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## **The Pilgrims of the Rhine**

**Lytton, Edward Bulwer Lytton**

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Chapter V.

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## CHAPTER V.

ROTTERDAM.—THE CHARACTER OF THE DUTCH.—THEIR RESEMBLANCE TO THE GERMANS.  
—A DISPUTE BETWEEN VANE AND TREVLYAN, AFTER THE MANNER OF THE ANCIENT  
NOVELISTS, AS TO WHICH IS PREFERABLE, THE LIFE OF ACTION OR THE LIFE OF REPOSE.  
—TREVLYAN'S CONTRAST BETWEEN LITERARY AMBITION AND THE AMBITION OF  
PUBLIC LIFE.—A CHAPTER TO BE FORGIVEN ONLY BY THOSE WHO FIND RASSELAS  
AMUSING.

OUR travellers arrived at ROTTERDAM on a bright and sunny day. There is a cheerfulness about the operations of commerce—a life—a bustle—an action which always exhilarates the spirits at the first glance. Afterwards they fatigue us; we get too soon behind the scenes, and find the base and troublous passions which move the puppets and conduct the drama.

But Gertrude, in whom ill health had not destroyed the vividness of impression that belongs to the inexperienced, was delighted at the cheeriness of all around her. As she leant lightly on Trevelyan's arm, he listened with a forgetful joy to her questions and exclamations at the stir and liveliness of a city, from which was to commence their pilgrimage along the Rhine. And indeed the scene was rife with the spirit of that people at once so active and so patient—so daring on the sea—so cautious on the land.



THE CHURCH OF ST. LAWRENCE.

Rotterdam.

J. Smith, Printer.



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Industry was visible everywhere; the vessels in the harbour—the crowded boat, putting off to land—the throng on the quay, all looked bustling and spoke of commerce. The city itself, on which the skies shone fairly through light and fleecy clouds, wore a cheerful aspect. The CHURCH OF ST. LAWRENCE rising above the clean, neat houses, and on one side, trees thickly grouped, gaily contrasted at once the waters and the city.

“I like this place,” said Gertrude’s father, quietly, “it has an air of comfort.”

“And an absence of grandeur,” said Trevelyman.

“A commercial people are one great middle class in their habits and train of mind,” replied Vane; “and grandeur belongs to the extremes,—an impoverished people, and a wealthy despot.”

They went to see the statue of Erasmus, and the house in which he was born. Vane had a certain admiration for Erasmus which his companions did not share; he liked the quiet irony of the sage, and his knowledge of the world; and, besides, Vane was of that time of life when philosophers become objects of interest. At first they are teachers, secondly, friends; and it is only a few who arrive at the third stage, and find them deceivers. The Dutch are a singular people; their literature is neglected, but it has some of the German vein in its strata,—the patience, the learning, the homely delineation, and even some traces of the mixture of the humorous and the terrible, which form that genius for the grotesque so markedly German,—you

find this in their legends, and ghost stories. But in Holland activity destroys, in Germany indolence nourishes, romance.

They stayed a day or two at Rotterdam, and then proceeded up the Rhine to Gorcum. The banks were flat and tame, and nothing could be less impressive of its native majesty than this part of the course of the great river.

"I never felt before," whispered Gertrude, tenderly, "how much there was of consolation in your presence, for here I am at last on the Rhine—the blue Rhine, and how disappointed I should be if you were not by my side."

"But, my Gertrude, you must wait till we have passed Cologne, before *the glories* of the Rhine burst upon you."

"It reverses life, my child," said the moralising Vane, "and the stream flows through dulness at first, reserving its poetry for our perseverance."

"I will not allow your doctrine," said Trevelyman, as the ambitious ardour of his native disposition stirred within him. "Life has always action; it is our own fault if it ever be dull; youth has its enterprise, manhood its schemes; and even if infirmity creep upon age, the mind, the mind still triumphs over the mortal clay, and in the quiet hermitage, among books, and from thoughts, keeps the great wheel within everlastingly in motion. No, the better class of spirits have always an antidote to the insipidity of a common career, they have ever energy at will"—

"And never happiness!" answered Vane, after a pause, as he gazed on the proud countenance of Trevelyman, with

that kind of calm, half-pitying interest which belonged to a character deeply imbued with the philosophy of a sad experience, acting upon an unimpassioned heart: "and in truth, Trevelyan, it would please me if I could but teach you the folly of preferring the exercise of that energy, of which you speak, to the golden luxuries of REST. What ambition can ever bring an adequate reward? Not surely the ambition of letters—the desire of intellectual renown."

"True," said Trevelyan, quietly; "that dream I have long renounced; there is nothing palpable in literary fame—it scarcely soothes the vain, perhaps—it assuredly chafes the proud. In my earlier years I attempted some works, which gained what the world, perhaps rightly, deemed a sufficient meed of reputation; yet was it not sufficient to recompense myself for the fresh hours I had consumed, for the sacrifices of pleasure I had made. The subtle aims that had inspired me were not perceived; the thoughts that had seemed new and beautiful to me, fell flat and lustreless on the soul of others; if I was approved, it was often for what I condemned myself; and I found that the trite commonplace and the false wit charmed, while the truth fatigued, and the enthusiasm revolted. For men of that genius to which I make no pretension, who have dwelt apart in the obscurity of their own thoughts, gazing upon stars that shine not for the dull sleepers of the world, it must be a keen sting to find the product of their labour confounded with a class, and to be mingled up in men's judgment with the faults or merits of a tribe. Every great genius must

deem himself original and alone in his conceptions ; it is not enough for him that these conceptions should be approved as good, unless they are admitted as inventive, if they mix him with the herd he has shunned, not separate him in fame as he has been separated in soul. Some Frenchman, the oracle of his circle, said of the poet of the *Phédre*, ‘ Racine and the other imitators of Corneille ;’ and Racine, in his wrath, nearly forswore tragedy for ever. It is in vain to tell the author that the public is the judge of his works. The author believes himself above the public, or he would never have written, and,” continued Trevelyhan, with enthusiasm, “ he *is* above them ; their fiat may crush his glory, but never his self-esteem. He stands alone and haughty amidst the wrecks of the temple he imagined he had raised ‘ TO THE FUTURE,’ and retaliates neglect with scorn. But is this, the life of scorn, a pleasurable state of existence ? Is it one to be cherished ? Does even the moment of fame counterbalance the years of mortification ? And what is there in literary fame itself present and palpable to its heir ? His work is a pebble thrown into the deep ; the stir lasts for a moment, and the wave closes up, to be susceptible no more to the same impression ? The circle may widen to other lands and other ages, but around *him* it is weak and faint. The trifles of the day, the low politics, the base intrigues, occupy the tongue, and fill the thought of his cotemporaries ; he is less rarely conversed of than a mountebank, or a new dancer ; his glory comes not home to him ; it brings no present, no perpetual reward, like the applauses that wait

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the actor, or the actor-like mummer of the senate; and this which vexes, also lowers him; his noble nature begins to nourish the base vices of jealousy, and the unwillingness to admire. Goldsmith is forgotten in the presence of a puppet; he feels it, and is mean; he expresses it, and is ludicrous. It is well to say that great minds will not stoop to jealousy; in the greatest minds it is most frequent\*. Few authors are ever so aware of the admiration they excite, as to afford to be generous; and this melancholy truth revolts us with our own ambition. Shall we be demigods in our closet, at the price of sinking below mortality in the world? No! it was from this deep sentiment of the unrealness of literary fame, of dissatisfaction at the fruits it produced, of fear for the meanness it engendered, that I resigned betimes all love for its career; and if by the restless desire that haunts men who think much, to write ever, I should be urged hereafter to literature, I will sternly teach myself to persevere in the indifference to its fame."

"You say as I would say," answered Vane, with his tranquil smile; "and your experience corroborates my theory. Ambition then is not the root of happiness. Why more in action than in letters?"

"Because," said Trevelyhan, "in action we commonly

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\* See the long list of names furnished by D'Israeli, in that most exquisite work, "The Literary Character," vol. ii. p. 75. Plato, Xenophon, Chaucer, Corneille, Voltaire, Dryden, the Caracci, Domenico Venetiano, murdered by his envious friend, and the gentle Castillo fainting away at the genius of Murillo. Let us add Wordsworth, cold to the lyre of Byron; and Byron at once stealing from Wordsworth, and ridiculing while he stole.

gain in our life all the honour we deserve: the public judge of men better and more rapidly than of books. And he who takes to himself in action a high and pure ambition, associates it with so many objects, that, unlike literature, the failure of one is balanced by the success of the other. He, the creator of deeds, not resembling the creator of books, stands not alone; he is eminently social; he has many comrades, and without their aid he could not accomplish his design. This divides and mitigates the impatient jealousy against others. He works for a cause, and knows early that he cannot monopolise its whole glory; he shares what he is aware it is impossible to engross. Besides, action leaves him no time for brooding over disappointment. The author has consumed his youth in a work,—it fails in glory. Can he write another work? Bid him call back another youth! But in action the labour of the mind is from day to day. A week replaces what a week has lost, and all the aspirant's fame is of the present. It is lipped by the Babel of the living world; he is ever on the stage, and the spectators are ever ready to applaud. Thus perpetually in the service of others, self ceases to be his world; he has no leisure to brood over real or imaginary wrongs, the excitement whirls on the machine till it is worn out"——

"And kicked aside," said Vane, "with the broken lumber of men's other tools, in the chamber of their sons' forgetfulness. Your man of action lasts but for an hour; the man of letters lasts for ages."

“ We live not for ages,” answered Trevelyhan ; “ our life is on earth, and not in the grave.”

“ But even grant,” continued Vane ; “ and I for one will concede the point—that posthumous fame is not worth the living agonies that obtain it, how are you better off in your poor and vulgar career of action ? Would you serve the rulers ?—servility ! The people ?—folly ! If you take the great philosophical view which the worshippers of the past rarely take, but which, unknown to them, is their sole excuse, viz. that the changes which *may* benefit the future unsettle the present ; and that it is not the wisdom of practical legislation to risk the peace of our cotemporaries in the hope of obtaining happiness for their posterity—to what suspicions, to what charges are you exposed ! You are deemed the foe of all liberal opinion, and you read your curses in the eyes of a nation. But take the side of the people ! What caprice—what ingratitude ! You have professed so much in theory, that you can never accomplish sufficient in practice. Moderation becomes a crime ; to be prudent is to be perfidious. New demagogues, without temperance, because without principle, outstrip you in the moment of your greatest services. The public is the grave of a great man’s deeds ; it is never sated ; its maw is eternally open ; it perpetually craves for more. Where in the history of the world do you find the gratitude of a people ? You find fervour, it is true, but not gratitude ; the fervour that exaggerates a benefit at one moment, but not the gratitude that remem-

bers it the next year. Once disappoint them, and all your actions, all your sacrifices, are swept from their remembrance for ever; they break the windows of the very house they have given you, and melt down their medals into bullets. Who serves man, ruler or peasant, serves the ungrateful; and all the ambitious are but types of a Wolsey or a De Witt."

"And what," said Trevylyan, "consoles a man in the ills that flesh is heir to, in that state of obscure repose, that serene inactivity to which you would confine him? Is it not his conscience? Is it not his self acquittal, or his self approval?"

"Doubtless," replied Vane.

"Be it so," answered the high-souled Trevylyan; "the same consolation awaits us in action as in repose. We sedulously pursue what we deem to be true glory. We are maligned; but our soul acquits us. Could it do more in the scandal and the prejudice that assail us in private life? You are silent: but note how much deeper should be the comfort, how much loftier the self-esteem; for if calumny attack us in a wilful obscurity, what have we done to refute the calumny? How have we served our species? Have we 'scorned delight and loved laborious days?' Have we made the utmost of the 'talent' confided to our care? Have we done those good deeds to our race upon which we can retire,—an 'Estate of Beneficence,'—from the malice of the world, and feel that our deeds are our defenders? This is the consolation of virtuous actions; is it so of—even a virtuous—indolence?"

“ You speak as a preacher,” said Vane ; “ I merely as a calculator. You of virtue in affliction, I of a life in ease.”

“ Well then, if the consciousness of perpetual endeavour to advance our race be not alone happier than the life of ease, let us see what this vaunted ease really is. Tell me, is it not another name for *emui* ? This state of quiescence, this objectless, dreamless torpor, this transition *du lit à la table, de la table au lit* ; what more dreary and monotonous existence can you devise ? Is it pleasure in this inglorious existence to think that you are serving pleasure ? Is it freedom to be the slave to self ? For I hold,” continued Trevlyan, “ that this jargon of ‘ consulting happiness,’ this cant of living for ourselves, is but a mean as well as a false philosophy. Why this eternal reference to self ? Is self alone to be consulted ? Is even our happiness, did it truly consist in repose, really the great end of life ? I doubt if we cannot ascend higher. I doubt if we cannot say with a great moralist, ‘ if virtue be not estimable in itself, we can see nothing estimable in following it for the sake of a bargain.’ But in fact repose is the poorest of all delusions ; the very act of recurring to self, brings about us all those ills of self from which in the turmoil of the world we can escape. We become hypochondriacs. Our very health grows an object of painful possession. We are so desirous to be well (for what is retirement without health) that we are ever fancying ourselves ill ; and, like the man in the Spectator, we weigh ourselves daily, and live but by grains and scruples. Retirement is happy only for the poet, for to him it is *not*

retirement. He secedes from one world but to gain another, and he finds not *ennui* in seclusion—why?—not because seclusion hath *repose*, but because it hath *occupation*. In one word, then, I say of action and of indolence, grant the same ills to both, and to action there is the readier escape or the nobler consolation.”

Vane shrugged his shoulders. “Ah, my dear friend,” said he, tapping his snuff-box with benevolent superiority, “you are much younger than I am!”

But these conversations which Trevelyman and Vane often held together, dull as I fear this specimen must seem to the reader, had an inexpressible charm for Gertrude. She loved the lofty and generous vein of philosophy which Trevelyman embraced, and which, while it suited his ardent nature, contrasted a demeanour commonly hard and cold to all but herself. And young and tender as she was, his ambition infused its spirit into her fine imagination, and that passion for enterprise which belongs inseparably to romance. She loved to muse over his future lot, and in fancy to share its toils and to exult in its triumphs. And if sometimes she asked herself whether a career of action might not estrange him from her, she had but to turn her gaze upon his watchful eye,—and lo, he was by her side or at her feet!