



EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON

ALICE OR THE MYSTERIES

BOOK V

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BOOK V.

"FOOLS blind to truth; nor know their erring soul
How much the half is better than the whole."

--HESIOD: *Op. et Dies*, 40.

CHAPTER I.

Do as the Heavens have done; forget your evil;
With them, forgive yourself.--*The Winter's Tale*.

. . . The sweet'st companion that e'er man
Bred his hopes out of.--*Ibid.*

THE curate of Brook-Green was sitting outside his door. The vicarage which he inhabited was a straggling, irregular, but picturesque building,--humble enough to suit the means of the curate, yet large enough to accommodate the vicar. It had been built in an age when the *indigentes et pauperes* for whom universities were founded supplied, more than they do now, the fountains of the Christian ministry, when pastor and flock were more on an equality.

From under a rude and arched porch, with an oaken settle on either side for the poor visitor, the door opened at once upon the old-fashioned parlour,--a homely but pleasant room, with one wide but low cottage casement, beneath which stood the dark shining table that supported the large Bible in its green baize cover; the Concordance, and the last Sunday's sermon, in its jetty case. There by the fireplace stood the bachelor's round elbow-chair, with a needlework cushion at the back; a walnut-tree bureau, another table or two, half a dozen plain chairs, constituted the rest of the furniture, saving some two or three hundred volumes, ranged in neat shelves on the clean wainscoted walls. There was another room, to which you ascended by two steps, communicating with this parlour, smaller but finer, and inhabited only on festive days, when Lady Vargrave, or some other quiet neighbour, came to drink tea with the good curate.

An old housekeeper and her grandson--a young fellow of about two and

twenty, who tended the garden, milked the cow, and did in fact what he was wanted to do--composed the establishment of the humble minister.

We have digressed from Mr. Aubrey himself.

The curate was seated, then, one fine summer morning, on a bench at the left of his porch, screened from the sun by the cool boughs of a chestnut-tree, the shadow of which half covered the little lawn that separated the precincts of the house from those of silent Death and everlasting Hope; above the irregular and moss-grown paling rose the village church; and, through openings in the trees, beyond the burial-ground, partially gleamed the white walls of Lady Vargrave's cottage, and were seen at a distance the sails on the--

"Mighty waters, rolling evermore."

The old man was calmly enjoying the beauty of the morning, the freshness of the air, the warmth of the dancing beam, and not least, perhaps, his own peaceful thoughts,--the spontaneous children of a contemplative spirit and a quiet conscience. His was the age when we most sensitively enjoy the mere sense of existence,--when the face of Nature and a passive conviction of the benevolence of our Great Father suffice to create a serene and ineffable happiness, which rarely visits us till we have done with the passions; till memories, if more alive than heretofore, are yet mellowed in the hues of time, and Faith softens into harmony all their asperities and harshness; till nothing within us remains to cast a shadow over the things without; and on the verge of life, the Angels are nearer to us than of yore. There is an old age which has more youth of heart than youth itself!

As the old man thus sat, the little gate through which, on Sabbath days, he was wont to pass from the humble mansion to the house of God noiselessly opened, and Lady Vargrave appeared.

The curate rose when he perceived her; and the lady's fair features were lighted up with a gentle pleasure, as she pressed his hand and returned his salutation.

There was a peculiarity in Lady Vargrave's countenance which I have rarely seen in others. Her smile, which was singularly expressive, came less from the lip than from the eyes; it was almost as if the brow smiled; it was as the sudden and momentary vanishing of a light but melancholy cloud that usually rested upon the features, placid as they were.

They sat down on the rustic bench, and the sea-breeze wantoned amongst the quivering leaves of the chestnut-tree that overhung their seat.

"I have come, as usual, to consult my kind friend," said Lady Vargrave; "and, as usual also, it is about our absent Evelyn."

"Have you heard again from her, this morning?"

"Yes; and her letter increases the anxiety which your observation, so much deeper than mine, first awakened."

"Does she then write much of Lord Vargrave?"

"Not a great deal; but the little she does say, betrays how much she shrinks from the union my poor husband desired: more, indeed, than ever! But this is not all, nor the worst; for you know that the late lord had provided against that probability--he loved her so tenderly, his ambition for her only came from his affection; and the letter he left behind him pardons and releases her, if she revolts from the choice he himself preferred."

"Lord Vargrave is, perhaps, a generous, he certainly seems a candid, man, and he must be sensible that his uncle has already done all that justice required."

"I think so. But this, as I said, is not all; I have brought the letter to show you. It seems to me as you apprehended. This Mr. Maltravers has wound himself about her thoughts more than she herself imagines; you see how she dwells on all that concerns him, and how, after checking herself, she returns again and again to the same subject."

The curate put on his spectacles, and took the letter. It was a strange thing, that old gray-haired minister evincing such grave interest in the secrets of that young heart! But they who would take charge of the soul must never be too wise to regard the heart!

Lady Vargrave looked over his shoulder as he bent down to read, and at times placed her finger on such passages as she wished him to note. The old curate nodded as she did so; but neither spoke till the letter was concluded.

The curate then folded up the epistle, took off his spectacles, hemmed, and looked grave.

"Well," said Lady Vargrave, anxiously, "well?"

"My dear friend, the letter requires consideration. In the first place, it is clear to me that, in spite of Lord Vargrave's presence at the rectory, his lordship so manages matters that the poor child is unable of herself to bring that matter to a conclusion. And, indeed, to a mind so sensitively delicate and honourable, it is no easy task."

"Shall I write to Lord Vargrave?"

"Let us think of it. In the meanwhile, this Mr. Maltravers--"

"Ah, this Mr. Maltravers!"

"The child shows us more of her heart than she thinks of; and yet I myself am puzzled. If you observe, she has only once or twice spoken of the Colonel Legard whom she has made acquaintance with; while she treats at length of Mr. Maltravers, and confesses the effect he has produced on her mind. Yet, do you know, I more dread the caution respecting the first than all the candour that betrays the influence of the last? There is a great difference between first fancy and first love."

"Is there?" said the lady, abstractedly.

"Again, neither of us is acquainted with this singular man,--I mean Maltravers; his character, temper, and principles, of all of which Evelyn is too young, too guileless, to judge for herself. One thing, however, in her letter speaks in his favour."

"What is that?"

"He absents himself from her. This, if he has discovered her secret, or if he himself is sensible of too great a charm in her presence, would be the natural course that an honourable and a strong mind would pursue."

"What!--if he love her?"

"Yes; while he believes her hand is engaged to another."

"True! What shall be done--if Evelyn should love, and love in vain? Ah, it is the misery of a whole existence!"

"Perhaps she had better return to us," said Mr. Aubrey; "and yet, if

already it be too late, and her affections are engaged, we should still remain in ignorance respecting the motives and mind of the object of her attachment; and he, too, might not know the true nature of the obstacle connected with Lord Vargrave's claims."

"Shall I, then, go to her? You know how I shrink from strangers; how I fear curiosity, doubts, and questions; how [and Lady Vargrave's voice faltered]--how unfitted I am for--for--" she stopped short, and a faint blush overspread her cheeks.

The curate understood her, and was moved.

"Dear friend," said he, "will you intrust this charge to myself? You know how Evelyn is endeared to me by certain recollections! Perhaps, better than you, I may be enabled silently to examine if this man be worthy of her, and one who could secure her happiness; perhaps, better than you I may ascertain the exact nature of her own feelings towards him; perhaps, too, better than you I may effect an understanding with Lord Vargrave."

"You are always my kindest friend," said the lady, with emotion; "how much I already owe you! what hopes beyond the grave! what--"

"Hush!" interrupted the curate, gently; "your own good heart and pure intentions have worked out your own atonement--may I hope also your own content? Let us return to our Evelyn. Poor child! how unlike this despondent letter to her gay light spirits when with us! We acted for the best; yet perhaps we did wrong to yield her up to strangers. And this Maltravers--with her enthusiasm and quick susceptibilities to genius, she was half prepared to imagine him all she depicts him to be. He must have a spell in his works that I have not discovered, for at times it seems to operate even on you."

"Because," said Lady Vargrave, "they remind me of his conversation, his habits of thought. If like him in other things, Evelyn may indeed be happy!"

"And if," said the curate, curiously,--"if now that you are free, you were ever to meet with him again, and his memory had been as faithful as yours; and if he offered the sole atonement in his power, for all that his early error cost you; if such a chance should happen in the vicissitudes of life, you would--"

The curate stopped short; for he was struck by the exceeding paleness of

his friend's cheek, and the tremor of her delicate frame.

"If that were to happen," said she, in a very low voice; "if we were to meet again, and if he were--as you and Mrs. Leslie seem to think--poor, and, like myself, humbly born, if my fortune could assist him, if my love could still--changed, altered as I am--ah! do not talk of it--I cannot bear the thought of happiness! And yet, if before I die I could but see him again!" She clasped her hands fervently as she spoke, and the blush that overspread her face threw over it so much of bloom and freshness, that even Evelyn, at that moment, would scarcely have seemed more young. "Enough!" she added, after a little while, as the glow died away. "It is but a foolish hope; all earthly love is buried; and my heart is there!"--she pointed to the heavens, and both were silent.

CHAPTER II.

QUIBUS otio vel magnifice, vel molliter, vivere copia era
incerta pro certis malebant.*--SALLUST.

* "They who had the means to live at ease, either in splendour or in luxury, preferred the uncertainty of change to their natural security."

LORD RABY--one of the wealthiest and most splendid noblemen in England--was prouder, perhaps, of his provincial distinctions than the eminence of his rank or the fashion of his wife. The magnificent chateaux, the immense estates, of our English peers tend to preserve to us in spite of the freedom, bustle, and commercial grandeur of our people more of the Norman attributes of aristocracy than can be found in other countries. In his county, the great noble is a petty prince; his house is a court; his possessions and munificence are a boast to every proprietor in his district. They are as fond of talking of the earl's or the duke's movements and entertainments, as Dangeau was of the gossip of the Tuileries and Versailles.

Lord Raby, while affecting, as lieutenant of the county, to make no political distinctions between squire and squire--hospitable and affable to all--still, by that very absence of exclusiveness, gave a tone to the politics of the whole county; and converted many who had once thought differently on the respective virtues of Whigs and Tories. A great man never loses so much as when he exhibits intolerance, or parades the right of persecution.

"My tenants shall vote exactly as they please," said Lord Raby; and he was never known to have a tenant vote against his wishes! Keeping a vigilant eye on all the interests, and conciliating all the proprietors, in the county, he not only never lost a friend, but he kept together a body of partisans that constantly added to its numbers.

Sir John Merton's colleague, a young Lord Nelthorpe, who could not speak three sentences if you took away his hat, and who, constant at Almack's, was not only inaudible but invisible in parliament, had no chance of being re-elected. Lord Nelthorpe's father, the Earl of Mainwaring, was a new peer; and, next to Lord Raby, the richest nobleman in the county. Now, though they were much of the same politics, Lord Raby hated Lord Mainwaring. They were too near each other,--they clashed; they had the jealousy of rival princes!

Lord Raby was delighted at the notion of getting rid of Lord Nelthorpe,--it would be so sensible a blow to the Mainwaring interest. The party had been looking out for a new candidate, and Maltravers had been much talked of. It is true that, when in parliament some years before, the politics of Maltravers had differed from those of Lord Raby and his set. But Maltravers had of late taken no share in politics, had uttered no political opinions, was intimate with the electioneering Mertons, was supposed to be a discontented man,--and politicians believe in no discontent that is not political. Whispers were afloat that Maltravers had grown wise, and changed his views: some remarks of his, more theoretical than practical, were quoted in favour of this notion. Parties, too, had much changed since Maltravers had appeared on the busy scene,--new questions had arisen, and the old ones had died off.

Lord Raby and his party thought that, if Maltravers could be secured to them, no one would better suit their purpose. Political faction loves converts better even than consistent adherents. A man's rise in life generally dates from a well-timed rat. His high reputation, his provincial rank as the representative of the oldest commoner's family in the county, his age, which combined the energy of one period with the experience of another,--all united to accord Maltravers a preference over richer men. Lord Raby had been pointedly courteous and flattering to the master of Burleigh; and he now contrived it so, that the brilliant entertainment he was about to give might appear in compliment to a distinguished neighbour, returned to fix his residence on his patrimonial property, while in reality it might serve an electioneering purpose,--serve to introduce Maltravers to the county, as if under his lordship's own wing, and minister to political uses that went beyond the

mere representation of the county.

Lord Vargrave had, during his stay at Merton Rectory, paid several visits to Knaresdean, and held many private conversations with the marquess: the result of these conversations was a close union of schemes and interests between the two noblemen. Dissatisfied with the political conduct of government, Lord Raby was also dissatisfied that, from various party reasons, a nobleman beneath himself in rank, and as he thought in influence, had obtained a preference in a recent vacancy among the Knights of the Garter. And if Vargrave had a talent in the world it was in discovering the weak points of men whom he sought to gain, and making the vanities of others conduce to his own ambition.

The festivities of Knaresdean gave occasion to Lord Raby to unite at his house the more prominent of those who thought and acted in concert with Lord Vargrave; and in this secret senate the operations for the following session were to be seriously discussed and gravely determined.

On the day which was to be concluded with the ball at Knaresdean, Lord Vargrave went before the rest of the Merton party, for he was engaged to dine with the marquess.

On arriving at Knaresdean, Lumley found Lord Saxingham and some other politicians, who had arrived the preceding day, closeted with Lord Raby; and Vargrave, who shone to yet greater advantage in the diplomacy of party management than in the arena of parliament, brought penetration, energy, and decision to timid and fluctuating counsels. Lord Vargrave lingered in the room after the first bell had summoned the other guests to depart.

"My dear lord," said he then, "though no one would be more glad than myself to secure Maltravers to our side, I very much doubt whether you will succeed in doing so. On the one hand, he appears altogether disgusted with politics and parliament; and on the other hand, I fancy that reports of his change of opinions are, if not wholly unfounded, very unduly coloured. Moreover, to do him justice, I think that he is not one to be blinded and flattered into the pale of a party; and your bird will fly away after you have wasted a bucketful of salt on his tail."

"Very possibly," said Lord Raby, laughing,--"you know him better than I do. But there are many purposes to serve in this matter,--purposes too provincial to interest you. In the first place, we shall humble the Nelthorpe interest, merely by showing that we do think of a new member; secondly, we shall get up a manifestation of feeling that would be

impossible, unless we were provided with a centre of attraction; thirdly, we shall rouse a certain emulation among other county gentlemen, and if Maltravers decline, we shall have many applicants; and fourthly, suppose Maltravers has not changed his opinions, we shall make him suspected by the party he really does belong to, and which would be somewhat formidable if he were to head them. In fact, these are mere county tactics that you can't be expected to understand."

"I see you are quite right: meanwhile you will at least have an opportunity (though I say it, who should not say it) to present to the county one of the prettiest young ladies that ever graced the halls of Knaresdean."

"Ah, Miss Cameron! I have heard much of her beauty: you are a lucky fellow, Vargrave! By the by, are we to say anything of the engagement?"

"Why, indeed, my dear lord, it is now so publicly known, that it would be false delicacy to affect concealment."

"Very well; I understand."

"How long I have detained you--a thousand pardons!--I have but just time to dress. In four or five months I must remember to leave you a longer time for your toilet."

"Me--how?"

"Oh, the Duke of ----- can't live long; and I always observe that when a handsome man has the Garter, he takes a long time pulling up his stockings."

"Ha, ha! you are so droll, Vargrave."

"Ha, ha! I must be off."

"The more publicity is given to this arrangement, the more difficult for Evelyn to shy at the leap," muttered Vargrave to himself as he closed the door. "Thus do I make all things useful to myself!"

The dinner party were assembled in the great drawing-room, when Maltravers and Cleveland, also invited guests to the banquet, were announced. Lord Raby received the former with marked empressment; and the stately marchioness honoured him with her most gracious smile. Formal presentations to the rest of the guests were interchanged; and it

was not till the circle was fully gone through that Maltravers perceived, seated by himself in a corner, to which he had shrunk on the entrance of Maltravers, a gray-haired solitary man,--it was Lord Saxingham! The last time they had met was in the death-chamber of Florence; and the old man forgot for the moment the anticipated dukedom, and the dreamed-of premiership, and his heart flew back to the grave of his only child! They saluted each other, and shook hands in silence. And Vargrave--whose eye was on them--Vargrave, whose arts had made that old man childless, felt not a pang of remorse! Living ever in the future, Vargrave almost seemed to have lost his memory. He knew not what regret was. It is a condition of life with men thoroughly worldly that they never look behind!

The signal was given: in due order the party were marshalled into the great hall,--a spacious and lofty chamber, which had received its last alteration from the hand of Inigo Jones; though the massive ceiling, with its antique and grotesque masques, betrayed a much earlier date, and contrasted with the Corinthian pilasters that adorned the walls, and supported the music-gallery, from which waved the flags of modern warfare and its mimicries,--the eagle of Napoleon, a token of the services of Lord Raby's brother (a distinguished cavalry officer in command at Waterloo), in juxtaposition with a much gayer and more glittering banner, emblematic of the martial fame of Lord Raby himself, as Colonel of the B----shire volunteers!

The music pealed from the gallery, the plate glittered on the board; the ladies wore diamonds, and the gentlemen who had them wore stars. It was a very fine sight, that banquet!--such as became the festive day of a lord-lieutenant whose ancestors had now defied, and now intermarried, with royalty. But there was very little talk, and no merriment. People at the top of the table drank wine with those at the bottom; and gentlemen and ladies seated next to each other whispered languidly in monosyllabic commune. On one side, Maltravers was flanked by a Lady Somebody Something, who was rather deaf, and very much frightened for fear he should talk Greek; on the other side he was relieved by Sir John Merton,--very civil, very pompous, and talking, at strictured intervals, about county matters, in a measured intonation, savouring of the House-of-Commons jerk at the end of the sentence.

As the dinner advanced to its close, Sir John became a little more diffuse, though his voice sank into a whisper.

"I fear there will be a split in the Cabinet before parliament meets."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; Vargrave and the premier cannot pull together very long. Clever man, Vargrave! but he has not enough stake in the country for a leader!"

"All men have public character to stake; and if that be good, I suppose no stake can be better?"

"Humph!--yes--very true; but still, when a man has land and money, his opinions, in a country like this, very properly carry more weight with them. If Vargrave, for instance, had Lord Raby's property, no man could be more fit for a leader,--a prime minister. We might then be sure that he would have no selfish interest to further: he would not play tricks with his party--you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"I am not a party man, as you may remember; indeed, you and I have voted alike on the same questions. Measures, not men,--that is my maxim; but still I don't like to see men placed above their proper stations."

"Maltravers, a glass of wine," said Lord Vargrave across the table.

"Will you join us, Sir John?"

Sir John bowed.

"Certainly," he resumed, "Vargrave is a pleasant man and a good speaker; but still they say he is far from rich,--embarrassed, indeed. However, when he marries Miss Cameron it may make a great difference,--give him more respectability; do you know what her fortune is--something immense?"

"Yes, I believe so; I don't know."

"My brother says that Vargrave is most amiable. The young lady is very handsome, almost too handsome for a wife--don't you think so? Beauties are all very well in a ballroom; but they are not calculated for domestic life. I am sure you agree with me. I have heard, indeed, that Miss Cameron is rather learned; but there is so much scandal in a country neighbourhood,--people are so ill-natured. I dare say she is not more learned than other young ladies, poor girl! What do you think?"

"Miss Cameron is--is very accomplished, I believe. And so you think the Government cannot stand?"

"I don't say that,--very far from it; but I fear there must be a change. However, if the country gentlemen hold together, I do not doubt but what we shall weather the storm. The landed interest, Mr. Maltravers, is the great stay of this country,--the sheet-anchor, I may say. I suppose Lord Vargrave, who seems, I must say, to have right notions on this head, will invest Miss Cameron's fortune in land. But though one may buy an estate, one can't buy an old family, Mr. Maltravers!--you and I may be thankful for that. By the way, who was Miss Cameron's mother, Lady Vargrave?--something low, I fear; nobody knows."

"I am not acquainted with Lady Vargrave; your sister-in-law speaks of her most highly. And the daughter in herself is a sufficient guarantee for the virtues of the mother."

"Yes; and Vargrave on one side, at least, has himself nothing in the way of family to boast of."

The ladies left the hall, the gentlemen re-seated themselves. Lord Raby made some remark on politics to Sir John Merton, and the whole round of talkers immediately followed their leader.

"It is a thousand pities, Sir John," said Lord Raby, "that you have not a colleague more worthy of you; Nelthorpe never attends a committee, does he?"

"I cannot say that he is a very active member; but he is young, and we must make allowances for him," said Sir John, discreetly; for he had no desire to oust his colleague,--it was agreeable enough to be _the_ efficient member.

"In these times," said Lord Raby, loftily, "allowances are not to be made for systematic neglect of duty; we shall have a stormy session; the Opposition is no longer to be despised; perhaps a dissolution may be nearer at hand than we think for. As for Nelthorpe, he cannot come in again."

"That I am quite sure of," said a fat country gentleman of great weight in the county; "he not only was absent on the great Malt question, but he never answered my letter respecting the Canal Company."

"Not answered your letter!" said Lord Raby, lifting up his hands and eyes in amaze and horror. "What conduct! Ah, Mr. Maltravers, you are the man for us!"

"Hear! hear!" cried the fat squire.

"Hear!" echoed Vargrave; and the approving sound went round the table.

Lord Raby rose. "Gentlemen, fill your glasses; a health to our distinguished neighbour!"

The company applauded; each in his turn smiled, nodded, and drank to Maltravers, who, though taken by surprise, saw at once the course to pursue. He returned thanks simply and shortly; and without pointedly noticing the allusion in which Lord Raby had indulged, remarked, incidentally, that he had retired, certainly for some years--perhaps forever--from political life.

Vargrave smiled significantly at Lord Raby, and hastened to lead the conversation into party discussion. Wrapped in his proud disdain of what he considered the contests of factions for toys and shadows, Maltravers remained silent; and the party soon broke up, and adjourned to the ballroom.

CHAPTER III.

LE plus grand défaut de la pénétration n'est pas de n'aller point jusqu'au but,--c'est de la passer.*--LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

* "The greatest defect of penetration is not that of not going just up to the point,--'tis the passing it."

EVELYN had looked forward to the ball at Knaresdean with feelings deeper than those which usually inflame the fancy of a girl proud of her dress and confident of her beauty. Whether or not she loved Maltravers, in the true acceptation of the word "love," it is certain that he had acquired a most powerful command over her mind and imagination. She felt the warmest interest in his welfare, the most anxious desire for his esteem, the deepest regret at the thought of their estrangement. At Knaresdean she should meet Maltravers,--in crowds, it is true; but still she should meet him; she should see him towering superior above the herd; she should hear him praised; she should mark him, the observed of all. But there was another and a deeper source of joy within her. A letter had been that morning received from Aubrey, in which he had announced his arrival for the next day. The letter, though affectionate, was short. Evelyn had been some months absent,--Lady Vargrave was anxious to make

arrangements for her return; but it was to be at her option whether she would accompany the curate home. Now, besides her delight at seeing once more the dear old man, and hearing from his lips that her mother was well and happy, Evelyn hailed in his arrival the means of extricating herself from her position with Lord Vargrave. She would confide in him her increased repugnance to that union, he would confer with Lord Vargrave; and then--and then--did there come once more the thought of Maltravers? No! I fear it was not Maltravers who called forth that smile and that sigh! Strange girl, you know not your own mind!--but few of us, at your age, do.

In all the gayety of hope, in the pride of dress and half-conscious loveliness, Evelyn went with a light step into Caroline's room. Miss Merton had already dismissed her woman, and was seated by her writing-table, leaning her cheek thoughtfully on her hand.

"Is it time to go?" said she, looking up. "Well, we shall put Papa, and the coachman, and the horses, too, in excellent humour. How well you look! Really, Evelyn, you are indeed beautiful!" and Caroline gazed with honest but not unenvious admiration at the fairy form so rounded and yet so delicate, and the face that seemed to blush at its own charms.

"I am sure I can return the flattery," said Evelyn, laughing bashfully.

"Oh, as for me, I am well enough in my way: and hereafter, I dare say, we may be rival beauties. I hope we shall remain good friends, and rule the world with divided empire. Do you not long for the stir, and excitement, and ambition of London?---for ambition is open to us as to men!"

"No, indeed," replied Evelyn, smiling; "I could be ambitious, indeed; but it would not be for myself, but for--"

"A husband, perhaps; well, you will have ample scope for such sympathy. Lord Vargrave--"

"Lord Vargrave again?" and Evelyn's smile vanished, and she turned away.

"Ah," said Caroline, "I should have made Vargrave an excellent wife--pity he does not think so! As it is, I must set up for myself and become a maitresse femme. So you think I look well to-night? I am glad of it--Lord Doltimore is one who will be guided by what other people say."

"You are not serious about Lord Doltimore?"

"Most sadly serious."

"Impossible! you could not speak so if you loved him."

"Loved him! no! but I intend to marry him."

Evelyn was revolted, but still incredulous.

"And you, too, will marry one whom you do not love--'tis our fate--"

"Never!"

"We shall see."

Evelyn's heart was damped, and her spirits fell.

"Tell me now," said Caroline, pressing on the wrung withers, "do you not think this excitement, partial and provincial though it be--the sense of beauty, the hope of conquest, the consciousness of power--better than the dull monotony of the Devonshire cottage? Be honest--"

"No, no, indeed!" answered Evelyn, tearfully and passionately; "one hour with my mother, one smile from her lips, were worth it all."

"And in your visions of marriage, you think then of nothing but roses and doves,--love in a cottage!"

"Love _in a home_, no matter whether a palace or a cottage," returned Evelyn.

"Home!" repeated Caroline, bitterly; "home,--home is the English synonym for the French _ennui_. But I hear Papa on the stairs."

A ballroom--what a scene of commonplace! how hackneyed in novels! how trite in ordinary life! and yet ballrooms have a character and a sentiment of their own, for all tempers and all ages. Something in the lights, the crowd, the music, conduces to stir up many of the thoughts that belong to fancy and romance. It is a melancholy scene to men after a certain age. It revives many of those lighter and more graceful images connected with the wandering desires of youth,--shadows that crossed us, and seemed love, but were not; having much of the grace and charm, but none of the passion and the tragedy, of love. So many of our earliest and gentlest recollections are connected with those chalked floors, and that music painfully gay, and those quiet nooks and corners, where the

talk that hovers about the heart and does not touch it has been held. Apart and unsympathizing in that austerer wisdom which comes to us after deep passions have been excited, we see form after form chasing the butterflies that dazzle us no longer among the flowers that have evermore lost their fragrance.

Somehow or other, it is one of the scenes that remind us most forcibly of the loss of youth! We are brought so closely in contact with the young and with the short-lived pleasures that once pleased us, and have forfeited all bloom. Happy the man who turns from "the tinkling cymbal" and "the gallery of pictures," and can think of some watchful eye and some kind heart _at home_; but those who have no home--and they are a numerous tribe--never feel lonelier hermits or sadder moralists than in such a crowd.

Maltravers leaned abstractedly against the wall, and some such reflections, perhaps, passed within, as the plumes waved and the diamonds glittered around him. Ever too proud to be vain, the _monstrari digito_ had not flattered even in the commencement of his career. And now he heeded not the eyes that sought his look, nor the admiring murmur of lips anxious to be overheard. Affluent, well-born, unmarried, and still in the prime of life,--in the small circles of a province, Ernest Maltravers would in himself have been an object of interest to the diplomacy of mothers and daughters; and the false glare of reputation necessarily deepened curiosity, and widened the range of speculators and observers.

Suddenly, however, a new object of attention excited new interest; new whispers ran through the crowd, and these awakened Maltravers from his reverie. He looked up, and beheld all eyes fixed upon one form! His own eyes encountered those of Evelyn Cameron!

It was the first time he had seen this beautiful young person in all the _eclat_, pomp, and circumstance of her station, as the heiress of the opulent Templeton,--the first time he had seen her the cynosure of crowds, who, had her features been homely, would have admired the charms of her fortune in her face. And now, as radiant with youth, and the flush of excitement on her soft cheek, she met his eye, he said to himself: "And could I have wished one so new to the world to have united her lot with a man for whom all that to her is delight has grown wearisome and stale? Could I have been justified in stealing her from the admiration that, at her age and to her sex, has so sweet a flattery? Or, on the other hand, could I have gone back to her years, and sympathized with feelings that time has taught me to despise? Better as it is."

Influenced by these thoughts, the greeting of Maltravers disappointed and saddened Evelyn, she knew not why; it was constrained and grave.

"Does not Miss Cameron look well?" whispered Mrs. Merton, on whose arm the heiress leaned. "You observe what a sensation she creates?"

Evelyn overheard, and blushed as she stole a glance at Maltravers. There was something mournful in the admiration which spoke in his deep earnest eyes.

"Everywhere," said he, calmly, and in the same tone, "everywhere Miss Cameron appears, she must outshine all others." He turned to Evelyn, and said with a smile, "You must learn to inure yourself to admiration; a year or two hence, and you will not blush at your own gifts!"

"And you, too, contribute to spoil me!--fie!"

"Are you so easily spoiled? If I meet you hereafter, you will think my compliments cold to the common language of others."

"You do not know me,--perhaps you never will."

"I am contented with the fair pages I have already read."

"Where is Lady Raby?" asked Mrs. Merton. "Oh, I see; Evelyn, my love, we must present ourselves to our hostess."

The ladies moved on; and when Maltravers next caught a glance of Evelyn, she was with Lady Raby, and Lord Vargrave also was by her side.

The whispers round him had grown louder.

"Very lovely indeed! so young, too! and she is really going to be married to Lord Vargrave: so much older than she is,--quite a sacrifice!"

"Scarcely so. He is so agreeable, and still handsome. But are you sure that the thing is settled?"

"Oh, yes. Lord Raby himself told me so. It will take place very soon."

"But do you know who her mother was? I cannot make out."

"Nothing particular. You know the late Lord Vargrave was a man of low

birth. I believe she was a widow of his own rank; she lives quite in seclusion."

"How d' ye do, Mr. Maltravers? So glad to see you," said the quick, shrill voice of Mrs. Hare. "Beautiful ball! Nobody does things like Lord Raby; don't you dance?"

"No, madam."

"Oh, you young gentlemen are so fine nowadays!" (Mrs. Hare, laying stress on the word young, thought she had paid a very elegant compliment, and ran on with increased complacency.)

"You are going to let Burleigh, I hear, to Lord Doltimore,--is it true? No! really now, what stories people do tell. Elegant man, Lord Doltimore! Is it true, that Miss Caroline is going to marry his lordship? Great match! No scandal, I hope; you'll excuse me! Two weddings on the tapis,--quite stirring for our stupid county. Lady Vargrave and Lady Doltimore, two new peeresses. Which do you think is the handsomer? Miss Merton is the taller, but there is something fierce in her eyes. Don't you think so? By the by, I wish you joy,--you'll excuse me."

"Wish me joy, madam?"

"Oh, you are so close. Mr. Hare says he shall support you. You will have all the ladies with you. Well, I declare, Lord Vargrave is going to dance. How old is he, do you think?"

Maltravers uttered an audible pshaw, and moved away; but his penance was not over. Lord Vargrave, much as he disliked dancing, still thought it wise to ask the fair hand of Evelyn; and Evelyn, also, could not refuse.

And now, as the crowd gathered round the red ropes, Maltravers had to undergo new exclamations at Evelyn's beauty and Vargrave's luck. Impatiently he turned from the spot, with that gnawing sickness of the heart which none but the jealous know. He longed to depart, yet dreaded to do so. It was the last time he should see Evelyn, perhaps for years; the last time he should see her as Miss Cameron!

He passed into another room, deserted by all save four old gentlemen--Cleveland one of them--immersed in whist; and threw himself upon an ottoman, placed in a recess by the oriel window. There, half

concealed by the draperies, he communed and reasoned with himself. His heart was sad within him; he never felt before _how_ deeply and _how_ passionately he loved Evelyn; how firmly that love had fastened upon the very core of his heart! Strange, indeed, it was in a girl so young, of whom he had seen but little,--and that little in positions of such quiet and ordinary interest,--to excite a passion so intense in a man who had gone through strong emotions and stern trials! But all love is unaccountable. The solitude in which Maltravers had lived, the absence of all other excitement, perhaps had contributed largely to fan the flame. And his affections had so long slept, and after long sleep the passions wake with such giant strength! He felt now too well that the last rose of life had bloomed for him; it was blighted in its birth, but it could never be replaced. Henceforth, indeed, he should be alone, the hopes of home were gone forever; and the other occupations of mind and soul--literature, pleasure, ambition--were already forsworn at the very age in which by most men they are most indulged!

O Youth! begin not thy career too soon, and let one passion succeed in its due order to another; so that every season of life may have its appropriate pursuit and charm!

The hours waned; still Maltravers stirred not; nor were his meditations disturbed, except by occasional ejaculations from the four old gentlemen, as between each deal they moralized over the caprices of the cards.

At length, close beside him he heard that voice, the lightest sound of which could send the blood rushing through his veins; and from his retreat he saw Caroline and Evelyn, seated close by.

"I beg pardon," said the former, in a low voice,--"I beg pardon, Evelyn, for calling you away; but I longed to tell you. The die is cast. Lord Doltimore has proposed, and I have accepted him! Alas, alas! I half wish I could retract!"

"Dearest Caroline!" said the silver voice of Evelyn, "for Heaven's sake, do not thus wantonly resolve on your own unhappiness! You wrong yourself, Caroline! you do, indeed! You are not the vain ambitious character you affect to be! Ah, what is it you require? Wealth? Are you not my friend; am I not rich enough for both? Rank? What can it give you to compensate for the misery of a union without love? Pray, forgive me for speaking thus. Do not think me presumptuous, or romantic; but, indeed, indeed, I know from my own heart what yours must undergo!"

Caroline pressed her friend's hand with emotion.

"You are a bad comforter, Evelyn. My mother, my father, will preach a very different doctrine. I am foolish, indeed, to be so sad in obtaining the very object I have sought! Poor Doltimore! he little knows the nature, the feelings of her whom he thinks he has made the happiest of her sex; he little knows--" Caroline paused, turned pale as death, and then went rapidly on, "but you, Evelyn, _you_ will meet the same fate; we shall bear it together."

"No! no! do not think so! Where I give my hand, there shall I give my heart."

At this time Maltravers half rose, and sighed audibly.

"Hush!" said Caroline, in alarm. At the same moment, the whist-table broke up, and Cleveland approached Maltravers.

"I am at your service," said he; "I know you will not stay the supper. You will find me in the next room; I am just going to speak to Lord Saxingham." The gallant old gentleman then paid a compliment to the young ladies, and walked away.

"So you too are a deserter from the ballroom!" said Miss Merton to Maltravers as she rose.

"I am not very well; but do not let me frighten you away."

"Oh, no! I hear the music; it is the last quadrille before supper: and here is my fortunate partner looking for me."

"I have been everywhere in search of you," said Lord Doltimore, in an accent of tender reproach: "come, we are almost too late now."

Caroline put her arm into Lord Doltimore's, who hurried her into the ballroom.

Miss Cameron looked irresolute whether or not to follow, when Maltravers seated himself beside her; and the paleness of his brow, and something that bespoke pain in the compressed lip, went at once to her heart. In her childlike tenderness, she would have given worlds for the sister's privilege of sympathy and soothing. The room was now deserted; they were alone.

The words that he had overheard from Evelyn's lips, "Where I shall give

my hand, there shall I give my heart," Maltravers interpreted but in one sense,--"she loved her betrothed;" and strange as it may seem, at that thought, which put the last seal upon his fate, selfish anguish was less felt than deep compassion. So young, so courted, so tempted as she must be--and with such a protector!--the cold, the unsympathizing, the heartless Vargrave! She, too, whose feelings, so warm, ever trembled on her lip and eye. Oh! when she awoke from her dream, and knew whom she had loved, what might be her destiny, what her danger!

"Miss Cameron," said Maltravers, "let me for one moment detain you; I will not trespass long. May I once, and for the last time, assume the austere rights of friendship? I have seen much of life, Miss Cameron, and my experience has been purchased dearly; and harsh and hermit-like as I may have grown, I have not outlived such feelings as you are well formed to excite. Nay,"--and Maltravers smiled sadly--"I am not about to compliment or flatter, I speak not to you as the young to the young; the difference of our years, that takes away sweetness from flattery, leaves still sincerity to friendship. You have inspired me with a deep interest,--deeper than I thought that living beauty could ever rouse in me again! It may be that something in the tone of your voice, your manner, a nameless grace that I cannot define, reminds me of one whom I knew in youth,--one who had not your advantages of education, wealth, birth; but to whom Nature was more kind than Fortune."

He paused a moment; and without looking towards Evelyn, thus renewed,--

"You are entering life under brilliant auspices. Ah, let me hope that the noonday will keep the promise of the dawn! You are susceptible, imaginative; do not demand too much, or dream too fondly. When you are wedded, do not imagine that wedded life is exempt from its trials and its cares; if you know yourself beloved--and beloved you must be--do not ask from the busy and anxious spirit of man all which Romance promises and Life but rarely yields. And oh!" continued Maltravers, with an absorbing and earnest passion, that poured forth its language with almost breathless rapidity,--"if ever your heart rebels, if ever it be dissatisfied, fly the false sentiment as a sin! Thrown, as from your rank you must be, on a world of a thousand perils, with no guide so constant and so safe as your own innocence, make not that world too dear a friend. Were it possible that your own home ever could be lonely or unhappy, reflect that to woman the unhappiest home is happier than all excitement abroad. You will have a thousand suitors hereafter: believe that the asp lurks under the flatterer's tongue, and resolve, come what may, to be contented with your lot. How many have I known, lovely and pure as you, who have suffered the very affections--the very beauty of

their nature--to destroy them! Listen to me as a warner, as a brother, as a pilot who has passed the seas on which your vessel is about to launch. And ever, ever let me know, in whatever lands your name may reach me, that one who has brought back to me all my faith in human excellence, while the idol of our sex, is the glory of her own. Forgive me this strange impertinence; my heart is full, and has overflowed. And now, Miss Cameron--Evelyn Cameron--this is my last offence, and my last farewell!"

He held out his hand, and involuntarily, unknowingly, she clasped it, as if to detain him till she could summon words to reply. Suddenly he heard Lord Vargrave's voice behind. The spell was broken; the next moment Evelyn was alone, and the throng swept into the room towards the banquet, and laughter and gay voices were heard, and Lord Vargrave was again by Evelyn's side!

CHAPTER IV.

To you
This journey is devoted.
Lover's Progress, Act iv. sc. 1.

AS Cleveland and Maltravers returned homeward, the latter abruptly checked the cheerful garrulity of his friend. "I have a favour, a great favour to ask of you."

"And what is that?"

"Let us leave Burleigh tomorrow; I care not at what hour; we need go but two or three stages if you are fatigued."

"Most hospitable host! and why?"

"It is torture, it is agony to me, to breathe the air of Burleigh," cried Maltravers, wildly. "Can you not guess my secret? Have I then concealed it so well? I love, I adore Evelyn Cameron, and she is betrothed to--she loves--another!"

Mr. Cleveland was breathless with amaze; Maltravers had indeed so well concealed his secret, and now his emotion was so impetuous, that it startled and alarmed the old man, who had never himself experienced a passion, though he had indulged a sentiment. He sought to console and

soothe; but after the first burst of agony, Maltravers recovered himself, and said gently,--

"Let us never return to this subject again: it is right that I should conquer this madness, and conquer it I will! Now you know my weakness, you will indulge it. My cure, cannot commence until I can no longer see from my casements the very roof that shelters the affianced bride of another."

"Certainly, then, we will set off to-morrow: my friend! is it indeed--"

"Ah, cease," interrupted the proud man; "no compassion, I implore: give me but time and silence,--they are the only remedies."

Before noon the next day, Burleigh was once more deserted by its lord. As the carriage drove through the village, Mrs. Elton saw it from her open window; but her patron, too absorbed at that hour even for benevolence, forgot her existence and yet so complicated are the webs of fate, that in the breast of that lowly stranger was locked a secret of the most vital moment to Maltravers.

"Where is he going; where is the squire going?" asked Mrs. Elton, anxiously.

"Dear heart!" said the cottager, "they do say he be going for a short time to foren parts. But he will be back at Christmas."

"And at Christmas I may be gone hence forever," muttered the invalid; "but what will that matter to him--to any one?"

At the first stage Maltravers and his friend were detained a short time for the want of horses. Lord Raby's house had been filled with guests on the preceding night, and the stables of this little inn, dignified with the sign of the Raby Arms, and about two miles distant from the great man's place, had been exhausted by numerous claimants returning homeward from Knaresdean. It was a quiet, solitary post-house, and patience, till some jaded horses should return, was the only remedy; the host, assuring the travellers that he expected four horses every moment, invited them within. The morning was cold, and the fire not unacceptable to Mr. Cleveland; so they went into the little parlour. Here they found an elderly gentleman of very prepossessing appearance, who was waiting for the same object. He moved courteously from the fireplace as the travellers entered, and pushed the "B-----shire Chronicle" towards Cleveland: Cleveland bowed urbanely. "A cold day, sir; the autumn begins

to show itself."

"It is true, sir," answered the old gentleman; "and I feel the cold the more, having just quitted the genial atmosphere of the South."

"Of Italy?"

"No, of England only. I see by this paper (I am not much of a politician) that there is a chance of a dissolution of parliament, and that Mr. Maltravers is likely to come forward for this county; are you acquainted with him, sir?"

"A little," said Cleveland, smiling.

"He is a man I am much interested in," said the old gentleman; "and I hope soon to be honoured with his acquaintance."

"Indeed! and you are going into his neighbourhood?" asked Cleveland, looking more attentively at the stranger, and much pleased with a certain simple candour in his countenance and manner.

"Yes, to Merton Rectory."

Maltravers, who had been hitherto stationed by the window, turned round.

"To Merton Rectory?" repeated Cleveland. "You are acquainted with Mr. Merton, then?"

"Not yet; but I know some of his family. However, my visit is rather to a young lady who is staying at the rectory,--Miss Cameron."

Maltravers sighed heavily; and the old gentleman looked at him curiously.

"Perhaps, sir, if you know that neighbourhood, you may have seen--"

"Miss Cameron! Certainly; it is an honour not easily forgotten."

The old gentleman looked pleased.

"The dear child!" said he, with a burst of honest affection, and he passed his hand over his eyes. Maltravers drew near to him.

"You know Miss Cameron; you are to be envied, sir," said he.

"I have known her since she was a child; Lady Vargrave is my dearest

friend."

"Lady Vargrave must be worthy of such a daughter. Only under the light of a sweet disposition and pure heart could that beautiful nature have been trained and reared."

Maltravers spoke with enthusiasm; and, as if fearful to trust himself more, left the room.

"That gentleman speaks not more warmly than justly," said the old man, with some surprise. "He has a countenance which, if physiognomy be a true science, declares his praise to be no common compliment; may I inquire his name?"

"Maltravers," replied Cleveland, a little vain of the effect his ex-pupil's name was to produce.

The curate--for it was he--started and changed countenance.

"Maltravers! but he is not about to leave the county?"

"Yes, for a few months."

Here the host entered. Four horses, that had been only fourteen miles, had just re-entered the yard. If Mr. Maltravers could spare two to that gentleman, who had, indeed, pre-engaged them?

"Certainly," said Cleveland; "but be quick."

"And is Lord Vargrave still at Mr. Merton's?" asked the curate, musingly.

"Oh, yes, I believe so. Miss Cameron is to be married to him very shortly,--is it not so?"

"I cannot say," returned Aubrey, rather bewildered. "You know Lord Vargrave, sir?"

"Extremely well!"

"And you think him worthy of Miss Cameron?"

"That is a question for her to answer. But I see the horses are put to. Good-day, sir! Will you tell your fair young friend that you have met an old gentleman who wishes her all happiness; and if she ask you his name,

say Cleveland?"

So saying, Mr. Cleveland bowed, and re-entered the carriage. But Maltravers was yet missing. In fact, he returned to the house by the back way, and went once more into the little parlour. It was something to see again one who would so soon see Evelyn!

"If I mistake not," said Maltravers, "you are that Mr. Aubrey on whose virtues I have often heard Miss Cameron delight to linger? Will you believe my regret that our acquaintance is now so brief?"

As Maltravers spoke thus simply, there was in his countenance, his voice, a melancholy sweetness, which greatly conciliated the good curate; and as Aubrey gazed upon his noble features and lofty mien, he no longer wondered at the fascination he had appeared to exercise over the young Evelyn.

"And may I not hope, Mr. Maltravers," said he, "that before long our acquaintance may be renewed? Could not Miss Cameron," he added, with a smile and a penetrating look, "tempt you into Devonshire?"

Maltravers shook his head, and, muttering something not very audible, quitted the room. The curate heard the whirl of the wheels, and the host entered to inform him that his own carriage was now ready.

"There is something in this," thought Aubrey, "which I do not comprehend. His manner, his trembling voice, bespoke emotions he struggled to conceal. Can Lord Vargrave have gained his point? Is Evelyn, indeed, no longer free?"

CHAPTER V.

CERTES, c'est un grand cas, l'cas,
Que toujours tracas ou fracas
Vous faites d'une ou d'autre sort;
C'est le diable qui vous emporte!--VOITURE.

* "Certes, it is the fact, l'cas, that you are always engaged in tricks or scrapes of some sort or other; it must be the devil that bewitches you."

LORD VARGRAVE had passed the night of the ball and the following morning

at Knaresdean. It was necessary to bring the counsels of the scheming conclave to a full and definite conclusion; and this was at last effected. Their strength numbered, friends and foes alike canvassed and considered, and due account taken of the waverers to be won over, it really did seem, even to the least sanguine, that the Saxingham or Vargrave party was one that might well aspire either to dictate to, or to break up, a government. Nothing now was left to consider but the favourable hour for action. In high spirits, Lord Vargrave returned about the middle of the day to the rectory.

"So," thought he, as he reclined in his carriage,--"so, in politics, the prospect clears as the sun breaks out. The party I have espoused is one that must be the most durable, for it possesses the greatest property and the most stubborn prejudice--what elements for Party! All that I now require is a sufficient fortune to back my ambition. Nothing can clog my way but these cursed debts, this disreputable want of gold. And yet Evelyn alarms me! Were I younger, or had I not made my position too soon, I would marry her by fraud or by force,--run off with her to Gretna, and make Vulcan minister to Plutus. But this would never do at my years, and with my reputation. A pretty story for the newspapers, d-----n them! Well, nothing venture, nothing have; I will brave the hazard! Meanwhile, Doltimore is mine; Caroline will rule him, and I rule her. His vote and his boroughs are something,--his money will be more immediately useful: I must do him the honour to borrow a few thousands,--Caroline must manage that for me. The fool is miserly, though a spendthrift; and looked black when I delicately hinted the other day that I wanted a friend--_id est_, a loan! money and friendship same thing,--distinction without a difference!" Thus cogitating, Vargrave whiled away the minutes till his carriage stopped at Mr. Merton's door.

As he entered the hall he met Caroline, who had just quitted her own room.

"How lucky I am that you have on your bonnet! I long for a walk with you round the lawn."

"And I, too, am glad to see you, Lord Vargrave," said Caroline, putting her arm in his.

"Accept my best congratulations, my own sweet friend," said Vargrave, when they were in the grounds. "You have no idea how happy Doltimore is. He came to Knaresdean yesterday to communicate the news, and his neckcloth was primmer than ever. C'est un bon enfant."

"Ah, how can you talk thus? Do you feel no pain at the thought that--that I am another's?"

"Your heart will be ever mine,--and that is the true fidelity. What else, too, could be done? As for Lord Doltimore, we will go shares in him. Come, cheer thee, _m'amie_; I rattle on thus to keep up your spirits. Do not fancy I am happy!"

Caroline let fall a few tears; but beneath the influence of Vargrave's sophistries and flatteries, she gradually recovered her usual hard and worldly tone of mind.

"And where is Evelyn?" asked Vargrave. "Do you know, the little witch seemed to be half mad the night of the ball. Her head was turned; and when she sat next me at supper, she not only answered every question I put to her _a tort et a travers_, but I fancied every moment she was going to burst out crying. Can you tell what was the matter with her?"

"She was grieved to hear that I was to be married to the man I do not love. Ah, Vargrave, she has more heart than you have!"

"But she never fancies that you love me?" asked Lumley, in alarm. "You women are so confoundedly confidential!"

"No, she does not suspect our secret."

"Then I scarcely think your approaching marriage was a sufficient cause for so much distraction."

"Perhaps she may have overheard some of the impertinent whispers about her mother,--'Who was Lady Vargrave?' and 'What Cameron was Lady Vargrave's first husband?' _I_ overheard a hundred such vulgar questions; and provincial people whisper so loud."

"Ah, that is a very probable solution of the mystery; and for my part, I am almost as much puzzled as any one else can be to know who Lady Vargrave was!"

"Did not your uncle tell you?"

"He told me that she was of no very elevated birth and station,--nothing more; and she herself, with her quiet, say-nothing manner, slips through all my careless questionings like an eel. She is still a beautiful creature, more regularly handsome than even Evelyn; and old Templeton had

a very sweet tooth at the back of his head, though he never opened his mouth wide enough to show it."

"She must ever at least have been blameless, to judge by an air which, even now, is more like that of a child than a matron."

"Yes; she has not much of the widow about her, poor soul! But her education, except in music, has not been very carefully attended to; and she knows about as much of the world as the Bishop of Autun (better known as Prince Talleyrand) knows of the Bible. If she were not so simple, she would be silly; but silliness is never simple,--always cunning; however, there is some cunning in her keeping her past Cameronian Chronicles so close. Perhaps I may know more about her in a short time, for I intend going to C-----, where my uncle once lived, in order to see if I can revive under the rose--since peers are only contraband electioneers--his old parliamentary influence in that city: and they may tell me more there than I now know."

"Did the late lord marry at C-----?"

"No; in Devonshire. I do not even know if Mrs. Cameron ever was at C-----."

"You must be curious to know who the father of your intended wife was?"

"Her father! No; I have no curiosity in that quarter. And, to tell you the truth, I am much too busy about the Present to be raking into that heap of rubbish we call the Past. I fancy that both your good grandmother and that comely old curate of Brook-Green know everything about Lady Vargrave; and, as they esteem her so much, I take it for granted she is *_sans tache_*."

"How could I be so stupid! *_A propos_* of the curate, I forgot to tell you that he is here. He arrived about two hours ago, and has been closeted with Evelyn ever since!"

"The deuce! What brought the old man hither?"

"That I know not. Papa received a letter from him yesterday morning, to say that he would be here to-day. Perhaps Lady Vargrave thinks it time for Evelyn to return home."

"What am I to do?" said Vargrave, anxiously. "Dare I yet venture to propose?"

"I am sure it will be in vain, Vargrave. You must prepare for disappointment."

"And ruin," muttered Vargrave, gloomily. "Hark you, Caroline, she may refuse me if she pleases. But I am not a man to be baffled. Have her I will, by one means or another; revenge urges me to it almost as much as ambition. That girl's thread of life has been the dark line in my woof; she has robbed me of fortune, she now thwarts me in my career, she humbles me in my vanity. But, like a hound that has tasted blood, I will run her down, whatever winding she takes."

"Vargrave, you terrify me! Reflect; we do not live in an age when violence--"

"Tush!" interrupted Lumley, with one of those dark looks which at times, though very rarely, swept away all its customary character from that smooth, shrewd countenance. "Tush! We live in an age as favourable to intellect and to energy as ever was painted in romance. I have that faith in fortune and myself that I tell you, with a prophet's voice, that Evelyn shall fulfil the wish of my dying uncle. But the bell summons us back."

On returning to the house, Lord Vargrave's valet gave him a letter which had arrived that morning. It was from Mr. Gustavus Douce, and ran thus:--

FLEET STREET, ----- 20, 18--.

MY LORD,--It is with the greatest regret that I apprise you, for Self & Co., that we shall not be able in the present state of the Money Market to renew your Lordship's bill for 10,000 pounds, due the 28th instant. Respectfully calling your Lordship's attention to the same, I have the honour to be, for Self & Co., my Lord,

Your Lordship's most obedient and most obliged humble servant,
GUSTAVUS DOUCE.

To the Right Hon. LORD VARGRAVE, etc.

This letter sharpened Lord Vargrave's anxiety and resolve; nay, it seemed almost to sharpen his sharp features as he muttered sundry denunciations

on Messrs. Douce and Co., while arranging his neckcloth at the glass.

CHAPTER VI.

Sol. Why, please your honourable lordship, we were talking here and there,--this and that.--_The Stranger_.

AUBREY had been closeted with Evelyn the whole morning; and, simultaneous with his arrival, came to her the news of the departure of Maltravers. It was an intelligence that greatly agitated and unnerved her; and, coupling that event with his solemn words on the previous night, Evelyn asked herself, in wonder, what sentiments she could have inspired in Maltravers. Could he love her,--her, so young, so inferior, so uninformed? Impossible! Alas! alas! for Maltravers! His genius, his gifts, his towering qualities,--all that won the admiration, almost the awe, of Evelyn,--placed him at a distance from her heart! When she asked herself if he loved her, she did not ask, even in that hour, if she loved him. But even the question she did ask, her judgment answered erringly in the negative. Why should he love, and yet fly her? She understood not his high-wrought scruples, his self-deluding belief. Aubrey was more puzzled than enlightened by his conversation with his pupil; only one thing seemed certain,--her delight to return to the cottage and her mother.

Evelyn could not sufficiently recover her composure to mix with the party below; and Aubrey, at the sound of the second dinner-bell, left her to her solitude, and bore her excuses to Mrs. Merton.

"Dear me!" said that worthy lady; "I am so sorry. I thought Miss Cameron looked fatigued at breakfast, and there was something hysterical in her spirits; and I suppose the surprise of your arrival has upset her. Caroline, my dear, you had better go and see what she would like to have taken up to her room,--a little soup and the wing of a chicken."

"My dear," said Mr. Merton, rather pompously, "I think it would be but a proper respect to Miss Cameron, if you yourself accompanied Caroline."

"I assure you," said the curate, alarmed at the avalanche of politeness that threatened poor Evelyn,--"I assure you that Miss Cameron would prefer being left alone at present; as you say, Mrs. Merton, her spirits are rather agitated."

But Mrs. Merton, with a sliding bow, had already quitted the room, and Caroline with her.

"Come back, Sophy! Cecilia, come back!" said Mr. Merton, settling his _jabot_.

"Oh, dear Evy! poor dear Evy!--Evy is ill!" said Sophy; "I may go to Evy? I must go, Papa!"

"No, my dear, you are too noisy; these children are quite spoiled, Mr. Aubrey."

The old man looked at them benevolently, and drew them to his knee; and, while Cissy stroked his long white hair, and Sophy ran on about dear Evy's prettiness and goodness, Lord Vargrave sauntered into the room.

On seeing the curate, his frank face lighted up with surprise and pleasure; he hastened to him, seized him by both hands, expressed the most heartfelt delight at seeing him, inquired tenderly after Lady Vargrave, and, not till he was out of breath, and Mrs. Merton and Caroline returning apprised him of Miss Cameron's indisposition, did his rapture vanish; and, as a moment before he was all joy, so now he was all sorrow.

The dinner passed off dully enough; the children, re-admitted to dessert, made a little relief to all parties; and when they and the two ladies went, Aubrey himself quickly rose to join Evelyn.

"Are you going to Miss Cameron?" said Lord Vargrave; "pray say how unhappy I feel at her illness. I think these grapes--they are very fine--could not hurt her. May I ask you to present them with my best--best and most anxious regards? I shall be so uneasy till you return. Now, Merton (as the door closed on the curate), let's have another bottle of this famous claret! Droll old fellow that,--quite a character!"

"He is a great favourite with Lady Vargrave and Miss Cameron, I believe," said Mr. Merton. "A mere village priest, I suppose; no talent, no energy--or he could not be a curate at that age."

"Very true,--a shrewd remark. The Church is as good a profession as any other for getting on, if a man has anything in him. I shall live to see _you_ a bishop!"

Mr. Merton shook his head.

"Yes, I shall; though you have hitherto disdained to exhibit any one of the three orthodox qualifications for a mitre."

"And what are they, my lord?"

"Editing a Greek play, writing a political pamphlet, and apostatizing at the proper moment."

"Ha, ha! your lordship is severe on us."

"Not I; I often wish I had been brought up to the Church,--famous profession, properly understood. By Jupiter, I should have been a capital bishop!"

In his capacity of parson, Mr. Merton tried to look grave; in his capacity of a gentlemanlike, liberal fellow, he gave up the attempt, and laughed pleasantly at the joke of the rising man.

CHAPTER VII.

WILL nothing please you?

What do you think of the Court?--_The Plain Dealer_.

ON one subject Aubrey found no difficulty in ascertaining Evelyn's wishes and condition of mind. The experiment of her visit, so far as Vargrave's hopes were concerned, had utterly failed; she could not contemplate the prospect of his alliance, and she poured out to the curate, frankly and fully, all her desire to effect a release from her engagement. As it was now settled that she should return with Aubrey to Brook-Green, it was indeed necessary to come to the long-delayed understanding with her betrothed. Yet this was difficult, for he had so little pressed, so distantly alluded to, their engagement, that it was like a forwardness, an indelicacy in Evelyn to forestall the longed-for yet dreaded explanation. This, however, Aubrey took upon himself; and at this promise Evelyn felt as the slave may feel when the chain is stricken off.

At breakfast, Mr. Aubrey communicated to the Mertons Evelyn's intention to return with him to Brook-Green on the following day. Lord Vargrave started, bit his lip, but said nothing.

Not so silent was Mr. Merton.

"Return with you! my dear Mr. Aubrey, just consider; it is impossible! You see Miss Cameron's rank of life, her position,--so very strange; no servants of her own here but her woman,--no carriage even! You would not have her travel in a post-chaise such a long journey! Lord Vargrave, you can never consent to that, I am sure?"

"Were it only as Miss Cameron's _guardian_," said Lord Vargrave, pointedly, "I should certainly object to such a mode of performing such a journey. Perhaps Mr. Aubrey means to perfect the project by taking two outside places on the top of the coach?"

"Pardon me," said the curate, mildly, "but I am not so ignorant of what is due to Miss Cameron as you suppose. Lady Vargrave's carriage, which brought me hither, will be no unsuitable vehicle for Lady Vargrave's daughter; and Miss Cameron is not, I trust, quite so spoiled by all your friendly attentions as to be unable to perform a journey of two days with no other protector than myself."

"I forgot Lady Vargrave's carriage,--or rather I was not aware that you had used it, my dear sir," said Mr. Merton. "But you must not blame us, if we are sorry to lose Miss Cameron so suddenly; I was in hopes that _you_ too would stay at least a week with us."

The curate bowed at the rector's condescending politeness; and just as he was about to answer, Mrs. Merton put in,--

"And you see I had set my heart on her being Caroline's bridesmaid."

Caroline turned pale, and glanced at Vargrave, who appeared solely absorbed in breaking toast into his tea,--a delicacy he had never before been known to favour.

There was an awkward pause. The servant opportunely entered with a small parcel of books, a note to Mr. Merton, and that most blessed of all blessed things in the country,--the letter-bag.

"What is this?" said the rector, opening his note, while Mrs. Merton unlocked the bag and dispensed the contents: "Left Burleigh for some months, a day or two sooner than he had expected; excuse French leave-taking; return Miss Merton's books, much obliged; gamekeeper has orders to place the Burleigh preserves at my disposal. So we have lost our neighbour!"

"Did you not know Mr. Maltravers was gone?" said Caroline. "I heard so from Jenkins last night; he accompanies Mr. Cleveland to Paris."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Merton, opening her eyes. "What could take him to Paris?"

"Pleasure, I suppose," answered Caroline. "I'm sure I should rather have wondered what could detain him at Burleigh."

Vargrave was all this while breaking open seals and running his eyes over sundry scrawls with the practised rapidity of the man of business; he came to the last letter. His countenance brightened.

"Royal invitation, or rather command, to Windsor," he cried. "I am afraid I, too, must leave you, this very day."

"Bless me!" exclaimed Mrs. Merton; "is that from the king? Do let me see!"

"Not exactly from the king; the same thing though:" and Lord Vargrave, carelessly pushing the gracious communication towards the impatient hand and loyal gaze of Mrs. Merton, carefully put the other letters in his pocket, and walked musingly to the window.

Aubrey seized the opportunity to approach him. "My lord, can I speak with you a few moments?"

"Me! certainly; will you come to my dressing-room?"

CHAPTER VIII.

. . . THERE was never
Poor gentleman had such a sudden fortune.

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER: *The Captain*, Act v. sc. 5.

"MY LORD," said the curate, as Vargrave, leaning back in his chair, appeared to examine the shape of his boots, while in reality "his sidelong looks;" not "of love," were fixed upon his companion,--"I need scarcely refer to the wish of the late lord, your uncle, relative to Miss Cameron and yourself; nor need I, to one of a generous spirit, add that

an engagement could be only so far binding as both the parties whose happiness is concerned should be willing in proper time and season to fulfil it."

"Sir!" said Vargrave, impatiently waving his hand; and, in his irritable surmise of what was to come, losing his habitual self-control, "I know not what all this has to do with you; surely you trespass upon ground sacred to Miss Cameron and myself? Whatever you have to say, let me beg you to come at once to the point."

"My lord, I will obey you. Miss Cameron--and, I may add, with Lady Vargrave's consent--deputes me to say that, although she feels compelled to decline the honour of your lordship's alliance, yet if in any arrangement of the fortune bequeathed to her she could testify to you, my lord, her respect and friendship, it would afford her the most sincere gratification."

Lord Vargrave started.

"Sir," said he, "I know not if I am to thank you for this information, the announcement of which so strangely coincides with your arrival. But allow me to say that there needs no ambassador between Miss Cameron and myself. It is due, sir, to my station, to my relationship, to my character of guardian, to my long and faithful affection, to all considerations which men of the world understand, which men of feeling sympathize with, to receive from Miss Cameron alone the rejection of my suit."

"Unquestionably Miss Cameron will grant your lordship the interview you have a right to seek; but pardon me, I thought it might save you both much pain, if the meeting were prepared by a third person; and on any matter of business, any atonement to your lordship--"

"Atonement! what can atone to me?" exclaimed Vargrave, as he walked to and fro the room in great disorder and excitement. "Can you give me back years of hope and expectancy,--the manhood wasted in a vain dream? Had I not been taught to look to this reward, should I have rejected all occasion--while my youth was not yet all gone, while my heart was not yet all occupied--to form a suitable alliance? Nay, should I have indulged in a high and stirring career, for which my own fortune is by no means qualified? Atonement! atonement! Talk of atonement to boys! Sir, I stand before you a man whose private happiness is blighted, whose public prospects are darkened, life wasted, fortunes ruined, the schemes of an existence built upon one hope, which was lawfully indulged, overthrown;

and you talk to me of _atonement_!"

Selfish as the nature of this complaint might be, Aubrey was struck with its justice.

"My lord," said he, a little embarrassed, "I cannot deny that there is truth in much of what you say. Alas! it proves how vain it is for man to calculate on the future; how unhappily your uncle erred in imposing conditions, which the chances of life and the caprices of affection could at any time dissolve! But this is blame that attaches only to the dead: can you blame the living?"

"Sir, I considered myself bound by my uncle's prayer to keep my hand and heart disengaged, that this title--miserable and barren distinction though it be!--might, as he so ardently desired, descend to Evelyn. I had a right to expect similar honour upon her side!"

"Surely, my lord, you, to whom the late lord on his death-bed confided all the motives of his conduct and the secret of his life, cannot but be aware that, while desirous of promoting your worldly welfare, and uniting in one line his rank and his fortune, your uncle still had Evelyn's happiness at heart as his warmest wish; you must know that, if that happiness were forfeited by a marriage with you, the marriage became but a secondary consideration. Lord Vargrave's will in itself was a proof of this. He did not impose as an absolute condition upon Evelyn her union with yourself; he did not make the forfeiture of her whole wealth the penalty of her rejection of that alliance. By the definite limit of the forfeit, he intimated a distinction between a command and a desire. And surely, when you consider all circumstances, your lordship must think that, what with that forfeit and the estate settled upon the title, your uncle did all that in a worldly point of view equity and even affection could exact from him."

Vargrave smiled bitterly, but said nothing.

"And if this be doubted, I have clearer proof of his intentions. Such was his confidence in Lady Vargrave, that in the letter he addressed to her before his death, and which I now submit to your lordship, you will observe that he not only expressly leaves it to Lady Vargrave's discretion to communicate to Evelyn that history of which she is at present ignorant, but that he also clearly defines the line of conduct he wished to be adopted with respect to Evelyn and yourself. Permit me to point out the passage."

Impatiently Lord Vargrave ran his eye over the letter placed in his hand, till he came to these lines:--

"And if, when she has arrived at the proper age to form a judgment, Evelyn should decide against Lumley's claims, you know that on no account would I sacrifice her happiness; that all I require is, that fair play be given to his pretensions, due indulgence to the scheme I have long had at heart. Let her be brought up to consider him her future husband; let her not be prejudiced against him; let her fairly judge for herself, when the time arrives."

"You see, my lord," said Mr. Aubrey, as he took back the letter, "that this letter bears the same date as your uncle's will. What he desired has been done. Be just, my lord, be just, and exonerate us all from blame: who can dictate to the affections?"

"And I am to understand that I have no chance, now or hereafter, of obtaining the affections of Evelyn? Surely, at your age, Mr. Aubrey, you cannot encourage the heated romance common to all girls of Evelyn's age. Persons of our rank do not marry like the Corydon and Phyllis of a pastoral. At my years, I never was fool enough to expect that I should inspire a girl of seventeen with what is called a passionate attachment. But happy marriages are based upon suitable circumstances, mutual knowledge and indulgence, respect, esteem. Come, sir, let me hope yet,--let me hope that, on the same day, I may congratulate you on your preferment and you may congratulate me upon my marriage."

Vargrave said this with a cheerful and easy smile; and the tone of his voice was that of a man who wished to convey serious meaning in a jesting accent.

Mr. Aubrey, meek as he was, felt the insult of the hinted bribe, and coloured with a resentment no sooner excited than checked. "Excuse me, my lord, I have now said all; the rest had better be left to your ward herself."

"Be it so, sir. I will ask you, then, to convey my request to Evelyn to honour me with a last and parting interview."

Vargrave flung himself on his chair, and Aubrey left him.

CHAPTER IX.

THUS airy Strephon tuned his lyre.--SHENSTONE.

IN his meeting with Evelyn, Vargrave certainly exerted to the utmost all his ability and all his art. He felt that violence, that sarcasm, that selfish complaint would not avail in a man who was not loved,--though they are often admirable cards in the hands of a man who is. As his own heart was perfectly untouched in the matter, except by rage and disappointment,--feelings which with him never lasted very long,--he could play coolly his losing game. His keen and ready intellect taught him that all he could now expect was to bequeath sentiments of generous compassion and friendly interest; to create a favourable impression, which he might hereafter improve; to reserve, in short, some spot of vantage-ground in the country from which he was to affect to withdraw all his forces. He had known, in his experience of women, which, whether as an actor or a spectator, was large and various--though not among very delicate and refined natures--that a lady often takes a fancy to a suitor _after_ she has rejected him; that precisely _because_ she has once rejected she ultimately accepts him. And even this chance was, in circumstances so desperate, not to be neglected. He assumed, therefore, the countenance, the postures, and the voice of heart-broken but submissive despair; he affected a nobleness and magnanimity in his grief, which touched Evelyn to the quick, and took her by surprise.

"It is enough," said he, in sad and faltering accents; "quite enough for me to know that you cannot love me,--that I should fail in rendering you happy. Say no more, Evelyn, say no more! Let me spare you, at least, the pain your generous nature must feel in my anguish. I resign all pretensions to your hand; you are free!--may you be happy!"

"Oh, Lord Vargrave! oh, Lumley!" said Evelyn, weeping, and moved by a thousand recollections of early years. "If I could but prove in any other way my grateful sense of your merits, your too partial appreciation of me, my regard for my lost benefactor, then, indeed, nor till then, could I be happy. Oh that this wealth, so little desired by me, had been more at my disposal! but as it is, the day that sees me in possession of it, shall see it placed under your disposition, your control. This is but justice,--common justice to you; you were the nearest relation of the departed. I had no claim on him,--none but affection. Affection! and yet I disobey him!"

There was much in all this that secretly pleased Vargrave; but it only

seemed to redouble his grief.

"Talk not thus, my ward, my friend--ah, still my friend," said he, putting his handkerchief to his eyes. "I repine not; I am more than satisfied. Still let me preserve my privilege of guardian, of adviser,--a privilege dearer to me than all the wealth of the Indies!"

Lord Vargrave had some faint suspicion that Legard had created an undue interest in Evelyn's heart; and on this point he delicately and indirectly sought to sound her. Her replies convinced him that if Evelyn had conceived any prepossession for Legard, there had not been time or opportunity to ripen it into deep attachment. Of Maltravers he had no fear. The habitual self-control of that reserved personage deceived him partly; and his low opinion of mankind deceived him still more. For if there had been any love between Maltravers and Evelyn, why should the former not have stood his ground, and declared his suit? Lumley would have "bah'd" and "pish'd" at the thought of any punctilious regard for engagements so easily broken having power either to check passion for beauty, or to restrain self-interest in the chase of an heiress. He had known Maltravers ambitious; and with him, ambition and self-interest meant the same. Thus, by the very *finesse* of his character--while Vargrave ever with the worldly was a keen and almost infallible observer--with natures of a more refined, or a higher order, he always missed the mark by overshooting. Besides, had a suspicion of Maltravers ever crossed him, Caroline's communications would have dispelled it. It was more strange that Caroline should have been blind; nor would she have been so had she been less absorbed in her own schemes and destinies. All her usual penetration had of late settled in self; and an uneasy feeling--half arising from conscientious reluctance to aid Vargrave's objects, half from jealous irritation at the thought of Vargrave's marrying another--had prevented her from seeking any very intimate or confidential communication with Evelyn herself.

The dreaded conference was over; Evelyn parted from Vargrave with the very feelings he had calculated on exciting,--the moment he ceased to be her lover, her old childish regard for him recommenced. She pitied his dejection, she respected his generosity, she was deeply grateful for his forbearance. But still--still she was free; and her heart bounded within her at the thought.

Meanwhile, Vargrave, after his solemn farewell to Evelyn, retreated again to his own room, where he remained till his post-horses arrived. Then, descending into the drawing-room, he was pleased to find neither Aubrey nor Evelyn there. He knew that much affectation would be thrown away

upon Mr. and Mrs. Merton; he thanked them for their hospitality, with grave and brief cordiality, and then turned to Caroline, who stood apart by the window.

"All is up with me at present," he whispered. "I leave you, Caroline, in anticipation of fortune, rank, and prosperity; that is some comfort. For myself, I see only difficulties, embarrassment, and poverty in the future; but I despond of nothing. Hereafter you may serve me, as I have served you. Adieu!--I have been advising Caroline not to spoil Doltimore, Mrs. Merton; he is conceited enough already. Good-by! God bless you all! love to your little girls. Let me know if I can serve you in any way, Merton,--good-by again!" And thus, sentence by sentence, Vargrave talked himself into his carriage. As it drove by the drawing-room windows, he saw Caroline standing motionless where he had left her; he kissed his hand,--her eyes were fixed mournfully on his. Hard, wayward, and worldly as Caroline Merton was, Vargrave was yet not worthy of the affection he had inspired; for she could feel, and he could not,--the distinction, perhaps, between the sexes. And there still stood Caroline Merton, recalling the last tones of that indifferent voice, till she felt her hand seized, and turned round to see Lord Doltimore, and smile upon the happy lover, persuaded that he was adored!

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