

## LITERATURE.

ERNEST;  
OR, THE CHILD OF DESTINY.

BY PAUL CREYTON.

## CHAPTER III.

## THE DUEL.

As Maurice had said, Vibert was considered one of the first lames in the French capital. But Ernest was nothing daunted by the intelligence. Confident of his own skill—he having devoted much time to perfecting himself in the practice of all weapons used by duelists at that period—he was even glad to learn that he had no undue advantage over his adversary.

They crossed their swords. Ernest was cool as if merely going through with the exercises with a companion. Vibert, although heated with passion, and desperate, also appeared self-possessed; but he began the combat with an energy that contrasted strangely with the careless defence of his antagonist. An anxious group was collected around them, not the least interested of whom was Maurice Lambert.

For some time the weapons of the combatants crossed, and wound about each other, so to speak, with that grace and dexterity which bespeak the accomplished swordsman. At first Ernest confined himself to observing his adversary's mode of attack, and to defending his own person, without seriously defending his thrusts; but at length, as Vibert pressed him more closely, his weapon moved with greater rapidity and force, and his eye flashed with a strange and terrible meaning. The two blades crashed and grated against each other in quick succession, when Vibert made a masterly thrust and grazed his antagonist's side.

"A hit!" murmured the spectators.

"A scratch," said Ernest, with a fiendish smile, "but there will be something worse in a moment!"

He now changed his mode of defence into a furious and skilful attack, thrusting with such precision and rapidity that Vibert was obliged to fall back.

Ernest darted forward, and with a skilful movement wrenched his antagonist's weapon from his grasp.

"Finish me!" said Vibert.

"Resume your sword," returned young Clairret, with a smile.

Vibert did so. Again the two were opposed to each other in deadly strife. Twice the cold steel touched the breast of Ernest. Vibert was bleeding at half a dozen wounds. Feeling his strength failing fast, he thrust fiercely at Ernest, regardless of the wounds which he himself received, and at last succeeded in planting his blade, directly beneath his ribs, on the left side. No sooner did Ernest feel the pang shoot through him, than summoning all his remaining strength he plunged his sword into the bosom of his antagonist, and fell with him to the ground.

Maurice sprang forward to assist his friend. He had already fainted, and the blood was gushing from his wound. Two surgeons were at hand; one of them hastened to Ernest's side, and while the other was occupied with Vibert, proceeded to examine the gash in his side. The blood was staunch, and Ernest was conveyed to a couch.

"The wound!" whispered Maurice, in an agony of doubt.

"Is dangerous, if not mortal!" replied the surgeon.

In a few moments the young man recovered his consciousness.

"And Vibert?" he murmured, "have I killed him?"

"Ernest!" exclaimed Maurice, "do not speak—"

"But tell me if he is dead!"

"I do not know. But you must be quiet."

"Quiet! how can I be quiet? Impossible, until I know if he is dead."

An attendant was sent to ascertain the truth. When he returned, Ernest had fainted a second time. On recovering, his first words were concerning Vibert.

"He is not yet dead," said Maurice.

"Thank God!" murmured the young man. "I am the one to blame; and if he should die, I am a murderer!"

"Hush, Ernest," said Maurice. Remember it was in a duel—"

"A duel—yes! but it is not pleasant to think of leaving the world responsible for the death of a fellow-being, even though that fellow-being at the same time caused your own."

"Ernest—what do you mean?"

"I mean that I feel what the surgeon would conceal from me—that my wound is mortal, and—"

"No, no!" interrupted Maurice, in broken accents, "it is only a slight hurt."

"Do not attempt to deceive me, my dear Maurice," replied Ernest, with a sad smile, "for I feel that I am going fast. Is my father, M. Clairret, sent for?"

"Yes."

"Well, but if I die before his arrival, you will say to him that I thought of him with gratitude, until the last. Adieu, Maurice—"

Then the voice of the young man became so faint that his friend was obliged to incline his ear to his lips to hear him.

"Go on," said Maurice.

"Send the attendants away."

"They are gone."

"My dear friend," pursued Ernest, pressing his companion's hand, "I have but two requests to make, which, if you love me, you will fulfil."

"Ernest!" exclaimed the other, in a voice choked by sobs.

"In the first place, if you ever meet a man named Laurence Belfont—a man of about fifty years—ask him if he remembers Virginie Lordilliere; and if he betrays the least emotion, it is he!"

"Who?"

"The man whom I have sought since I was able to wield a sword—the man I have sworn to punish—the man whom you must kill as you would the betrayer of your sister!"

"But, Ernest—"

"Do not question me, but swear to fulfil my request."

"I swear," said Maurice, firmly.

"It is well!" murmured his dying friend; "and now, Maurice, I have a secret for your heart alone. Take the locket you will find upon my heart—if it has not been removed—and I need say no more."

Maurice took the locket, opened it, and beheld the portrait of her he had long loved in secret—Marie Duval! He turned pale and started back.

"You love her?" he murmured.

"Do I love her?" sighed Ernest; "ah! better than life itself!"

"And she—she loves you?" gasped Maurice. "Alas! I fear not. She does not even know of the passion that has consumed me—consumes me still!"

Maurice breathed more easily. A feeling of jealousy had, for a moment, rankled in his bosom, but full of noble devotion to his dying friend, he banished all unworthy thoughts, and forgot that Ernest might have been his rival.

"This portrait," said Ernest, "you will keep."

Maurice raised the miniature to his lips, at the same time pressing the hand of his friend.

"Keep it," continued Ernest, faintly, "as the choicest jewel your friend ever possessed. When you look at it you will remember me, and for my sake you will regard Marie as a sister. I can say no more—do not forget Belfont Maurice—Marie—"

At that moment M. Clairret entered, and found his adopted son fainting in the arms of his friend.

## CHAPTER IV.

## A FRIEND'S DEVOTION.

Contrary to the expectations of all Ernest survived his wounds. For several days he lay, so to speak, on the brink of the grave; but at last, thanks to the surgeon's skill, youth, and a naturally strong constitution, he began slowly to recover.

Several weeks after the events related in our last chapter, when Ernest had nearly regained his strength, Maurice Lambert was seated one day along with Marie Duval. Little did the young girl suspect the feelings which she had inspired in the hearts of the two young men, and still less did she dream of the struggle in Maurice's breast between love for her and devotion to his friend. Had Ernest never confided to him his passion, Maurice might have

used every means to win the hand of Marie for himself, even in opposition to his friend; but, as it was, he felt that to do so would be not only dishonorable, but perfidious in the extreme. Nobly did he oppose the dictates of his passion; generously did he resolve to sacrifice his own happiness to that of his friend; firmly did he determine to conceal his love from all. Any less noble than he might have regretted that Ernest did not die; but Maurice, far from such unworthy thoughts, was the first to rejoice in the recovery of his friend.

The young man, we said, was alone with Marie Duval. He had determined to do all in his power to favor Ernest's interests, and had resolved to speak with Marie upon the subject.

The young girl had just been reading in the works of the immortal Chateaubriand, the description of Atala upon her death-bed; and the passionate breathings of tenderness which that fair and virtuous being addressed to her afflicted lover, had sunk deep into her heart. Tears of sympathy were still glistening in her eyes; as, turning to Maurice Lambert, she said in a voice tremulous with emotion:

"How deep and holy must be that passion which is triumphant even in death—which can inspire the heart to struggle against dissolution, and to feel itself immortal by the strength of love alone! But I can scarce believe in the existence of such love."

"Indeed?" said Maurice.

"No—for it is too heavenly—"

"But I have witnessed it in a degree."

"You!"

"Yes; only a few weeks ago I was at the death-bed of a friend, whose last thoughts were of one whom he loved in secret, but deeply, perhaps hopelessly."

"A friend, do you say?" asked Marie, interested.

"Yes, and it is a friend of mine too, whom he loved."

"And she never knew his sentiments towards her?"

"No, for he feared lest she might despise the poor offering of his heart?"

"Ah!" said Marie, "little did he know of woman, if he judged her thus. She may reject, but she cannot despise man's love, though she may appear to do so to the world."

"But perhaps she whom he loved was an exception—she might be more cruel than her sex in general. But yet she is fair and gentle."

"Do I know her?" asked Marie.

"You have seen her, perhaps," replied Maurice, with a smile. "And between us, I will say that my friend, feeling himself about to die, put into my hand the portrait of his mistress, which he had procured unknown to her, and worn next his heart as a secret treasure."

"Have you it now?"

"It is this," replied Maurice, producing a locket. "Would you like to look at it?"

"Ah!" sighed Marie, affected by the reality of the story her companion was relating, "if it should prove the miniature of one I know, I fear that I could never look on her again without regarding her as unnatural and cruel."

"But you forget that she knew not the sentiments she inspired."

"True. But the portrait."

Maurice handed the locket to his companion, who opened it and beheld—a likeness of herself! She turned pale at first, and then a tinge of crimson mounted to her brow.

"How is this?" she murmured, "explain."

"In the first place," said Maurice, "you must know that my friend, although dangerously wounded, did not die."

"And what you have said is true?"

"Every word, except that he lives and loves you still."

Marie blushed, but it was not with shame nor offence. Marie was a woman; and none can deny that the thought of being the object of sincere and pure affection, is dear to woman's heart. But a pang shot through her bosom, for she cherished a hidden affection for another who she knew had not been dangerously ill. But Maurice, when he revealed to her the name of her lover, judged by her appearance that Ernest was the object of her choice, and although his own heart received a wound, hastened to impart the intelligence to his friend.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE SECRET.

"She loves you!" cried Maurice, breaking abruptly into the apartment of Ernest Clairret, "she loves you!"

"Who?" demanded Ernest, his eyes sparkling with joy—"you cannot mean—"

"Marie Duval—none other, I assure you, dear Ernest."

"But how—is it possible—dear Maurice!" murmured Ernest, clasping his friend warmly by the hand; and he added, after a pause, "are you sure of what you say?"

"I have not a doubt."

"But how did you learn such joyful news?"

"I beg your pardon, Ernest," said Maurice, "for having been guilty of an indiscretion; and I am sure you will forgive me when I tell you all—my motives and my success."

"What do you mean?" cried Ernest, turning pale.

Maurice took his friend's hand, and related all that had passed between him and Marie Duval. Ernest listened eagerly, but the intelligence seemed to cause him less pleasure than pain. As his friend concluded, his brows gathered darkly, and his features became pale with agitation.

"Maurice," he said in broken accents, "you have done wrong—but you thought to do me a service, and I forgive you—thank you!"

"Mortbleu!" exclaimed Maurice, astonished; "are you mad? Explain yourself."

"Not mad!" returned Ernest with a melancholy smile, "but unfortunate. The thought of being beloved by Marie Duval would make my heart leap for joy, did I not look upon our union as next to impossible. As it is, the thrill of pleasure is accompanied by a thrill of pain!"

Maurice was more astonished than before. "Explain, for Heaven's sake, Ernest!" he exclaimed. "What mystery is this?—Marie loves you—you love her—you are on an equal footing in society, what is there to prevent your union?"

"Prejudice!" replied Ernest.

"How prejudice?"

"Maurice," said the adopted son of M. Clairret sadly, "I can never possess the hand of Marie Duval without first revealing the secret of my birth; and that once known to her father, he is too proud to accept me as a member of his family. True, I might perhaps marry her without revealing the secret, but it would be a dishonorable act. Alas! I feel that it were better had Marie never known of my unhappy passion, which I have long regarded as hopeless, while yet I have allowed it to prey upon my heart!"

As Ernest spoke, strange thoughts crowded the bosom of his friend. Curiosity to know the mystery to which Ernest alluded, pity for his unfortunate position, and bitter reflections with regard to his own hopeless passion for Marie, were mingled confusedly in his breast.

"Ernest," he said, after a pause, "may I ask as a friend and adviser, the secret which you say prevents your union with Marie?"

"Have you not divined it?"

"How could I?"

"Do you not remember hearing me speak of one Laurence Belfont?"

"Of him you have sworn to punish—"

"The same."

"And who is he?" asked Maurice.

"My father!" answered Ernest, covering his face with his hands.

Maurice started back with a shudder of horror.

"Your father—and you have sworn to take his life—"

"I have sworn to be revenged on him!" said Ernest, firmly; "for betraying Virginie Lordilliere, my mother, and me, the offspring of her shame!"

Maurice regarded his friend with astonishment. He had never suspected the secret of his birth, and now the news came like a clap of thunder.

"You are surprised," said Ernest with a sad smile, "and perhaps you hate me now that you know that my life began in infamy."

"Ernest!" exclaimed the other, reproachfully, grasping his hand; "you wrong me with such suspicions. I know the generosity of your heart—the nobility of your nature, and care not for the rest."

"You are above prejudice, Maurice," ex-