



EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON

ALICE OR THE MYSTERIES

BOOK VII

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BOOK VII.

Words of dark import gave suspicion birth.--POTTER.

CHAPTER I.

Luce. Is the wind there?

That makes for me.

Isab. Come, I forget a business.

Wit without Money.

LORD VARGRAVE'S travelling-carriage was at his door, and he himself was putting on his greatcoat in his library, when Lord Saxingham entered.

"What! you are going into the country?"

"Yes; I wrote you word,--to see Lisle Court."

"Ay, true; I had forgot. Somehow or other my memory is not so good as it was. But, let me see, Lisle Court is in -----shire. Why, you will pass within ten miles of C-----."

"C-----! Shall I? I am not much versed in the geography of England,--never learned it at school. As for Poland, Kamschatka, Mexico, Madagascar, or any other place as to which knowledge would be _useful_, I have every inch of the way at my finger's end. But _a propos_ of C-----, it is the town in which my late uncle made his fortune."

"Ah, so it is. I recollect you were to have stood for C-----, but gave it up to Staunch; very handsome in you. Have you any interest there still?"

"I think my ward has some tenants,--a street or two,--one called Richard Street, and the other Templeton Place. I had intended some weeks ago to have gone down there, and seen what interest was still left to our family; but Staunch himself told me that C----- was a sure card."

"So he thought; but he has been with me this morning in great alarm: he

now thinks he shall be thrown out. A Mr. Winsley, who has a great deal of interest there, and was a supporter of his, hangs back on account of the ----- question. This is unlucky, as Staunch is quite with _us_; and if he were to rat now it would be most unfortunate."

"Winsley! Winsley!--my poor uncle's right-hand man. A great brewer,--always chairman of the Templeton Committee. I know the name, though I never saw the man."

"If you could take C----- in your way?"

"To be sure. Staunch must not be lost. We cannot throw away a single vote, much more one of such weight,--eighteen stone at the least! I'll stop at C----- on pretence of seeing after my ward's houses, and have a quiet conference with Mr. Winsley. Hem! Peers must not interfere in elections, eh? Well, good-by: take care of yourself. I shall be back in a week, I hope,--perhaps less."

In a minute more Lord Vargrave and Mr. George Frederick Augustus Howard, a slim young gentleman of high birth and connections, but who, having, as a portionless cadet, his own way to make in the world, condescended to be his lordship's private secretary, were rattling over the streets the first stage to C-----.

It was late at night when Lord Vargrave arrived at the head inn of that grave and respectable cathedral city, in which once Richard Templeton, Esq.,--saint, banker, and politician,--had exercised his dictatorial sway. "Sic transit gloria mundi!" As he warmed his hands by the fire in the large wainscoted apartment into which he was shown, his eye met a full length engraving of his uncle, with a roll of papers in his hand,--meant for a parliamentary bill for the turnpike trusts in the neighbourhood of C-----. The sight brought back his recollections of that pious and saturnine relation, and insensibly the minister's thoughts flew to his death-bed, and to the strange secret which in that last hour he had revealed to Lumley,--a secret which had done much in deepening Lord Vargrave's contempt for the forms and conventionalities of decorous life. And here it may be mentioned--though in the course of this volume a penetrating reader may have guessed as much--that, whatever that secret, it did not refer expressly or exclusively to the late lord's singular and ill-assorted marriage. Upon that point much was still left obscure to arouse Lumley's curiosity, had he been a man whose curiosity was very vivacious. But on this he felt but little interest. He knew enough to believe that no further information could benefit himself personally; why should he trouble his head with what never would fill his

pockets?

An audible yawn from the slim secretary roused Lord Vargrave from his revery.

"I envy you, my young friend," said he, good-humouredly. "It is a pleasure we lose as we grow older,--that of being sleepy. However, 'to bed,' as Lady Macbeth says. Faith, I don't wonder the poor devil of a thane was slow in going to bed with such a tigress. Good-night to you."

CHAPTER II.

MA fortune va prendre une face nouvelle.*

RACINE. *Androm.*, Act i. sc. 1.

* "My fortune is about to take a turn."

THE next morning Vargrave inquired the way to Mr. Winsley's, and walked alone to the house of the brewer. The slim secretary went to inspect the cathedral.

Mr. Winsley was a little, thickset man, with a civil but blunt electioneering manner. He started when he heard Lord Vargrave's name, and bowed with great stiffness. Vargrave saw at a glance that there was some cause of grudge in the mind of the worthy man; nor did Mr. Winsley long hesitate before he cleansed his bosom of its perilous stuff.

"This is an unexpected honour, my lord: I don't know how to account for it."

"Why, Mr. Winsley, your friendship with my late uncle can, perhaps, sufficiently explain and apologize for a visit from a nephew sincerely attached to his memory."

"Humph! I certainly did do all in my power to promote Mr. Templeton's interests. No man, I may say, did more; and yet I don't think it was much thought of the moment he turned his back upon the electors of C-----. Not that I bear any malice; I am well to do, and value no man's favour,--no man's, my lord!"

"You amaze me! I always heard my poor uncle speak of you in the highest terms."

"Oh, well, it don't signify; pray say no more of it. Can I offer your lordship a glass of wine?"

"No, I am much obliged to you; but we really must set this little matter right. You know that after his marriage my uncle never revisited C-----; and that shortly before his death he sold the greater part of his interest in this city. His young wife, I suppose, liked the neighbourhood of London; and when elderly gentlemen _do_ marry, you know they are no longer their own masters; but if you had ever come to Fulham--ah! then, indeed, my uncle would have rejoiced to see his old friend."

"Your lordship thinks so," said Mr. Winsley with a sardonic smile. "You are mistaken; I did call at Fulham; and though I sent in my card, Lord Vargrave's servant (he was then My Lord) brought back word that his lordship was not at home."

"But that must have been true; he was out, you may depend on it."

"I saw him at the window, my lord," said Mr. Winsley, taking a pinch of snuff.

"Oh, the deuce! I'm in for it," thought Lumley.--"Very strange, indeed! but how can you account for it? Ah, perhaps the health of Lady Vargrave--she was so very delicate then, and my poor uncle lived for her--you know that he left all his fortune to Miss Cameron?"

"Miss Cameron! Who is she, my lord?"

"Why, his daughter-in-law; Lady Vargrave was a widow,--a Mrs. Cameron."

"Mrs. Cam--I remember now,--they put Cameron in the newspapers; but I thought it was a mistake. But, perhaps" (added Winsley, with a sneer of peculiar malignity),--"perhaps, when your worthy uncle thought of being a peer, he did not like to have it known that he married so much beneath him."

"You quite mistake, my dear sir; my uncle never denied that Mrs. Cameron was a lady of no fortune or connections,--widow to some poor Scotch gentleman, who died I think in India."

"He left her very ill off, poor thing; but she had a great deal of merit, and worked hard; she taught my girls to play--"

"Your girls! did Mrs. Cameron ever reside in C-----?"

"To be sure; but she was then called Mrs. Butler--just as pretty a name to my fancy."

"You must make a mistake: my uncle married this lady in Devonshire."

"Very possibly," quoth the brewer, doggedly. "Mrs. Butler left the town with her little girl some time before Mr. Templeton married."

"Well, you are wiser than I am," said Lumley, forcing a smile. "But how can you be sure that Mrs. Butler and Mrs. Cameron are one and the same person? You did not go into the house, you could not have seen Lady Vargrave" (and here Lumley shrewdly guessed--if the tale were true--at the cause of his uncle's exclusion of his old acquaintance).

"No! but I saw her ladyship on the lawn," said Mr. Winsley, with another sardonic smile; "and I asked the porter at the lodge as I went out if that was Lady Vargrave, and he said, 'yes.' However, my lord, bygones are bygones,--I bear no malice; your uncle was a good man: and if he had but said to me, 'Winsley, don't say a word about Mrs. Butler,' he might have reckoned on me just as much as when in his elections he used to put five thousand pounds in my hands, and say, 'Winsley, no bribery,--it is wicked; let this be given in charity.' Did any one ever know how that money went? Was your uncle ever accused of corruption? But, my lord, surely you will take some refreshment?"

"No, indeed; but if you will let me dine with you tomorrow, you'll oblige me much; and, whatever my uncle's faults (and latterly, poor man, he was hardly in his senses; what a will he made!) let not the nephew suffer for them. Come, Mr. Winsley," and Lumley held out his hand with enchanting frankness, "you know my motives are disinterested; I have no parliamentary interest to serve, we have no constituents for our Hospital of Incurables; and--oh! that's right,--we're friends, I see! Now I must go and look after my ward's houses. Let me see, the agent's name is--is--"

"Perkins, I think, my lord," said Mr. Winsley, thoroughly softened by the charm of Vargrave's words and manner. "Let me put on my hat, and show you his house."

"Will you? That's very kind; give me all the election news by the way--you know I was once within an ace of being your member."

Vargrave learned from his new friend some further particulars relative to Mrs. Butler's humble habits and homely mode of life at C-----, which served completely to explain to him why his proud and worldly uncle had so carefully abstained from all intercourse with that city, and had prevented the nephew from standing for its vacant representation. It seemed, however, that Winsley--whose resentment was not of a very active or violent kind--had not communicated the discovery he had made to his fellow townspeople; but had contented himself with hints and aphorisms, whenever he had heard the subject of Mr. Templeton's marriage discussed, which had led the gossips of the place to imagine that he had made a much worse selection than he really had. As to the accuracy of Winsley's assertion, Vargrave, though surprised at first, had but little doubt on consideration, especially when he heard that Mrs. Butler's principal patroness had been the Mrs. Leslie, now the intimate friend of Lady Vargrave. But what had been the career, what the earlier condition and struggles of this simple and interesting creature? With her appearance at C-----, commenced all that surmise could invent. Not greater was the mystery that wrapped the apparition of Manco Capac by the lake Titiaca, than that which shrouded the places and the trials whence the lowly teacher of music had emerged amidst the streets of C-----.

Weary, and somewhat careless, of conjecture, Lord Vargrave, in dining with Mr. Winsley, turned the conversation upon the business on which he had principally undertaken his journey,--namely, the meditated purchase of Lisle Court.

"I myself am not a very good judge of landed property," said Vargrave; "I wish I knew of an experienced surveyor to look over the farms and timber: can you help me to such a one?"

Mr. Winsley smiled, and glanced at a rosy-cheeked young lady, who simpered and turned away. "I think my daughter could recommend one to your lordship, if she dared."

"Oh, Pa!"

"I see. Well, Miss Winsley, I will take no recommendation but yours."

Miss Winsley made an effort.

"Indeed, my lord, I have always heard Mr. Robert Hobbs considered very clever in his profession."

"Mr. Robert Hobbs is my man! His good health--and a fair wife to him."

Miss Winsley glanced at Mamma, and then at a younger sister; and then there was a titter, and then a fluttering, and then a rising, and Mr. Winsley, Lord Vargrave, and the slim secretary were left alone.

"Really, my lord," said the host, resettling himself, and pushing the wine, "though you have guessed our little family arrangement, and I have some interest in the recommendation, since Margaret will be Mrs. Robert Hobbs in a few weeks, yet I do not know a more acute, intelligent young man anywhere. Highly respectable, with an independent fortune; his father is lately dead, and made at least thirty thousand pounds in trade. His brother Edward is also dead; so he has the bulk of the property, and he follows his profession merely for amusement. He would consider it a great honour."

"And where does he live?"

"Oh, not in this county,--a long way off; close to ----; but it is all in your lordship's road. A very nice house he has, too. I have known his family since I was a boy; it is astonishing how his father improved the place,--it was a poor little lath-and-plaster cottage when the late Mr. Hobbs bought it, and it is now a very excellent family house."

"Well, you shall give me the address and a letter of introduction, and so much for that matter. But to return to politics;" and here Lord Vargrave ran eloquently on, till Mr. Winsley thought him the only man in the world who could save the country from that utter annihilation, the possibility of which he had never even suspected before.

It may be as well to add, that, on wishing Lord Vargrave good-night, Mr. Winsley whispered in his ear, "Your lordship's friend, Lord Staunch, need be under no apprehension,--we are all right!"

CHAPTER III.

THIS is the house, sir.--_Love's Pilgrimage_, Act iv, sc. 2.

Redeunt Saturnia regna.*--VIRGIL.

* "A former state of things returns."

THE next morning, Lumley and his slender companion were rolling rapidly over the same road on which, sixteen years ago, way-worn and weary, Alice Darvil had first met with Mrs. Leslie; they were talking about a new opera-dancer as they whirled by the very spot.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon, the next day, when the carriage stopped at a cast-iron gate, on which was inscribed this epigraph, "Hobbs' lodge--Ring the Bell."

"A snug place enough," said Lord Vargrave, as they were waiting the arrival of the footman to unbar the gate.

"Yes," said Mr. Howard. "If a retired Cit could be transformed into a house, such is the house he would be."

Poor Dale Cottage,--the home of Poetry and Passion! But change visits the Commonplace as well as the Romantic. Since Alice had pressed to that cold grating her wistful eyes, time had wrought his allotted revolutions; the old had died, the young grown up. Of the children playing on the lawn, death had claimed some, and marriage others,--and the holiday of youth was gone for all.

The servant opened the gate. Mr. Robert Hobbs was at home; he had friends with him,--he was engaged; Lord Vargrave sent in his card, and the introductory letter from Mr. Winsley. In two seconds, these missives brought to the gate Mr. Robert Hobbs himself, a smart young man, with a black stock, red whiskers, and an eye-glass pendant to a hair-chain which was possibly a gage d'amour from Miss Margaret Winsley.

A profusion of bows, compliments, apologies, etc., the carriage drove up the sweep, and Lord Vargrave descended, and was immediately ushered into Mr. Hobbs's private room. The slim secretary followed, and sat silent, melancholy, and upright, while the peer affably explained his wants and wishes to the surveyor.

Mr. Hobbs was well acquainted with the locality of Lisle Court, which was little more than thirty miles distant, he should be proud to accompany Lord Vargrave thither the next morning. But, might he venture, might he dare, might he presume--a gentleman who lived at the town of ----- was to dine with him that day; a gentleman of the most profound knowledge of agricultural affairs; a gentleman who knew every farm, almost every acre, belonging to Colonel Maltravers; if his lordship could be induced to waive ceremony, and dine with Mr. Hobbs; it might be really useful to meet this gentleman. The slim secretary, who was very hungry, and who

thought he sniffed an uncommonly savoury smell, looked up from his boots. Lord Vargrave smiled.

"My young friend here is too great an admirer of Mrs. Hobbs--who is to be--not to feel anxious to make the acquaintance of any member of the family she is to enter."

Mr. George Frederick Augustus Howard blushed indignant refutation of the calumnious charge. Vargrave continued,--"As for me, I shall be delighted to meet any friends of yours, and am greatly obliged for your consideration. We may dismiss the postboys, Howard; and what time shall we summon them,--ten o'clock?"

"If your lordship would condescend to accept a bed, we can accommodate your lordship and this gentleman, and start at any hour in the morning that--"

"So be it," interrupted Vargrave. "You speak like a man of business. Howard, be so kind as to order the horses for six o'clock to-morrow. We'll breakfast at Lisle Court."

This matter settled, Lord Vargrave and Mr. Howard were shown into their respective apartments. Travelling dresses were changed, the dinner put back, and the fish over-boiled; but what mattered common fish, when Mr. Hobbs had just caught such a big one? Of what consequence he should be henceforth and ever! A peer, a minister, a stranger to the county,--to come all this way to consult him! to be his guest! to be shown off, and patted, and trotted out before all the rest of the company! Mr. Hobbs was a made man! Careless of all this, ever at home with any one, and delighted, perhaps, to escape a tete-a-tete with Mr. Howard in a strange inn, Vargrave lounged into the drawing-room, and was formally presented to the expectant family and the famishing guests.

During the expiring bachelorship of Mr. Robert Hobbs, his sister, Mrs. Tiddy (to whom the reader was first introduced as a bride gathering the wisdom of economy and large joints from the frugal lips of her mamma), officiated as lady of the house,--a comely matron, and well-preserved,--except that she had lost a front tooth,--in a jaundiced satinet gown, with a fall of British blonde, and a tucker of the same, Mr. Tiddy being a starch man, and not willing that the luxuriant charms of Mrs. T. should be too temptingly exposed! There was also Mr. Tiddy, whom his wife had married for love, and who was now well to do,--a fine-looking man, with large whiskers, and a Roman nose, a little awry. Moreover, there was a Miss Bidy or Bridget Hobbs, a young lady of four or five

and twenty, who was considering whether she might ask Lord Vargrave to write something in her album, and who cast a bashful look of admiration at the slim secretary, as he now sauntered into the room, in a black coat, black waistcoat, black trousers, and a black neckcloth, with a black pin,--looking much like an ebony cane split half-way up. Miss Biddy was a fair young lady, a _leettle_ faded, with uncommonly thin arms and white satin shoes, on which the slim secretary cast his eyes and--shuddered!

In addition to the family group were the Rector of -----, an agreeable man, who published sermons and poetry; also Sir William Jekyll, who was employing Mr. Hobbs to make a map of an estate he had just purchased; also two country squires and their two wives; moreover, the physician of the neighbouring town,--a remarkably tall man, who wore spectacles and told anecdotes; and, lastly, Mr. Onslow, the gentleman to whom Mr. Hobbs had referred,--an elderly man of prepossessing exterior, of high repute as the most efficient magistrate, the best farmer, and the most sensible person in the neighbourhood. This made the party, to each individual of which the great man bowed and smiled; and the great man's secretary bent, condescendingly, three joints of his backbone.

The bell was now rung, dinner announced. Sir William Jekyll led the way with one of the she-squires, and Lord Vargrave offered his arm to the portly Mrs. Tiddy.

Vargrave, as usual, was the life of the feast. Mr. Howard, who sat next to Miss Bridget, conversed with her between the courses, "in dumb show." Mr. Onslow and the physician played second and third to Lord Vargrave. When the dinner was over, and the ladies had retired, Vargrave found himself seated next to Mr. Onslow, and discovered in his neighbour a most agreeable companion. They talked principally about Lisle Court, and from Colonel Maltravers the conversation turned naturally upon Ernest. Vargrave proclaimed his early intimacy with the latter gentleman, complained, feelingly, that politics had divided them of late, and told two or three anecdotes of their youthful adventures in the East. Mr. Onslow listened to him with much attention.

"I made the acquaintance of Mr. Maltravers many years ago," said he, "and upon a very delicate occasion. I was greatly interested in him; I never saw one so young (for he was then but a boy) manifest feelings so deep. By the dates you have referred to, your acquaintance with him must have commenced very shortly after mine. Was he at that time cheerful, in good spirits?"

"No, indeed; hypochondriacal to the greatest degree."

"Your lordship's intimacy with him, and the confidence that generally exists between young men, induce me to suppose that he may have told you a little romance connected with his early years."

Lumley paused to consider; and this conversation, which had been carried on apart, was suddenly broken into by the tall doctor, who wanted to know whether his lordship had ever heard the anecdote about Lord Thurlow and the late king. The anecdote was as long as the doctor himself; and when it was over, the gentlemen adjourned to the drawing-room, and all conversation was immediately drowned by "Row, brothers, row," which had only been suspended till the arrival of Mr. Tiddy, who had a fine bass voice.

Alas! eighteen years ago, in that spot of earth, Alice Darvil had first caught the soul of music from the lips of Genius and of Love! But better as it is,--less romantic, but more proper,--as Hobbs' Lodge was less pretty, but more safe from the winds and rains, than Dale Cottage.

Miss Bridget ventured to ask the good-humoured Lord Vargrave if he sang. "Not I, Miss Hobbs; but Howard, there!--ah, if you heard _him_!" The consequence of this hint was, that the unhappy secretary, who, alone, in a distant corner, was unconsciously refreshing his fancy with some cool weak coffee, was instantly beset with applications from Miss Bridget, Mrs. Tiddy, Mr. Tiddy, and the tall doctor, to favour the company with a specimen of his talents. Mr. Howard could sing,--he could even play the guitar. But to sing at Hobbs' Lodge, to sing to the accompaniment of Mrs. Tiddy, to have his gentle tenor crushed to death in a glee by the heavy splayfoot of Mr. Tiddy's manly bass--the thought was insufferable! He faltered forth assurances of his ignorance, and hastened to bury his resentment in the retirement of a remote sofa. Vargrave, who had forgotten the significant question of Mr. Onslow, renewed in a whisper his conversation with that gentleman relative to the meditated investment, while Mr. and Mrs. Tiddy sang "Come dwell with me;" and Onslow was so pleased with his new acquaintance, that he volunteered to make a fourth in Lumley's carriage the next morning, and accompany him to Lisle Court. This settled, the party soon afterwards broke up. At midnight Lord Vargrave was fast asleep; and Mr. Howard, tossing restlessly to and fro on his melancholy couch, was revolving all the hardships that await a native of St. James's, who ventures forth among--

"The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders!"

CHAPTER IV.

BUT how were these doubts to be changed into absolute certainty?

EDGAR HUNTLEY.

THE next morning, while it was yet dark, Lord Vargrave's carriage picked up Mr. Onslow at the door of a large old-fashioned house, at the entrance of the manufacturing town of ----. The party were silent and sleepy till they arrived at Lisle Court. The sun had then appeared, the morning was clear, the air frosty and bracing; and as, after traversing a noble park, a superb quadrangular pile of brick flanked by huge square turrets coped with stone broke upon the gaze of Lord Vargrave, his worldly heart swelled within him, and the image of Evelyn became inexpressibly lovely and seductive.

Though the housekeeper was not prepared for Vargrave's arrival at so early an hour, yet he had been daily expected: the logs soon burned bright in the ample hearth of the breakfast-room; the urn hissed, the cutlets smoked; and while the rest of the party gathered round the fire, and unmuffled themselves of cloaks and shawl-handkerchiefs, Vargrave seized upon the housekeeper, traversed with delighted steps the magnificent suite of rooms, gazed on the pictures, admired the state bed-chambers, peeped into the offices, and recognized in all a mansion worthy of a Peer of England,--but which a more prudent man would have thought, with a sigh, required careful management of the rent-roll raised from the property adequately to equip and maintain. Such an idea did not cross the mind of Vargrave; he only thought how much he should be honoured and envied, when, as Secretary of State, he should yearly fill those feudal chambers with the pride and rank of England! It was characteristic of the extraordinary sanguineness and self-confidence of Vargrave, that he entirely overlooked one slight obstacle to this prospect, in the determined refusal of Evelyn to accept that passionate homage which he offered to--her fortune!

When breakfast was over the steward was called in, and the party, mounted upon ponies, set out to reconnoitre. After spending the short day most agreeably in looking over the gardens, pleasure-grounds, park, and home-farm, and settling to visit the more distant parts of the property the next day, the party were returning home to dine, when Vargrave's eye caught the glittering _whim_ of Sir Gregory Gubbins.

He pointed it out to Mr. Onslow, and laughed much at hearing of the annoyance it occasioned to Colonel Maltravers. "Thus," said Lumley, "do we all crumple the rose-leaf under us, and quarrel with couches the most luxuriant! As for me, I will wager, that were this property mine, or my ward's, in three weeks we should have won the heart of Sir Gregory, made him pull down his _whim_, and coaxed him out of his interest in the city of ----- . A good seat for you, Howard, some day or other."

"Sir Gregory has prodigiously bad taste," said Mr. Hobbs. "For my part, I think that there ought to be a certain modest simplicity in the display of wealth got in business,--that was my poor father's maxim."

"Ah!" said Vargrave, "Hobbs' Lodge is a specimen. Who was your predecessor in that charming retreat?"

"Why, the place--then called Dale Cottage--belonged to a Mr. Berners, a rich bachelor in business, who was rich enough not to mind what people said of him, and kept a lady there. She ran off from him, and he then let it to some young man--a stranger, very eccentric, I hear--a Mr.--Mr. Butler--and he, too, gave the cottage an unlawful attraction,--a most beautiful girl, I have heard."

"Butler!" echoed Vargrave,--"Butler! Butler!" Lumley recollected that such had been the real name of Mrs. Cameron.

Onslow looked hard at Vargrave.

"You recognize the name, my lord," said he in a whisper, as Hobbs had turned to address himself to Mr. Howard. "I thought you very discreet when I asked you, last night, if you remembered the early follies of your friend." A suspicion at once flashed upon the quick mind of Vargrave: Butler was a name on the mother's side in the family of Maltravers; the gloom of Ernest when he first knew him, the boy's hints that the gloom was connected with the affections, the extraordinary and single accomplishment of Lady Vargrave in that art of which Maltravers was so consummate a master, the similarity of name,--all taken in conjunction with the meaning question of Mr. Onslow, were enough to suggest to Vargrave that he might be on the verge of a family secret, the knowledge of which could be turned to advantage. He took care not to confess his ignorance, but artfully proceeded to draw out Mr. Onslow's communications.

"Why, it is true," said he, "that Maltravers and I had no secrets. Ah, we were wild fellows then! The name of Butler is in his family, eh?"

"It is. I see you know all."

"Yes; he told me the story, but it is eighteen years ago. Do refresh my memory. Howard, my good fellow, just ride on and expedite dinner: Mr. Hobbs, will you go with Mr. What's-his-name, the steward, and look over the maps, out-goings, etc.? Now, Mr. Onslow--so Maltravers took the cottage, and a lady with it?--ay, I remember."

Mr. Onslow (who was in fact that magistrate to whom Ernest had confided his name and committed the search after Alice, and who was really anxious to know if any tidings of the poor girl had ever been ascertained) here related that history with which the reader is acquainted,--the robbery of the cottage, the disappearance of Alice, the suspicions that connected that disappearance with her ruffian father, the despair and search of Maltravers. He added that Ernest, both before his departure from England, and on his return, had written to him to learn if Alice had ever been heard of; the replies of the magistrate were unsatisfactory. "And do you think, my lord, that Mr. Maltravers has never to this day ascertained what became of the poor young woman?"

"Why, let me see,--what was her name?"

The magistrate thought a moment, and replied, "Alice Darvil."

"Alice!" exclaimed Vargrave. "Alice!"--aware that such was the Christian name of his uncle's wife, and now almost convinced of the truth of his first vague suspicion.

"You seem to know the name?"

"Of Alice; yes--but not Darvil. No, no; I believe he has never heard of the girl to this hour. Nor you either?"

"I have not. One little circumstance related to me by Mr. Hobbs, your surveyor's father, gave me some uneasiness. About two years after the young woman disappeared, a girl, of very humble dress and appearance, stopped at the gate of Hobbs' Lodge, and asked earnestly for Mr. Butler. On hearing he was gone, she turned away, and was seen no more. It seems that this girl had an infant in her arms--which rather shocked the propriety of Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs. The old gentleman told me the circumstance a few days after it happened, and I caused inquiry to be made for the stranger; but she could not be discovered. I thought at first this possibly might be the lost Alice; but I learned that, during

his stay at the cottage, your friend--despite his error, which we will not stop to excuse--had exercised so generous and wide a charity amongst the poor in the town and neighbourhood, that it was a more probable supposition of the two that the girl belonged to some family he had formerly relieved, and her visit was that of a mendicant, not a mistress. Accordingly, after much consideration, I resolved not to mention the circumstances to Mr. Maltravers, when he wrote to me on his return from the Continent. A considerable time had then elapsed since the girl had applied to Mr. Hobbs; all trace of her was lost; the incident might open wounds that time must have nearly healed, might give false hopes--or, what was worse, occasion a fresh and unfounded remorse at the idea of Alice's destitution; it would, in fact, do no good, and might occasion unnecessary pain. I therefore suppressed all mention of it."

"You did right: and so the poor girl had an infant in her arms?--humph! What sort of looking person was this Alice Darvil,--pretty, of course?"

"I never saw her; and none but the persons employed in the premises knew her by sight; they described her as remarkably lovely."

"Fair and slight, with blue eyes, I suppose?--those are the orthodox requisites of a heroine."

"Upon my word I forget; indeed I should never have remembered as much as I do, if the celebrity of Mr. Maltravers, and the consequence of his family in these parts, together with the sight of his own agony--the most painful I ever witnessed--had not served to impress the whole affair very deeply on my mind."

"Was the girl who appeared at the gate of Hobbs' Lodge described to you?"

"No; they scarcely observed her countenance, except that her complexion was too fair for a gypsy's; yet, now I think of it, Mrs. Tiddy, who was with her father when he told me the adventure, dwelt particularly on her having (as you so pleasantly conjecture) fair hair and blue eyes. Mrs. Tiddy, being just married, was romantic at that day."

"Well, it is an odd tale; but life is full of odd tales. Here we are at the house; it really is a splendid old place!"

CHAPTER V.

PENDENT opera interrupta.*--VIRGIL.

* "The things begun are interrupted and suspended."

THE history Vargrave had heard he revolved much when he retired to rest. He could not but allow that there was still little ground for more than conjecture that Alice Darvil and Alice Lady Vargrave were one and the same person. It might, however, be of great importance to him to trace this conjecture to certainty. The knowledge of a secret of early sin and degradation in one so pure, so spotless, as Lady Vargrave, might be of immense service in giving him a power over her, which he could turn to account with Evelyn. How could he best prosecute further inquiry,--by repairing at once to Brook-Green, or--the thought struck him--by visiting and "pumping" Mrs. Leslie, the patroness of Mrs. Butler, of C-----, the friend of Lady Vargrave? It was worth trying the latter,--it was little out of his way back to London. His success in picking the brains of Mr. Onslow of a secret encouraged him in the hope of equal success with Mrs. Leslie. He decided accordingly, and fell asleep to dream of Christmas _battues_, royal visitors, the Cabinet, the premiership! Well, no possession equals the dream of it! Sleep on, my lord! you would be restless enough if you were to get all you want.

For the next three days, Lord Vargrave was employed in examining the general outlines of the estate; and the result of this survey satisfied him as to the expediency of the purchase. On the third day, he was several miles from the house when a heavy rain came on. Lord Vargrave was constitutionally hardy, and not having been much exposed to visitations of the weather of late years, was not practically aware that when a man is past forty, he cannot endure with impunity all that falls innocuously on the elasticity of twenty-six. He did not, therefore, heed the rain that drenched him to the skin, and neglected to change his dress till he had finished reading some letters and newspapers which awaited his return at Lisle Court. The consequence of this imprudence was, that the next morning when he woke, Lord Vargrave found himself, for almost the first time in his life, seriously ill. His head ached violently, cold shiverings shook his frame like an ague; the very strength of the constitution on which the fever had begun to fasten itself augmented its danger. Lumley--the last man in the world to think of the possibility of dying--fought up against his own sensations, ordered his post-horses, as his visit of survey was now over, and scarcely even alluded to his indisposition. About an hour before he set off, his letters arrived; one of these informed him that Caroline, accompanied by Evelyn, had already arrived in Paris; the other was from Colonel Legard, respectfully resigning his office, on the ground of an accession of fortune by the

sudden death of the admiral, and his intention to spend the ensuing year in a Continental excursion. This last letter occasioned Vargrave considerable alarm; he had always felt a deep jealousy of the handsome ex-guardsmen, and he at once suspected that Legard was about to repair to Paris as his rival. He sighed, and looked round the spacious apartment, and gazed on the wide prospects of grove and turf that extended from the window, and said to himself, "Is another to snatch these from my grasp?" His impatience to visit Mrs. Leslie, to gain ascendancy over Lady Vargrave, to repair to Paris, to scheme, to manoeuvre, to triumph, accelerated the progress of the disease that was now burning in his veins; and the hand that he held out to Mr. Hobbs, as he stepped into his carriage, almost scorched the cold, plump, moist fingers of the surveyor. Before six o'clock in the evening Lord Vargrave confessed reluctantly to himself that he was too ill to proceed much farther. "Howard," said he then, breaking a silence that had lasted some hours, "don't be alarmed; I feel that I am about to have a severe attack; I shall stop at M---- (naming a large town they were approaching); I shall send for the best physician the place affords; if I am delirious to-morrow, or unable to give my own orders, have the kindness to send express for Dr. Holland,--but don't leave me yourself, my good fellow. At my age, it is a hard thing to have no one in the world to care for me in illness; d----n affection when I am well!"

After this strange burst, which very much frightened Mr. Howard, Lumley relapsed into silence, not broken till he reached M----. The best physician was sent for; and the next morning, as he had half foreseen and foretold, Lord Vargrave was delirious!

CHAPTER VI.

NOUGHT under Heaven so strongly doth allure
The sense of man, and all his mind possess,
As Beauty's love-bait.--SPENSER.

LEGARD was, as I have before intimated, a young man of generous and excellent dispositions, though somewhat spoiled by the tenor of his education, and the gay and reckless society which had administered tonics to his vanity and opiates to his intellect. The effect which the beauty, the grace, the innocence of Evelyn had produced upon him had been most deep and most salutary. It had rendered dissipation tasteless and insipid; it had made him look more deeply into his own heart, and into the rules of life. Though, partly from irksomeness of dependence upon an

uncle at once generous and ungracious, partly from a diffident and feeling sense of his own inadequate pretensions to the hand of Miss Cameron, and partly from the prior and acknowledged claims of Lord Vargrave, he had accepted, half in despair, the appointment offered to him, he still found it impossible to banish that image which had been the first to engrave upon ardent and fresh affections an indelible impression. He secretly chafed at the thought that it was to a fortunate rival that he owed the independence and the station he had acquired, and resolved to seize an early opportunity to free himself from obligations that he deeply regretted he had incurred. At length he learned that Lord Vargrave had been refused,—that Evelyn was free; and within a few days from that intelligence, the admiral was seized with apoplexy; and Legard suddenly found himself possessed, if not of wealth, at least of a competence sufficient to redeem his character as a suitor from the suspicion attached to a fortune-hunter and adventurer. Despite the new prospects opened to him by the death of his uncle, and despite the surly caprice which had mingled with and alloyed the old admiral's kindness, Legard was greatly shocked by his death; and his grateful and gentle nature was at first only sensible to grief for the loss he had sustained. But when, at last, recovering from his sorrow, he saw Evelyn disengaged and free, and himself in a position honourably to contest her hand, he could not resist the sweet and passionate hopes that broke upon him. He resigned, as we have seen, his official appointment, and set out for Paris. He reached that city a day or two after the arrival of Lord and Lady Doltimore. He found the former, who had not forgotten the cautions of Vargrave, at first cold and distant; but partly from the indolent habit of submitting to Legard's dictates on matters of taste, partly from a liking to his society, and principally from the popular suffrages of fashion, which had always been accorded to Legard, and which were nowadays diminished by the news of his accession of fortune, Lord Doltimore, weak and vain, speedily yielded to the influences of his old associate, and Legard became quietly installed as the *_enfant de la maison_*. Caroline was not in this instance a very faithful ally to Vargrave's views and policy. In his singular *_liaison_* with Lady Doltimore, the crafty manoeuvrer had committed the vulgar fault of intriguers: he had over-refined and had overreached himself. At the commencement of their strange and unprincipled intimacy, Vargrave had had, perhaps, no other thought than that of piquing Evelyn, consoling his vanity, amusing his *_ennui_*, and indulging rather his propensities as a gallant than promoting his more serious objects as a man of the world. By degrees, and especially at Knaresdean, Vargrave himself became deeply entangled by an affair that he had never before contemplated as more important than a passing diversion; instead of securing a friend to assist him in his designs on Evelyn, he suddenly found that he had

obtained a mistress anxious for his love and jealous of his homage. With his usual promptitude and self-confidence, he was led at once to deliver himself of all the ill-consequences of his rashness,--to get rid of Caroline as a mistress, and to retain her as a tool, by marrying her to Lord Doltimore. By the great ascendancy which his character acquired over her, and by her own worldly ambition, he succeeded in inducing her to sacrifice all romance to a union that gave her rank and fortune; and Vargrave then rested satisfied that the clever wife would not only secure him a permanent power over the political influence and private fortune of the weak husband, but also abet his designs in securing an alliance equally desirable for himself. Here it was that Vargrave's incapacity to understand the refinements and scruples of a woman's affection and nature, however guilty the one, and however worldly the other, foiled and deceived him. Caroline, though the wife of another, could not contemplate without anguish a similar bondage for her lover; and having something of the better qualities of her sex still left to her, she recoiled from being an accomplice in arts that were to drive the young, inexperienced, and guileless creature who called her "friend" into the arms of a man who openly avowed the most mercenary motives, and who took gods and men to witness that his heart was sacred to another. Only in Vargrave's presence were these scruples overmastered; but the moment he was gone they returned in full force. She had yielded, from positive fear, to his commands that she should convey Evelyn to Paris; but she trembled to think of the vague hints and dark menaces that Vargrave had let fall as to ulterior proceedings, and was distracted at the thought of being implicated in some villanous or rash design. When, therefore, the man whose rivalry Vargrave most feared was almost established at her house, she made but a feeble resistance; she thought that, if Legard should become a welcome and accepted suitor before Lumley arrived, the latter would be forced to forego whatever hopes he yet cherished, and that she should be delivered from a dilemma, the prospect of which daunted and appalled her. Added to this, Caroline was now, alas! sensible that a fool is not so easily governed; her resistance to an intimacy with Legard would have been of little avail: Doltimore, in these matters, had an obstinate will of his own; and, whatever might once have been Caroline's influence over her liege, certain it is that such influence had been greatly impaired of late by the indulgence of a temper, always irritable, and now daily more soured by regret, remorse, contempt for her husband,--and the melancholy discovery that fortune, youth, beauty, and station are no talismans against misery.

It was the gayest season of Paris; and to escape from herself, Caroline plunged eagerly into the vortex of its dissipations. If Doltimore's heart was disappointed, his vanity was pleased at the admiration Caroline

excited; and he himself was of an age and temper to share in the pursuits and amusements of his wife. Into these gayeties, new to their fascination, dazzled by their splendour, the young Evelyn entered with her hostess; and ever by her side was the unequalled form of Legard. Each of them in the bloom of youth, each of them at once formed to please, and to be pleased by that fair Armida which we call the World, there was, necessarily, a certain congeniality in their views and sentiments, their occupations and their objects; nor was there, in all that brilliant city, one more calculated to captivate the eye and fancy than George Legard. But still, to a certain degree diffident and fearful, Legard never yet spoke of love; nor did their intimacy at this time ripen to that point in which Evelyn could have asked herself if there were danger in the society of Legard, or serious meaning in his obvious admiration. Whether that melancholy, to which Lady Vargrave had alluded in her correspondence with Lumley, were occasioned by thoughts connected with Maltravers, or unacknowledged recollections of Legard, it remains for the acute reader himself to ascertain.

The Doltimores had been about three weeks in Paris; and for a fortnight of that time Legard had been their constant guest, and half the inmate of their hotel, when, on that night which has been commemorated in our last book, Maltravers suddenly once more beheld the face of Evelyn, and in the same hour learned that she was free. He quitted Valerie's box; with a burning pulse and a beating heart, joy and surprise and hope sparkling in his eyes and brightening his whole aspect, he hastened to Evelyn's side.

It was at this time Legard, who sat behind Miss Cameron, unconscious of the approach of a rival, happened by one of those chances which occur in conversation to mention the name of Maltravers. He asked Evelyn if she had yet met him.

"What! is he, then, in Paris?" asked Evelyn, quickly. "I heard, indeed," she continued, "that he left Burleigh for Paris, but imagined he had gone on to Italy."

"No, he is still here; but he goes, I believe, little into the society Lady Doltimore chiefly visits. Is he one of your favourites, Miss Cameron?"

There was a slight increase of colour in Evelyn's beautiful cheek, as she answered,--

"Is it possible not to admire and be interested in one so gifted?"

"He has certainly noble and fine qualities," returned Legard; "but I cannot feel at ease with him: a coldness, a hauteur, a measured distance of manner, seem to forbid even esteem. Yet I ought not to say so," he added, with a pang of self-reproach.

"No, indeed, you ought not to say so," said Evelyn, shaking her head with a pretty affectation of anger; "for I know that you pretend to like what I like, and admire what I admire; and I am an enthusiast in all that relates to Mr. Maltravers!"

"I know that I would wish to see all things in life through Miss Cameron's eyes," whispered Legard, softly; and this was the most meaning speech he had ever yet made.

Evelyn turned away, and seemed absorbed in the opera; and at that instant the door of the box opened, and Maltravers entered.

In her open, undisguised, youthful delight at seeing him again, Maltravers felt, indeed, "as if Paradise were opened in her face." In his own agitated emotions, he scarcely noticed that Legard had risen and resigned his seat to him; he availed himself of the civility, greeted his old acquaintance with a smile and a bow, and in a few minutes he was in deep converse with Evelyn.

Never had he so successfully exerted the singular, the master-fascination that he could command at will,—the more powerful from its contrast to his ordinary coldness. In the very expression of his eyes, the very tone of his voice, there was that in Maltravers, seen at his happier moments, which irresistibly interested and absorbed your attention: he could make you forget everything but himself, and the rich, easy, yet earnest eloquence, which gave colour to his language and melody to his voice. In that hour of renewed intercourse with one who had at first awakened, if not her heart, at least her imagination and her deeper thoughts, certain it is that even Legard was not missed. As she smiled and listened, Evelyn dreamed not of the anguish she inflicted. Leaning against the box, Legard surveyed the absorbed attention of Evelyn, the adoring eyes of Maltravers, with that utter and crushing wretchedness which no passion but jealousy, and that only while it is yet a virgin agony, can bestow! He had never before even dreamed of rivalry in such a quarter; but there was that ineffable instinct, which lovers have, and which so seldom errs, that told him at once that in Maltravers was the greatest obstacle his passion could encounter. He waited in hopes that Evelyn would take the occasion to turn to him at least—when the fourth act closed. She did not; and, unable to constrain his emotions, and reply to the small-talk

of Lord Doltimore, he abruptly quitted the box.

When the opera was over, Maltravers offered his arm to Evelyn; she accepted it, and then she looked round for Legard. He was gone.

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