



EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON

ERNEST MALTRAVERS

BOOK IX

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BOOK IX.

I go, the bride of Acheron.--SOPH. /Antig./

These things are in the Future.--/lb./ 1333.

CHAPTER I.

* * * "There the action lies

In its true nature * * * *

* * * What then? What rests?

Try what repentance can!"--/Hamlet/.

"I doubt he will be dead or ere I come."--/King John/.

IT was a fine afternoon in December, when Lumley Ferrers turned from Lord Saxingham's door. The knockers were muffled--the windows on the third story were partially closed. There was sickness in that house.

Lumley's face was unusually grave; it was even sad. "So young--so beautiful," he muttered. "If ever I loved woman, I do believe I loved her--that love must be my excuse. . . . I repent of what I have done--but I could not foresee that a mere lover's stratagem was to end in such effects--the metaphysician was very right when he said, 'We only sympathise with feelings we know ourselves.' A little disappointment in love could not have hurt me much--it is d----d odd it should hurt her so. I am altogether out of luck: old Templeton--I beg his pardon, Lord Vargrave--(by-the-by, he gets heartier every day--what a constitution he has!) seems cross with me. He did not like the idea that I should marry Lady Florence--and when I thought that vision might have been realised, hinted that I was disappointing some expectations he had formed; I can't make out what he means. Then, too, the government have offered that place to Maltravers instead of to me. In fact, my star is not in the ascendant. Poor Florence, though,--I would really give a great deal to know her restored to health!--I have done a villainous thing, but I thought it only a clever one. However, regret is a fool's passion. By Jupiter!--talking of fools, here comes Cesarini."

Wan, haggard, almost spectral, his hat over his brows, his dress neglected, his air reckless and fierce, Cesarini crossed the way, and thus accosted Lumley:

"We have murdered her, Ferrers; and her ghost will haunt us to our dying day!"

"Talk prose; you know I am no poet. What do you mean?"

"She is worse to-day," groaned Cesarini, in a hollow voice. "I wander like a lost spirit round the house; I question all who come from it. Tell me--oh, tell me, is there hope?"

"I do, indeed, trust so," replied Ferrers, fervently. "The illness has only of late assumed an alarming appearance. At first it was merely a severe cold, caught by imprudent exposure one rainy night. Now they fear it has settled on the lungs; but if we could get her abroad, all might be well."

"You think so, honestly?"

"I do. Courage, my friend; do not reproach yourself; it has nothing to do with us. She was taken ill of a cold, not of a letter, man!"

"No, no; I judge her heart by my own. Oh, that I could recall the past! Look at me; I am the wreck of what I was; day and night the recollection of my falsehood haunts me with remorse."

"Pshaw!--we will go to Italy together, and in your beautiful land love will replace love."

"I am half resolved, Ferrers."

"Ha!--to do what?"

"To write--to reveal all to her."

The hardy complexion of Ferrers grew livid; his brow became dark with a terrible expression.

"Do so, and fall the next day by my hand; my aim in slighter quarrel never erred."

"Do you dare to threaten me?"

"Do you dare to betray me? Betray one who, if he sinned, sinned on your account--in your cause; who would have secured to you the loveliest

bride, and the most princely dower in England; and whose only offence against you is that he cannot command life and health?"

"Forgive me," said the Italian, with great emotion,--"forgive me, and do not misunderstand; I would not have betrayed /you/--there is honour among villains. I would have confessed only my own crime; I would never have revealed yours--why should I?--it is unnecessary."

"Are you in earnest--are you sincere?"

"By my soul!"

"Then, indeed, you are worthy of my friendship. You will assume the whole forgery--an ugly word, but it avoids circumlocution--to be your own?"

"I will."

Ferrers paused a moment, and then stopped suddenly short.

"You will swear this!"

"By all that is holy."

"Then mark me, Cesarini; if to-morrow Lady Florence be worse, I will throw no obstacle in the way of your confession, should you resolve to make it; I will even use that influence which you leave me, to palliate your offence, to win your pardon. And yet to resign your hopes--to surrender one so loved to the arms of one so hated--it is magnanimous--it is noble--it is above my standard! Do as you will."

Cesarini was about to reply, when a servant on horseback abruptly turned the corner, almost at full speed. He pulled in--his eye fell upon Lumley--he dismounted.

"Oh, Mr. Ferrers," said the man breathlessly, "I have been to your house; they told me I might find you at Lord Saxingham's--I was just going there--"

"Well, well, what is the matter?"

"My poor master, sir--my lord, I mean--"

"What of him?"

"Had a fit, sir--the doctors are with him--my mistress--for my lord can't speak--sent me express for you."

"Lend me your horse--there, just lengthen the stirrups."

While the groom was engaged at the saddle, Ferrers turned to Cesarini.

"Do nothing rashly," said he; "I would say, if I might, nothing at all, without consulting me; but mind, I rely, at all events, on your promise--your oath."

"You may," said Cesarini, gloomily.

"Farewell, then," said Lumley, as he mounted; and in a few moments he was out of sight.

CHAPTER II.

"O world, thou wast the forest to this hart,

* * * * *

Dost thou here lie?"--/Julius Caesar/.

AS Lumley leapt from his horse at his uncle's door, the disorder and bustle of those demesnes, in which the severe eye of the master usually preserved a repose and silence as complete as if the affairs of life were carried on by clockwork, struck upon him sensibly. Upon the trim lawn the old women employed in cleaning and weeding the walks were all assembled in a cluster, shaking their heads ominously in concert, and carrying on their comments in a confused whisper. In the hall, the housemaid (and it was the first housemaid whom Lumley had ever seen in that house, so invisibly were the wheels of the domestic machine carried on) was leaning on her broom, "swallowing with open mouth a footman's news." It was as if, with the first slackening of the rigid rein, human nature broke loose from the conventual stillness in which it had ever paced its peaceful path in that formal mansion.

"How is he?"

"My lord is better, sir; he has spoken, I believe."

At this moment a young face, swollen and red with weeping, looked down from the stairs; and presently Evelyn rushed breathlessly into the hall.

"Oh, come up--come up--cousin Lumley; he cannot, cannot die in your presence; you always seem so full of life! He cannot die; you do not think he will die? Oh, take me with you, they won't let me go to him!"

"Hush, my dear little girl, hush; follow me lightly--that is right."

Lumley reached the door, tapped gently--entered; and the child also stole in unobserved or at least unprevented. Lumley drew aside the curtains; the new lord was lying on his bed, with his head propped by pillows, his eyes wide open, with a glassy, but not insensible stare, and his countenance fearfully changed.

Lady Vargrave was kneeling on the other side of the bed, one hand clasped in her husband's, the other bathing his temples, and her tears falling, without sob or sound, fast and copiously down her pale fair cheeks.

Two doctors were conferring in the recess of the window; an apothecary was mixing drugs at a table; and two of the oldest female servants of the house were standing near the physicians, trying to overhear what was said.

"My dear, dear uncle, how are you?" asked Lumley.

"Ah, you are come, then," said the dying man, in a feeble yet distinct voice; "that is well--I have much to say to you."

"But not now--not now--you are not strong enough," said the wife, imploringly.

The doctors moved to the bedside. Lord Vargrave waved his hand, and raised his head.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I feel as if death were hastening upon me; I have much need, while my senses remain, to confer with my nephew. Is the present a fitting time?--if I delay, are you sure that I shall have another?"

The doctors looked at each other.

"My lord," said one, "it may perhaps settle and relieve your mind to

converse with your nephew; afterwards you may more easily compose yourself to sleep."

"Take this cordial, then," said the other doctor.

The sick man obeyed. One of the physicians approached Lumley, and beckoned him aside.

"Shall we send for his lordship's lawyer?" whispered the leech.

"I am his heir-at-law," thought Lumley. "Why, /no/, my dear sir--no, I think not, unless he expresses a desire to see him; doubtless my poor uncle has already settled his worldly affairs. What is his state?"

The doctor shook his head. "I will speak to you, sir, after you have left his lordship."

"What is the matter there?" cried the patient, sharply and querulously. "Clear the room--I would be alone with my nephew."

The doctors disappeared; the old women reluctantly followed; when, suddenly, the little Evelyn sprang forward and threw herself on the breast of the dying man, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"My poor child!--my sweet child--my own, own darling!" gasped out Lord Vargrave, folding his weak arms round her; "bless you--bless you! and God will bless you. My wife," he added, with a voice far more tender than Lumley had ever before heard him address to Lady Vargrave, "if these be the last words I utter to you, let them express all the gratitude I feel for you, for duties never more piously discharged: you did not love me, it is true; and in health and pride that knowledge often made me unjust to you. I have been severe--you have had much to bear--forgive me."

"Oh! do not talk thus; you have been nobler, kinder than my deserts. How much I owe you--how little I have done in return!"

"I cannot bear this; leave me, my dear, leave me. I may live yet--I hope I may--I do not want to die. The cup may pass from me. Go--go--and you, my child."

"Ah, let /me/ stay."

Lord Vargrave kissed the little creature, as she clung to his neck, with

passionate affection, and then, placing her in her mother's arms, fell back exhausted on his pillow. Lumley, with handkerchief to his eyes, opened the door to Lady Vargrave, who sobbed bitterly, and carefully closing it, resumed his station by his uncle.

When Lumley Ferrers left the room, his countenance was gloomy and excited rather than sad. He hurried to the room which he usually occupied, and remained there for some hours while his uncle slept--a long and sound sleep. But the mother and the stepchild (now restored to the sick-room) did not desert their watch.

It wanted about an hour to midnight, when the senior physician sought the nephew.

"Your uncle asks for you, Mr. Ferrers; and I think it right to say that his last moments approach. We have done all that can be done."

"Is he fully aware of his danger?"

"He is; and has spent the last two hours in prayer--it is a Christian's death-bed, sir."

"Humph!" said Ferrers, as he followed the physician. The room was darkened--a single lamp, carefully shaded, burned on a table, on which lay the Book of Life in Death: and with awe and grief on their faces, the mother and the child were kneeling beside the bed.

"Come here, Lumley," faltered forth the fast-dying man.

"There are none here but you three--nearest and dearest to me?--That is well. Lumley, then, you know all--my wife, he knows all. My child, give your hand to your cousin--so you are now plighted. When you grow up, Evelyn, you will know that it is my last wish and prayer that you should be the wife of Lumley Ferrers. In giving you this angel, Lumley, I atone to you for all seeming injustice. And to you, my child, I secure the rank and honours to which I have painfully climbed, and which I am forbidden to enjoy. Be kind to her, Lumley--you have a good and frank heart--let it be her shelter--she has never known a harsh word. God bless you all, and God forgive me--pray for me. Lumley, to-morrow you will be Lord Vargrave, and by and by" (here a ghastly, but exultant smile flitted over the speaker's countenance), "you will be my Lady--Lady Vargrave. Lady--so--so--Lady Var--"

The words died on his trembling lips; he turned round, and, though he

continued to breathe for more than an hour, Lord Vargrave never uttered another syllable.

CHAPTER III.

"Hopes and fears
Start up alarmed, and o'er life's narrow verge
Look down--on what?--a fathomless abyss."--YOUNG.

"Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!"
/Much Ado about Nothing/.

THE wound which Maltravers had received was peculiarly severe and rankling. It is true that he had never been what is called violently in love with Florence Lascelles; but from the moment in which he had been charmed and surprised into the character of a declared suitor, it was consonant with his scrupulous and loyal nature to view only the bright side of Florence's gifts and qualities, and to seek to enamour his grateful fancy with her beauty, her genius, and her tenderness for himself. He had thus forced and formed his thoughts and hopes to centre all in one object; and Florence and the Future had grown words which conveyed the same meaning to his mind. Perhaps he felt more bitterly her sudden and stunning accusations, couched as they were in language so unqualified, because they fell upon his pride rather than his affection, and were not softened away by the thousand excuses and remembrances which a passionate love would have invented and recalled. It was a deep, concentrated sense of injury and insult, that hardened and soured his whole nature--wounded vanity, wounded pride, and wounded honour.

And the blow, too, came upon him at a time when he was most dissatisfied with all other prospects. He was disgusted with the littleness of the agents and springs of political life--he had formed a weary contempt for the barrenness of literary reputation. At thirty years of age he had necessarily outlived the sanguine elasticity of early youth, and he had already broken up many of those later toys in business and ambition which afford the rattle and the hobby-horse to our maturer manhood. Always asking for something too refined and too exalted for human life, every new proof of unworthiness in men and things saddened or revolted a mind still too fastidious for that quiet contentment with the world as it is, which we must all learn before we can make our philosophy practical and our genius as fertile of the harvest as it may be prodigal of the blossom. Haughty, solitary, and unsocial, the ordinary resources

of mortified and disappointed men were not for Ernest Maltravers. Rigidly secluded in his country retirement, he consumed the days in moody wanderings; and in the evenings he turned to books with a spirit disdainful and fatigued. So much had he already learned, that books taught him little that he did not already know. And the biographies of authors, those ghost-like beings who seem to have had no life but in the shadow of their own haunting and imperishable thoughts, dimmed the inspiration he might have caught from their pages. Those slaves of the Lamp, those Silkworms of the Closet, how little had they enjoyed, how little had they lived! Condemned to a mysterious fate by the wholesale destinies of the world, they seemed born but to toil and to spin thoughts for the common crowd--and, their task performed in drudgery and in darkness, to die when no further service could be wrung from their exhaustion. Names had they been in life, and as names they lived for ever, in life as in death, airy and unsubstantial phantoms. It pleased Maltravers at this time to turn a curious eye towards the obscure and half-extinct philosophies of the ancient world. He compared the Stoics with the Epicureans--those Epicureans who had given their own version to the simple and abstemious utilitarianism of their master. He asked which was the wiser, to sharpen pain or to deaden pleasure--to bear all or to enjoy all; and, by a natural reaction which often happens to us in life, this man, hitherto so earnest, active-spirited, and resolved on great things, began to yearn for the drowsy pleasures of indolence. The garden grew more tempting than the porch. He seriously revolved the old alternative of the Grecian demi-god--might it not be wiser to abandon the grave pursuits to which he had been addicted, to dethrone the august but severe ideal in his heart, to cultivate the light loves and voluptuous trifles of the herd, and to plant the brief space of youth yet left to him with the myrtle and the rose? As water flows over water, so new schemes rolled upon new--sweeping away every momentary impression, and leaving the surface facile equally to receive and to forget. Such is the common state with men of imagination in those crises of life, when some great revolution of designs and hopes unsettles elements too susceptible of every changing wind. And thus the weak are destroyed, while the strong relapse, after terrible but unknown convulsions, into that solemn harmony and order from which destiny and God draw their uses to mankind.

It was from this irresolute contest between antagonist principles that Maltravers was aroused by the following letter from Florence Lascelles:

"For three days and three sleepless nights I have debated with myself whether or not I ought to address you. Oh, Ernest, were I what I was,

in health, in pride, I might fear that, generous as you are, you would misconstrue my appeal; but that is now impossible. Our union never can take place, and my hopes bound themselves to one sweet and melancholy hope, that you will remove from my last hours the cold and dark shadow of your resentment. We have both been cruelly deceived and betrayed. Three days ago I discovered the perfidy that has been practised against us. And then, ah! then, with all the weak human anguish of discovering it too late (/your curse is fulfilled/, Ernest!), I had at least one moment of proud, of exquisite rapture. Ernest Maltravers, the hero of my dreams, stood pure and lofty as of old--a thing it was not unworthy to love, to mourn, to die for. A letter in your handwriting had been shown to me, garbled and altered, as it seems--but I detected not the imposture--it was yourself, yourself alone, brought in false and horrible witness against yourself! And could you think that any other evidence, the words, the oaths of others, would have convicted you in my eyes? There you wronged me. But I deserved it--I had bound myself to secrecy--the seal is taken from my lips in order to be set upon my tomb. Ernest, beloved Ernest--beloved till the last breath is extinct--till the last throb of this heart is stilled--write me one word of comfort and of pardon. You will believe what I have imperfectly written, for you ever trusted my faith, if you have blamed my faults. I am now comparatively happy--a word from you will, make me blest. And Fate has, perhaps, been more merciful to both, than in our shortsighted and querulous human vision, we might, perhaps, believe; for now that the frame is brought low--and in the solitude of my chamber I can duly and humbly commune with mine own heart, I see the aspect of those faults which I once mistook for virtues--and feel that, had we been united, I, loving you ever, might not have constituted your happiness, and so have known the misery of losing your affection. May He who formed you for glorious and yet all unaccomplished purposes strengthen you, when these eyes can no longer sparkle at your triumphs, or weep at your lightest sorrow. You will go on in your broad and luminous career--a few years, and my remembrance will have left but the vestige of a dream behind. But, but--I can write no more. God bless you!"

CHAPTER IV.

"Oh, stop this headlong current of your goodness;
It comes too fast upon a feeble soul."

DRYDEN: /Sebastian and Doras/.

THE smooth physician had paid his evening visit; Lord Saxingham had gone

to a cabinet dinner, for Life must ever walk side by side with Death: and Lady Florence Lascelles was alone. It was a room adjoining her sleeping-apartment--a room in which, in the palmy days of the brilliant and wayward heiress, she had loved to display her fanciful and peculiar taste. There had she been accustomed to muse, to write, to study--there had she first been dazzled by the novel glow of Ernest's undiurnal and stately thoughts--there had she first conceived the romance of girlhood, which had led her to confer with him, unknown--there had she first confessed to herself that fancy had begotten love--there had she gone through love's short and exhausting process of lone emotion;--the doubt, the hope, the ecstasy; the reverse, the terror; the inanimate despondency, the agonised despair! And there now, sadly and patiently, she awaited the gradual march of inevitable decay. And books and pictures, and musical instruments, and marble busts, half shadowed by classic draperies--and all the delicate elegancies of womanly refinement--still invested the chamber with a grace as cheerful as if youth and beauty were to be the occupants for ever--and the dark and noisome vault were not the only lasting residence for the things of clay.

Florence Lascelles was dying; but not indeed wholly of that common, if mystic malady, a broken heart. Her health, always delicate, because always preyed upon by a nervous, irritable, and feverish spirit, had been gradually and invisibly undermined, even before Ernest confessed his love. In the singular lustre of those large-pupilled eyes--in the luxuriant transparency of that glorious bloom,--the experienced might long since have traced the seeds which cradled death. In the night when her restless and maddened heart so imprudently drove her forth to forestall the communication of Lumley (whom she had sent to Maltravers, she scarce knew for what object, or with what hope), in that night she was already in a high state of fever. The rain and the chill struck the growing disease within--her excitement gave it food and fire--delirium succeeded; and in that most fearful and fatal of all medical errors, which robs the frame, when it most needs strength, of the very principle of life, they had bled her into a temporary calm, and into permanent and incurable weakness. Consumption seized its victim. The physicians who attended her were the most renowned in London, and Lord Saxingham was firmly persuaded that there was no danger. It was not in his nature to think that death would take so great a liberty with Lady Florence Lascelles, when there were so many poor people in the world whom there would be no impropriety in removing from it. But Florence knew her danger, and her high spirit did not quail before it. Yet, when Cesarini, stung beyond endurance by the horrors of his remorse, wrote and confessed all his own share of the fatal treason, though, faithful

to his promise, he concealed that of his accomplice,--then, ah then, she did indeed repine at her doom, and long to look once more with the eyes of love and joy upon the face of the beautiful world. But the illness of the body usually brings out a latent power and philosophy of the soul, which health never knows; and God has mercifully ordained it as the customary lot of nature, that in proportion as we decline into the grave, the sloping path is made smooth and easy to our feet; and every day, as the films of clay are removed from our eyes, Death loses the false aspect of the spectre, and we fall at last into its arms as a wearied child upon the bosom of its mother.

It was with a heavy heart that Lady Florence listened to the monotonous clicking of the clock that announced the departure of moments few, yet not precious, still spared to her. Her face buried in her hands, she bent over the small table beside her sofa, and indulged her melancholy thoughts. Bowed was the haughty crest, unnerved the elastic shape that had once seemed born for majesty and command--no friends were near, for Florence had never made friends. Solitary had been her youth, and solitary were her dying hours.

As she thus sat and mused, a sound of carriage wheels in the street below slightly shook the room--it ceased--the carriage stopped at the door. Florence looked up. "No, no, it cannot be," she muttered; yet, while she spoke, a faint flush passed over her sunken and faded cheek, and the bosom heaved beneath the robe, "a world too wide for its shrunk" proportions. There was a silence, which to her seemed interminable, and she turned away with a deep sigh, and a chill sinking of the heart.

At this time her woman entered with a meaning and flurried look.

"I beg your pardon, my lady--but--"

"But what?"

"Mr. Maltravers has called, and asked for your ladyship--so, my lady, Mr. Burton sent for me, and I said, my lady is too unwell to see any one; but Mr. Maltravers would not be denied; and he is waiting in my lord's library, and insisted on my coming up and 'nouncing him, my lady."

Now Mrs. Shinfield's words were not euphonistic, nor her voice mellifluous; but never had eloquence seemed to Florence so effective. Youth, love, beauty, all rushed back upon her at once, brightening her eyes, her cheek, and filling up ruin with sudden and deceitful light.

"Well," she said, after a pause, "let Mr. Maltravers come up."

"Come up, my lady? Bless me!--let me just 'range your hair--your ladyship is really in such dish-a-bill."

"Best as it is, Shinfield--he will excuse all.--Go."

Mrs. Shinfield shrugged her shoulders, and departed. A few moments more--a step on the stairs, the creaking of the door,--and Maltravers and Florence were again alone. He stood motionless on the threshold. She had involuntarily risen, and so they stood opposite to each other, and the lamp fell full upon her face. Oh, Heaven! when did that sight cease to haunt the heart of Maltravers! When shall that altered aspect not pass as a ghost before his eyes!--there it is, faithful and reproachful alike in solitude and in crowds--it is seen in the glare of noon--it passes dim and wan at night beneath the stars and the earth--it looked into his heart and left its likeness there for ever and for ever! Those cheeks, once so beautifully rounded, now sunken into lines and hollows--the livid darkness beneath the eyes--the whitened lip--the sharp, anxious, worn expression, which had replaced that glorious and beaming regard from which all the life of genius, all the sweet pride of womanhood had glowed forth, and in which not only the intelligence, but the eternity of the soul, seemed visibly wrought.

There he stood, aghast and appalled. At length a low groan broke from his lips--he rushed forward, sank on his knees beside her, and clasping both her hands, sobbed aloud as he covered them with kisses. All the iron of his strong nature was broken down, and his emotions, long silenced, and now uncontrollable and resistless, were something terrible to behold!

"Do not--do not weep so," murmured Lady Florence, frightened by his vehemence; "I am sadly changed, but the fault is mine--Ernest, it is mine; best, kindest, gentlest, how could I have been so mad! And you forgive me? I am yours again--a little while yours. Ah, do not grieve while I am so blessed!"

As she spoke, her tears--tears from a source how different from that whence broke the scorching and intolerable agony of his own! fell soft upon his bended head, and the hands that still convulsively strained hers. Maltravers looked wildly up into her countenance, and shuddered as he saw her attempt to smile. He rose abruptly, threw himself into a chair, and covered his face. He was seeking by a violent effort to

master himself, and it was only by the heaving of his chest, and now and then a gasp as for breath, that he betrayed the stormy struggle within.

Florence gazed at him a moment in bitter, in almost selfish penitence.

"And this was the man who seemed to me so callous to the softer sympathies--this was the heart I trampled upon--this the nature I distrusted!"

She came near him, trembling and with feeble steps--she laid her hand upon his shoulder, and the fondness of love came over her, and she wound her arms around him.

"It is our fate--it is my fate," said Maltravers at last, awaking as from a hideous dream, and in a hollow but calm voice--"we are the things of destiny, and the wheel has crushed us. It is an awful state of being this human life!--What is wisdom--virtue--faith to men--piety to Heaven--all the nurture we bestow on ourselves--all our desire to win a loftier sphere, when we are thus the tools of the merest chance--the victims of the pettiest villainy; and our very existence--our very senses almost, at the mercy of every traitor and every fool!"

There was something in Ernest's voice, as well as in his reflections, which appeared so unnaturally calm and deep that it startled Florence, with a fear more acute than his previous violence had done. He rose, and muttering to himself, walked to and fro, as if insensible of her presence--in fact he was so. At length he stopped short, and fixing his eyes upon Lady Florence, said in a whispered and thrilling tone:

"Now, then, the name of our undoer?"

"No, Ernest, no--never, unless you promise me to forego the purpose which I read in your eyes. He has confessed--he is penitent--I have forgiven him--you will do so too!"

"His name!" repeated Maltravers, and his face, before very flushed, was unnaturally pale.

"Forgive him--promise me."

"His name, I say,--his name?"

"Is this kind?--you terrify me--you will kill me!" faltered out Florence, and she sank on the sofa exhausted: her nerves, now so weakened, were perfectly unstrung by his vehemence, and she wrung her

hands and wept piteously.

"You will not tell me his name?" said Maltravers, softly. "Be it so. I will ask no more. I can discover it myself. Fate the Avenger will reveal it."

At the thought he grew more composed; and as Florence wept on, the unnatural concentration and fierceness of his mind again gave way, and, seating himself beside her, he uttered all that could soothe, and comfort, and console. And Florence was soon soothed! And there, while over their heads the grim skeleton was holding the funeral pall, they again exchanged their vows, and again, with feelings fonder than of old, spoke of love.

CHAPTER V.

"Erichtho, then,
Breathes her dire murmurs, which enforce him bear
Her baneful secrets to the spirits of horror."--MARLOWE.

WITH a heavy step Maltravers ascended the stairs of his lonely house that night, and heavily, with a suppressed groan, did he sink upon the first chair that proffered rest.

It was intensely cold. During his long interview with Lady Florence, his servant had taken the precaution to go to Seamore Place, and make some hasty preparations for the owner's return. But the bedroom looked comfortless and bare, the curtains were taken down, the carpets were taken up (a single man's housekeeper is wonderfully provident in these matters; the moment his back is turned, she bustles, she displaces, she exults; "things can be put a little to rights!"). Even the fire would not burn clear, but gleamed sullen and fitful from the smothering fuel. It was a large chamber, and the lights imperfectly filled it. On the table lay parliamentary papers, and pamphlets, and bills and presentation-books from younger authors--evidences of the teeming business of that restless machine the world. But of all this Maltravers was not sensible: the winter frost numbed not his feverish veins. His servant, who loved him, as all who saw much of Maltravers did, fidgeted anxiously about the room, and plied the sullen fire, and laid out the comfortable dressing-robe, and placed wine on the table, and asked questions which were not answered, and pressed service which was not heeded. The little wheels of life go on, even when the great wheel is

paralysed or broken. Maltravers was, if I may so express it, in a kind of mental trance. His emotions had left him thoroughly exhausted. He felt that torpor which succeeds and is again the precursor of great woe. At length he was alone, and the solitude half unconsciously restored him to the sense of his heavy misery. For it may be observed, that when misfortune has stricken us home, the presence of any one seems to interfere between the memory and the heart. Withdraw the intruder, and the lifted hammer falls at once upon the anvil! He rose as the door closed on his attendant--rose with a start, and pushed the hat from his gathered brows. He walked for some moments to and fro, and the air of the room, freezing as it was, oppressed him.

There are times when the arrow quivers within us--in which all space seems too confined. Like the wounded hart, we could fly on for ever; there is a vague desire of escape--a yearning, almost insane, to get out from our own selves: the soul struggles to flee away, and take the wings of the morning.

Impatiently, at last, did Maltravers throw open his window; it communicated with a balcony, built out to command the wide view which, from a certain height, that part of the park affords. He stepped into the balcony and bared his breast to the keen air. The uncomfortable and icy heavens looked down upon the hoar-rime that gathered over the grass, and the ghostly boughs of the deathlike trees. All things in the world without brought the thought of the grave, and the pause of being, and the withering up of beauty, closer and closer to his soul. In the palpable and gripping winter, death itself seemed to wind around him its skeleton and joyless arms. And as thus he stood, and, wearied with contending against, passively yielded to, the bitter passions that wrung and gnawed his heart,--he heard not a sound at the door--nor the footsteps on the stairs--nor knew he that a visitor was in his room--till he felt a hand upon his shoulder, and turning round, he beheld the white and livid countenance of Castruccio Cesarini.

"It is a dreary night and a solemn hour, Maltravers," said the Italian, with a distorted smile--"a fitting night and time for my interview with you."

"Away!" said Maltravers, in an impatient tone. "I am not at leisure for these mock heroics."

"Ay, but you shall hear me to the end. I have watched your arrival--I have counted the hours in which you remained with her--I have followed you home. If you have human passions, humanity itself must be dried up

within you, and the wild beast in his cavern is not more fearful to encounter. Thus, then, I seek and brave you. Be still. Has Florence revealed to you the name of him who belied you, and who betrayed herself to the death?"

"Ha!" said Maltravers, growing very pale, and fixing his eyes on Cesarini, "you are not the man--my suspicions lighted elsewhere."

"I am the man. Do thy worst."

Scarce were the words uttered, when, with a fierce cry, Maltravers threw himself on the Italian;--he tore him from his footing--he grasped him in his arms as a child--he literally whirled him around and on high; and in that maddening paroxysm, it was, perhaps, but the balance of a feather, in the conflicting elements of revenge and reason, which withheld Maltravers from hurling the criminal from the fearful height on which they stood. The temptation passed--Cesarini leaned safe, unharmed, but half senseless with mingled rage and fear, against the wall.

He was alone--Maltravers had left him--had fled from himself--fled into the chamber--fled for refuge from human passions to the wing of the All-Seeing and All-Present. "Father," he groaned, sinking on his knees, "support me, save me: without Thee I am lost."

Slowly Cesarini recovered himself, and re-entered the apartment. A string in his brain was already loosened, and, sullen and ferocious, he returned again to goad the lion that had spared him. Maltravers had already risen from his brief prayer. With locked and rigid countenance, with arms folded on his breast, he stood confronting the Italian, who advanced towards him with a menacing brow and arm, but halted involuntarily at the sight of that commanding aspect.

"Well, then," said Maltravers at last, with a tone preternaturally calm and low, "you then are the man. Speak on--what arts did you employ?"

"Your own letter. When, many months ago, I wrote to tell you of the hopes it was mine to conceive, and to ask your opinion of her I loved, how did you answer me? With doubts, with depreciation, with covert and polished scorn, of the very woman whom, with a deliberate treachery, you afterwards wrested from my worshipping and adoring love. That letter I garbled. I made the doubts you expressed of my happiness seem doubts of your own. I changed the dates--I made the letter itself appear written, not on your first acquaintance with her, but subsequent to your plighted and accepted vows. Your own handwriting convicted you of mean

suspicious and of sordid motives. These were my arts."

"They were most noble. Do you abide by them--or repent?"

"For what I have done to /thee/ I have no repentance. Nay, I regard thee still as the aggressor. Thou hast robbed me of her who was all the world to me--and, be thine excuses what they may, I hate thee with a hate that cannot slumber--that abjures the abject name of remorse! I exult in the very agonies thou endurest. But for her--the stricken--the dying! O God, O God! The blow falls upon mine own head!"

"Dying!" said Maltravers, slowly and with a shudder. "No, no--not dying--or what art thou? Her murderer! And what must I be? Her avenger!"

Overpowered with his own passions, Cesarini sank down and covered his face with his clasped hands. Maltravers stalked gloomily to and fro the apartment. There was silence for some moments.

At length Maltravers paused opposite Cesarini and thus addressed him:

"You have come hither not so much to confess the basest crime of which man can be guilty, as to gloat over my anguish and to brave me to revenge my wrongs. Go, man, go--for the present you are safe. While she lives, my life is not mine to hazard--if she recover, I can pity you and forgive. To me your offence, foul though it be, sinks below contempt itself. It is the consequences of that crime as they relate to--to--that noble and suffering woman, which can alone raise the despicable into the tragic and make your life a worthy and a necessary offering--not to revenge, but justice--life for life--victim for victim! 'Tis the old law--'tis a righteous one."

"You shall not, with your accursed coldness, thus dispose of me as you will, and arrogate the option to smite or save! No," continued Cesarini, stamping his foot--"no; far from seeking forbearance at your hands--I dare and defy you! You think I have injured you--I, on the other hand, consider that the wrong has come from yourself. But for you, she might have loved me--have been mine. Let that pass. But for you, at least, it is certain that I should neither have sullied my soul with a vile sin, nor brought the brightest of human beings to the grave. If she dies, the murder may be mine, but you were the cause--the devil that tempted to the offence. I defy and spit upon you--I have no softness left in me--my veins are fire--my heart thirsts for blood. You--you--have still the privilege to see--to bless--to tend her:--and

I--I, who loved her so--who could have kissed the earth she trod on--I--well, well, no matter--I hate you--I insult you--I call you villain and dastard--I throw myself on the laws of honour, and I demand that conflict you defer or deny!"

"Home, doter--home--fall on thy knees, and pray to Heaven for pardon--make up thy dread account--repine not at the days yet thine to wash the black spot from thy soul. For, while I speak, I foresee too well that her days are numbered, and with her thread of life is entwined thine own. Within twelve hours from her last moment, we shall meet again: but now I am as ice and stone,--thou canst not move me. Her closing life shall not be darkened by the aspect of blood--by the thought of the sacrifice it demands. Begone, or menials shall cast thee from my door: those lips are too base to breathe the same air as honest men. Begone, I say, begone!"

Though scarce a muscle moved in the lofty countenance of Maltravers--though no frown darkened the majestic brow--though no fire broke from the steadfast and scornful eye--there was a kingly authority in the aspect, in the extended arm, the stately crest, and a power in the swell of the stern voice, which awed and quelled the unhappy being whose own passions exhausted and unmanned him. He strove to fling back scorn to scorn, but his lips trembled, and his voice died in hollow murmurs within his breast. Maltravers regarded him with a crushing and intense disdain. The Italian with shame and wrath wrestled against himself, but in vain: the cold eye that was fixed upon him was as a spell, which the fiend within him could not rebel against or resist. Mechanically he moved to the door,--then turning round, he shook his clenched hand at Maltravers, and, with a wild, maniacal laugh, rushed from the apartment.

CHAPTER VI.

"On some fond breast the parting soul relies."--GRAY.

NOT a day passed in which Maltravers was absent from the side of Florence. He came early, he went late. He subsided into his former character of an accepted suitor, without a word of explanation with Lord Saxingham. That task was left to Florence. She doubtless performed it well, for his lordship seemed satisfied though grave, and, almost for the first time in his life, sad. Maltravers never reverted to the cause of their unhappy dissension. Nor from that night did he once give way

to whatever might be his more agonised and fierce emotions--he never affected to reproach himself--he never bewailed with a vain despair their approaching separation. Whatever it cost him, he stood collected and stoical in the intense power of his self control. He had but one object, one desire, one hope--to save the last hours of Florence Lascelles from every pang--to brighten and smooth the passage across the Solemn Bridge. His forethought, his presence of mind, his care, his tenderness, never forsook him for an instant: they went beyond the attributes of men, they went into all the fine, the indescribable minutiae by which woman makes herself, "in pain and anguish," the "ministering angel." It was as if he had nerved and braced his whole nature to one duty--as if that duty were more felt than affection itself--as if he were resolved that Florence should not remember that /she had no mother/!

And, oh, then, how Florence loved him! how far more luxurious, in its grateful and clinging fondness, was that love, than the wild and jealous fire of their earlier connection! Her own character, as is often the case in lingering illness, became incalculably more gentle and softened down, as the shadows closed around it. She loved to make him read and talk to her--and her ancient poetry of thought now grew mellowed, as it were, into religion, which is indeed poetry with a stronger wing. . . . There was a world beyond the grave--there was life out of the chrysalis sleep of death--they would yet be united. And Maltravers, who was a solemn and intense believer in the GREAT HOPE, did not neglect the purest and highest of all the fountains of solace.

Often in that quiet room, in that gorgeous mansion, which had been the scene of all vain or worldly schemes--of flirtations and feastings, and political meetings and cabinet dinners, and all the bubbles of the passing wave--often there did these persons, whose position to each other had been so suddenly and so strangely changed--converse on those matters--daring and divine--which "make the bridal of the earth and sky."

"How fortunate am I," said Florence, one day, "that my choice fell on one who thinks as you do! How your words elevate and exalt me!--yet once I never dreamt of asking your creed on these questions. It is in sorrow or sickness that we learn why Faith was given as a soother to man--Faith, which is Hope with a holier name--hope that knows neither deceit nor death. Ah, how wisely do you speak of the /philosophy/ of belief! It is, indeed, the telescope through which the stars grow large upon our gaze. And to you, Ernest, my beloved--comprehended and known at last--to you I leave, when I am gone, that monitor--that friend; you

will know yourself what you teach to me. And when you look not on the heaven alone but in all space--on all the illimitable creation, you will know that I am there! For the home of a spirit is wherever spreads the Universal Presence of God. And to what numerous stages of being, what paths, what duties, what active and glorious tasks in other worlds may we not be reserved--perhaps to know and share them together, and mount age after age higher in the scale of being. For surely in heaven there is no pause or torpor--we do not lie down in calm and unimprovable repose. Movement and progress will remain the law and condition of existence. And there will be efforts and duties for us above as there have been below."

It was in this theory, which Maltravers shared, that the character of Florence, her overflowing life and activity of thought--her aspirations, her ambition, were still displayed. It was not so much to the calm and rest of the grave that she extended her unreluctant gaze, as to the light and glory of a renewed and progressive existence.

It was while thus they sat, the low voice of Ernest, tranquil yet half trembling with the emotions he sought to restrain--sometimes sobering, sometimes yet more elevating, the thoughts of Florence, that Lord Vargrave was announced, and Lumley Ferrers, who had now succeeded to that title, entered the room. It was the first time that Florence had seen him since the death of his uncle--the first time Maltravers had seen him since the evening so fatal to Florence. Both started--Maltravers rose and walked to the window. Lord Vargrave took the hand of his cousin and pressed it to his lips in silence, while his looks betokened feelings that for once were genuine.

"You see, Lumley, I am resigned," said Florence, with a sweet smile. "I am resigned and happy."

Lumley glanced at Maltravers, and met a cold, scrutinising, piercing eye, from which he shrank with some confusion. He recovered himself in an instant.

"I am rejoiced, my cousin, I /am/ rejoiced," said he, very earnestly, "to see Maltravers here again. Let us now hope the best."

Maltravers walked deliberately up to Lumley. "Will you take my hand /now/, too?" said he, with deep meaning in his tone.

"More willingly than ever," said Lumley; and he did not shrink as he said it.

"I am satisfied," replied Maltravers, after a pause, and in a voice that expressed more than his words.

There is in some natures so great a hoard of generosity, that it often dulls their acuteness. Maltravers could not believe that frankness could be wholly a mask--it was an hypocrisy he knew not of. He himself was not incapable, had circumstances so urged him, of great crimes; nay, the design of one crime lay at that moment deadly and dark within his heart, for he had some passions which in so resolute a character could produce, should the wind waken them into storm, dire and terrible effects. Even at the age of thirty, it was yet uncertain whether Ernest Maltravers might become an exemplary or an evil man. But he could sooner have strangled a foe than taken the hand of a man whom he had once betrayed.

"I love to think you friends," said Florence, gazing at them affectionately, "and to you, at least, Lumley, such friendship should be a blessing. I always loved you much and dearly, Lumley--loved you as a brother, though our characters often jarred."

Lumley winced. "For Heaven's sake," he cried, "do not speak thus tenderly to me--I cannot bear it, and look on you and think--"

"That I am dying. Kind words become us best when our words are approaching to the last. But enough of this--I grieved for your loss."

"My poor uncle!" said Lumley, eagerly changing the conversation--"the shock was sudden; and melancholy duties have absorbed me so till this day, that I could not come even to you. It soothed me, however, to learn, in answer to my daily inquiries, that Ernest was here. For my part," he added with a faint smile, "I have had duties as well as honours devolved on me. I am left guardian to an heiress, and betrothed to a child."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, my poor uncle was so fondly attached to his wife's daughter, that he has left her the bulk of his property: a very small estate--not £2000 a year--goes with the title (a new title, too, which requires twice as much to carry it off and make its pinchbeck pass for gold). In order, however, to serve a double purpose, secure to his /protegee/ his own beloved peerage, and atone to his nephew for the loss of wealth--he has left it a last request, that I should marry the young lady over whom I

am appointed guardian, when she is eighteen--alas! I shall then be at the other side of forty! If she does not take to so mature a bridegroom, she loses thirty--only thirty of the L200,000 settled upon her, which goes to me as a sugar-plum after the nauseous draught of the young lady's 'No.' Now, you know all. His widow, really an exemplary young woman, has a jointure of L1500 a year, and the villa. It is not much, but she is contented."

The lightness of the new peer's tone revolted Maltravers, and he turned impatiently away. But Lord Vargrave, resolving not to suffer the conversation to glide back to sorrowful subjects, which he always hated, turned round to Ernest, and said, "Well, my dear Ernest, I see by the papers that you are to have N-----'s late appointment--it is a very rising office. I congratulate you."

"I have refused," said Maltravers, drily.

"Bless me!--indeed!--why?"

Ernest bit his lip, and frowned; but his glance wandering unconsciously at Florence, Lumley thought he detected the true reply to his question, and became mute.

The conversation was afterwards embarrassed and broken up; Lumley went away as soon as he could, and Lady Florence that night had a severe fit, and could not leave her bed the next day. That confinement she had struggled against to the last; and now, day by day, it grew more frequent and inevitable. The steps of Death became accelerated. And Lord Saxingham, wakened at last to the mournful truth, took his place by his daughter's side, and forgot that he was a cabinet minister.

CHAPTER VII.

"Away, my friends, why take such pains to know
What some brave marble soon in church shall show?"

CRABBE.

IT may seem strange, but Maltravers had never loved Lady Florence as he did now. Was it the perversity of human nature that makes the things of mortality dearer to us in proportion as they fade from our hopes, like birds whose hues are only unfolded when they take wing and vanish amidst the skies; or was it that he had ever doted more on loveliness of mind

than that of form, and the first bloomed out the more, the more the last decayed? A thing to protect, to soothe, to shelter--oh, how dear it is to the pride of man! The haughty woman who can stand alone and requires no leaning-place in our heart, loses the spell of her sex.

I pass over those stages of decline gratuitously painful to record; and which in this case mine cannot be the cold and technical hand to trace. At length came that time when physicians could define within a few days the final hour of release. And latterly the mocking pruderies of rank had been laid aside, and Maltravers had, for some hours at least in the day, taken his watch beside the couch to which the admired and brilliant Florence Lascelles was now almost constantly reduced. But her high and heroic spirit was with her to the last. To the last she could endure love and hope. One day when Maltravers left his post, she besought him, with more solemnity than usual, to return that evening. She fixed the precise hour, and she sighed heavily when he departed. Maltravers paused in the hall to speak to the physician, who was just quitting Lord Saxingham's library. Ernest spoke to him for some moments calmly, and when he heard the fiat, he betrayed no other emotion than a slight quiver of the lip! "I must not weep for her yet," he muttered, as he turned from the door. He went thence to the house of a gentleman of his own age, with whom he had formed that kind of acquaintance which never amounts to familiar friendship, but rests upon mutual respect, and is often more ready than professed friendship itself to confer mutual service. Colonel Danvers was a man who usually sat next to Maltravers in parliament; they voted together, and thought alike on principles both of politics and honour: they would have lent thousands to each other without bond or memorandum; and neither ever wanted a warm and indignant advocate when he was abused behind his back in the presence of the other. Yet their tastes and ordinary habits were not congenial; and when they met in the streets, they never said, as they would to companions they esteemed less, "Let us spend the day together!" Such forms of acquaintance are not uncommon among honourable men who have already formed habits and pursuits of their own, which they cannot surrender even to friendship. Colonel Danvers was not at home--they believed he was at his club, of which Ernest also was a member. Thither Maltravers bent his way. On arriving, he found that Danvers had been at the club an hour ago, and left word that he should shortly return. Maltravers entered and quietly sat down. The room was full of its daily loungers; but he did not shrink from, he did not even heed, the crowd. He felt not the desire of solitude--there was solitude enough within him. Several distinguished public men were there, grouped around the fire, and many of the hangers-on and satellites of political life; they were talking with eagerness and animation, for it was a season of great

party conflict. Strange as it may seem, though Maltravers was then scarcely sensible of their conversation, it all came back vividly and faithfully on him afterwards, in the first hours of reflection on his own future plans, and served to deepen and consolidate his disgust of the world. They were discussing the character of a great statesman whom, warmed but by the loftiest and purest motives, they were unable to understand. Their gross suspicions, their coarse jealousies, their calculations of patriotism by place, all that strips the varnish from the face of that fair harlot--Political Ambition--sank like caustic into his spirit. A gentleman seeing him sit silent, with his hat over his moody brows, civilly extended to him the paper he was reading.

"It is the second edition; you will find the last French express."

"Thank you," said Maltravers; and the civil man started as he heard the brief answer; there was something so inexpressibly prostrate and broken-spirited in the voice that uttered it.

Maltravers's eyes fell mechanically on the columns, and caught his own name. That work which, in the fair retirement of Temple Grove it had so pleased him to compose--in every page and every thought of which Florence had been consulted--which was so inseparably associated with her image, and glorified by the light of her kindred genius--was just published. It had been completed long since; but the publisher had, for some excellent reason of the craft, hitherto delayed its appearance. Maltravers knew nothing of its publication; he had meant, after his return to town, to have sent to forbid its appearance; but his thoughts of late had crushed everything else out of his memory--he had forgotten its existence. And now, in all the pomp and parade of authorship, it was sent into the world! /Now/, /now/, when it was like an indecent mockery of the Bed of Death--a sacrilege, an impiety! There is a terrible disconnection between the author and the man---the author's life and the man's life--the eras of visible triumph may be those of the most intolerable, though unrevealed and unconjectured anguish. The book that delighted us to compose may first appear in the hour when all things under the sun are joyless. This had been Ernest Maltravers's most favoured work. It had been conceived in a happy hour of great ambition--it had been executed with that desire of truth, which, in the mind of genius, becomes ART. How little in the solitary hours stolen from sleep had he thought of self, and that labourer's hire called "fame!" how had he dreamt that he was promulgating secrets to make his kind better, and wiser, and truer to the great aims of life! How had Florence, and Florence alone, understood the beatings of his heart in every page! /And now!--it so chanced that the work was reviewed in the

paper he read--it was not only a hostile criticism, it was a personally abusive diatribe, a virulent invective. All the motives that can darken or defile were ascribed to him. All the mean spite of some mean mind was sputtered forth. Had the writer known the awful blow that awaited Maltravers at that time, it is not in man's nature but that he would have shrunk from this petty gall upon the wrung withers; but, as I have said, there is a terrible disconnection between the author and the man. The first is always at our mercy--of the last we know nothing. At such an hour Maltravers could feel none of the contempt that proud--none of the wrath that vain, minds feel at these stings. He could feel nothing but an undefined abhorrence of the world, and of the aims and objects he had pursued so long. Yet that even he did not then feel. He was in a dream; but as men remember dreams, so when he awoke did he loathe his own former aspirations, and sicken at their base rewards. It was the first time since his first year of inexperienced authorship that abuse had had the power even to vex him for a moment. But here, when the cup was already full, was the drop that overflowed. The great column of his past world was gone, and all else seemed crumbling away.

At length Colonel Danvers entered. Maltravers drew him aside, and they left the club.

"Danvers," said the latter, "the time in which I told you I should need your services is near at hand; let me see you, if possible, to-night."

"Certainly--I shall be, at the House till eleven. After that hour you will find me at home."

"I thank you."

"Cannot this matter be arranged amicably?"

"No, it is a quarrel of life and death."

"Yet the world is really growing too enlightened for these old mimicries of single combat."

"There are some cases in which human nature and its deep wrongs will be ever stronger than the world and its philosophy. Duels and wars belong to the same principle; both are sinful on light grounds and poor pretexts. But it is not sinful for a soldier to defend his country from invasion, nor for man, with a man's heart, to vindicate truth and honour with his life. The robber that asks me for money I am allowed to shoot. Is the robber that tears from me treasures never to be replaced, to go

free? These are the inconsistencies of a pseudo-ethics, which, as long as we are made of flesh and blood, we can never subscribe to."

"Yet the ancients," said Danvers, with a smile, "were as passionate as ourselves, and they dispensed with duels."

"Yes, because they resorted to assassination!" answered Maltravers, with a gloomy frown. "As in revolutions all law is suspended, so are there stormy events and mighty injuries in life which are as revolutions to individuals. Enough of this--it is no time to argue like the schoolmen. When we meet you shall know all, and you will judge like me. Good day!"

"What, are you going already? Maltravers, you look ill, your hand is feverish--you should take advice."

Maltravers smiled--but the smile was not like his own--shook his head, and strode rapidly away.

Three of the London clocks, one after the other, had told the hour of nine, as a tall and commanding figure passed up the street towards Saxingham House. Five doors before you reach that mansion there is a crossing, and at this spot stood a young man, in whose face youth itself looked sapless and blasted. It was then March;--the third of March; the weather was unusually severe and biting, even for that angry month. There had been snow in the morning, and it lay white and dreary in various ridges along the street. But the wind was not still in the keen but quiet sharpness of frost; on the contrary, it howled almost like a hurricane through the desolate thoroughfares, and the lamps flickered unsteadily in the turbulent gusts. Perhaps it was the blasts which increased the haggardness of aspect in the young man I have mentioned. His hair, which was much longer than is commonly worn, was tossed wildly from cheeks preternaturally shrunken, hollow, and livid: and the frail, thin form seemed scarcely able to support itself against the rush of the winds.

As the tall figure, which, in its masculine stature and proportions, and a peculiar and nameless grandeur of bearing, strongly contrasted that of the younger man, now came to the spot where the streets met, it paused abruptly.

"You are here once more, Castruccio Cesarini; it is well!" said the low but ringing voice of Ernest Maltravers. "This, I believe, will not be our last interview to-night."

"I ask you, sir," said Cesarini, in a tone in which pride struggled with emotion--"I ask you to tell me how she is; whether you know--I cannot speak--"

"Your work is nearly done," answered Maltravers. "A few hours more, and your victim, for she is yours, will bear her tale to the Great Judgment Seat. Murderer as you are, tremble, for your own hour approaches!"

"She dies and I cannot see her! and you are permitted that last glimpse of human perfectness; you who never loved her as I did; you--hated and detested! you--"

Cesarini paused, and his voice died away, choked in his own convulsive gaspings for breath.

Maltravers looked at him from the height of his erect and lofty form, with a merciless eye; for in this one quarter, Maltravers had shut out pity from his soul.

"Weak criminal!" said he, "hear me. You received at my hands forbearance, friendship, fostering and anxious care. When your own follies plunged you into penury, mine was the unseen hand that plucked you from famine, or the prison. I strove to redeem, and save, and raise you, and endow your miserable spirit with the thirst and the power of honour and independence. The agent of that wish was Florence Lascelles; you repaid us well! a base and fraudulent forgery, attaching meanness to me, fraught with agony and death to her. Your conscience at last smote you; you revealed to her your crime--one spark of manhood made you reveal it also to myself. Fresh as I was in that moment from the contemplations of the ruin you had made, I curbed the impulse that would have crushed the life from your bosom. I told you to live on while life was left to her. If she recovered, I could forgive; if she died, I must avenge. We entered into that solemn compact, and in a few hours the bond will need the seal: it is the blood of one of us. Castruccio Cesarini, there is justice in Heaven. Deceive yourself not; you will fall by my hand. When the hour comes, you will hear from me. Let me pass--I have no more now to say."

Every syllable of this speech was uttered with that thrilling distinctness which seems as if the depth of the heart spoke in the voice. But Cesarini did not appear to understand its import. He seized Maltravers by the arm, and looked in his face with a wild and menacing glare.

"Did you tell me she was dying?" he said. "I ask you that question: why do you not answer me? Oh, by the way, you threaten me with your vengeance. Know you not that I long to meet you front to front, and to the death? Did I not tell you so--did I not try to move your slow blood--to insult you into a conflict in which I should have gloried? Yet then you were marble."

"Because /my/ wrong I could forgive, and /hers/--there was then a hope that hers might not need the atonement. Away!"

Maltravers shook the hold of the Italian from his arm, and passed on. A wild, sharp yell of despair rang after him, and echoed in his ear as he strode the long, dim, solitary stairs that led to the death-bed of Florence Lascelles.

Maltravers entered the room adjoining that which contained the sufferer--the same room, still gay and cheerful, in which had been his first interview with Florence since their reconciliation.

Here he found the physician dozing in a /fauteuil/. Lady Florence had fallen asleep during the last two or three hours. Lord Saxingham was in his own apartment, deeply and noisily affected; for it was not thought that Florence could survive the night.

Maltravers sat himself quietly down. Before him, on a table, lay several manuscript books, gaily and gorgeously bound; he mechanically opened them. Florence's fair, noble Italian characters met his eye in every page. Her rich and active mind, her love for poetry, her thirst for knowledge, her indulgence of deep thought, spoke from those pages like the ghosts of herself. Often, underscored with the marks of her approbation, he chanced upon extracts from his own works, sometimes upon reflections by the writer herself, not inferior in truth and depth to his own; snatches of wild verse never completed, but of a power and energy beyond the delicate grace of lady-poets; brief, vigorous criticisms on books, above the common holiday studies of the sex; indignant and sarcastic aphorisms on the real world, with high and sad bursts of feeling upon the ideal one; all chequering and enriching the various volumes, told of the rare gifts with which this singular girl was endowed--a herbal, as it were, of withered blossoms that might have borne Hesperian fruits. And sometimes in these outpourings of the full mind and laden heart were allusions to himself, so tender and so touching--the pencilled outline of his features, traced by memory in a thousand aspects--the reference to former interviews and conversations--the dates and hours marked with a woman's minute and

treasuring care!--all these tokens of genius and of love spoke to him with a voice that said, "And this creature is lost to you, forever: you never appreciated her till the time for her departure was irrevocably fixed!"

Maltravers uttered a deep groan; all the past rushed over him. Her romantic passion for one yet unknown--her interest in his glory--her zeal for his life of life, his spotless and haughty name. It was as if with her, Fame and Ambition were dying also, and henceforth nothing but common clay and sordid motives were to be left on earth.

How sudden--how awfully sudden had been the blow! True, there had been an absence of some months in which the change had operated. But absence is a blank, a nonentity. He had left her in apparent health, in the time of prosperity and pride. He saw her again--stricken down in body and temper--chastened--humbled--dying. And this being, so bright and lofty, how had she loved him! Never had he been so loved, except in that morning dream, haunted by the vision of the lost and dim-remembered Alice. Never on earth could he be so loved again. The air and aspect of the whole chamber grew to him painful and oppressive. It was full of her--the owner! There the harp, which so well became her muse-like form that it was associated with her like a part of herself! There the pictures, fresh and glowing from her hand,-the grace--the harmony--the classic and simple taste everywhere displayed.

Rousseau has left to us an immortal portrait of the lover waiting for the first embraces of his mistress. But to wait with a pulse as feverish, a brain as dizzy, for her last look--to await the moment of despair, not rapture--to feel the slow and dull time as palpable a load upon the heart, yet to shrink from your own impatience, and wish that the agony of suspense might endure for ever--this, oh, this is a picture of intense passion--of flesh and blood reality--of the rare and solemn epochs of our mysterious life--which had been worthier the genius of that "Apostle of Affliction"!

At length the door opened; the favourite attendant of Florence looked in.

"Is Mr. Maltravers there? Oh, sir, my lady is awake and would see you."

Maltravers rose, but his feet were glued to the ground, his sinking heart stood still--it was a mortal terror that possessed him. With a deep sigh he shook off the numbing spell, and passed to the bedside of Florence.

She sat up, propped by pillows, and as he sank beside her, and clasped her wan, transparent hand, she looked at him with a smile of pitying love.

"You have been very, very kind to me," she said, after a pause, and with a voice which had altered even since the last time he heard it. "You have made that part of life from which human nature shrinks with dread, the happiest and the brightest of all my short and vain existence. My own dear Ernest--Heaven reward you!"

A few grateful tears dropped from her eyes, and they fell on the hand which she bent her lips to kiss.

"It was not here--nor amidst the streets and the noisy abodes of anxious, worldly men--nor was it in this harsh and dreary season of the year, that I could have wished to look my last on earth. Could I have seen the face of Nature--could I have watched once more with the summer sun amidst those gentle scenes we loved so well, Death would have had no difference from sleep. But what matters it? With you there are summer and Nature everywhere!"

Maltravers raised his face, and their eyes met in silence--it was a long, fixed gaze, which spoke more than all words could. Her head dropped on his shoulder, and there it lay, passive and motionless, for some moments. A soft step glided into the room--it was the unhappy father's. He came to the other side of his daughter, and sobbed convulsively.

She then raised herself, and even in the shades of death, a faint blush passed over her cheek.

"My good dear father, what comfort will it give you hereafter to think how fondly you spoiled your Florence!"

Lord Saxingham could not answer: he clasped her in his arms and wept over her. Then he broke away--looked on her with a shudder--

"O God!" he cried, "she is dead--she is dead!"

Maltravers started. The physician kindly approached, and, taking Lord Saxingham's hand, led him from the room--he went mute and obedient like a child.

But the struggle was not yet past. Florence once more opened her eyes, and Maltravers uttered a cry of joy. But along those eyes the film was darkening rapidly, as still through the mist and shadow they sought the beloved countenance which hung over her, as if to breathe life into waning life. Twice her lips moved, but her voice failed her; she shook her head sadly.

Maltravers hastily held to her mouth a cordial which lay ready on the table near her, but scarce had it moistened her lips, when her whole frame grew heavier and heavier, in his clasp. Her head once more sank upon his bosom--she thrice gasped wildly for breath--and at length, raising her hand on high, life struggled into its expiring ray.

"There!--above!--Ernest--that name--Ernest!"

Yes, that name was the last she uttered; she was evidently conscious of that thought, for a smile, as her voice again faltered--a smile sweet and serene--that smile never seen but on the faces of the dying and the dead--borrowed from a light that is not of this world--settled slowly on her brow, her lips, her whole countenance; still she breathed, but the breath grew fainter! at length, without murmur, sound, or struggle, it passed away--the head dropped from his bosom--the form fell from his arms--all was over!

CHAPTER VIII.

* * * * "Is this the promised end?"--/Lear/.

IT was two hours after that scene before Maltravers left the house. It was then just on the stroke of the first hour of morning. To him, while he walked through the streets, and the sharp winds howled on his path, it was as if a strange and wizard life had passed into and supported him--a sort of drowsy, dull existence. He was like a sleepwalker, unconscious of all around him; yet his steps went safe and free; and the one thought that possessed his being--into which all intellect seemed shrunk--the thought, not fiery nor vehement, but calm, stern, and solemn--the thought of revenge--seemed, as it were, grown his soul itself. He arrived at the door of Colonel Danvers, mounted the stairs, and as his friend advanced to meet him, said calmly, "Now, then, the hour has arrived."

"But what would you do now?"

"Come with me, and you shall learn."

"Very well, my carriage is below. Will you direct the servants?"

Maltravers nodded, gave his orders to the careless footman, and the two friends were soon driving through the less known and courtly regions of the giant city. It was then that Maltravers concisely stated to Danvers the fraud that had been practised by Cesarini.

"You will go with me now," concluded Maltravers, "to his house. To do him justice, he is no coward; he has not shrunk from giving me his address, nor will he shrink from the atonement I demand. I shall wait below while you arrange our meeting--at daybreak for to-morrow."

Danvers was astonished and even appalled by the discovery made to him. There was something so unusual and strange in the whole affair. But neither his experience, nor his principles of honour, could suggest any alternative to the plan proposed. For though not regarding the cause of quarrel in the same light as Maltravers, and putting aside all question as to the right of the latter to constitute himself the champion of the betrothed, or the avenger of the dead, it seemed clear to the soldier that a man whose confidential letter had been garbled by another for the purpose of slandering his truth and calumniating his name, had no option but contempt, or the sole retribution (wretched though it be) which the customs of the higher class permit to those who live within its pale. But contempt for a wrong that a sorrow so tragic had followed--was /that/ option in human philosophy?

The carriage stopped at a door in a narrow lane in an obscure suburb. Yet, dark as all the houses around were, lights were seen in the upper windows of Cesarini's residence, passing to and fro; and scarce had the servant's loud knock echoed through the dim thoroughfare, ere the door was opened. Danvers descended, and entered the passage--"Oh, sir, I am so glad you are come!" said an old woman, pale and trembling; "he do take on so!"

"There is no mistake," asked Danvers, halting; "an Italian gentleman named Cesarini lodges here?"

"Yes, sir, poor cretur--I sent for you to come to him--for says I to my boy, says I--"

"Whom do you take me for?"

"Why, la, sir, you be's the doctor, ben't you?"

Danvers made no reply; he had a mean opinion of the courage of one who could act dishonourably; he thought there was some design to cheat his friend out of his revenge; accordingly he ascended the stairs, motioning the woman to precede him.

He came back to the door of the carriage in a few minutes. "Let us go home, Maltravers," said he, "this man is not in a state to meet you."

"Ha!" cried Maltravers, frowning darkly, and all his long-smothered indignation rushing like fire through every vein of his body; "would he shrink from the atonement?" He pushed Danvers impatiently aside, leapt from the carriage, and rushed up-stairs.

Danvers followed.

Heated, wrought-up, furious, Ernest Maltravers burst into a small and squalid chamber; from the closed doors of which, through many chinks, had gleamed the light that told him Cesarini was within. And Cesarini's eyes, blazing with horrible fire, were the first object that met his gaze. Maltravers stood still, as if frozen into stone.

"Ha! ha!" laughed a shrill and shrieking voice, which contrasted dreadfully with the accents of the soft Tuscan, in which the wild words were strung--"who comes here with garments dyed in blood? You cannot accuse me--for my blow drew no blood, it went straight to the heart--it tore no flesh by the way; we Italians poison our victims! Where art thou--where art thou, Maltravers? I am ready. Coward, you do not come! Oh, yes, yes, here you are; the pistols--I will not fight so. I am a wild beast. Let us rend each other with our teeth and talons!"

Huddled up like a heap of confused and jointless limbs in the furthest corner of the room, lay the wretch, a raving maniac;--two men keeping their firm gripe on him, which, ever and anon, with the mighty strength of madness, he shook off, to fall back senseless and exhausted; his strained and bloodshot eyes starting from their sockets, the slaver gathering round his lips, his raven hair standing on end, his delicate and symmetrical features distorted into a hideous and Gorgon aspect. It was, indeed, an appalling and sublime spectacle, full of an awful moral, the meeting of the foes! Here stood Maltravers, strong beyond the common strength of men, in health, power, conscious superiority, premeditated vengeance--wise, gifted; all his faculties ripe, developed, at his command;--the complete and all-armed man, prepared for defence

and offence against every foe--a man who, once roused in a righteous quarrel, would not have quailed before an army; and there and thus was his dark and fierce purpose dashed from his soul, shivered into atoms at his feet. He felt the nothingness of man and man's wrath--in the presence of the madman on whose head the thunderbolt of a greater curse than human anger ever breathes had fallen. In his horrible affliction the Criminal triumphed over the Avenger!

"Yes! yes!" shouted Cesarini, again; "they tell me she is dying; but he is by her side;--pluck him thence--he shall not touch her hand--she shall not bless him--she is mine--if I killed her, I have saved her from him--she is mine in death. Let me in, I say,--I will come in,--I will, I will see her, and strangle him at her feet." With that, by a tremendous effort, he tore himself from the clutch of his holders, and with a sudden and exultant bound sprang across the room, and stood face to face with Maltravers. The proud brave than turned pale, and recoiled a step--"It is he! it is he!" shrieked the maniac, and he leaped like a tiger at the throat of his rival. Maltravers quickly seized his arm, and whirled him round. Cesarini fell heavily on the floor, mute, senseless, and in strong convulsions.

"Mysterious Providence!" murmured Maltravers, "thou hast justly rebuked the mortal for dreaming he might arrogate to himself thy privilege of vengeance. Forgive the sinner, O God, as I do--as thou teachest this stubborn heart to forgive--as she forgave who is now with thee, a blessed saint in heaven!"

When, some minutes afterwards, the doctor, who had been sent for, arrived, the head of the stricken patient lay on the lap of his foe, and it was the hand of Maltravers that wiped the froth from the white lips, and the voice of Maltravers that strove to soothe, and the tears of Maltravers that were falling on that fiery brow.

"Tend him, sir, tend him as my brother," said Maltravers, hiding his face as he resigned the charge. "Let him have all that can alleviate and cure--remove him hence to some fitter abode--send for the best advice. Restore him, and--and--" He could say no more, but left the room abruptly.

It was afterwards ascertained that Cesarini had remained in the streets after his short interview with Ernest, that at length he had knocked at Lord Saxingham's door just in the very hour when death had claimed its victim. He heard the announcement--he sought to force his way up-stairs--they thrust him from the house, and nothing more of him was

known till he arrived at his own door, an hour before Danvers and Maltravers came, in raging frenzy. Perhaps by one of the dim erratic gleams of light which always chequer the darkness of insanity, he retained some faint remembrance of his compact and assignation with Maltravers, which had happily guided his steps back to his abode.

* * * * *

It was two months after this scene, a lovely Sabbath morning, in the earliest May, as Lumley, Lord Vargrave, sat alone, by the window in his late uncle's villa, in his late uncle's easy-chair--his eyes were resting musingly on the green lawn on which the windows opened, or rather on two forms that were seated upon a rustic bench in the middle of the sward. One was the widow in her weeds, the other was that fair and lovely child destined to be the bride of the new lord. The hands of the mother and daughter were clasped each in each. There was sadness in the faces of both--deeper if more resigned on that of the elder, for the child sought to console her parent, and grief in childhood comes with a butterfly's wing.

Lumley gazed on them both, and on the child more earnestly.

"She is very lovely," he said; "she will be very rich. After all, I am not to be pitied. I am a peer, and I have enough to live upon at present. I am a rising man--our party wants peers; and though I could not have had more than a subaltern's seat at the Treasury Board six months ago, when I was an active, zealous, able commoner, now that I am a lord, with what they call a stake in the country, I may open my mouth and--bless me! I know not how many windfalls may drop in! My uncle was wiser than I thought in wrestling for this peerage, which he won and I wear!--Then, by and by, just at the age when I want to marry and have an heir (and a pretty wife saves one a vast deal of trouble), L200,000 and a young beauty! Come, come, I have strong cards in my hands if I play them tolerably. I must take care that she falls desperately in love with me. Leave me alone for that--I know the sex, and have never failed except in--ah, that poor Florence! Well, it is no use regretting! Like thrifty artists, we must paint out the unmarketable picture, and call luckier creations to fill up the same canvas!"

Here the servant interrupted Lord Vargrave's meditation by bringing in the letters and the newspapers which had just been forwarded from his town house. Lord Vargrave had spoken in the Lords on the previous Friday, and he wished to see what the Sunday newspapers said of his speech. So he took up one of the leading papers before he opened the

letters. His eyes rested upon two paragraphs in close neighbourhood with each other: the first ran thus:

"The celebrated Mr. Maltravers has abruptly resigned his seat for the ----- of -----, and left town yesterday on an extended tour on the Continent. Speculation is busy on the causes of the singular and unexpected self-exile of a gentleman so distinguished--in the very zenith of his career."

"So, he has given up the game!" muttered Lord Vargrave; "he was never a practical man--I am glad he is out of the way. But what's this about myself?"

"We hear that important changes are to take place in the government---it is said that ministers are at last alive to the necessity of strengthening themselves with new talent. Among other appointments confidently spoken of in the best-informed circles, we learn that Lord Vargrave is to have the place of ----- . It will be a popular appointment. Lord Vargrave is not a holiday orator, a mere declamatory rhetorician--but a man of clear business-like views, and was highly thought of in the House of Commons. He has also the art of attaching his friends, and his frank, manly character cannot fail to have its due effect with the English public. In another column of our journal our readers will see a full report of his excellent maiden speech in the House of Lords, on Friday last: the sentiments there expressed do the highest honour to his lordship's patriotism and sagacity."

"Very well, very well indeed!" said Lumley, rubbing his hands; and turning to his letters, his attention was drawn to one with an enormous seal, marked "Private and confidential." He knew before he opened it that it contained the offer of the appointment alluded to in the newspaper. He read, and rose exultantly; passing through the French windows, he joined Lady Vargrave and Evelyn on the lawn, and, as he smiled on the mother and caressed the child, the scene and the group made a pleasant picture of English domestic happiness.

Here ends the First Portion of this work: it ends in the view that bounds us when we look on the practical world with the outward unspiritual eye--and see life that dissatisfies justice,--for life is so seen but in fragments. The influence of fate seems so small on the man

who, in erring, but errs as the egotist, and shapes out of ill some use that can profit himself. But Fate hangs a shadow so vast on the heart that errs but in venturing and knows only in others the sources of sorrow and joy.

Go alone, O Maltravers, unfriendly, remote--thy present a waste, and thy past life a ruin, go forth to the future!--Go, Ferrers, light cynic--with the crowd take thy way,--complacent, elated,--no cloud upon conscience, for thou seest but sunshine on fortune.--Go forth to the future!

Human life is compared to the circle.--Is the simile just? All lines that are drawn from the centre to touch the circumference, by the law of the circle, are equal. But the lines that are drawn from the heart of the man to the verge of his destiny--do they equal each other?--Alas! some seem so brief, and some lengthen on as for ever.

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