

The Interpreter.

CHAPTER XI.

(CONTINUED.)

DULCE DOMUM.

I asked leave to try, amidst the jeers of all, for I was usually so quiet and undemonstrative that no one believed Egerton had, in school-boy parlance either 'pith or pluck' in him. I laid my weight to it and heaved 'with a will.' The great block of timber vibrated, moved, and rolled along the sward. What a triumph it was, and how I prided myself on it. I, too, had my ideal of what I should like to be, although I had not confessed it to a soul. I wished to be like some *preux chevalier* of the olden time. I would have been brave and courteous and chivalrous and courteous and strong. Yes, in all the characters of the olden time that I so loved to study, strength was described as one of the first attributes of a hero. Sir Tristram, Sir Lancelot, Sir Bevis, were all strong, and my heart leapt to think that if the opportunity ever arrived, my personal strength might give me a chance of distinguishing myself when the beautiful and the gallant were helpless and overcome. But there was another qualification of which in my secret soul I had hideous misgivings—I doubted my own courage. I knew I was nervous and timid in the common every-day pursuits of schoolboy life. I could not venture on a strange horse without feeling my heart in my mouth. I did not dare stop a ball that was bowled swiftly in to my wicket, nor fire a gun without shutting both eyes before pulling the trigger. What if I should be a coward after all? A coward! the thoughts of it almost drove me mad. And yet how could I tell but that I was branded with that hideous curse? I longed, yet dreaded, to know the worst.

In my studies I was unusually backward for a boy of my age. Virgil, thanks to the picture of Dido, never to be forgotten, I had completely mastered. But mathematics, arithmetic—all that are termed the exact sciences—I appeared totally incapable of learning. Languages I picked up with extraordinary facility, and thus alone redeemed me from the character of an irreclaimable dunce.

'You can learn, sir, if you will,' was March's constant remark, after I had arrived at the exalted position of a senior boy, to whom flogging and such coarse measure were inappropriate, and for whom out of bounds was not. 'You can learn, or else why do I see you poring over Arabic and Sanscrit during play-hours, when you had much better be at cricket? You must have brains somewhere, but to save my life, I can't find them. You can speak half-a-dozen languages I am informed, nearly as well as I can speak Latin, and yet if I set you to do a 'Rule of Three' sum, you make more blunders than the lowest little dunce in the school! Egerton, I can't make you out.'

It was breaking up day at Everdon. Victor and I walked with our arms over each other's shoulders, up and down, up and down, at the old playground, and as we paced those well-worn flags, of which we knew every stone, my heart sank within me to think it was for the last, last time. What is there that we are not sorry to do for the last time? I had hated school as much as any schoolboy could. I had looked forward to my emancipation as the captive looks forward to the opening of his prison-door; and now the time was come, and I felt grieved and out of spirit to think that I should see the old place no more.

'You must write to me constantly, Vere,' said Victor, with an affectionate hug, as we took our hundredth turn. 'We must never forget each other, however far apart, and next winter you must come again to Edlington. I shall be there when the shooting begins. Oh, Vere, you will be very dull at home.'

'No,' I replied, 'I like Alton Grange, and I like a quiet life. I am not of your way of thinking, Victor. You are never happy except in a bustle. I wish I were more like you, and I sighed as I thought of the contrast between us.

I shall not break my heart; I am so glad to get away from this dull, dreadful place.'

Then he did not care for Miss Beverley, after all. Well, and what difference could that possibly make to me? Certainly, I was likely to see her pretty constantly in the next year or two, as our respective abodes would be but a short distance apart; but what of that? There could be nothing in common between the high-born, haughty young lady, and her awkward, repulsive neighbor. Yet I was glad, too, that Victor did not care for her. All my old affection for him came back with a gush, and I wrung his hand, and cried like a fool to think we were so soon to be parted, perhaps for years. The other boys were singing *Dulce domum* in the schoolroom, hands joined, dancing round and round, and stamping wildly with the chorus, like so many Bacchanals; they had no regrets, no misgivings; they were not going to leave for good. Even Manners looked forward to his temporary release with bright anticipations of amusement. He was to spend the vacation with a clerical cousin in Devonshire, the cousin of whom we all know so much by report, and who indeed, to judge by his relative's account, must have been an individual of extraordinary talents and attainments. The usher approached us with an expression of mingled pleasure and pain on his good looking, vacant countenance. He had nearly finished packing his things, and was now knocking the dust out of those old green slippers I remembered when first I came to Everdon. He was a goodhearted fellow, and was sorry to lose his two old friends.

'We shall miss you both very much next half,' said he; 'nothing but little boys here now. Everdon is not what it used to be. Dear me, we never have such a pupil as Ropsley now. When you two are gone there will be no one left for me to associate with; this is not a place for a man of energy, for a man that feels he is a man,' added Manners, doubling his arm, and feeling if the biceps was still in its right place. 'Here am I now, with a muscular frame, a good constitution, a spirit of adventure, and a military figure' (appealing to me, for Victor, as usual, was beginning to laugh), 'and what chance have I of using my advantages in this circumscribed sphere of action? I might as well be a weak, puny stripling, without an atom of nerve, or manliness, or energy, for all the good I am likely to do here. I must out it, Egerton; I must find a career; I am too good for an usher—an usher,' he repeated, with a strong expression of disgust; 'I, who feel fit to fight my way anywhere—I have mistaken my profession—I ought to have been an officer—a cavalry officer; that would have suited me better than this dull, insipid life. I must consult my cousin about it; perhaps we shall meet again in some different scenes. What say you, De Rohau, should you not be surprised to see me at the head of a regiment?'

Victor could conceal his mirth no longer, and Manners turned somewhat angrily to me. 'You seem to be very happy as you are,' I answered, sadly, for I was contrasting his well-grown, upright figure and simple fresh-colored face, with my own repulsive exterior, and thinking how willingly I would change places with him, although he was an usher; 'but wherever we meet, I am sure I shall be glad to see you again.' In my own heart I thought Manners was pretty certain to be at Everdon if I should revisit it that day ten years, as I was used to these visionary schemes of his for the future, and had heard him talk in the same strain every vacation regularly since I first came to school.

But there was little time for such speculations. The chaises were driving round to the door to take the boys away. March bid us an affectionate farewell in his study. Victor and I were presented respectively with a richly bound copy of *Horatius Flaccus* and *Virgilius Maro*—copies which, I fear, in after life were never soiled by too much use. The last farewell was spoken—the last pressure of the hand exchanged—and we drove off on our different destinations; my friend bound for London, Paris, and his beloved Hungary; myself, longing to see my father once more, and taste the seclusion and repose of Alton Grange. To no boy on earth could a school-life have been more distasteful than to me; no boy could have longed more ardently for the peaceful calm of a domestic hearth, and yet I felt lonely and out of spirits even now, when I was going home

summer, were the distinguishing qualities of the old house. Of furniture there was but a scanty supply, and that of the most old-fashioned description: high backed chairs of carved oak, black leathern fauteuils, chimney-pieces that the tallest housemaid could never reach to dust, would have impressed on a stranger an idea of anything but comfort, whilst the decorations were confined to two or three hideous old pictures, representing impossible sufferings of certain fabulous martyrs; and one or two sketches of my father's, which had arrived at sufficient maturity to leave the painting-room, and adorn the every-day life of the establishment.

The last-named apartment was cheerful enough; it was necessarily supplied with a sufficiency of daylight, and as my father made it his own peculiar den, and spent the greater part of his life in it, there were present many smaller comforts and luxuries which might have been sought elsewhere in the house in vain. But no room was ever comfortable yet without a woman. Men have no idea of order without formality, or abundance without untidiness. My father had accumulated in his own particular retreat a heterogeneous mass of articles which should have had their proper places appointed, and had no business mixed up with his colors, and easel, and brushes. Sticks, whips, cloaks, umbrellas, cigar-boxes, swords, and fire arms, were mingled with last-year's models, studies, and draperies, in a manner that would have driven an orderly person out of his senses; but my father never troubled his head about these matters, and when he came in from a walk or ride, would fling his hat down in one corner of the room, the end of his cigar in another, his cloak or whip in a third, and begin painting again with an avidity that seemed to grow fiercer from the enforced abstinence of a few hours in taking necessary exercise. My poor father! I often think if he had devoted less attention to his art, and more to the common every-day business of life, which no one may neglect with impunity, how much better he would have succeeded, both as a painter and a man.

He was hard at work when I came home from school. I knew well where to find him, and hurried at once to the painting-room. He was seated at his easel, but as I entered he drew a screen across the canvas, and so hid his work from my inquiring gaze. I never knew him to do so before; on the contrary, it had always seemed his greatest desire to rustle into his son some of his own love for the art; but I had hardly time to think of this ere I was in his arms, looking up once more in the kind face, on which I never in my whole life remembered to have seen a harsh expression. He was altered, though, and thinner than when I had seen him last, and his hair was now quite grey, so that the contrast with his flashing dark eye—brighter it seemed to me than ever—was almost unearthly. His hands, too, were wasted, and whiter than they used to be, and the whole figure, which I remembered once a tower of strength, was now sunk and fallen in, particularly about the chest and shoulders. When he stood up, it struck me, also, that he was shorter than he used to be, and my heart tightened for a moment at the thought that he might be even now embarking on that long journey from which there is no return. I remembered him such a tall, handsome, stalwart man, and now he seemed so shrunk and emaciated, and quite to totter and lean on me for support.

'You are grown, my boy,' said he, looking fondly at me; 'you are getting quite a man now, Vere; it will be sadly dull for you at the Grange; but you must stay with your old father for a time—it will not be for long—not for long,' he repeated, and his eye turned to the screened canvas, and a glance shot from it that I could hardly bear to see—so despairing, yet so longing—so wild, and yet so fond. I had never seen him look thus before, and it frightened me.

Our quiet meal in the old oak parlor—our saunter after dinner through the dark walls and shrubberies—all was so like the olden time, that I felt quite a boy again. My father lighted up for a time into his former good spirits and amusing sallies, but I remarked that after every flash he sank into a deeper dejection, and I fancied the tears were in his eyes as he wished me good-night at the door of the painting room. I little thought when I went to bed that it was his habit to sit brooding there till the early dawn of morning, when he would retire for three or four hours

dark eyes, a touch of her soft hand, from the helms of Beverley Manor.

Yes, Alton Grange was distant but a short walk from Beverley. Many a time I found myself roaming through the old trees at the end of the park, looking wistfully at the angles and turrets of the beautiful Manor House, and debating within myself whether I ought or ought not to call and renew an acquaintance with the family that had treated me so kindly after the scrape brought on by Bold's insubordination. That favorite was now a mature and experienced retriever, grave, imperturbable, and of extraordinary sagacity. Poor Bold! he was the handsomest and most powerful dog I ever saw, with a solemn expression of countenance that denoted as much intellect as was ever apparent on the face of a human being. We were vastly proud of Bold's beauty at the Grange, and my father had painted him a dozen times, in the performance of every feat, possible or impossible, that it comes within the province of a retriever to attempt. Bold was now my constant companion; he knew the way to Beverley as well as his own lair in my bed-room, where he slept. Day after day he and I took the same road; day after day my courage failed me at the last moment, and we turned back without making the intended visit. At last, one morning while as I strolled among the old trees at one extremity of the park, I caught sight of a white dress rounding the corner of the house, and entering the front door. I felt sure it could only belong to one, and with an effort that quite surprised even myself, I resolved to master my absurd timidity, and walk boldly up to call.

I have not the slightest recollection of my ringing the door-bell, nor of the usual process by which a gentleman is admitted into a drawing room; the rush of blood to my head almost blinded me, but I conclude that instinct took the place of reason, and that I demeaned myself in no such incoherent manner as to excite the attention of the servants, for I found myself in the beautiful drawing-room, which I remembered I had thought such a scene of fairyland years before, and seated, hat in hand, opposite Miss Beverley.

She must have thought me the stupidest morning visitor that ever obtained entrance into a country-house. Indeed, had it not been for the good-natured efforts of an elderly lady with a hook nose, who had been her governess, and was now a sort of companion, Miss Beverley would have had all the conversation to herself. And I am constrained to admit that once or twice I caught an expression on her calm, sweet face, that could only have been called up by the very inconsequent answers of which I was guilty in my nervous abstraction. I was so taken up in watching and admiring her, that I could think of nothing else. She was so quiet and self-possessed, so gentle and lady-like, so cool and well-dressed. I can remember the way in which her hair was parted and arranged to this day. She seemed to me a being of a superior order, something that never could be by any possibility belong to the sphere as myself. She was more like the picture of Queen Dido than ever, but the queen, happy and fancy-free, with kindly eyes and unruffled brow; not the deceived, broken-hearted woman on her self-selected death-bed. I am not going to describe her—perhaps she was not so beautiful to others—perhaps I should have wished all the rest of the world to think her positively hideous—perhaps she was then not so transcendently beautiful even to me. Nay, as I looked, I could pick faults in her features and coloring. I had served a long enough apprenticeship to my father to be able to criticise like an artist, and I could see here a tint that might be deepened, there a plait that might be better arranged—I do not mean to say she was perfect—I do not mean to say that she was a goddess or an angel; but I do mean to say that if ever there was a face on earth which to me presented the ideal of all that is sweetest and most lovable in woman, that face was Constance Beverley's.

And yet I was not in love. No, I felt something exalting, something exhilarating in her presence—she seemed to fill the void in my life, which had long been so wearisome, but I was not in love with her—certainly not then. I felt less shy than usual, I even felt as if I too had some claim to social distinction, and could play my part as well as the rest on the shifting stage.

here I hesitated and stammered, till reassured by the smile on his dear old face,—'I don't mind asking you, and I do wish to know—am I so very, very—ugly?' I brought out the hated word with an effort—my father burst out laughing.

'What an odd question—why do you wish to know, Vere?' he asked. I made no reply, but I felt I was blushing painfully. My father looked wistfully at me, while an expression as of pain contracted his features; and here the conversation dropped.

CHAPTER XIII.

'LETHALIS ARUNDO.'

That week I went over again to Beverley the next, I had a book to fetch for Constance from Fleetsbury, that she had long wished to read, and I took it to her a volume at a time. My father was still busy with his painting—Sir Harry had gone off to Newmarket—Miss Minim seemed delighted to find any one who could relieve the monotony of the Manor House, and Constance herself treated me, now that the first awkwardness of our re-introduction was over, like an old playmate and friend. I was happier than I had ever been in my life. I felt an elasticity of spirits, a self-respect and self-reliance that I had thought myself hitherto incapable of entertaining. Oh, the joy of that blindfold time! whilst our eyes are wistfully shut to the future that we yet know must come, whilst we bask in the sunshine and inhale the fragrance of the rose, nor heed the thunder-cloud sleeping on the horizon, and the worm creeping at the core of the flower. I looked on Constance as I would have looked on an angel from heaven. I did not even confess to myself that I loved her, I was satisfied with the intense happiness of the present and trembled at the bare idea of anything that might break the spell, and interrupt the calm quiet of our lives. With one excuse of another, I was at Beverley nearly every day; there were flowers to be dried for Constance, a great botanist, and I had taken up that study, as I would have taken up shoe-making, could I have seen her a minute a day longer for the pursuit—there was music to be copied, and if I could do nothing else, could point off those crabbed hieroglyphic like a very engraver. Then Miss Minim broke her fan, and I walked ten miles in the rain to get it mended, with an alacrity and devotion that must have convinced her it was not for her sake; and yet I loved Miss Minim dearly, she was so associated in my mind with Constance, that except the young lady's own, that wizened old face brought the blood to my brow more rapidly than any other in the world. Oh my heart aches when I think of that beautiful drawing-room, opening into the conservatory, and Constance playing airs on the pianoforte that made my nerves tingle with an ecstasy that was almost painful. Miss Minim engaged with her crochet-work in the back-ground, and I, the awkward, ungainly youth, saying nothing hardly breathing, lest I should break the spell; but gazing intently on the fair young face, with its soft kind eyes, and its thrilling smile, and the smooth, shining braids of jet black hair parted simply on that pure brow. Miss was no love at first sight, no momentary infatuation that has its course and burns itself out, the fiercer the sooner, with its own unstained violence. No; it grew and stole upon me by degrees, I drank it with every breath I breathed—I fought against it till every moment of my life was a struggle; and yet I cherished and pressed it to my heart when all was done. I knew there was no equal for such as Miss Beverley. I knew I had no right even to lift my eyes to so much beauty and so much goodness—the awkward, ugly schoolboy, or at best the shrinking, unattractive youth, in whose homage there was nothing for a woman to take pride, even if she did not think it ridiculous; but yet—God! how I loved her! Not a blossom in the garden, not a leaf on the tree, not a ray of sunshine, nor a white cloud drifting over the heaven, but was associated in my mind with her who was all the world to me. If I saw other women, I only compared them with her; if I read of beauty and grace in my dear old romances, or hunted over the exquisite casts and spirited studies of my father's painting-room, it was but to refer the poet's dream and the artist's conception back to my own ideal. How I longed