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AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

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**BENJAMIN DISRAELI**

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*AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY.*

BY THE  
RIGHT HON. BENJAMIN DISRAELI,

AUTHOR OF

"LOTHAIR," "VENETIA," "HENRIETTA TEMPLE," "VIVIAN GREY," "ALROY,"  
"CONINGSBY," ETC., ETC.



NEW YORK:  
D. APPLETON & COMPANY,

90, 92 & 94 GRAND STREET.

1870.

Price 50 Cents.

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## CONTARINI FLEMING.

### I.

WANDERING in those deserts of Africa that border the Erythrean sea, I came to the river Nile, to that ancient, and mighty, and famous stream, whose waters yielded us our earliest civilization, and which, after having witnessed the formation of so many states, and the invention of so many creeds, still flow on with the same serene beneficence, like all that we can conceive of Deity; in form sublime, in action systematic, in nature bountiful, in source unknown.

My solitary step sounded in the halls of the Pharaohs. I moved through those imperial chambers, supported by a thousand columns, and guarded by colossal forms seated on mysterious thrones; I passed under glittering gates meet to receive the triumphal chariot of a Titan; I gazed on sublime obelisks pointing to the skies, whose secrets their mystic characters affected to conceal. Wherever I threw my sight, I beheld vast avenues of solemn sphinxes reposing in supernatural beauty, and melancholy groups of lion-visaged kings; huge walls vividly pictured with the sacred rites and the domestic offices of remote antiquity, or sculptured with the breathing forms of heroic warfare.

And all this might, all this magnificence, all this mystery, all this beauty, all this labour, all this high invention—where were their originators? I fell into deep musing. And the kingdoms of the earth passed before me, from the thrones of the Pharaohs to those enormous dominations that sprang out of the feudal chaos, the unlawful children of Ignorance and Expediency. And I surveyed the generations of man from Ramesses the Great, and Memnon the Beautiful, to the solitary pilgrim, whose presence now violated the sanctity of their gorgeous sepulchres. And I found that the history of my race was but one tale of rapid destruction or gradual decay.

And in the anguish of my heart, I lifted up my hands to the blue ether, and I said, "Is there no hope? What is knowledge, and what is truth? How shall I gain wisdom?"

The wind arose, the bosom of the desert heaved, pillars of sand sprang from the earth and whirled across the plain, sounds more awful than thunder came rushing from the south; the fane and the palace, the portal and the obelisk, the altar and the throne, the picture and the frieze, disappeared from my sight, and darkness brooded over the land. I knelt down and hid my face in the movable and burning soil, and as the wisp of the desert passed over me, methought it whispered, "Child of nature, learn to unlearn!"

We are the slaves of false knowledge. Our memories are filled with ideas that have no origin in truth. We learn nothing from ourselves. The sum

of our experience is but a dim dream of the conduct of past generations, generations that lived in a total ignorance of their nature. Our instructors are the unknowing and the dead. We study human nature in a charnel-house, and, like the nations of the East, we pay divine honours to the maniac and the fool. A series of systems have mystified existence. We believe what our fathers credited, because they were convinced without a cause. The faculty of thought has been destroyed. Yet our emasculated minds, without the power of fruition, still pant for the charms of wisdom. It is this that makes us fly with rapture to false knowledge—to tradition, to prejudice, to custom. Delusive tradition, destructive prejudice, degenerating custom! It is this that makes us prostrate ourselves with reverence before the wisdom of by-gone ages, in no one of which has man been the master of his own reason.

I am desirous of writing a book which shall be all truth, a work of which the passion, the thought, the action, and even the style, should spring from my own experience of feeling, from the meditations of my own intellect, from my own observation of incident, from my own study of the genius of expression.

When I turn over the pages of the metaphysician, I perceive a science that deals in words instead of facts. Arbitrary axioms lead to results that violate reason; imaginary principles establish systems that contradict the common sense of mankind. All is dogma, no part demonstration. Weary, perplexed, doubtful, I throw down the volume in disgust.

When I search into my own breast, and trace the development of my own intellect, and the formation of my own character, all is light and order. The luminous succeeds to the obscure, the certain to the doubtful, the intelligent to the illogical, the practical to the impossible, and I experience all that refined and ennobling satisfaction that we derive from the discovery of truth and the contemplation of nature.

I have resolved, therefore, to write the history of my own life, because it is the subject of which I have the truest knowledge.

At an age when some have scarcely entered upon their career, I can look back upon past years spent in versatile adventure and long meditation. My thought has been the consequence of my organization; my action the result of a necessity not less imperious. My fortune and my intelligence have blended together, and formed my character.

I am desirous of executing this purpose while my brain is still fed by the ardent though tempered flame of youth; while I can recall the past with accuracy, and record it with vividness; while my memory is still faithful, and while the dewy freshness of youthful fancy still lingers on the flowers of my mind.



I would bring to this work the illumination of an intellect emancipated from the fatal prejudices of an irrational education. This may be denied me. Yet some exemption from the sectarian prejudices that imbuiter life may surely be expected from one who, by a curious combination of circumstances, finds himself without country, without kindred, and without friends; nor will he be suspected of indulging in the delusion of worldly vanity, who, having acted in the world, has retired to meditate in an inviolate solitude, and seeks relief from the overwhelming vitality of thought in the flowing spirit of creation.

## II.

WHEN I can first recall existence, I remember myself a melancholy child. My father, Baron Fleming, was a Saxon nobleman of ancient family, who, being opposed to the French interest, quitted, at the commencement of this century, his country, and after leading for some years a wandering life, entered into the service of a northern court. At Venice, yet a youth, he married a daughter of the noble house of Contarini, and of that marriage I was the only offspring. My entrance into this world was marked with evil, for my mother yielded up her life while investing me with mine. I was christened with the name of her illustrious race. Thus much, during the first years of my childhood, I casually learned, but I know not how; I feel I was early conscious that my birth was a subject on which it was proper that I should not speak, and one, the mention of which, it was early instilled into me, would only occasion my remaining parent bitter sorrow. Therefore upon this topic I was ever silent, and with me, from my earliest recollection, Venice was a name to be shunned.

My father again married. His new bride was a daughter of the country which had adopted him. She was of high blood, and very wealthy, and beautiful in the fashion of her land. This union produced two children, both males. As a child, I viewed them with passive antipathy. They were called my brothers, but nature gave the lie to the reiterated assertion. There was no similitude between us. Their blue eyes, their flaxen hair, and their white visages claimed no kindred with my Venetian countenance. Wherever I moved, I looked around me, and beheld a race different from myself. There was no sympathy between my frame and the rigid clime whither I had been brought to live. I knew not why, but I was unhappy. Had I found in one of my father's new children a sister, all might have been changed. In that sweet and singular tie, I might have discovered solace, and the variance of constitution would perhaps, between different sexes, have fostered, rather than discouraged affection. But this blessing, which I have ever considered the choicest boon of nature, was denied me. I was alone.

I loved my father dearly and deeply, but I seldom saw him. He was buried in the depth of affairs. A hurried kiss and a passing smile were the fleeting gifts of his affection. Scrupulous care however was taken that I should never be, and should never feel, neglected. I was overloaded with attentions, even as an infant. My stepmother, swayed by my father, and perhaps by a well-regulated mind, was vigilant in not violating the etiquette of maternal duty. No favour was shown to my white brethren which was not extended also to me. To me also,

as the eldest, the preference, if necessary, was ever yielded. But for the rest, she was cold, and I was repulsive, and she stole from the saloon, which I rendered interesting by no infantile graces, to the nursery, where she could lavish her love upon her troublesome, but sympathizing offspring, and listen to the wondrous chronicle which their attendants daily supplied of their marvellous deeds and almost oracular prattle.

Because I was unhappy, I was sedentary and silent, for the lively sounds and the wild gambols of children are but the unconscious outpourings of joy. They make their gay noises, and burst into their gay freaks, as young birds in spring chant in the free air, and flutter in the fresh boughs. But I could not revel in the rushing flow of my new blood, nor yield up my frame to its dashing and voluptuous course. I could not yet analyze my feelings; I could not indeed yet think; but I had an instinct that I was different from my fellow-creatures, and the feeling was not triumph, but horror.

My quiet inaction gained me the reputation of stupidity. In vain they endeavoured to conceal from me their impression. I read it in their looks; in their glances of pity full of learned discernment, in their telegraphic exchanges of mutual conviction. At last, in a moment of irritation, the secret broke from one of my white brothers. I felt that the archin spoke truth, but I cut him to the ground. He ran howling and yelping to his dam. I was surrounded by the indignant mother and the domestic police. I listened to their agitated accusations, and palpitating threats of punishment, with sullen indifference. I offered no defence. I courted their vengeance. It came in the shape of imprisonment. I was conducted to my room, and my door was locked on the outside. I answered the malignant sound by belting it in the interior. I remained there two days deaf to all their entreaties, without sustenance, feeding only upon my vengeance. Each fresh visit was an additional triumph. I never answered; I never moved. Demands of apology were exchanged for promises of pardon: promises of pardon were in turn succeeded by offers of reward. I gave no sign. I heard them stealing on tiptoe to the portal, full of horrible alarm, and even doubtful of my life. I scarcely would breathe. At length the door was burst open, and in rushed the half-fainting baroness, and a posse of servants, with the children clinging to their nurses' gowns. Planted in the most distant corner, I received them with a grim smile. I was invited away. I refused to move. A man-servant advanced and touched me. I stamped, I gnashed my teeth, I gave a savage growl, that made him recoil with dread. The baroness lost her remaining presence of mind, withdrew her train, and was obliged to call in my father, to whom all was for the first time communicated.

I heard his well-known step upon the stair, I beheld the face that never looked upon me without a smile, if in carelessness, still, still a smile. Now it was grave, but sad, not harsh.

"Contarini," he said, in a serious, but not angried voice, "what is all this?"

I burst into a wild cry, I rushed to his arms. He pressed me to his bosom. He tried to kiss away the flooding tears, that each embrace called forth more plenteously. For the first time in my life I felt happy, because for the first time in my life I felt loved.

## III.

It was a beautiful garden, full of terraces and arched walks of bowery trees. A tall fountain sprang up from a marble basin, and its glittering column broke in its fall into a thousand coloured drops, and woke the gleamy fish that would have slept in the dim water. And I wandered about, and the enchanted region seemed illimitable, and at each turn more magical and more bright. Now a white vase shining in the light, now a dim statue shadowy in a cool grot. I would have lingered a moment at the mossy hermitage, but the distant bridge seemed to invite me to new adventures.

It was only three miles from the city, and belonged to the aunt of the baroness. I was brought here to play. When the women met there was much kissing, and I also was kissed, but it gave me no pleasure, for I felt even then that it was a form, and I early imbibed a hatred of all this mechanical domestic love. And they sat together, and took out their work, and talked without ceasing, chiefly about the children. The baroness retold all the wonderful stories of the nurses, many of which I knew to be false. I did not say this, but the conviction gave me, thus early, a contempt for the chatter of women. As soon as I was unobserved, I stole away to the garden.

Even then it was ravishing to be alone. And although I could not think, and knew not the cause of the change, I felt serene, and the darkness of my humour seemed to leave me. 'All was so new and so beautiful. The bright sweet flowers, and the rich shrubs, and the tall trees, and the fitting birds, and the golden bees, and the gay butterflies, and that constant and soothing hum, broken only ever and anon by a strange shrill call, and that wonderful blending of brilliancy and freshness, and perfume and warmth, that strong sense of the loveliness and vitality of nature which we feel amid the growing life of a fair garden, entered into my soul, and diffused themselves over my frame, softened my heart, and charmed my senses.

But all this was not alone the cause of my happiness. For to me the garden was not a piece of earth belonging to my aunt, but a fine world. I wandered about in quest of some strange adventure, which I would fain believe, in so fair a region must quickly occur. The terrace was a vast desert over which I travelled for many days, and the mazy walks, so mysterious and unworldly, were an unexplored forest fit for a true knight. And in the hermitage, I sought the simple hospitality of a mild and aged host, who pointed to the far bridge as surely leading to a great fulfilment, and my companion was a faithful esquire, whose fidelity was never wanting, and we conversed much, but most respecting a mighty ogre, who was to fall beneath my puissant arm. Thus glided many a day in unconscious and creative revery, but sometimes, when I had explored over again each nook and corner, and the illimitable feeling had worn off, the power of imagination grew weak. I found myself alone amid the sweets and sunshine, and felt sad.

But I would not quit this delicious world without an effort, and invented a new mode of mingling in its life. I reclined beneath a shady tree, and I covered my eyes with my little hand, and I tried to shut out the garish light, that seemed to destroy the visions which were ever fitting before me.

They came in their beauty, obedient to my call. And I wandered in strange countries, and achieved many noble acts, and said many noble words, and the beings with whom I acted were palpable as myself, with beautiful faces and graceful forms. And there was a brave young knight, who was my friend, and his life I ever saved, and a lovely princess, who spoke not, but smiled ever, and ever upon me. And we were lost in vast forests, and shared hard food, and as the evening drew on, we came to the gates of a castle.

"Contarini! Contarini!" a voice sounded from the house, and all the sweet visions rushed away like singing birds scared out of a tree. I was no longer a brave knight: I was a child. I rose miserable and exhausted, and in spite of a repeated cry, I returned with a slow step and a sullen face.

I saw there was an unusual bustle in the house. Servants were running to and fro doing nothing, doors were slammed, and there was much calling. I stole into the room unperceived. It was a new comer. They were all standing around a beautiful girl, expanding into prime womanhood, and all talking at the same time. There was also much kissing.

It appeared to me that there could not be a more lovely being than the visitor. She was dressed in a blue riding-coat, with a black hat, which had fallen off her forehead. Her full chestnut curls had broken loose. Her rich cheek glowed with the excitement of the meeting, and her laughing eyes sparkled with social love.

I gazed upon her unperceived. She must have been at least eight years my senior. This idea crossed me not then, I gazed upon her unperceived, and it was fortunate, for I was entranced. I could not move or speak. My whole system changed. My breath left me. I panted with great difficulty. The colour fled from my cheek, and I was sick from the blood rushing to my heart.

I was seen, I was seized, I was pulled forward. I bent down my head. They lifted it up, drawing back my curls; they lifted it up covered with blushes. She leant down, she kissed me—O! how unlike the dull kisses of the morning. But I could not return her embrace; I nearly swooned upon her bosom. She praised, in her good-nature, the pretty boy, and the tone in which she spoke made me doubly feel my wretched insignificance.

The bustle subsided; eating succeeded to talking. Our good aunt was a great priestess in the mysteries of plum-cake and sweet wine. I had no appetite. This was the fruitful theme of much discussion. I could not eat: I thought only of the fair stranger. They wearied me with their wonderment and their inquiries. I was irritated and I was irritable. The baroness schooled me in that dull tedious way which always induces obstinacy. At another time, I should have been sullen, but my heart was full and softened, and I wept. My stepmother was alarmed lest, in an unguarded moment, she should have passed the cold, strict line of maternal impartiality which she had laid down for her constant regulation. She would have soothed me with commonplace consolation. I was miserable and disgusted. I fled again to the garden.

I regained with hurrying feet my favourite haunt, again I sat under my favourite tree. But not now to build castles of joy and hope, not now to commune with my beautiful creation, and revel in the warm flow of my excited fancy. All, all had fled.

all, all had changed. I shivered under the cold horror of reality.

I thought I heard beautiful music, but it was only the voice of a woman.

"Contarini," said the voice, "why do you weep?"

I looked up; it was the stranger, it was Christiana. "Because," I answered, sobbing, "I am miserable."

"Sweet boy," she said, as she knelt down beside me, "dry, dry your tears, for we all love you. Mamma meant not to be cross."

"Mamma! She is not *my* mamma."

"But she loves you like a mother."

"No one loves me."

"All love you, dearest—I love you," and she kissed me with a thousand kisses.

"O! Christiana," I exclaimed, in a low, tremulous voice, "love me, love me always. If *you* do not love me I shall die!"

I threw my arms around her neck, and a gleam of rapture seemed to burst through the dark storm of my grief. She pressed me to her heart a thousand times, and each time I clung with a more ardent grasp—and by degrees, the fierceness of my passion died away, and heavy sobs succeeded to my torrents of tears, and light sighs at last came flying after, like clouds in a clearing heaven. Our grief dies away like a thunder-storm.

#### IV.

THE visit of Christiana was the first great incident of my life. No day passed without my seeing her, either at the garden-house, or at our town, and each day I grew happier. Her presence, the sound of her voice, one bright smile, and I was a different being; but her caresses, her single society, the possession of her soft hand—all this was maddening. When I was with her in the company of others, I was happy, but I indicated my happiness by no exterior sign. I sat by her side, with my hand locked in hers, and I fed in silence upon my tranquil joy. But when we were alone, then it was that her influence over me broke forth. All the feelings of my heart were hers. I concealed nothing. I told her each moment that I loved her, and that until I knew her I was unhappy. Then I would communicate to her in confidence all my secret sources of enjoyment, and explain how I had turned common places into enchanted regions, where I could always fly for refuge. She listened with fondness and delight, and was the heroine of all my sports. Now I had indeed a princess. Strolling with her, the herculean was still more like a forest, and the solace of the hermit's cell still more refreshing.

Her influence over me was all-powerful, for she seemed to change my habits and my temper. In kindness she entered into my solitary joys; in kindness she joined in my fantastic amusements; for her own temper was social, and her own delight in pastimes that were common to all. She tried to rouse me from my inaction, she counselled me to mingle with my companions. How graceful was this girl! Grace was indeed her characteristic, her charm. Sometimes she would run away swifter than an arrow, and then, as she was skimming along, suddenly stop, and turn her head with an expression so fascinating, that she appeared to me always like a young sunny fawn.

"Contarini!" she would cry, in a clear flute-like voice. How I rushed to her!

I became more amiable to my brothers. I courted more the members of my little society. I even joined in their sports. It was whispered that Contarini was much improved, and the baroness glanced at me with a kind of patronising air, that seemed to hint to the initiated not to press me too heavily with their regulations, or exercise towards me so unpractised, perhaps so incapable, all the severity of their childish legislation.

The visit of Christiana drew to a close. There was a children's ball at our house, and she condescended to be its mistress. Among my new companions, there was a boy who was two years my senior. He had more knowledge of the world than most of us, for he had been some time at school. He was gay, vivacious, talkative. He was the leader in all our diversions. We all envied him his superiority, and all called him conceited. He was ever with Christiana. I disliked him.

I hated dancing, but to-night I had determined to dance, for the honour of our fair president. When the ball opened, I walked up to claim her hand as a matter of course. She was engaged—she was engaged to this youthful hero. Engaged! Was it true! Engaged! Horrible jargon! Were the hollow forms of mature society to interfere with our play of love? She expressed her regret, and promised to dance with me afterward. She promised what I did not require. Pale and agitated, I stole to a corner, and fed upon my mortified heart.

I watched her in the dance. Never had she looked more beautiful; what was worse, never more happy. Every smile pierced me through. Each pressure of my rival's hand touched my brain. I grew sick and dizzy. It was a terrible effort not to give way to my passion. But I succeeded, and escaped from the chamber, with all its glaring lights and jarring sounds.

I stopped one moment on the staircase for breath. A servant came up and asked if I wanted any thing. I could not answer. He asked if I were unwell. I struggled with my choking voice, and said I was very well. I stole up to my bed-room. I had no light, but a dim moon just revealed my bed. I threw myself upon it and wished to die.

My forehead was burning hot, my feet were icy cold. My heart seemed in my throat. I felt quite sick. I could not speak; I could not weep; I could not think. Every thing seemed blended in one terrible sensation of desolate and desolating wretchedness.

Much time perhaps had not elapsed, although it seemed to me an age, but there was a sound in the room, light and gentle. I looked around, I thought that a shadowy form passed between me and the window. A feeling of terror crossed me. I nearly cried out; but as my lips moved, a warm mouth sealed them with sweetness.

"Contarini," said a voice I could not mistake, "are you unwell?"

I would not answer.

"Contarini, my love, speak to Christiana!"

But the demon prevailed, and I would not speak.

"Contarini, you are not asleep?"

Still I was silent.

"Contarini, you do not love me."

I would have been silent, but I sighed.

"Contarini, what has happened? Tell me, tell me, dearest. Tell your Christiana. You know you always tell her every thing."

I seized her hand—I bathed it with my fast-flowing tears.