



EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON

ALICE OR THE MYSTERIES

BOOK X

2008 – All rights reserved
Non commercial use permitted

BOOK X.

"A dream!"--HOMER, I, 3.

CHAPTER I.

QUALIS ubi in lucem coluber
. . . Mala gramina pastus.*--VIRGIL.

Pars minima est ipsa puella sui.**--OVID.

* "As when a snake glides into light, having fed on pernicious pastures."

** "The girl is the least part of himself."

IT would be superfluous, and, perhaps, a sickening task, to detail at length the mode and manner in which Vargrave coiled his snares round the unfortunate girl whom his destiny had marked out for his prey. He was right in foreseeing that, after the first amazement caused by the letter of Maltravers, Evelyn would feel resentment crushed beneath her certainty of his affection her incredulity at his self-accusations, and her secret conviction that some reverse, some misfortune he was unwilling she should share, was the occasion of his farewell and flight. Vargrave therefore very soon communicated to Evelyn the tale he had suggested to Maltravers. He reminded her of the habitual sorrow, the evidence of which was so visible in Lady Vargrave; of her indifference to the pleasures of the world; of her sensitive shrinking from all recurrence to her early fate. "The secret of this," said he, "is in a youthful and most fervent attachment; your mother loved a young stranger above her in rank, who (his head being full of German romance) was then roaming about the country on pedestrian and adventurous excursions, under the assumed name of Butler. By him she was most ardently beloved in return. Her father, perhaps, suspected the rank of her lover, and was fearful of her honour being compromised. He was a strange man, that father! and I know not his real character and motives; but he suddenly withdrew his daughter from

the suit and search of her lover,--they saw each other no more; her lover mourned her as one dead. In process of time your mother was constrained by her father to marry Mr. Cameron, and was left a widow with an only child,--yourself: she was poor;--very poor! and her love and anxiety for you at last induced her to listen to the addresses of my late uncle; for your sake she married again; again death dissolved the tie! But still, unceasingly and faithfully, she recalled that first love, the memory of which darkened and embittered all her life, and still she lived upon the hope to meet with the lost again. At last, and most recently, it was my fate to discover that the object of this unconquerable affection lived,--was still free in hand if not in heart: you behold the lover of your mother in Ernest Maltravers! It devolved on me (an invidious--a reluctant duty) to inform Maltravers of the identity of Lady Vargrave with the Alice of his boyish passion; to prove to him her suffering, patient, unsubdued affection; to convince him that the sole hope left to her in life was that of one day or other beholding him once again. You know Maltravers,--his high-wrought, sensitive, noble character; he recoiled in terror from the thought of making his love to the daughter the last and bitterest affliction to the mother he had so loved; knowing too how completely that mother had entwined herself round your affections, he shuddered at the pain and self-reproach that would be yours when you should discover to whom you had been the rival, and whose the fond hopes and dreams that your fatal beauty had destroyed. Tortured, despairing, and half beside himself, he has fled from this ill-omened passion, and in solitude he now seeks to subdue that passion. Touched by the woe, the grief, of the Alice of his youth, it is his intention, as soon as he can know you restored to happiness and content, to hasten to your mother, and offer his future devotion as the fulfilment of former vows. On you, and you alone, it depends to restore Maltravers to the world,--on you alone it depends to bless the remaining years of the mother who so dearly loves you!"

It may be easily conceived with what sensations of wonder, compassion, and dismay, Evelyn listened to this tale, the progress of which her exclamations, her sobs, often interrupted. She would write instantly to her mother, to Maltravers. Oh, how gladly she would relinquish his suit: How cheerfully promise to rejoice in that desertion which brought happiness to the mother she had so loved!

"Nay," said Vargrave, "your mother must not know, till the intelligence can be breathed by his lips, and softened by his protestations of returning affection, that the mysterious object of her early romance is that Maltravers whose vows have been so lately offered to her own child. Would not such intelligence shock all pride, and destroy all hope? How

could she then consent to the sacrifice which Maltravers is prepared to make? No! not till you are another's--not (to use the words of Maltravers) till you are a happy and beloved wife--must your mother receive the returning homage of Maltravers; not till then can she know where that homage has been recently rendered; not till then can Maltravers feel justified in the atonement he meditates. He is willing to sacrifice himself; he trembles at the thought of sacrificing you! Say nothing to your mother, till from her own lips she tells you that she has learned all."

Could Evelyn hesitate; could Evelyn doubt? To allay the fears, to fulfil the prayers of the man whose conduct appeared so generous, to restore him to peace and the world; above all, to pluck from the heart of that beloved and gentle mother the rankling dart, to shed happiness over her fate, to reunite her with the loved and lost,--what sacrifice too great for this?

Ah, why was Legard absent? Why did she believe him capricious, light, and false? Why had she shut her softest thoughts from her soul? But he--the true lover--was afar, and his true love unknown! and Vargrave, the watchful serpent, was at hand.

In a fatal hour, and in the transport of that enthusiasm which inspires alike our more rash and our more sublime deeds, which makes us alike dupes and martyrs,--the enthusiasm that tramples upon self, that forfeits all things to a high-wrought zeal for others, Evelyn consented to become the wife of Vargrave! Nor was she at first sensible of the sacrifice,--sensible of anything but the glow of a noble spirit and an approving conscience. Yes, thus, and thus alone, did she obey both duties,--that, which she had well-nigh abandoned, to her dead benefactor, and that to the living mother. Afterwards came a dread reaction; and then, at last, that passive and sleep-like resignation, which is Despair under a milder name. Yes,--such a lot had been predestined from the first; in vain had she sought to fly it: Fate had overtaken her, and she must submit to the decree!

She was most anxious that the intelligence of the new bond might be transmitted instantly to Maltravers. Vargrave promised, but took care not to perform. He was too acute not to know that in so sudden a step Evelyn's motives would be apparent, and his own suit indelicate and ungenerous. He was desirous that Maltravers should learn nothing till the vows had been spoken, and the indissoluble chain forged. Afraid to leave Evelyn, even for a day, afraid to trust her in England to an interview with her mother,--he remained at Paris, and hurried on all the

requisite preparations. He sent to Douce, who came in person, with the deeds necessary for the transfer of the money for the purchase of Lisle Court, which was now to be immediately completed. The money was to be lodged in Mr. Douce's bank till the lawyers had completed their operations; and in a few weeks, when Evelyn had attained the allotted age, Vargrave trusted to see himself lord alike of the betrothed bride, and the hereditary lands of the crushed Maltravers. He refrained from stating to Evelyn who was the present proprietor of the estate to become hers; he foresaw all the objections she would form;--and, indeed, she was unable to think, to talk, of such matters. One favour she had asked, and it had been granted,--that she was to be left unmolested to her solitude till the fatal day. Shut up in her lonely room, condemned not to confide her thoughts, to seek for sympathy even in her mother,--the poor girl in vain endeavoured to keep up to the tenor of her first enthusiasm, and reconcile herself to a step, which, however, she was heroine enough not to retract or to repent, even while she recoiled from its contemplation.

Lady Doltimore, amazed at what had passed,--at the flight of Maltravers, the success of Lumley,--unable to account for it, to extort explanation from Vargrave or from Evelyn, was distracted by the fear of some villanous deceit which she could not fathom. To escape herself she plunged yet more eagerly into the gay vortex. Vargrave, suspicious, and fearful of trusting to what she might say in her nervous and excited temper if removed from his watchful eye, deemed himself compelled to hover round her. His manner, his conduct, were most guarded; but Caroline herself, jealous, irritated, unsettled, evinced at times a right both to familiarity and anger, which drew upon her and himself the sly vigilance of slander. Meanwhile Lord Doltimore, though too cold and proud openly to notice what passed around him, seemed disturbed and anxious. His manner to Vargrave was distant; he shunned all tete-a-tetes with his wife. Little, however, of this did Lumley heed. A few weeks more, and all would be well and safe. Vargrave did not publish his engagement with Evelyn: he sought carefully to conceal it till the very day was near at hand; but it was whispered abroad; some laughed, some believed. Evelyn herself was seen nowhere. De Montaigne had, at first, been indignantly incredulous at the report that Maltravers had broken off a connection he had so desired from a motive so weak and unworthy as that of mere family pride. A letter from Maltravers, who confided to him and Vargrave alone the secret of his retreat, reluctantly convinced him that the wise are but pompous fools; he was angry and disgusted; and still more so when Valerie and Teresa (for female friends stand by us right or wrong) hinted at excuses, or surmised that other causes lurked behind the one alleged. But his thoughts were much drawn from this subject by increasing anxiety for Cesarini, whose abode and

fate still remained an alarming mystery.

It so happened that Lord Doltimore, who had always had a taste for the antique, and who was greatly displeased with his own family-seat because it was comfortable and modern, fell, from _ennui_, into a habit, fashionable enough in Paris, of buying curiosities and cabinets,-- high-back chairs and oak-carvings; and with this habit returned the desire and the affection for Burleigh. Understanding from Lumley that Maltravers had probably left his native land forever, he imagined it extremely probable that the latter would now consent to the sale, and he begged Vargrave to forward a letter from him to that effect.

Vargrave made some excuse, for he felt that nothing could be more indelicate than such an application forwarded through his hands at such a time; and Doltimore, who had accidentally heard De Montaigne confess that he knew the address of Maltravers, quietly sent his letter to the Frenchman, and, without mentioning its contents, begged him to forward it. De Montaigne did so. Now it is very strange how slight men and slight incidents bear on the great events of life; but that simple letter was instrumental to a new revolution in the strange history of Maltravers.

CHAPTER II.

QUID frustra simulacra fugacia captas?--
Quod petis est nusquam.*--OVID: *Met.* iii. 432.

* "Why, in vain, do you catch at fleeting shadows?
That which you seek is nowhere."

TO no clime dedicated to the indulgence of majestic griefs or to the soft melancholy of regret--not to thy glaciers, or thy dark-blue lakes, beautiful Switzerland, mother of many exiles; nor to thy fairer earth and gentler heaven, sweet Italy,--fled the agonized Maltravers. Once, in his wanderings, he had chanced to pass by a landscape so steeped in sullen and desolate gloom, that it had made a powerful and uneffaced impression upon his mind: it was amidst those swamps and morasses that formerly surrounded the castle of Gil de Retz, the ambitious Lord, the dreaded Necromancer, who perished at the stake, after a career of such power and splendour as seemed almost to justify the dark belief in his preternatural agencies.*

* See, for description of this scenery, and the fate of De Retz, the high-wrought and glowing romance by Mr. Ritchie called "The Magician."

Here, in a lonely and wretched inn, remote from other habitations, Maltravers fixed himself. In gentler griefs there is a sort of luxury in bodily discomfort; in his inexorable and unmitigated anguish, bodily discomfort was not felt. There is a kind of magnetism in extreme woe, by which the body itself seems laid asleep, and knows no distinction between the bed of Damians and the rose-couch of the Sybarite. He left his carriage and servants at a post-house some miles distant. He came to this dreary abode alone; and in that wintry season, and that most disconsolate scene, his gloomy soul found something congenial, something that did not mock him, in the frowns of the haggard and dismal Nature. Vain would it be to describe what he then felt, what he then endured. Suffice it that, through all, the diviner strength of man was not wholly crushed, and that daily, nightly, hourly, he prayed to the Great Comforter to assist him in wrestling against a guilty love. No man struggles so honestly, so ardently as he did, utterly in vain; for in us all, if we would but cherish it, there is a spirit that must rise at last--a crowned, if bleeding conqueror--over Fate and all the Demons!

One day after a prolonged silence from Vargrave, whose letters all breathed comfort and assurance in Evelyn's progressive recovery of spirit and hope, his messenger returned from the post-town with a letter in the hand of De Montaigne. It contained, in a blank envelope (De Montaigne's silence told him how much he had lost in the esteem of his friend), the communication of Lord Doltimore. It ran thus:--

MY DEAR SIR,--As I hear that your plans are likely to make you a long resident on the Continent, may I again inquire if you would be induced to dispose of Burleigh? I am willing to give more than its real value, and would raise a mortgage on my own property sufficient to pay off, at once, the whole purchase-money. Perhaps you may be the more induced to the sale from the circumstance of having an example in the head of your family, Colonel Maltravers, as I learn through Lord Vargrave, having resolved to dispose of Lisle Court. Waiting your answer,

I am, dear Sir, truly yours,

DOLTIMORE.

"Ay," said Maltravers, bitterly, crushing the letter in his hand, "let our name be blotted out from the land, and our hearths pass to the stranger. How could I ever visit the place where I first saw _her_?"

He resolved at once,--he would write to England, and place the matter in the hands of agents. This was but a short-lived diversion to his thoughts, and their cloudy darkness soon gathered round him again.

What I am now about to relate may appear, to a hasty criticism, to savour of the Supernatural; but it is easily accounted for by ordinary agencies, and it is strictly to the letter of the truth.

In his sleep that night a dream appeared to Maltravers. He thought he was alone in the old library at Burleigh, and gazing on the portrait of his mother; as he so gazed, he fancied that a cold and awful tremor seized upon him, that he in vain endeavoured to withdraw his eyes from the canvas--his sight was chained there by an irresistible spell. Then it seemed to him that the portrait gradually changed,--the features the same, but the bloom vanished into a white and ghastly hue; the colours of the dress faded, their fashion grew more large and flowing, but heavy and rigid as if cut in stone,--the robes of the grave. But on the face there was a soft and melancholy smile, that took from its livid aspect the natural horror; the lips moved, and, it seemed as if without a sound, the released soul spoke to that which the earth yet owned.

"Return," it said, "to thy native land, and thine own home. Leave not the last relic of her who bore and yet watches over thee to stranger hands. Thy good Angel shall meet thee at thy hearth!"

The voice ceased. With a violent effort Maltravers broke the spell that had forbidden his utterance. He called aloud, and the dream vanished: he was broad awake, his hair erect, the cold dews on his brow. The pallet, rather than bed on which he lay, was opposite to the window, and the wintry moonlight streamed wan and spectral into the cheerless room. But between himself and the light there seemed to stand a shape, a shadow, that into which the portrait had changed in his dream,--that which had accosted and chilled his soul. He sprang forward, "My mother! even in the grave canst thou bless thy wretched son! Oh, leave me not--say that thou--" The delusion vanished, and Maltravers fell back insensible.

It was long in vain, when, in the healthful light of day, he revolved this memorable dream, that Maltravers sought to convince himself that dreams need no ministers from heaven or hell to bring the gliding falsehoods along the paths of sleep; that the effect of that dream

itself, on his shattered nerves, his excited fancy, was the real and sole raiser of the spectre he had thought to behold on waking. Long was it before his judgment could gain the victory, and reason disown the empire of a turbulent imagination; and even when at length reluctantly convinced, the dream still haunted him, and he could not shake it from his breast. He longed anxiously for the next night; it came, but it brought neither dreams nor sleep, and the rain beat, and the winds howled, against the casement. Another night, and the moon was again bright; and he fell into a deep sleep; no vision disturbed or hallowed it. He woke ashamed of his own expectation. But the event, such as it was, by giving a new turn to his thoughts, had roused and relieved his spirit, and misery sat upon him with a lighter load. Perhaps, too, to that still haunting recollection was mainly owing a change in his former purpose. He would still sell the old Hall; but he would first return, and remove that holy portrait, with pious hands; he would garner up and save all that had belonged to her whose death had been his birth. Ah, never had she known for what trials the infant had been reserved!

CHAPTER III.

THE weary hours steal on
And flaky darkness breaks.--_Richard III._

ONCE more, suddenly and unlooked for, the lord of Burleigh appeared at the gates of his deserted hall! and again the old housekeeper and her satellites were thrown into dismay and consternation. Amidst blank and welcomeless faces, Maltravers passed into his study: and as soon as the logs burned and the bustle was over, and he was left alone, he took up the light and passed into the adjoining library. It was then about nine o'clock in the evening; the air of the room felt damp and chill, and the light but faintly struggled against the mournful gloom of the dark book-lined walls and sombre tapestry. He placed the candle on the table, and drawing aside the curtain that veiled the portrait, gazed with deep emotion, not unmixed with awe, upon the beautiful face whose eyes seemed fixed upon him with mournful sweetness. There is something mystical about those painted ghosts of ourselves, that survive our very dust! Who, gazing upon them long and wistfully, does not half fancy that they seem not insensible to his gaze, as if we looked our own life into them, and the eyes that followed us where we moved were animated by a stranger art than the mere trick of the limner's colours?

With folded arms, rapt and motionless, Maltravers contemplated the form

that, by the upward rays of the flickering light, seemed to bend down towards the desolate son. How had he ever loved the memory of his mother! how often in his childish years had he stolen away, and shed wild tears for the loss of that dearest of earthly ties, never to be compensated, never to be replaced! How had he respected, how sympathized with the very repugnance which his father had at first testified towards him, as the innocent cause of her untimely death! He had never seen her,--never felt her passionate kiss; and yet it seemed to him, as he gazed, as if he had known her for years. That strange kind of inner and spiritual memory which often recalls to us places and persons we have never seen before, and which Platonists would resolve to the unquenched and struggling consciousness of a former life, stirred within him, and seemed to whisper, "You were united in the old time." "Yes!" he said, half aloud, "we will never part again. Blessed be the delusion of the dream that recalled to my heart the remembrance of thee, which, at least, I can cherish without a sin. 'My good angel shall meet me at my hearth!' so didst thou say in the solemn vision. Ah, does thy soul watch over me still? How long shall it be before the barrier is broken! how long before we meet, but not in dreams!"

The door opened, the housekeeper looked in. "I beg pardon, sir, but I thought your honour would excuse the liberty, though I know it is very bold to--"

"What is the matter? What do you want?"

"Why, sir, poor Mrs. Elton is dying,--they say she cannot get over the night; and as the carriage drove by the cottage window, the nurse told her that the squire was returned; and she has sent up the nurse to entreat to see your honour before she dies. I am sure I was most loth to disturb you, sir, with such a message; and says I, the squire has only just come off a journey--"

"Who is Mrs. Elton?"

"Don't your honour remember the poor woman that was run over, and you were so good to, and brought into the house the day Miss Cameron--"

"I remember,--say I will be with her in a few minutes. About to die!" muttered Maltravers; "she is to be envied,--the prisoner is let loose, the bark leaves the desert isle!"

He took his hat and walked across the park, dimly lighted by the stars, to the cottage of the sufferer. He reached her bedside, and took her

hand kindly. She seemed to rally at the sight of him; the nurse was dismissed, they were left alone. Before morning, the spirit had left that humble clay; and the mists of dawn were heavy on the grass as Maltravers returned home. There were then on his countenance the traces of recent and strong emotion, and his step was elastic, and his cheek flushed. Hope once more broke within him, but mingled with doubt, and faintly combated by reason. In another hour Maltravers was on his way to Brook-Green. Impatient, restless, fevered, he urged on the horses, he sowed the road with gold; and at length the wheels stopped before the door of the village inn. He descended, asked the way to the curate's house; and crossing the burial-ground, and passing under the shadow of the old yew-tree, entered Aubrey's garden. The curate was at home, and the conference that ensued was of deep and breathless interest to the visitor.

It is now time to place before the reader, in due order and connection, the incidents of that story, the knowledge of which, at that period, broke in detached and fragmentary portions on Maltravers.

CHAPTER IV.

I CANNA chuse, but ever will
Be luving to thy father still,
Whaireir he gae, whaireir he ryde,
My luv with him maun still abyde;
In weil or wae, whaireir he gae,
Mine heart can neir depart him frae.

Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament.

IT may be remembered that in the earlier part of this continuation of the history of Maltravers it was stated that Aubrey had in early life met with the common lot of a disappointed affection. Eleanor Westbrook, a young woman of his own humble rank, had won, and seemed to return, his love; but of that love she was not worthy. Vain, volatile, and ambitious, she forsook the poor student for a more brilliant marriage. She accepted the hand of a merchant, who was caught by her beauty, and who had the reputation of great wealth. They settled in London, and Aubrey lost all traces of her. She gave birth to an only daughter: and when that child had attained her fourteenth year, her husband suddenly, and seemingly without cause, put an end to his existence. The cause, however, was apparent before he was laid in his grave. He was involved far beyond his fortune,—he had died to escape beggary and a jail. A

small annuity, not exceeding one hundred pounds, had been secured on the widow. On this income she retired with her child into the country; and chance, the vicinity of some distant connections, and the cheapness of the place, concurred to fix her residence in the outskirts of the town of C----- . Characters that in youth have been most volatile and most worldly, often when bowed down and dejected by the adversity which they are not fitted to encounter, become the most morbidly devout; they ever require an excitement, and when earth denies, they seek it impatiently from heaven.

This was the case with Mrs. Westbrook; and this new turn of mind brought her naturally into contact with the principal saint of the neighbourhood, Mr. Richard Templeton. We have seen that that gentleman was not happy in his first marriage; death had not then annulled the bond. He was of an ardent and sensual temperament, and quietly, under the broad cloak of his doctrines, he indulged his constitutional tendencies. Perhaps in this respect he was not worse than nine men out of ten. But then he professed to be better than nine hundred thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a million! To a fault of temperament was added the craft of hypocrisy, and the vulgar error became a dangerous vice. Upon Mary Westbrook, the widow's daughter, he gazed with eyes that were far from being the eyes of the spirit. Even at the age of fourteen she charmed him; but when, after watching her ripening beauty expand, three years were added to that age, Mr. Templeton was most deeply in love. Mary was indeed lovely,--her disposition naturally good and gentle, but her education worse than neglected. To the frivolities and meannesses of a second-rate fashion, inculcated into her till her father's death, had now succeeded the quackeries, the slavish subservience, the intolerant bigotries, of a transcendental superstition. In a change so abrupt and violent, the whole character of the poor girl was shaken; her principles unsettled, vague, and unformed, and naturally of mediocre and even feeble intellect, she clung to the first plank held out to her in "that wide sea of wax" in which "she halted." Early taught to place the most implicit faith in the dictates of Mr. Templeton, fastening her belief round him as the vine winds its tendrils round the oak, yielding to his ascendancy, and pleased with his fostering and almost caressing manner, no confessor in Papal Italy ever was more dangerous to village virtue than Richard Templeton (who deemed himself the archetype of the only pure Protestantism) to the morals and heart of Mary Westbrook.

Mrs. Westbrook, whose constitution had been prematurely broken by long participation in the excesses of London dissipation and by the reverse of fortune which still preyed upon a spirit it had rather soured than humbled, died when Mary was eighteen. Templeton became the sole friend,

comforter, and supporter of the daughter.

In an evil hour (let us trust not from premeditated villany),--an hour when the heart of one was softened by grief and gratitude, and the conscience of the other laid asleep by passion, the virtue of Mary Westbrook was betrayed. Her sorrow and remorse, his own fears of detection and awakened self-reproach, occasioned Templeton the most anxious and poignant regret. There had been a young woman in Mrs. Westbrook's service, who had left it a short time before the widow died, in consequence of her marriage. Her husband ill-used her; and glad to escape from him and prove her gratitude to her employer's daughter, of whom she had been extremely fond, she had returned to Miss Westbrook after the funeral of her mother. The name of this woman was Sarah Miles. Templeton saw that Sarah more than suspected his connection with Mary; it was necessary to make a confidant,--he selected her. Miss Westbrook was removed to a distant part of the country, and Templeton visited her cautiously and rarely. Four months afterwards, Mrs. Templeton died, and the husband was free to repair his wrong. Oh, how he then repented of what had passed! but four months' delay, and all this sin and sorrow might have been saved! He was now racked with perplexity and doubt: his unfortunate victim was advanced in her pregnancy. It was necessary, if he wished his child to be legitimate--still more if he wished to preserve the honour of its mother--that he should not hesitate long in the reparation to which duty and conscience urged him. But on the other hand, he, the saint, the oracle, the immaculate example for all forms, proprieties, and decorums, to scandalize the world by so rapid and premature a hymen--

"Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in his galled eyes,
To marry."

No! he could not brave the sneer of the gossips, the triumph of his foes, the dejection of his disciples, by so rank and rash a folly. But still Mary pined so, he feared for her health--for his own unborn offspring. There was a middle path,--a compromise between duty and the world; he grasped at it as most men similarly situated would have done,--they were married, but privately, and under feigned names: the secret was kept close. Sarah Miles was the only witness acquainted with the real condition and names of the parties.

Reconciled to herself, the bride recovered health and spirits, Templeton formed the most sanguine hopes. He resolved, as soon as the confinement was over, to go abroad; Mary should follow; in a foreign land they should

be publicly married; they would remain some years on the Continent; when he returned, his child's age could be put back a year. Oh, nothing could be more clear and easy!

Death shivered into atoms all the plans of Mr. Templeton. Mary suffered most severely in childbirth, and died a few weeks afterwards. Templeton at first was inconsolable, but worldly thoughts were great comforters. He had done all that conscience could do to atone a sin, and he was freed from a most embarrassing dilemma, and from a temporary banishment utterly uncongenial and unpalatable to his habits and ideas. But now he had a child,--a legitimate child, successor to his name, his wealth; a first-born child,--the only one ever sprung from him, the prop and hope of advancing years! On this child he doted with all that paternal passion which the hardest and coldest men often feel the most for their own flesh and blood--for fatherly love is sometimes but a transfer of self-love from one fund to another.

Yet this child--this darling that he longed to show to the whole world--it was absolutely necessary, for the present, that he should conceal and disown. It had happened that Sarah's husband died of his own excesses a few weeks before the birth of Templeton's child, she having herself just recovered from her confinement; Sarah was therefore free forever from her husband's vigilance and control. To her care the destined heiress was committed, and her own child put out to nurse. And this was the woman and this the child who had excited so much benevolent curiosity in the breasts of the worthy clergyman and the three old maids of C-----.* Alarmed at Sarah's account of the scrutiny of the parson, and at his own rencontre with that hawk-eyed pastor, Templeton lost no time in changing the abode of the nurse; and to her new residence had the banker bent his way, with rod and angle, on that evening which witnessed his adventure with Luke Darvil.** When Mr. Templeton first met Alice, his own child was only about thirteen or fourteen months old,--but little older than Alice's. If the beauty of Mrs. Leslie's protege first excited his coarser nature, her maternal tenderness, her anxious care for her little one, struck a congenial chord in the father's heart. It connected him with her by a mute and unceasing sympathy. Templeton had felt so deeply the alarm and pain of illicit love, he had been (as he profanely believed) saved from the brink of public shame by so signal an interference of grace, that he resolved no more to hazard his good name and his peace of mind upon such perilous rocks. The dearest desire at his heart was to have his daughter under his roof,--to fondle, to play with her, to watch her growth, to win her affection. This, at present, seemed impossible. But if he were to marry,--marry a widow, to whom he might confide all, or a portion, of the truth; if that child could be

passed off as hers--ah, that was the best plan! And Templeton wanted a wife! Years were creeping on him, and the day would come when a wife would be useful as a nurse. But Alice was supposed to be a widow; and Alice was so meek, so docile, so motherly. If she could be induced to remove from C-----, either part with her own child or call it her niece--and adopt his. Such, from time to time, were Templeton's thoughts, as he visited Alice, and found, with every visit, fresh evidence of her tender and beautiful disposition; such the objects which, in the First Part of this work, we intimated were different from those of mere admiration for her beauty.*** But again, worldly doubts and fears--the dislike of so unsuitable an alliance, the worse than lowness of Alice's origin, the dread of discovery for her early error--held him back, wavering and irresolute. To say truth, too, her innocence and purity of thought kept him at a certain distance. He was acute enough to see that he--even he, the great Richard Templeton--might be refused by the faithful Alice.

* See "Ernest Maltravers," book iv., p. 164.

** "Ernest Maltravers," book iv., p. 181.

*** "Our banker always seemed more struck by Alice's moral feelings than even by her physical beauty. Her love for her child, for instance, impressed him powerfully," etc. "His feelings altogether for Alice, the designs he entertained towards her, were of a very complicated nature, and it will be long, perhaps, before the reader can thoroughly comprehend them."--See "Ernest Maltravers," book iv., p. 178.

At last Darvil was dead; he breathed more freely, he revolved more seriously his projects; and at this time, Sarah, wooed by her first lover, wished to marry again; his secret would pass from her breast to her second husband's, and thence how far would it travel? Added to this, Sarah's conscience grew uneasy; the brand ought to be effaced from the memory of the dead mother, the legitimacy of the child proclaimed; she became importunate, she wearied and she alarmed the pious man. He therefore resolved to rid himself of the only witness to his marriage whose testimony he had cause to fear--of the presence of the only one acquainted with his sin and the real name of the husband of Mary Westbrook. He consented to Sarah's marriage with William Elton, and offered a liberal dowry on the condition that she should yield to the wish of Elton himself, an adventurous young man, who desired to try his fortunes in the New World. His daughter he must remove elsewhere.

While this was going on, Alice's child, long delicate and drooping, became seriously ill. Symptoms of decline appeared; the physician recommended a milder air, and Devonshire was suggested. Nothing could equal the generous, the fatherly kindness which Templeton evinced on this most painful occasion. He insisted on providing Alice with the means to undertake the journey with ease and comfort; and poor Alice, with a heart heavy with gratitude and sorrow, consented for her child's sake to all he offered.

Now the banker began to perceive that all his hopes and wishes were in good train. He foresaw that the child of Alice was doomed!--that was one obstacle out of the way. Alice herself was to be removed from the sphere of her humble calling. In a distant county she might appear of better station, and under another name. Conformably to these views, he suggested to her that, in proportion to the seeming wealth and respectability of patients, did doctors attend to their complaints. He proposed that Alice should depart privately to a town many miles off; that there he would provide for her a carriage, and engage a servant; that he would do this for her as for a relation, and that she should take that relation's name. To this, Alice rapt in her child, and submissive to all that might be for the child's benefit, passively consented. It was arranged then as proposed, and under the name of Cameron, which, as at once a common yet a well-sounding name, occurred to his invention, Alice departed with her sick charge and a female attendant (who knew nothing of her previous calling or story), on the road to Devonshire. Templeton himself resolved to follow her thither in a few days; and it was fixed that they should meet at Exeter.

It was on this melancholy journey that occurred that memorable day when Alice once more beheld Maltravers; and, as she believed, uttering the vows of love to another.* The indisposition of her child had delayed her some hours at the inn: the poor sufferer had fallen asleep; and Alice had stolen from its couch for a little while, when her eyes rested on the father. Oh, how then she longed, she burned to tell him of the new sanctity, that, by a human life, had been added to their early love! And when, crushed and sick at heart, she turned away, and believed herself forgotten and replaced, it was the pride of the mother rather than of the mistress that supported her. She, meek creature, felt not the injury to herself; but his child,--the sufferer, perhaps the dying one,--there, there was the wrong! No! she would not hazard the chance of a cold--great Heaven! perchance an incredulous--look upon the hushed, pale face above. But little time was left for thought, for explanation, for discovery. She saw him--unconscious of the ties so near, and thus lost--depart as a stranger from the spot; and henceforth was gone the

sweet hope of living for the future. Nothing was left her but the pledge of that which had been. Mournful, despondent, half broken-hearted, she resumed her journey. At Exeter she was joined, as agreed, by Mr. Templeton; and with him came a fair, a blooming, and healthful girl to contrast her own drooping charge. Though but a few weeks older, you would have supposed the little stranger by a year the senior of Alice's child: the one was so well grown, so advanced; the other so backward, so nipped in the sickly bud.

* See "Ernest Maltravers," book v., p. 221.

"You can repay me for all, for more than I have done; more than I ever can do for you and yours," said Templeton, "by taking this young stranger also under your care. It is the child of one dear, most dear to me; an orphan; I know not with whom else to place it. Let it for the present be supposed your own,--the elder child."

Alice could refuse nothing to her benefactor; but her heart did not open at first to the beautiful girl, whose sparkling eyes and rosy cheeks mocked the languid looks and faded hues of her own darling. But the sufferer seemed to hail a playmate; it smiled, it put forth its poor, thin hands; it uttered its inarticulate cry of pleasure, and Alice burst into tears, and clasped them both to her heart.

Mr. Templeton took care not to rest under the same roof with her he now seriously intended to make his wife; but he followed Alice to the seaside, and visited her daily. Her infant rallied; it was tenacious of the upper air; it clung to life so fondly; poor child, it could not foresee what a bitter thing to some of us life is! And now it was that Templeton, learning from Alice her adventure with her absent lover, learning that all hope in that quarter was gone, seized the occasion, and pressed his suit. Alice at the hour was overflowing with gratitude; in her child's reviving looks she read all her obligations to her benefactor. But still, at the word love, at the name of marriage, her heart recoiled; and the lost, the faithless, came back to his fatal throne. In choked and broken accents, she startled the banker with the refusal--the faltering, tearful, but resolute refusal--of his suit.

But Templeton brought new engines to work: he wooed her through her child; he painted all the brilliant prospects that would open to the infant by her marriage with him. He would cherish, rear, provide for it as his own. This shook her resolves; but this did not prevail. He had recourse to a more generous appeal: he told her so much of his history with Mary Westbrook as commenced with his hasty and indecorous

marriage,--attributing the haste to love! made her comprehend his scruples in owning the child of a union the world would be certain to ridicule or condemn; he expiated on the inestimable blessings she could afford him, by delivering him from all embarrassment, and restoring his daughter, though under a borrowed name, to her father's roof. At this Alice mused; at this she seemed irresolute. She had long seen how inexpressibly dear to Templeton was the child confided to her care; how he grew pale if the slightest ailment reached her; how he chafed at the very wind if it visited her cheek too roughly; and she now said to him simply,--

"Is your child, in truth, your dearest object in life? Is it with her, and her alone, that your dearest hopes are connected?"

"It is,--it is indeed!" said the banker, honestly surprised out of his gallantry; "at least," he added, recovering his self-possession, "as much so as is compatible with my affection for you."

"And only if I marry you, and adopt her as my own, do you think that your secret may be safely kept, and all your wishes with respect to her be fulfilled?"

"Only so."

"And for that reason, chiefly, nay entirely, you condescend to forget what I have been, and seek my hand? Well, if that were all, I owe you too much; my poor babe tells me too loudly what I owe you to draw back from anything that can give you so blessed an enjoyment. Ah, one's child! one's own child, under one's own roof, it is such a blessing! But then, if I marry you, it can be only to secure to you that object; to be as a mother to your child; but wife only in name to you! I am not so lost as to despise myself. I know now, though I knew it not at first, that I have been guilty; nothing can excuse that guilt but fidelity to him! Oh, yes! I never, never can be unfaithful to my babe's father! As for all else, dispose of me as you will." And Alice, who from very innocence had uttered all this without a blush, now clasped her hands passionately, and left Templeton speechless with mortification and surprise.

When he recovered himself, he affected not to understand her; but Alice was not satisfied, and all further conversation ceased. He began slowly, and at last, and after repeated conferences and urgings, to comprehend how strange and stubborn in some points was the humble creature whom his proposals so highly honoured. Though his daughter was indeed his first

object in life; though for her he was willing to make a _mesalliance_, the extent of which it would be incumbent on him studiously to conceal,--yet still, the beauty of Alice awoke an earthlier sentiment that he was not disposed to conquer. He was quite willing to make promises, and talk generously; but when it came to an oath,--a solemn, a binding oath--and this Alice rigidly exacted,--he was startled, and drew back. Though hypocritical, he was, as we have before said, a most sincere believer. He might creep through a promise with unbruised conscience; but he was not one who could have dared to violate an oath, and lay the load of perjury on his soul. Perhaps, after all, the union never would have taken place, but Templeton fell ill; that soft and relaxing air did not agree with him; a low but dangerous fever seized him, and the worldly man trembled at the aspect of Death. It was in this illness that Alice nursed him with a daughter's vigilance and care; and when at length he recovered, impressed with her zeal and kindness, softened by illness, afraid of the approach of solitary age,--and feeling more than ever his duties to his motherless child, he threw himself at Alice's feet, and solemnly vowed all that she required.

It was during this residence in Devonshire, and especially during his illness, that Templeton made and cultivated the acquaintance of Mr. Aubrey. The good clergyman prayed with him by his sick-bed; and when Templeton's danger was at its height, he sought to relieve his conscience by a confession of his wrongs to Mary Westbrook. The name startled Aubrey; and when he learned that the lovely child who had so often sat on his knee, and smiled in his face, was the granddaughter of his first and only love, he had a new interest in her welfare, a new reason to urge Templeton to reparation, a new motive to desire to procure for the infant years of Eleanor's grandchild the gentle care of the young mother, whose own bereavement he sorrowfully foretold. Perhaps the advice and exhortations of Aubrey went far towards assisting the conscience of Mr. Templeton, and reconciling him to the sacrifice he made to his affection for his daughter. Be that as it may, he married Alice, and Aubrey solemnized and blessed the chill and barren union.

But now came a new and inexpressible affliction; the child of Alice had rallied but for a time. The dread disease had but dallied with its prey; it came on with rapid and sudden force; and within a month from the day that saw Alice the bride of Templeton, the last hope was gone, and the mother was bereft and childless!

The blow that stunned Alice was not, after the first natural shock of sympathy, an unwelcome event to the banker. Now _his_ child would be Alice's sole care; now there could be no gossip, no suspicion why, in

life and after death, he should prefer one child, supposed not his own, to the other.

He hastened to remove Alice from the scene of her affliction. He dismissed the solitary attendant who had accompanied her on her journey; he bore his wife to London, and finally settled, as we have seen, at a villa in its vicinity. And there, more and more, day by day, centred his love upon the supposed daughter of Mrs. Templeton, his darling and his heiress, the beautiful Evelyn Cameron.

For the first year or two, Templeton evinced some alarming disposition to escape from the oath he had imposed upon himself; but on the slightest hint there was a sternness in the wife, in all else so respectful, so submissive, that repressed and awed him. She even threatened--and at one time was with difficulty prevented carrying the threat into effect--to leave his roof forever, if there were the slightest question of the sanctity of his vow. Templeton trembled; such a separation would excite gossip, curiosity, scandal, a noise in the world, public talk, possible discovery. Besides, Alice was necessary to Evelyn, necessary to his own comfort; something to scold in health, something to rely upon in illness. Gradually then, but sullenly, he reconciled himself to his lot; and as years and infirmities grew upon him, he was contented at least to have secured a faithful friend and an anxious nurse. Still a marriage of this sort was not blessed: Templeton's vanity was wounded; his temper, always harsh, was soured; he avenged his affront by a thousand petty tyrannies; and, without a murmur, Alice perhaps in those years of rank and opulence suffered more than in all her wanderings, with love at her heart and her infant in her arms.

Evelyn was to be the heiress to the wealth of the banker. But the title of the new peer!--if he could unite wealth and title, and set the coronet on that young brow! This had led him to seek the alliance with Lumley. And on his death-bed, it was not the secret of Alice, but that of Mary Westbrook and his daughter, which he had revealed to his dismayed and astonished nephew, in excuse for the apparently unjust alienation of his property, and as the cause of the alliance he had sought.

While her husband, if husband he might be called, lived, Alice had seemed to bury in her bosom her regret--deep, mighty, passionate, as it was--for her lost child, the child of the unforgotten lover, to whom, through such trials, and amid such new ties, she had been faithful from first to last. But when once more free, her heart flew back to the far and lowly grave. Hence her yearly visits to Brook-Green; hence her purchase of the cottage, hallowed by memories of the dead. There, on that lawn, had she

borne forth the fragile form, to breathe the soft noontide air; there, in that chamber, had she watched and hoped, and prayed and despaired; there, in that quiet burial-ground, rested the beloved dust! But Alice, even in her holiest feelings, was not selfish: she forbore to gratify the first wish of her heart till Evelyn's education was sufficiently advanced to enable her to quit the neighbourhood; and then, to the delight of Aubrey (who saw in Evelyn a fairer, and nobler, and purer Eleanor), she came to the solitary spot, which, in all the earth, was the least solitary to her!

And now the image of the lover of her youth--which during her marriage she had sought, at least, to banish--returned to her, and at times inspired her with the only hopes that the grave had not yet transferred to heaven! In relating her tale to Aubrey or in conversing with Mrs. Leslie, whose friendship she still maintained, she found that both concurred in thinking that this obscure and wandering Butler, so skilled in an art in which eminence in man is generally professional, must be of mediocre or perhaps humble station. Ah! now that she was free and rich, if she were to meet him again, and his love was not all gone, and he would believe in her strange and constant truth; now, his infidelity could be forgiven,--forgotten in the benefits it might be hers to bestow! And how, poor Alice, in that remote village, was chance to throw him in your way? She knew not: but something often whispered to her, "Again you shall meet those eyes; again you shall hear that voice; and you shall tell him, weeping on his breast, how you loved his child!" And would he not have forgotten her; would he not have formed new ties?--could he read the loveliness of unchangeable affection in that pale and pensive face! Alas, when we love intensely, it is difficult to make us fancy that there is no love in return!

The reader is acquainted with the adventures of Mrs. Elton, the sole confidant of the secret union of Templeton and Evelyn's mother. By a singular fatality, it was the selfish and characteristic recklessness of Vargrave that had, in fixing her home at Burleigh, ministered to the revelation of his own villanous deceit. On returning to England she had inquired for Mr. Templeton; she had learned that he had married again, had been raised to the peerage under the title of Lord Vargrave, and was gathered to his fathers. She had no claim on his widow or his family. But the unfortunate child who should have inherited his property, she could only suppose her dead.

When she first saw Evelyn, she was startled by her likeness to her unfortunate mother. But the unfamiliar name of Cameron, the intelligence received from Maltravers that Evelyn's mother still lived, dispelled her

suspicions; and though at times the resemblance haunted her, she doubted and inquired no more. In fact, her own infirmities grew upon her, and pain usurped her thoughts.

Now it so happened that the news of the engagement of Maltravers to Miss Cameron became known to the county but a little time before he arrived,--for news travels slow from the Continent to our provinces,--and, of course, excited all the comment of the villagers. Her nurse repeated the tale to Mrs. Elton, who instantly remembered the name, and recalled the resemblance of Miss Cameron to the unfortunate Mary Westbrook.

"And," said the gossiping nurse, "she was engaged, they say, to a great lord, and gave him up for the squire,--a great lord in the court, who had been staying at Parson Merton's, Lord Vargrave!"

"Lord Vargrave!" exclaimed Mrs. Elton, remembering the title to which Mr. Templeton had been raised.

"Yes; they do say as how the late lord left Miss Cameron all his money--such a heap of it--though she was not his child, over the head of his nevy, the present lord, on the understanding like that they were to be married when she came of age. But she would not take to him after she had seen the squire. And, to be sure, the squire is the finest-looking gentleman in the county."

"Stop! stop!" said Mrs. Elton, feebly; "the late lord left all his fortune to Miss Cameron,--not his child! I guess the riddle! I understand it all! my foster-child!" she murmured, turning away; "how could I have mistaken that likeness?"

The agitation of the discovery she supposed she had made, her joy at the thought that the child she had loved as her own was alive and possessed of its rights, expedited the progress of Mrs. Elton's disease; and Maltravers arrived just in time to learn her confession (which she naturally wished to make to one who was at once her benefactor, and supposed to be the destined husband of her foster-child), and to be agitated with hope, with joy, at her solemn conviction of the truth of her surmises. If Evelyn were not his daughter--even if not to be his bride--what a weight from his soul! He hastened to Brook-Green; and dreading to rush at once to the presence of Alice, he recalled Aubrey to his recollection. In the interview he sought, all, or at least much, was cleared up. He saw at once the premeditated and well-planned villany of Vargrave. And Alice, her tale--her sufferings--her indomitable

love!--how should he meet _her_?

CHAPTER V.

YET once more, O ye laurels! and once more,
Ye myrtles!--LYCIDAS.

WHILE Maltravers was yet agitated and excited by the disclosures of the curate, to whom, as a matter of course, he had divulged his own identity with the mysterious Butler, Aubrey, turning his eyes to the casement, saw the form of Lady Vargrave slowly approaching towards the house.

"Will you withdraw to the inner room?" said he; "she is coming; you are not yet prepared to meet her!--nay, would it be well?"

"Yes, yes; I am prepared. We must be alone. I will await her here."

"But--"

"Nay, I implore you!"

The curate, without another word, retired into the inner apartment, and Maltravers sinking in a chair breathlessly awaited the entrance of Lady Vargrave. He soon heard the light step without; the door, which opened at once on the old-fashioned parlour, was gently unclosed, and Lady Vargrave was in the room! In the position he had taken, only the outline of Ernest's form was seen by Alice, and the daylight came dim through the cottage casement; and seeing some one seated in the curate's accustomed chair, she could but believe that it was Aubrey himself.

"Do not let me interrupt you," said that sweet, low voice, whose music had been dumb for so many years to Maltravers, "but I have a letter from France, from a stranger. It alarms me so; it is about Evelyn;" and, as if to imply that she meditated a longer visit than ordinary, Lady Vargrave removed her bonnet, and placed it on the table. Surprised that the curate had not answered, had not come forward to welcome her, she then approached; Maltravers rose, and they stood before each other face to face. And how lovely still was Alice! lovelier he thought even than of old! And those eyes, so divinely blue, so dovelike and soft, yet with some spiritual and unfathomable mystery in their clear depth, were once more fixed upon him. Alice seemed turned to stone; she moved not, she spoke not, she scarcely breathed; she gazed spellbound, as if her

senses--as if life itself--had deserted her.

"Alice!" murmured Maltravers,--"Alice, we meet at last!"

His voice restored memory, consciousness, youth, at once to her! She uttered a loud cry of unspeakable joy, of rapture! She sprang forward--reserve, fear, time, change, all forgotten; she threw herself into his arms, she clasped him to her heart again and again!--the faithful dog that has found its master expresses not his transport more uncontrollably, more wildly. It was something fearful--the excess of her ecstasy! She kissed his hands, his clothes; she laughed, she wept; and at last, as words came, she laid her head on his breast, and said passionately, "I have been true to thee! I have been true to thee!--or this hour would have killed me!" Then, as if alarmed by his silence, she looked up into his face, and as his burning tears fell upon her cheek, she said again and with more hurried vehemence, "I _have_ been faithful,--do you not believe me?"

"I do, I do, noble, unequalled Alice! Why, why were you so long lost to me? Why now does your love so shame my own?"

At these words, Alice appeared to awaken from her first oblivion of all that had chanced since they met; she blushed deeply, and drew herself gently and bashfully from his embrace. "Ah," she said, in altered and humbled accents, "you have loved another! Perhaps you have no love left for me! Is it so; is it? No, no; those eyes--you love me--you love me still!"

And again she clung to him, as if it were heaven to believe all things, and death to doubt. Then, after a pause, she drew him gently with both her hands towards the light, and gazed upon him fondly, proudly, as if to trace, line by line, and feature by feature, the countenance which had been to her sweet thoughts as the sunlight to the flowers. "Changed, changed," she muttered; "but still the same,--still beautiful, still divine!" She stopped. A sudden thought struck her: his garments were worn and soiled by travel, and that princely crest, fallen and dejected, no longer towered in proud defiance above the sons of men. "You are not rich," she exclaimed eagerly,--"say you are not rich! I am rich enough for both; it is all yours,--all yours; I did not betray you for it; there is no shame in it. Oh, we shall be so happy! Thou art come back to thy poor Alice! thou knowest how she loved thee!"

There was in Alice's manner, her wild joy, something so different from her ordinary self, that none who could have seen her--quiet, pensive,

subdued--would have fancied her the same being. All that Society and its woes had taught were gone; and Nature once more claimed her fairest child. The very years seemed to have fallen from her brow, and she looked scarcely older than when she had stood with him beneath the moonlight by the violet banks far away. Suddenly, her colour faded; the smile passed from the dimpled lips; a sad and solemn aspect succeeded to that expression of passionate joy. "Come," she said, in a whisper, "come, follow;" and still clasping his hand, she drew him to the door. Silent and wonderingly he followed her across the lawn, through the moss-grown gate, and into the lonely burial-ground. She moved on with a noiseless and gliding step,--so pale, so hushed, so breathless, that even in the noonday you might have half fancied the fair shape was not owned by earth. She paused where the yew-tree cast its gloomy shadow; and the small and tombless mound, separated from the rest, was before them. She pointed to it, and falling on her knees beside it, murmured, "Hush, it sleeps below,--thy child!" She covered her face with both her hands, and her form shook convulsively.

Beside that form and before that grave knelt Maltravers. There vanished the last remnant of his stoic pride; and there--Evelyn herself forgotten--there did he pray to Heaven for pardon to himself, and blessings on the heart he had betrayed. There solemnly did he vow, the remainder of his years, to guard from all future ill the faithful and childless mother.

CHAPTER VI.

WILL Fortune never come with both hands full,
But write her fair words still in foulest letters?

Henry IV. Part ii.

I PASS over those explanations, that record of Alice's eventful history, which Maltravers learned from her own lips, to confirm and add to the narrative of the curate, the purport of which is already known to the reader.

It was many hours before Alice was sufficiently composed to remember the object for which she had sought the curate. But she had laid the letter which she had brought, and which explained all, on the table at the vicarage; and when Maltravers, having at last induced Alice, who seemed afraid to lose sight of him for an instant, to retire to her room, and seek some short repose, returned towards the vicarage, he met Aubrey in

the garden. The old man had taken the friend's acknowledged license to read the letter evidently meant for his eye; and, alarmed and anxious, he now eagerly sought a consultation with Maltravers. The letter, written in English, as familiar to the writer as her own tongue, was from Madame de Ventadour. It had been evidently dictated by the kindest feelings. After apologizing briefly for her interference, she stated that Lord Vargrave's marriage with Miss Cameron was now a matter of public notoriety; that it would take place in a few days; that it was observed with suspicion that Miss Cameron appeared nowhere; that she seemed almost a prisoner in her room; that certain expressions which had dropped from Lady Doltimore had alarmed her greatly. According to these expressions, it would seem that Lady Vargrave was not apprised of the approaching event; that, considering Miss Cameron's recent engagement to Mr. Maltravers suddenly (and, as Valerie thought, unaccountably) broken off on the arrival of Lord Vargrave; considering her extreme youth, her brilliant fortune; and, Madame de Ventadour delicately hinted, considering also Lord Vargrave's character for unscrupulous determination in the furtherance of any object on which he was bent,--considering all this, Madame de Ventadour had ventured to address Miss Cameron's mother, and to guard her against the possibility of design or deceit. Her best apology for her intrusion must be her deep interest in Miss Cameron, and her long friendship for one to whom Miss Cameron had been so lately betrothed. If Lady Vargrave were aware of the new engagement, and had sanctioned it, of course her intrusion was unseasonable and superfluous; but if ascribed to its real motive, would not be the less forgiven.

It was easy for Maltravers to see in this letter how generous and zealous had been that friendship for himself which could have induced the woman of the world to undertake so officious a task. But of this he thought not, as he hurried over the lines, and shuddered at Evelyn's urgent danger.

"This intelligence," said Aubrey, "must be, indeed, a surprise to Lady Vargrave. For we have not heard a word from Evelyn or Lord Vargrave to announce such a marriage; and she (and myself till this day) believed that the engagement between Evelyn and Mr. ----, I mean," said Aubrey with confusion,--"I mean yourself, was still in force. Lord Vargrave's villany is apparent; we must act immediately. What is to be done?"

"I will return to Paris to-morrow; I will defeat his machination, expose his falsehood!"

"You may need a proxy for Lady Vargrave, an authority for Evelyn; one whom Lord Vargrave knows to possess the secret of her birth, her rights:

I will go with you. We must speak to Lady Vargrave."

Maltravers turned sharply round. "And Alice knows not who I am; that I--I am, or was, a few weeks ago, the suitor of another; and that other the child she has reared as her own! Unhappy Alice! in the very hour of her joy at my return, is she to writhe beneath this new affliction?"

"Shall I break it to her?" said Aubrey, pityingly.

"No, no; these lips must inflict the last wrong!" Maltravers walked away, and the curate saw him no more till night.

In the interval, and late in the evening, Maltravers rejoined Alice.

The fire burned clear on the hearth, the curtains were drawn, the pleasant but simple drawing-room of the cottage smiled its welcome as Maltravers entered, and Alice sprang up to greet him! It was as if the old days of the music-lesson and the meerschaum had come back.

"This is yours," said Alice, tenderly, as he looked round the apartment. "Now--now I know what a blessed thing riches are! Ah, you are looking on that picture; it is of her who supplied your daughter's place,--she is so beautiful, so good, you will love her as a daughter. Oh, that letter--that--that letter--I forgot it till now--it is at the vicarage--I must go there immediately, and you will come too,--you will advise us."

"Alice, I have read the letter,--I know all. Alice, sit down and hear me,--it is you who have to learn from me. In our young days I was accustomed to tell you stories in winter nights like these,--stories of love like our own, of sorrows which, at that time, we only knew by hearsay. I have one now for your ear, truer and sadder than they were. Two children, for they were then little more--children in ignorance of the world, children in freshness of heart, children almost in years--were thrown together by strange vicissitudes, more than eighteen years ago. They were of different sexes,--they loved and they erred. But the error was solely with the boy; for what was innocence in her was but passion in him. He loved her dearly; but at that age her qualities were half developed. He knew her beautiful, simple, tender; but he knew not all the virtue, the faith, and the nobleness that Heaven had planted in her soul. They parted,--they knew not each other's fate. He sought her anxiously, but in vain; and sorrow and remorse long consumed him, and her memory threw a shadow over his existence. But again--for his love had not the exalted holiness of hers (_she_ was true!)--he sought to renew in others the charm he had lost with her. In vain,--long, long in vain.

Alice, you know to whom the tale refers. Nay, listen yet. I have heard from the old man yonder that you were witness to a scene many years ago which deceived you into the belief that you beheld a rival. It was not so: that lady yet lives,--then, as now, a friend to me; nothing more. I grant that, at one time, my fancy allured me to her, but my heart was still true to thee."

"Bless you for those words!" murmured Alice; and she crept more closely to him.

He went on. "Circumstances, which at some calmer occasion you shall hear, again nearly connected my fate by marriage to another. I had then seen you at a distance, unseen by you,--seen you apparently surrounded by respectability and opulence; and I blessed Heaven that your lot, at least, was not that of penury and want." (Here Maltravers related where he had caught that brief glimpse of Alice,*--how he had sought for her again and again in vain.) "From that hour," he continued, "seeing you in circumstances of which I could not have dared to dream, I felt more reconciled to the past; yet, when on the verge of marriage with another--beautiful, gifted, generous as she was--a thought, a memory half acknowledged, dimly traced, chained back my sentiments; and admiration, esteem, and gratitude were not love! Death--a death melancholy and tragic--forbade this union; and I went forth in the world, a pilgrim and a wanderer. Years rolled away, and I thought I had conquered the desire for love,--a desire that had haunted me since I lost thee. But, suddenly and recently, a being, beautiful as yourself--sweet, guileless, and young as you were when we met--woke in me a new and a strange sentiment. I will not conceal it from you: Alice, at last I loved another! Yet, singular as it may seem to you, it was a certain resemblance to yourself, not in feature, but in the tones of the voice, the nameless grace of gesture and manner, the very music of your once happy laugh,--those traits of resemblance which I can now account for, and which children catch not from their parents only, but from those they most see, and, loving most, most imitate in their tender years,--all these, I say, made perhaps a chief attraction, that drew me towards--Alice, are you prepared for it?--drew me towards Evelyn Cameron. Know me in my real character, by my true name: I am that Maltravers to whom the hand of Evelyn was a few weeks ago betrothed!"

* See "Ernest Maltravers," book v., p. 228.

He paused, and ventured to look up at Alice; she was exceedingly pale, and her hands were tightly clasped together, but she neither wept nor spoke. The worst was over; he continued more rapidly, and with less

constrained an effort: "By the art, the duplicity, the falsehood of Lord Vargrave, I was taught in a sudden hour to believe that Evelyn was our daughter, that you recoiled from the prospect of beholding once more the author of so many miseries. I need not tell you, Alice, of the horror that succeeded to love. I pass over the tortures I endured. By a train of incidents to be related to you hereafter, I was led to suspect the truth of Vargrave's tale. I came hither; I have learned all from Aubrey. I regret no more the falsehood that so racked me for the time; I regret no more the rupture of my bond with Evelyn; I regret nothing that brings me at last free and unshackled to thy feet, and acquaints me with thy sublime faith and ineffable love. Here then--here beneath your own roof--here he, at once your earliest friend and foe, kneels to you for pardon and for hope! He woos you as his wife, his companion to the grave! Forget all his errors, and be to him, under a holier name, all that you were to him of old!"

"And you are then Evelyn's suitor,--you are he whom she loves? I see it all--all!" Alice rose, and, before he was even aware of her purpose, or conscious of what she felt, she had vanished from the room.

Long, and with the bitterest feelings, he awaited her return; she came not. At last he wrote a hurried note, imploring her to join him again, to relieve his suspense; to believe his sincerity; to accept his vows. He sent it to her own room, to which she had hastened to bury her emotions. In a few minutes there came to him this answer, written in pencil, blotted with tears.

"I thank you, I understand your heart; but forgive me--I cannot see you yet. She is so beautiful and good, she is worthy of you. I shall soon be reconciled. God bless you,--bless you both!"

The door of the vicarage was opened abruptly, and Maltravers entered with a hasty but heavy tread.

"Go to her, go to that angel; go, I beseech you! Tell her that she wrongs me, if she thinks I can ever wed another, ever have an object in life, but to atone to, to merit her. Go, plead for me."

Aubrey, who soon gathered from Maltravers what had passed, departed to the cottage. It was near midnight before he returned. Maltravers met him in the churchyard, beside the yew-tree. "Well, well, what message do you bring?"

"She wishes that we should both set off for Paris to-morrow. Not a day is to be lost,--we must save Evelyn from this snare."

"Evelyn! Yes, Evelyn shall be saved; but the rest--the rest--why do you turn away?"

"You are not the poor artist, the wandering adventurer; you are the high-born, the wealthy, the renowned Maltravers: Alice has nothing to confer on you. You have won the love of Evelyn,--Alice cannot doom the child confided to her care to hopeless affection; you love Evelyn,--Alice cannot compare herself to the young and educated and beautiful creature, whose love is a priceless treasure. Alice prays you not to grieve for her; she will soon be content and happy in your happiness.' This is the message."

"And what said you,--did you not tell her such words would break my heart?"

"No matter what I said; I mistrust myself when I advise her. Her feelings are truer than all our wisdom!"

Maltravers made no answer, and the curate saw him gliding rapidly away by the starlit graves towards the village.

CHAPTER VII.

THINK you I can a resolution fetch
From flowery tenderness?--_Measure for Measure_.

THEY were on the road to Dover. Maltravers leaned back in the corner of the carriage with his hat over his brows, though the morning was yet too dark for the curate to perceive more than the outline of his features. Milestone after milestone glided by the wheels, and neither of the travellers broke the silence. It was a cold, raw morning, and the mists rose sullenly from the dank hedges and comfortless fields.

Stern and self-accusing was the scrutiny of Maltravers into the recesses of his conscience, and the blotted pages of the Past. That pale and solitary mother, mourning over the grave of her--of his own--child, rose again before his eyes, and seemed silently to ask him for an account of the heart he had made barren, and of the youth to which his love had

brought the joylessness of age. With the image of Alice,--afar, alone, whether in her wanderings, a beggar and an outcast, or in that hollow prosperity, in which the very ease of the frame allowed more leisure to the pinings of the heart,--with that image, pure, sorrowing, and faithful from first to last, he compared his own wild and wasted youth, his resort to fancy and to passion for excitement. He contrasted with her patient resignation his own arrogant rebellion against the trials, the bitterness of which his proud spirit had exaggerated; his contempt for the pursuits and aims of others; the imperious indolence of his later life, and his forgetfulness of the duties which Providence had fitted him to discharge. His mind, once so rudely hurled from that complacent pedestal, from which it had so long looked down on men, and said, "I am wiser and better than you," became even too acutely sensitive to its own infirmities; and that desire for Virtue, which he had ever deeply entertained, made itself more distinctly and loudly heard amidst the ruins and the silence of his pride.

From the contemplation of the Past, he roused himself to face the Future. Alice had refused his hand, Alice herself had ratified and blessed his union with another! Evelyn, so madly loved,--Evelyn might still be his! No law--from the violation of which, even in thought, Human Nature recoils appalled and horror-stricken--forbade him to reclaim her hand, to snatch her from the grasp of Vargrave, to woo again, and again to win her! But did Maltravers welcome, did he embrace that thought? Let us do him justice: he did not. He felt that Alice's resolution, in the first hour of mortified affection, was not to be considered final; and even if it were so, he felt yet more deeply that her love--the love that had withstood so many trials--never could be subdued. Was he to make her nobleness a curse? Was he to say, "Thou hast passed away in thy generation, and I leave thee again to thy solitude for her whom thou hast cherished as a child?" He started in dismay from the thought of this new and last blow upon the shattered spirit; and then fresh and equally sacred obstacles between Evelyn and himself broke slowly on his view. Could Templeton rise from his grave, with what resentment, with what just repugnance, would he have regarded in the betrayer of his wife (even though wife but in name) the suitor to his child!

These thoughts came in fast and fearful force upon Maltravers, and served to strengthen his honour and his conscience. He felt that though, in law, there was no shadow of connection between Evelyn and himself, yet his tie with Alice had been of a nature that ought to separate him from one who had regarded Alice as a mother. The load of horror, the agony of shame, were indeed gone; but still a voice whispered as before, "Evelyn is lost to thee forever!" But so shaken had already been her image in

the late storms and convulsion of his soul, that this thought was preferable to the thought of sacrificing Alice. If that were all--but Evelyn might still love him; and justice to Alice might be misery to her! He started from his reverie with a vehement gesture, and groaned audibly.

The curate turned to address to him some words of inquiry and surprise; but the words were unheard, and he perceived, by the advancing daylight, that the countenance of Maltravers was that of a man utterly rapt and absorbed by some mastering and irresistible thought. Wisely, therefore, he left his companion in peace, and returned to his own anxious and engrossing meditations.

The travellers did not rest till they arrived at Dover. The vessel started early the following morning, and Aubrey, who was much fatigued, retired to rest. Maltravers glanced at the clock upon the mantelpiece; it was the hour of nine. For him there was no hope of sleep; and the prospect of the slow night was that of dreary suspense and torturing self-commune.

As he turned restlessly in his seat, the waiter entered to say that there was a gentleman who had caught a glimpse of him below on his arrival, and who was anxious to speak with him. Before Maltravers could answer, the gentleman himself entered, and Maltravers recognized Legard.

"I beg your pardon," said the latter, in a tone of great agitation, "but I was most anxious to see you for a few moments. I have just returned to England--all places alike hateful to me! I read in the papers--an--an announcement--which--which occasions me the greatest--I know not what I would say,--but is it true? Read this paragraph;" and Legard placed "The Courier" before Maltravers.

The passage was as follows:

"It is whispered that Lord Vargrave, who is now at Paris, is to be married in a few days to the beautiful and wealthy Miss Cameron, to whom he has been long engaged."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Legard, following the eyes of Maltravers, as he glanced over the paragraph. "Were not you the lover,--the accepted, the happy lover of Miss Cameron? Speak, tell me, I implore you!--that it was for you, who saved my life and redeemed my honour, and not for that cold schemer, that I renounced all my hopes of earthly happiness, and

surrendered the dream of winning the heart and hand of the only woman I ever loved!"

A deep shade fell over the features of Maltravers. He gazed earnestly and long upon the working countenance of Legard, and said, after a pause,--

"You, too, loved her, then? I never knew it,--never guessed it; or, if once I suspected, it was but for a moment; and--"

"Yes," interrupted Legard, passionately, "Heaven is my witness how fervently and truly I did love--I do still love Evelyn Cameron! But when you confessed to me your affection--your hopes--I felt all that I owed you; I felt that I never ought to become your rival. I left Paris abruptly. What I have suffered I will not say; but it was some comfort to think that I had acted as became one who owed you a debt never to be cancelled nor repaid. I travelled from place to place, each equally hateful and wearisome; at last, I scarce know why, I returned to England. I have arrived this day; and now--but tell me, is it true?"

"I believe it true," said Maltravers, in a hollow voice, "that Evelyn is at this moment engaged to Lord Vargrave. I believe it equally true that that engagement, founded upon false impressions, never will be fulfilled. With that hope and that belief, I am on my road to Paris."

"And she will be yours, still?" said Legard, turning away his face:
"well, that I can bear. May you be happy, sir!"

"Stay, Legard," said Maltravers, in a voice of great feeling: "let us understand each other better; you have renounced your passion to your sense of honour." Maltravers paused thoughtfully. "It was noble in you, it was more than just to me; I thank you and respect you. But, Legard, was there aught in the manner, the bearing of Evelyn Cameron, that could lead you to suppose that she would have returned your affection? True, had we started on equal terms, I am not vain enough to be blind to your advantages of youth and person; but I believed that the affections of Evelyn were already mine, before we met at Paris."

"It might be so," said Legard, gloomily; "nor is it for me to say that a heart so pure and generous as Evelyn's could deceive yourself or me. Yet I _had_ fancied, I _had_ hoped, while you stood aloof, that the partiality with which she regarded you was that of admiration more than love; that you had dazzled her imagination rather than won her heart. I had hoped that I should win, that I was winning, my way to her affection!"

But let this pass; I drop the subject forever--only, Maltravers, only do me justice. You are a proud man, and your pride has often irritated and stung me, in spite of my gratitude. Be more lenient to me than you have been; think that, though I have my errors and my follies, I am still capable of some conquests over myself. And most sincerely do I now wish that Evelyn's love may be to you that blessing it would have been to me!"

This was, indeed, a new triumph over the pride of Maltravers,--a new humiliation. He had looked with a cold contempt on this man, because he affected not to be above the herd; and this man had preceded him in the very sacrifice he himself meditated.

"Legard," said Maltravers, and a faint blush overspread his face, "you rebuke me justly. I acknowledge my fault, and I ask you to forgive it. From this night, whatever happens, I shall hold it an honour to be admitted to your friendship; from this night, George Legard never shall find in me the offences of arrogance and harshness."

Legard wrung the hand held out to him warmly, but made no answer; his heart was full, and he would not trust himself to speak.

"You think, then," resumed Maltravers, in a more thoughtful tone,--"you think that Evelyn could have loved you, had my pretensions not crossed your own? And you think, also--pardon me, dear Legard--that you could have acquired the steadiness of character, the firmness of purpose, which one so fair, so young, so inexperienced and susceptible, so surrounded by a thousand temptations, would need in a guardian and protector?"

"Oh, do not judge of me by what I have been. I feel that Evelyn could have reformed errors worse than mine; that her love would have elevated dispositions yet more light and commonplace. You do not know what miracles love works! But now, what is there left for me? What matters it how frivolous and poor the occupations which can distract my thoughts, and bring me forgetfulness? Forgive me; I have no right to obtrude all this egotism on you."

"Do not despond, Legard," said Maltravers, kindly; "there may be better fortunes in store for you than you yet anticipate. I cannot say more now; but will you remain at Dover a few days longer? Within a week you shall hear from me. I will not raise hopes that it may not be mine to realize. But if it be as you think it was, why little, indeed, would rest with me. Nay, look not on me so wistfully," added Maltravers, with a mournful smile; "and let the subject close for the present. You will stay at Dover?"

"I will; but--"

"No buts, Legard; it is so settled."

Add yourself as a volunteer or giver, to promote the growing and diffusion of
[Biblioteca Virtual Universal. www.biblioteca.org.ar](http://www.biblioteca.org.ar)

If you take notice of any kind of mistake, or you want to make any suggestion
please visit our link www.biblioteca.org.ar/comentario

