

HIS LETTERS

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His Letters by Julien Gordon

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JULIEN GORDON

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BY

JULIEN GORDON

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HIS LETTERS

CHAPTER I.

THERE had been a crowd about her painting all of the day, we were told at the door. But when we entered the gallery from the wet, darkening street, there were but a few stragglers left, loitering languidly, not as if they had a care for the pictures, but because they were afraid to venture into a cold, gusty twilight. By and by even these threw away or rolled up their catalogues, lowered their veils and hoisted up their petticoats, or turned up their collars and their trousers, as their sex might dictate, and made for the great banging baize door. So Thornton and I were left alone.

He had passed the picture once or twice with his rapid, cold glance, but, when he had the field all to himself, he came back to it

with a certain eager restlessness that did not escape my notice. One was apt to notice what Thornton did. What is it about some people that so arrests, so excites our curiosity? It is a riddle, sphinxlike, unreadable, untellable. We may say of this or that man or woman that we love or hate them, approve or disapprove; we may praise or censure them, extol or vilify, there is just one thing that we cannot do—ignore them. They hold us; be it to irritate or to charm, it matters not. We say of such an one: he or she is a person, an individual, a reality; occupying space in a world of shadows. We breathe them; whether they be mephitic or wholesome may depend upon our lungs, but at any rate they have furnished us with an atmosphere. It environs us, we absorb it, and it becomes a part of us.

Why do I say all this? I was thinking of poor Thornton. No one that I have ever met had more of this curious, inexpressible impelling power, force, call it what you will.

I can see him now with his pale and tragic face; his eyes that seemed to pierce the souls of others, while they kept so well

their own secrets; his tall, straight figure, his elegant, aristocratic hands; his set lips, with their expression which could be so sternly harsh, and again melt suddenly into a smile, whose sensitive beauty warmed the heart.

As he looked at this picture which, in an hour, had made the artist famous, I looked at him. I often did so, furtively, as men rarely look at each other. There was something in him that fascinated. He had come to the city where I dwelt, the great city of our Eastern civilization, alone, without wealth, with few friends, and he had thrown his glove across its cruel face defiantly, and he had conquered it. Of course he had been more or less well equipped; he was well-born, well-mannered, had taken high honors at his university—was, in fine, a gentleman. Yet how often all this is not enough! Later, terrible troubles had come upon him, troubles of which he never spoke, and he had for many years lived like a recluse, except when his voice thundered at the bar or from the tribune.

I looked down at the catalogue, where I

held it open with my thumb, and read the name of the picture before which we had paused, "Two Burdens." A desolate brown field, flat, stretching away to a dark red horizon, where a dying sun lay on a pile of clouds. Wind-swept, sere. In the foreground a few scraggy bushes, wan, fruitless. Across the melancholy desolation two human figures hurried. One was a humble, trembling, crouching creature, an old man in tattered garments, bowed under a great load which lay across his shoulders; tottering, weary, yet with a kindly, nay, happy light in two uplooking eyes. One whom Napoleon, meeting, would have said, "*Je m'écarte toujours pour qui porte un fardeau.*"

The other figure was that of a woman; a woman tall, queenly, lovely, dressed in queenly apparel. There were jewels upon the slender shoe, from which her garments were swept backward by a cruel blast, and jewels on her fingers and at her throat. She was wrapped in a rich cloak, or rather coat, cut in a strange fashion, of that dusky rose sheen of which Tintoretto seems alone