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LUCILE.

Dedication.

TO MY FATHER.

I DEDICATE to you a work, which is submitted to the public with a diffidence and hesitation proportioned to the novelty of the effort it represents. For in this poem I have abandoned those forms of verse with which I had most familiarized my thoughts, and have endeavored to follow a path on which I could discover no footprints before me, either to guide or to warn.

There is a moment of profound discouragement which succeeds to prolonged effort; when, the labor which has become a habit having ceased, we miss the sustaining sense of its championship, and stand, with a feeling of strangeness and embarrassment, before the abrupt and naked result. As regards myself, in the present instance, the force of all such sensations is increased by the circumstances to which I have referred. And in this moment of discouragement and doubt my heart instinctively turns to you, from whom it has so often sought, from whom it has never failed to receive, support.

I do not inscribe to you this book because it contains anything that is worthy of the beloved and honored name with which I thus seek to associate it; nor yet, because I would avail myself of a vulgar pretext to display in public an affection that is best honored by the silence which it renders sacred.

Feelings only such as those with which, in days when there existed for me no critic less gentle than yourself, I brought to you my childish manuscripts,—feelings only such as those which have, in later years, associated with your heart all that has moved or occupied my own,—lead me once more to seek assurance from the grasp of that hand which has hitherto been my guide and comfort through the life I owe to you.

And as in childhood, when existence had no toll beyond the day's simple lesson, no ambition beyond the neighboring approval of the night, I brought to you the morning's task for the evening's sanction, so now I bring to you the morning's task-work of maturer years; less confident indeed of your approval, but not less confident of your love; and anxious only to realize your presence between myself and the public, and to mingle with those severer voices to whose final sentence I submit my work the beloved and gracious accents of your own.

OWEN MEREDITH.

PART I.

CANTO I.

I.

Letter from the COMTESSE DE NEVERS to LORD ALFRED VARGRAVE.

"I HEAR from Bigorre you are there.

I am told

You are going to marry Miss Darcy.

Of old,

[it now,

So long since you may have forgotten

(When we parted as friends, soon mere strangers to grow,)

Your last words recorded a pledge—
what you will—

A promise—the time is now come to
fulfil.

The letters I ask you, my lord, to re-
turn,

I desire to receive from your hand.
You discern

My reasons, which, therefore, I need
not explain.

The distance to Serchon is short. I
remain

A month in these mountains. Miss Darcy, perchance, Will forego one brief page from the summer romance Of her courtship, and spare you one day from your place At her feet, in the light of her fair English face. I desire nothing more, and I trust you will feel I desire nothing much.
"Your friend always,
"LUCILE."

II.

Now in May Fair, of course,—in the fair month of May,—
When life is abundant, and busy, and gay :
When the markets of London are noisy about
Young ladies, and strawberries, —
"only just out :"
Fresh strawberries sold under all the house-eaves,
And young ladies on sale for the strawberry leaves :
When cards, invitations, and three-cornered notes
Fly about like white butterflies,—
gay little motes
In the sunbeam of Fashion ; and even Blue Books
Take a heavy-winged flight, and grow busy as rooks ;
And the postman (that Genius, indifferent and stern,
Who shakes out even-handed to all, from his urn,
Those lots which so often decide if our day
Shall be fretful and anxious, or joyous and gay),
Brings, each morning, more letters of one sort or other
Than Cadmus himself put together, to bother
The heads of Hellenes ;—I say, in the season
Of Fair May, in May Fair, there can be no reason

Why, when quietly munching your dry-toast and butter,
Your nerves should be suddenly thrown in a flutter
At the sight of a neat little letter, addressed
In a woman's handwriting, containing, half guessed,
An odor of violets faint as the Spring,
And coquettishly sealed with a small signet-ring.
But in Autumn, the season of sombre reflection,
When a damp day, at breakfast, begins with dejection ;
Far from London and Paris, and ill at one's ease,
Away in the heart of the blue Pyrenees,
Where a call from the doctor, a stroll to the bath,
A ride through the hills on a hack like a lath,
A cigar, a French novel, a tedious flirtation,
Are all a man finds for his day's occupation,
The whole case, believe me, is totally changed,
And a letter may alter the plans we arranged
Over-night, for the slaughter of Time,—a wild beast,
Which, though classified yet by no naturalist,
Abounds in these mountains, more hard to ensnare,
And more mischievous, too, than the lynx or the bear.

III.

I marvel less, therefore, that, having already
Torn open this note, with a hand most unsteady,
Lord Alfred was startled.
The month is September ;
Time, morning ; the scene at Bigorre ; (pray remember
These facts, gentle reader, because I intend

To fling all the unities by at the end.)
He walked to the window. The morning was chill :
The brown woods were crisped in the cold on the hill :
The sole thing abroad in the streets was the wind ;
And the straws on the gust, like the thoughts in his mind,
Rose, and eddied around and around, as though teasing
Each other. The prospect, in truth, was unpleasing :
And Lord Alfred, whilst moodily gazing around it,
To himself more than once (vexed in soul) sighed
. . . "Confound it !"

IV.

What the thoughts were which led to this bad interjection,
Sir, or Madam, I leave to your future detection ;
For whatever they were, they were burst in upon,
As the door was burst through, by my lord's Cousin John.

COUSIN JOHN.

A fool, Alfred, a fool, a most motley fool !

LORD ALFRED.

Who ?

JOHN.

The man who has anything better to do ;
And yet so far forgets himself, so far degrades
His position as Man, to this worst of all trades,
Which even a well-brought-up ape were above,
To travel about with a woman in love,—
Unless she's in love with himself.

ALFRED.

Indeed ! why
Are you there then, dear Jack ?

JOHN.

Can't you guess it ?

ALFRED.

Not I.

JOHN.

Because *I have* nothing that's better to do.

I had rather be bored, my dear Alfred, by you,
On the whole (I must own), than be bored by myself.

That perverse, imperturbable, golden-haired elf—

Your Will-o'-the-wisp—that has led you and me

Such a dance through these hills—

ALFRED.

Who, Matilda ?

JOHN.

Yes ! she,

Of course ! who but she could contrive so to keep

One's eyes, and one's feet too, from falling asleep

For even one half-hour of the long twenty-four ?

ALFRED.

What's the matter ?

JOHN.

Why, she is—a matter, the more I consider about it, the more it demands

An attention it does not deserve ; and expands

Beyond the dimensions which even crinoline,

When possessed by a fair face and saucy Eighteen,

Is entitled to take in this very small star,

Already too crowded, as *I* think, by far.

You read Malthus and Sadler ?

ALFRED.

Of course,

JOHN.
To what use,
When you countenance, calmly, such
monstrous abuse
Of one mere human creature's legit-
imate space
In this world? Mars, Apollo, —o-
rum! the case
Wholly passes my patience.

ALFRED.
My own is worse tried.

JOHN.
Yours, Alfred?

ALFRED.
Read this, if you doubt, and decide.

JOHN (reading the letter).
"I hear from Bigorre you are there.
I am told
You are going to marry Miss Darcy.
Of old—"
What is this?

ALFRED.
Read it on to the end, and you'll
know.

JOHN (continues reading).
"When we parted, your last words
recorded a vow—
What you will" . . .
Hang it! this smells all over, I
swear,
Of adventures and violets. Was it
your hair
You promised a lock of?"

ALFRED.
Read on. You'll discern.

JOHN (continues).
"Those letters I ask you, my lord,
to return." . . .
Humph! . . . Letters! . . . the
matter is worse than I guessed;
I have my misgivings—

ALFRED.
Well, read out the rest,
And advise.

JOHN.
Eh? . . . Where was I? . . .
(Continues.)

"Miss Darcy, perchance,
Will forego one brief page from the
summer romance
Of her courtship." . . .

Egad! a romance, for my part,
I'd forego every page of, and not
break my heart!

ALFRED.

Continue!

JOHN (reading).
"And spare you one day from your
place
At her feet." . . .

Pray forgive me the passing grim-
ace.

I wish you had my place!

(Reads.)
"I trust you will feel
I desire nothing much. Your
friend" . . .

Bless me! "Lucille"?
The Comtesse de Nevers?

ALFRED.

Yes.

JOHN.

What will you do?

ALFRED.

You ask me just what I would rather
ask you.

JOHN.

You can't go.

ALFRED.

I must.

JOHN.

And Matilda?

ALFRED.

O, that

You must manage!

JOHN.

Must I? I decline it, though, flat.
In an hour the horses will be at the
door,

And Matilda is now in her habit.
Before

I have finished my breakfast, of
course I receive

A message for "dear Cousin John!"
. . . I must leave

At the jeweller's the bracelet which
you broke last night;

I must call for the music. "Dear
Alfred is right:

The black shawl looks best: will I
change it? Of course

I can just stop, in passing, to order
the horse.

Then Beau has the mumps, or St.
Hubert knows what;

Will I see the dog-doctor?" Hang
Beau! I will not.

ALFRED.

Tush, tush! this is serious.

JOHN.

It is.

ALFRED.

Very well,

You must think—

JOHN.

What excuse will you make, though?

ALFRED.

O, tell

Mrs. Darcy that . . . lend me your
wits, Jack! . . . the deuce!

Can you not stretch your genius to fit
a friend's use?

Excuses are clothes which, when
asked unawares,

Good Breeding to naked Necessity
spares.

You must have a whole wardrobe,
no doubt.

JOHN.

My dear fellow!

Matilda is jealous, you know, as
Othello.

ALFRED.

You joke.

JOHN.

I am serious. Why go to Serchon?

ALFRED.

Don't ask me. I have not a choice,
my dear John.

Besides, shall I own a strange sort of
desire,

Before I extinguish forever the fire
Of youth and romance, in whose
shadowy light

Hope whispered her first fairy tales,
to excite

The last spark, till it rise, and fade
far in that dawn

Of my days where the twilights of
life were first drawn

By the rosy, reluctant auroras of
Love:

In short, from the dead Past the
gravestone to move;

Of the years long departed forever to
take

One last look, one final farewell, to
awake

The Heroic of youth from the Hades
of joy,

And once more be, though but for
an hour, Jack—a boy!

JOHN.

You had better go hang yourself.

ALFRED.

No! were it but
To make sure that the Past from the
Future is shut,

It were worth the step back. Do
you think we should live

With the living so lightly, and learn
to survive

That wild moment in which to the
grave and its gloom

We consigned our heart's best, if the
doors of the tomb

Were not locked with a key which
Fate keeps for our sake?

If the dead could return, or the
corpses awake?

JOHN.

Nonsense!

ALFRED.

Not wholly. The man who gets up
A filled guest from the banquet, and
drains off his cup,
Sees the last lamp extinguished with
cheerfulness, goes
Well contented to bed, and enjoys
its repose.
But he who hath supped at the
tables of kings,
And yet starved in the sight of lux-
urious things ;
Who hath watched the wine flow,
by himself but half tasted,
Heard the music, and yet missed the
tune ; who hath wasted
One part of life's grand possibili-
ties ;—friend,
That man will bear with him, be
sure, to the end,
A blighted experience, a rancor
within :
You may call it a virtue, I call it a
sin.

JOHN.

I see you remember the cynical story
Of that wicked old piece of Experi-
ence—a hoary
Lothario, whom dying, the priest by
his bed
(Knowing well the unprincipled life
he had led,
And observing, with no small amount
of surprise,
Resignation and calm in the old sin-
ner's eyes)
Asked if he had nothing that weighed
on his mind :
"Well, . . . no," says Lothario, "I
think not. I find
On reviewing my life, which in most
things was pleasant,
I never neglected, when once it was
present,
An occasion of pleasing myself. On
the whole,
I have naught to regret"; . . . and
so, smiling, his soul
Took its flight from this world.

ALFRED.

Well, Regret or Remorse,
Which is best ?

JOHN.

Why, Regret.

ALFRED.

No ; Remorse, Jack, of course ;
For the one is related, to be sure, to
the other.
Regret is a spiteful old maid ; but
her brother,
Remorse, though a widower cer-
tainly, yet
Has been wed to young Pleasure.
Dear Jack, hang Regret !

JOHN.

Bref ! you mean, then, to go ?

ALFRED.

Bref ! I do.

JOHN.

One word . . . stay !
Are you really in love with Matilda ?

ALFRED.

Love, eh ?

What a question ! Of course.

JOHN.

Were you really in love
With Madame de Nevers ?

ALFRED.

What ; Lucile ? No, by Jove,
Never really.

JOHN.

She's pretty ?

ALFRED.

Decidedly so,
At least, so she was, some ten sum-
mers ago.
As soft and as sallow as Autumn,—
with hair
Neither black, nor yet brown, but
that tinge which the air

Takes at eve in September, when
night lingers lone
Through a vineyard, from beams
of a slow-setting sun.
Eyes—the wistful gazelle's ; the fine
foot of a fairy ;
And a hand fit a fay's wand to wave,
—white and airy ;
A voice soft and sweet as a tune that
one knows.
Something in her there was, set you
thinking of those
Strange backgrounds of Raphael . . .
that hectic and deep
Brief twilight in which southern
suns fall asleep.

JOHN.

Coquette ?

ALFRED.

Not at all. 'Twas her own fault.
Not she !
I had loved her the better, had she
less loved me.
The heart of a man's like that deli-
cate weed
Which requires to be trampled on,
boldly indeed,
Ere it gives forth the fragrance you
wish to extract.
'Tis a simile, trust me, if not new,
exact.

JOHN.

Women change so.

ALFRED.

Of course.

JOHN.

And, unless rumor errs,
I believe that, last year, the Comtesse
de Nevers *

* O Shakespeare ! how couldst thou ask
"What's in a name?"
'Tis the devil's in it when a bard has to
frame
English rhymes for alliance with names
that are French ;
And in these rhymes of mine, well I know
that I trench
All too far on that license which critics re-
fuse,

Was at Baden the rage,—held an
absolute court
Of devoted adorers, and really made
sport
Of her subjects.

ALFRED.

Indeed !

JOHN.

When she broke off with you
Her engagement, her heart did not
break with it ?

ALFRED.

Pooh !

Pray would you have had her dress
always in black,
And shut herself up in a convent,
dear Jack ?
Besides, 'twas my fault the engage-
ment was broken.

JOHN.

Most likely. How was it ?

ALFRED.

The tale is soon spoken.
She bored me. I showed it. She
saw it. What next ?
She reproached. I retorted. Of
course she was vexed.
I was vexed that she was so. She
sulked. So did I.
If I asked her to sing, she looked
ready to cry.
I was contrite, submissive. She
softened. I hardened.
At noon I was banished. At eve I
was pardoned.

With just right, to accord to a well-brought-
up Muse.
Yet, though faulty the union, in many a
line,
'Twixt my British-born verse and my
French heroine,
Since, however auspiciously wedded they
be,
There is many a pair that yet cannot
agree.
Your forgiveness for this pair the author
invites,
Whom necessity, not inclination, unites.

She said I had no heart. I said she had no reason. I swore she talked nonsense. She sobbed I talked treason. In short, my dear fellow, 'twas time, as you see, Things should come to a crisis, and finish. 'Twas she By whom to that crisis the matter was brought. She released me. I lingered. I lingered, she thought, With too sullen an aspect. This gave me, of course, The occasion to fly in a rage, mount my horse, And declare myself uncomprehended. And so We parted. The rest of the story you know.

JOHN.

No, indeed.

ALFRED.

Well, we parted. Of course we could not Continue to meet, as before, in one spot. You conceive it was awkward? Even Don Ferdinando Can do, you remember, no more than he can do. I think that I acted exceedingly well, Considering the time when this rupture befell, For Paris was charming just then. It deranged All my plans for the winter. I asked to be changed,— Wrote for Naples, then vacant,—obtained it,—and so Joined my new post at once; but scarce reached it, when lo! My first news from Paris informs me Lucile Is ill, and in danger. Conceive what I feel. I fly back. I find her recovered, but yet

Looking pale. I am seized with a contrite regret; I ask to renew the engagement.

JOHN.

And she?

ALFRED.

Reflects, but declines. We part, swearing to be Friends ever, friends only. All that sort of thing! We each keep our letters . . . a portrait . . . a ring . . . With a pledge to return them whenever the one Or the other shall call for them back.

JOHN.

Pray go on.

ALFRED.

My story is finished. Of course I enjoin On Lucile all those thousand good maxims we coin To supply the grim deficit found in our days, When Love leaves them bankrupt. I preach. She obeys. She goes out in the world; takes to dancing once more.— A pleasure she rarely indulged in before. I go back to my post, and collect (I must own 'Tis a taste I had never before, my dear John) Antiques and small Elzevirs. Heigho! now, Jack, You know all.

JOHN (after a pause).

You are really resolved to go back?

ALFRED.

Eh, where?

JOHN.

To that worst of all places,—the past. You remember Lot's wife?

ALFRED.

'Twas a promise when last We parted. My honor is pledged to it.

JOHN.

Well, What is it you wish me to do?

ALFRED.

You must tell Matilda, I meant to have called—to leave word— To explain—but the time was so pressing—

JOHN.

My lord, Your lordship's obedient! I really can't do. . .

ALFRED.

You wish then to break off my marriage?

JOHN.

No, no! But indeed I can't see why yourself you need take These letters.

ALFRED.

Not see? would you have me, then, break A promise my honor is pledged to?

JOHN (humming).

"Off, off, And away! said the stranger". . .

ALFRED.

O, good! O, you scoff!

JOHN.

At what, my dear Alfred?

ALFRED.

At all things!

JOHN.

Indeed?

ALFRED.

Yes; I see that your heart is as dry as a reed:

That the dew of your youth is rubbed off you: I see You have no feeling left in you, even for me!

At honor you jest; you are cold as a stone

To the warm voice of friendship. Belief you have none;

You have lost faith in all things. You carry a blight

About with you everywhere. Yes, at the sight

Of such callous indifference, who could be calm?

I must leave you at once, Jack, or else the last balm

That is left me in Gilead you'll turn into gall.

Heartless, cold, unconcerned. . .

JOHN.

Have you done? Is that all? Well, then, listen to me! I presume when you made

Up your mind to propose to Miss Darcy, you weighed

All the drawbacks against the equivalent gains,

Ere you finally settled the point. What remains

But to stick to your choice? You want money: 'tis here.

A settled position: 'tis yours. A career:

You secure it. A wife, young, and pretty as rich,

Whom all men will envy you. Why must you itch

To be running away, on the eve of all this,

To a woman whom never for once did you miss

All these years since you left her? Who knows what may hap?

This letter—to me—is a palpable trap.

The woman has changed since you knew her. P'rchance

She yet seeks to renew her youth's broken romance.

When women begin to feel youth and their beauty

Slip from them, they count it a sort
of a duty
To let nothing else slip away unse-
cured
Which these, while they lasted,
might once have procured.
Lucile's coquette to the end of her
fingers,
I will stake my last farthing. Per-
haps the wish lingers
To recall the once reckless, indiffer-
ent lover
To the feet he has left ; let intrigue
now recover
What truth could not keep. 'Twere
a vengeance, no doubt—
A triumph ;—but why must you
bring it about ?
You are risking the substance of all
that you schemed
To obtain ; and for what ? Some
mad dream you have dreamed !

ALFRED.

But there's nothing to risk. You
exaggerate, Jack.
You mistake. In three days, at the
most, I am back.

JOHN.

Ay, but how ? . . . discontented, un-
settled, upset,
Bearing with you a comfortless
twinge of regret ;
Preoccupied, sulky, and likely
enough
To make your betrothed break off
all in a huff.
Three days, do you say ? But in
three days who knows
What may happen ? I don't, nor
do you, I suppose.

V.

Of all the good things in this good
world around us,
The one most abundantly furnished
and found us,
And which, for that reason, we
least care about,
And can best spare our friends, is
good counsel, no doubt.

But advice, when 'tis sought from a
friend (though civility
May forbid to avow it), means mere
liability
In the bill we already have drawn
on Remorse,
Which we deem that a true friend is
bound to indorse.
A mere lecture on debt from that
friend is a bore.
Thus, the better his cousin's advice
was, the more
Alfred Vargrave with angry resent-
ment opposed it.
And, having the worst of the con-
test, he closed it
With so firm a resolve his bad ground
to maintain,
That, sadly perceiving resistance was
vain,
And argument fruitless, the amiable
Jack
Came to terms, and assisted his
cousin to pack
A slender valise (the one small con-
descension
Which his final remonstrance ob-
tained), whose dimension
Excluded large outfits ; and, cursing
his stars, he
Shook hands with his friend and re-
turned to Miss Darcy.

VI.

Lord Alfred, when last to the win-
dow he turned,
Ere he locked up and quitted his
chamber, discerned
Matilda ride by, with her cheek
beaming bright
In what Virgil has called " Youth's
purpureal light "
(I like the expression, and can't find
a better).
He sighed as he looked at her. Did
he regret her ?
In her habit and hat, with her glad
golden hair, [air,
As airy and blithe as a blithe bird in
And her arch rosy lips, and her
eager blue eyes,

With their little impertinent look of
surprise,
And her round youthful figure, and
fair neck, below
The dark drooping feather, as
radiant as snow,—
I can only declare, that if I had the
chance
Of passing three days in the ex-
quisite glance
Of those eyes, or caressing the hand
that now petted
That fine English mare, I should
much have regretted
Whatever might lose me one little
half-hour
Of a pastime so pleasant, when once
in my power.
For, if one drop of milk from the
bright Milky-Way
Could turn into a woman, 'twould
look, I dare say,
Not more fresh than Matilda was
looking that day.

VII.

But, whatever the feeling that
prompted the sigh
With which Alfred Vargrave now
watched her ride by,
I can only affirm that, in watching
her ride,
As he turned from the window, he
certainly sighed.

CANTO II.

I.

Letter from LORD ALFRED VAR-
GRAVE to the COMTESSE DE
NEVERS.

"BIGORRE, Tuesday.

" Your note, Madam, reached me
to-day, at Bigorre,
And commands (need I add ?) my
obedience. Before
The night I shall be at Serclon,—
where a line,
If sent to Duval's, the hotel where I
dine,

Will find me, awaiting your orders.
Receive
My respects,
" Yours sincerely,
" A. VARGRAVE,
" I leave
In an hour."

II.

In an hour from the time he wrote
this,
Alfred Vargrave, in tracking a
mountain abyss,
Gave the rein to his steed and his
thoughts, and pursued,
In pursuing his course through the
blue solitude,
The reflections that journey gave
rise to.

And here

(Because, without some such pre-
caution, I fear
You might fail to distinguish them
each from the rest
Of the world they belong to ; whose
captives are drest,
As our convicts, precisely the same
one and all,
While the coat cut for Peter is passed
on to Paul)
I resolve, one by one, when I pick
from the mass
The persons I want, as before you
they pass,
To label them broadly in plain black
and white
On the backs of them. Therefore
whilst yet he's in sight,
I first label my hero.

III.

The age is gone o'er

When a man may in all things be all.
We have more
Painters, poets, musicians, and art-
ists, no doubt,
Than the great Cinquecento gave
birth to ; but out
Of a million of mere dilettanti, when,
when
Will a new LEONARDO arise on our
ken ?