upon a Regent Street tiger, could not have been more disdainful.

"Tush!" said the pedestrian, rudely, and turned upon his heel.

Percival coloured, and—shall we own it?—was boy enough to double his fist. Little would he have been deterred by the brawn of those great arms and the girth of that Herculean chest, if he had been quite sure that it was a proper thing to resent pugilistically so discourteous a monosyllable. The "tush!" stuck greatly in his throat. But the man, now removed to the farther verge of the hill, looked so tranquil and so lost in thought that the short-lived anger died.

"And after all, if I were as poor as he looks, I dare say I should be just as proud," muttered Percival. "However, it's his own fault if he goes to London on foot, when I might at least have given him a lift. Come, Beau, sir."

With his face still a little flushed, and his hat unconsciously cocked fiercely on one side, Percival sauntered back to his britzska.

As in a whirl of dust the light carriage was borne by the four posters down the hill, the pedestrian turned for an instant from the view before to the cloud behind, and muttered: "Ay, a fine prospect for the rich,—a noble field for the poor!" The tone in which those words were said told volumes; there spoke the pride, the hope, the energy, the ambition which make youth laborious, manhood prosperous, age renowned.

The stranger then threw himself on the sward, and continued his silent and intent contemplation till the clouds grew red in the west. When, then, he rose, his eye was bright, his mien erect, and a smile, playing round his firm, full lips, stole the moody sternness from his hard face. Throwing his knapsack once more on his back, John Ardworth went resolutely on to the great vortex.

CHAPTER I

THE CORONATION

The 8th of September, 1831, was a holiday in London. William the Fourth received the crown of his ancestors in that mighty church in which the most impressive monitors to human pomp are the monuments of the dead. The dust of conquerors and statesmen, of the wise heads and the bold hands that had guarded the thrones of departed kings, slept around; and the great men of the Modern time were assembled in homage to the monarch to whom the prowess and the liberty of generations had bequeathed an empire in which the sun never sets. In the Abbey—thinking little of the past, caring little for the future—the immense audience gazed eagerly on the pageant that occurs but once in that division of history,—the lifetime of a king. The assemblage was brilliant and imposing. The galleries sparkled with the gems of women who still upheld the celebrity for form and feature which, from the remotest times, has been awarded to the great English race. Below, in their robes and coronets, were men who neither in the senate nor the field have shamed their fathers. Conspicuous amongst all for grandeur of mien and stature towered the brothers of the king; while, commanding yet more the universal gaze, were seen, here the eagle features of the old hero of Waterloo, and there the majestic brow of the haughty statesman who was leading the people (while the last of the Bourbons, whom Waterloo had restored to the Tuileries, had left the orb and purple to the kindred house so fatal to his name) through a stormy and perilous transition to a bloodless revolution and a new charter.

Tier upon tier, in the division set apart for them, the members of the Lower House moved and murmured above the pageant; and the coronation of the new sovereign was connected in their minds with the great measure which, still undecided, made at that time a link between the People and the King, and arrayed against both, if not, indeed, the real Aristocracy, at least the Chamber recognized by the Constitution as its representative. Without the space was one dense mass. Houses, from balcony to balcony, window to window, were filled as some immense theatre. Up, through the long thoroughfare to Whitehall, the eye saw that audience,—A PEOPLE; and the gaze was bounded at the spot where Charles the First had passed from the banquet-house to the scaffold.

The ceremony was over, the procession had swept slowly by, the last huzza had died away; and after staring a while upon Orator Hunt, who had clambered up the iron palisade near Westminster Hall, to exhibit his goodly person in his court attire, the serried crowds, hurrying from the shower which then unseasonably descended, broke into large masses or lengthening columns.

In that part of London which may be said to form a boundary between its old and its new world, by which, on the one hand, you pass to Westminster, or through that gorge of the Strand which leads along endless rows of shops that have grown up on the sites of the ancient halls of the Salisburys and the Exeters, the Buckinghams and Southamptons; to the heart of the City built around the primeval palace of the "Tower;" while, on the other hand, you pass into the new city of aristocracy and letters, of art and fashion, embracing the whilom chase of Marylebone, and the once sedge-grown waters of Pimlico,—by this ignoble boundary (the crossing from the Opera House, at the bottom of the Haymarket, to the commencement of Charing Cross) stood a person whose discontented countenance was in singular contrast with the general gayety and animation of the day. This person, O gentle reader, this sour, querulous, discontented person, was a king, too, in his own walk! None might dispute it. He feared no rebel; he was harassed by no reform; he ruled without ministers. Tools he had; but when worn out, he replaced them without a pension or a sigh. He lived by taxes, but they were voluntary; and his Civil List was supplied without demand for the redress of grievances. This person, nevertheless, not deposed, was suspended from his empire for the day. He was pushed aside;

he was forgotten. He was not distinct from the crowd. Like Titus, he had lost a day,—his vocation was gone. This person was the Sweeper of the Crossing!

He was a character. He was young, in the fairest prime of youth; but it was the face of an old man on young shoulders. His hair was long, thin, and prematurely streaked with gray; his face was pale and deeply furrowed; his eyes were hollow, and their stare gleamed, cold and stolid, under his bent and shaggy brows. The figure was at once fragile and ungainly, and the narrow shoulders curved in a perpetual stoop. It was a person, once noticed, that you would easily remember, and associate with some undefined, painful impression. The manner was humble, but not meek; the voice was whining, but without pathos. There was a meagre, passionless dulness about the aspect, though at times it quickened into a kind of avid acuteness. No one knew by what human parentage this personage came into the world. He had been reared by the charity of a stranger, crept through childhood and misery and rags mysteriously; and suddenly succeeded an old defunct negro in the profitable crossing whereat he is now standing. All education was unknown to him, so was all love. In those festive haunts at St. Giles's where he who would see "life in London" may often discover the boy who has held his horse in the morning dancing merrily with his chosen damsel at night, our sweeper's character was austere as Charles the Twelfth's. And the poor creature had his good qualities. He was sensitively alive to kindness,—little enough had been shown him to make the luxury the more prized from its rarity! Though fond of money, he would part with it (we do not say cheerfully, but part with it still),—not to mere want, indeed (for he had been too pinched and starved himself, and had grown too obtuse to pinching and to starving for the sensitiveness that prompts to charity), but to any of his companions who had done him a good service, or who had even warmed his dull heart by a friendly smile. He was honest, too,— honest to the backbone. You might have trusted him with gold untold. Through the heavy clod which man's care had not moulded, nor books enlightened, nor the priest's solemn lore informed, still natural rays from the great parent source of Deity struggled, fitful and dim. He had no lawful name; none knew if sponsors had ever stood security for his sins at the sacred fount. But he had christened himself by the strange, unchristian like name of "Beck." There he was, then, seemingly without origin, parentage, or kindred tie,—a lonesome, squalid, bloodless thing, which the great monster, London, seemed to have spawned forth of its own self; one of its sickly, miserable, rickety offspring, whom it puts out at nurse to Penury, at school to Starvation, and, finally, and literally, gives them stones for bread, with the option of the gallows or the dunghill when the desperate offspring calls on the giant mother for return and home.

And this creature did love something,—loved, perhaps, some fellow-being; of that hereafter, when we dive into the secrets of his privacy. Meanwhile, openly and frankly, he loved his crossing; he was proud of his crossing; he was grateful to his crossing. God help thee, son of the street, why not? He had in it a double affection,—that of serving and being served. He kept the crossing, if the crossing kept him. He smiled at times to himself when he saw it lie fair and brilliant amidst the mire around; it bestowed on him a sense of property! What a man may feel for a fine estate in a ring fence, Beck felt for that isthmus of the kennel which was subject to his broom. The coronation had made one rebellious spirit when it swept the sweeper from his crossing.

He stood, then, half under the colonnade of the Opera House as the crowd now rapidly grew thinner and more scattered: and when the last carriage of a long string of vehicles had passed by, he muttered audibly,—

"It'll take a deal of pains to make she right agin!"

"So you be's 'ere to-day, Beck!" said a ragamuffin boy, who, pushing and scrambling through his betters, now halted, and wiped his forehead as he looked at the sweeper. "Vy, ve are all out pleasuring. Vy von't you come with ve? Lots of fun!"

The sweeper scowled at the urchin, and made no answer, but began sedulously to apply himself to the crossing.

"Vy, there isn't another sweep in the streets, Beck. His Majesty King Bill's currynation makes all on us so 'appy!"

"It has made she unkimmon dirty!" returned Beck, pointing to the dingy crossing, scarce distinguished from the rest of the road.

The ragamuffin laughed.

"But ve be's goin' to 'ave Reform now, Beck. The peopul's to have their rights and libties, hand the luds is to be put down, hand beefsteaks is to be a penny a pound, and—"

"What good will that do to she?"

"Vy, man, ve shall take turn about, and sum vun helse will sveep the crossings, and ve shall ride in sum vun helse's coach and four, p'r'aps,- -cos vy? ve shall hall be hequals!"

"Hequals! I tells you vot, if you keeps jawing there, atween me and she, I shall vop you, Joe, —cos vy? I be's the biggest!" was the answer of Beck the sweeper to Joe the ragamuffin.

The jovial Joe laughed aloud, snapped his fingers, threw up his ragged cap with a shout for King Bill, and set off scampering and whooping to join those festivities which Beck had so churlishly disdained.

Time crept on; evening began to close in, and Beck was still at his crossing, when a young gentleman on horseback, who, after seeing the procession, had stolen away for a quiet ride in the suburbs, reined in close by the crossing, and looking round, as for some one to hold his horse, could discover no loiterer worthy that honour except the solitary Beck. So young was the rider that he seemed still a boy. On his smooth countenance all that most prepossesses in early youth left its witching stamp. A smile, at once gay and sweet, played on his lips. There was a charm, even in a certain impatient petulance, in his quick eye and the slight contraction of his delicate brows. Almaviva might well have been jealous of such a page. He was the beau-ideal of Cherubino. He held up his whip, with an arch sign, to the sweeper. "Follow, my man," he said, in a tone the very command of which sounded gentle, so blithe was the movement of the lips, and so silvery the easy accent; and without waiting, he cantered carelessly down Pall Mall.

The sweeper cast a rueful glance at his melancholy domain. But he had gained but little that day, and the offer was too tempting to be rejected. He heaved a sigh, shouldered his broom, and murmuring to himself that he would give her a last brush before he retired for the night, he put his long limbs into that swinging, shambling trot which characterizes the motion of those professional jackals who, having once caught sight of a groomless rider, fairly hunt him down, and appear when he least expects it, the instant he dismounts. The young rider lightly swung himself from his sleek, high-bred gray at the door of one of the clubs in St. James's Street, patted his horse's neck, chucked the rein to the sweeper, and sauntered into the house, whistling musically,—if not from want of thought, certainly from want of care.

As he entered the club, two or three men, young indeed, but much older, to appearance at least, than himself, who were dining together at the same table, nodded to him their friendly greeting.

"Ah, Perce," said one, "we have only just sat down; here is a seat for you."

The boy blushed shyly as he accepted the proposal, and the young men made room for him at the table, with a smiling alacrity which showed that his shyness was no hindrance to his popularity.

"Who," said an elderly dandy, dining apart with one of his contemporaries,—"who is that lad? One ought not to admit such mere boys into the club."

"He is the only surviving son of an old friend of ours," answered the other, dropping his eyeglass, —"young Percival St. John."

"St. John! What! Vernon St. John's son?"

"Yes."

"He has not his father's good air. These young fellows have a tone, a something,—a want of self-possession, eh?"

"Very true. The fact is, that Percival was meant for the navy, and even served as a mid for a year or so. He was a younger son, then,—third, I think. The two elder ones died, and Master Percival walked into the inheritance. I don't think he is quite of age yet."

"Of age! he does not look seventeen."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.