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#203 in our series by Edward Bulwer Lytton

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ALICE;

OR,

THE MYSTERIES

BY

EDWARD BULWER LYTTON
(LORD LYTTON)

BOOK I.

"Thee, hid the bowring vales amidst, I call."
--EURIPIDES: *Hel.* I. 1116.

CHAPTER I.

Who art thou, fair one, who usurp'st the place
Of Blanch, the lady of the matchless grace?--LAMB.

IT was towards the evening of a day in early April that two ladies were seated by the open windows of a cottage in Devonshire. The lawn before them was gay with evergreens, relieved by the first few flowers and fresh turf of the reviving spring; and at a distance, through an opening amongst the trees, the sea, blue and tranquil, bounded the view, and contrasted the more confined and home-like features of the scene. It was a spot remote, sequestered, shut out from the business and pleasures of the world; as such it suited the tastes and character of the owner.

That owner was the younger of the ladies seated by the window. You would scarcely have guessed, from her appearance, that she was more than seven or eight and twenty, though she exceeded by four or five years that critical boundary in the life of beauty. Her form was slight and delicate in its proportions, nor was her countenance the less lovely because, from its gentleness and repose (not unmixed with a certain sadness) the coarse and the gay might have thought it wanting in expression. For there is a stillness in the aspect of those who have felt deeply, which deceives the common eye,--as rivers are often alike tranquil and profound, in proportion as they are remote from the springs which agitated and swelled the commencement of their course, and by which their waters are still, though invisibly, supplied.

The elder lady, the guest of her companion, was past seventy; her gray hair was drawn back from the forehead, and gathered under a stiff cap of

quaker-like simplicity; while her dress, rich but plain, and of no very modern fashion, served to increase the venerable appearance of one who seemed not ashamed of years.

"My dear Mrs. Leslie," said the lady of the house, after a thoughtful pause in the conversation that had been carried on for the last hour, "it is very true; perhaps I was to blame in coming to this place; I ought not to have been so selfish."

"No, my dear friend," returned Mrs. Leslie, gently; "selfish is a word that can never be applied to you; you acted as became you,--agreeably to your own instinctive sense of what is best when at your age,--independent in fortune and rank, and still so lovely,--you resigned all that would have attracted others, and devoted yourself, in retirement, to a life of quiet and unknown benevolence. You are in your sphere in this village,--humble though it be,--consoling, relieving, healing the wretched, the destitute, the infirm; and teaching your Evelyn insensibly to imitate your modest and Christian virtues." The good old lady spoke warmly, and with tears in her eyes; her companion placed her hand in Mrs. Leslie's.

"You cannot make me vain," said she, with a sweet and melancholy smile. "I remember what I was when you first gave shelter to the poor, desolate wanderer and her fatherless child; and I, who was then so poor and destitute, what should I be, if I was deaf to the poverty and sorrows of others,--others, too, who are better than I am. But now Evelyn, as you say, is growing up; the time approaches when she must decide on accepting or rejecting Lord Vargrave. And yet in this village how can she compare him with others; how can she form a choice? What you say is very true; and yet I did not think of it sufficiently. What shall I do? I am only anxious, dear girl, to act so as may be best for her own happiness."

"Of that I am sure," returned Mrs. Leslie; "and yet I know not how to advise. On one hand, so much is due to the wishes of your late husband, in every point of view, that if Lord Vargrave be worthy of Evelyn's esteem and affection, it would be most desirable that she should prefer him to all others. But if he be what I hear he is considered in the world,--an artful, scheming, almost heartless man, of ambitious and hard pursuits,--I tremble to think how completely the happiness of Evelyn's whole life may be thrown away. She certainly is not in love with him, and yet I fear she is one whose nature is but too susceptible of affection. She ought now to see others,--to know her own mind, and not to be hurried, blindfold and inexperienced, into a step that decides existence. This is a duty we owe to her,--nay, even to the late Lord Vargrave, anxious as he was for the marriage. His aim was surely her happiness, and he would not have insisted upon means that time and circumstances might show to be contrary to the end he had in view."

"You are right," replied Lady Vargrave. "When my poor husband lay on his bed of death, just before he summoned his nephew to receive his last blessing, he said to me, 'Providence can counteract all our schemes. If ever it should be for Evelyn's real happiness that my wish for her marriage with Lumley Ferrers should not be fulfilled, to you I must leave

the right to decide on what I cannot foresee. All I ask is that no obstacle shall be thrown in the way of my wish; and that the child shall be trained up to consider Lumley as her future husband.' Among his papers was a letter addressed to me to the same effect; and, indeed, in other respects that letter left more to my judgment than I had any right to expect. Oh, I am often unhappy to think that he did not marry one who would have deserved his affection! and--but regret is useless now."

"I wish you could really feel so," said Mrs. Leslie; "for regret of another kind still seems to haunt you; and I do not think you have yet forgotten your early sorrows."

"Ah, how can I?" said Lady Vargrave, with a quivering lip.

At that instant, a light shadow darkened the sunny lawn in front of the casements, and a sweet, gay young voice was heard singing at a little distance; a moment more, and a beautiful girl, in the first bloom of youth, bounded lightly along the grass, and halted opposite the friends.

It was a remarkable contrast,--the repose and quiet of the two persons we have described, the age and gray hairs of one, the resigned and melancholy gentleness written on the features of the other--with the springing step and laughing eyes and radiant bloom of the new comer! As she stood with the setting sun glowing full upon her rich fair hair, her happy countenance and elastic form, it was a vision almost too bright for this weary earth,--a thing of light and bliss, that the joyous Greek might have placed among the forms of Heaven, and worshipped as an Aurora or a Hebe.

"Oh, how can you stay indoors this beautiful evening? Come, dearest Mrs. Leslie; come, Mother, dear Mother, you know you promised you would,--you said I was to call you; see, it will rain no more, and the shower has left the myrtles and the violet-bank so fresh."

"My dear Evelyn," said Mrs. Leslie, with a smile, "I am not so young as you."

"No; but you are just as gay when you are in good spirits--and who can be out of spirits in such weather? Let me call for your chair; let me wheel you--I am sure I can. Down, Sultan; so you have found me out, have you, sir? Be quiet, sir, down!"

This last exhortation was addressed to a splendid dog of the Newfoundland breed, who now contrived wholly to occupy Evelyn's attention.

The two friends looked at this beautiful girl, as with all the grace of youth she shared while she rebuked the exuberant hilarity of her huge playmate; and the elder of the two seemed the most to sympathize with her mirth. Both gazed with fond affection upon an object dear to both. But some memory or association touched Lady Vargrave, and she sighed as she gazed.

CHAPTER II.

Is stormy life preferred to this serene?---YOUNG: _Satires_.

AND the windows were closed in, and night had succeeded to evening, and the little party at the cottage were grouped together. Mrs. Leslie was quietly seated at her tambour-frame; Lady Vargrave, leaning her cheek on her hand, seemed absorbed in a volume before her, but her eyes were not on the page; Evelyn was busily employed in turning over the contents of a parcel of books and music which had just been brought from the lodge where the London coach had deposited it.

"Oh, dear Mamma!" cried Evelyn, "I am so glad; there is something you will like,--some of the poetry that touched you so much set to music."

Evelyn brought the songs to her mother, who roused herself from her revery, and looked at them with interest.

"It is very strange," said she, "that I should be so affected by all that is written by this person: I, too" (she added, tenderly stroking down Evelyn's luxuriant tresses), "who am not so fond of reading as you are!"

"You are reading one of his books now," said Evelyn, glancing over the open page on the table. "Ah, that beautiful passage upon 'Our First Impressions.' Yet I do not like you, dear Mother, to read his books; they always seem to make you sad."

"There is a charm to me in their thoughts, their manner of expression," said Lady Vargrave, "which sets me thinking, which reminds me of--of an early friend, whom I could fancy I hear talking while I read. It was so from the first time I opened by accident a book of his years ago."

"Who is this author that pleases you so much?" asked Mrs. Leslie, with some surprise; for Lady Vargrave had usually little pleasure in reading even the greatest and most popular masterpieces of modern genius.

"Maltravers," answered Evelyn; "and I think I almost share my mother's enthusiasm."

"Maltravers!" repeated Mrs. Leslie. "He is, perhaps, a dangerous writer for one so young. At your age, dear girl, you have naturally romance and feeling enough of your own without seeking them in books."

"But, dear madam," said Evelyn, standing up for her favourite, "his writings do not consist of romance and feeling only; they are not exaggerated, they are so simple, so truthful."

"Did you ever meet him?" asked Lady Vargrave.

"Yes," returned Mrs. Leslie, "once, when he was a gay, fair-haired boy. His father resided in the next county, and we met at a country-house. Mr. Maltravers himself has an estate near my daughter in B-----shire, but

he does not live on it; he has been some years abroad,--a strange character!"

"Why does he write no more?" said Evelyn; "I have read his works so often, and know his poetry so well by heart, that I should look forward to something new from him as an event."

"I have heard, my dear, that he has withdrawn much from the world and its objects,--that he has lived greatly in the East. The death of a lady to whom he was to have been married is said to have unsettled and changed his character. Since that event he has not returned to England. Lord Vargrave can tell you more of him than I."

"Lord Vargrave thinks of nothing that is not always before the world," said Evelyn.

"I am sure you wrong him," said Mrs. Leslie, looking up and fixing her eyes on Evelyn's countenance; "for you are not before the world."

Evelyn slightly--very slightly--pouted her pretty lip, but made no answer. She took up the music, and seating herself at the piano, practised the airs. Lady Vargrave listened with emotion; and as Evelyn in a voice exquisitely sweet, though not powerful, sang the words, her mother turned away her face, and half unconsciously, a few tears stole silently down her cheek.

When Evelyn ceased, herself affected,--for the lines were impressed with a wild and melancholy depth of feeling,--she came again to her mother's side, and seeing her emotion, kissed away the tears from the pensive eyes. Her own gayety left her; she drew a stool to her mother's feet, and nestling to her, and clasping her hand, did not leave that place till they retired to rest.

And the lady blessed Evelyn, and felt that, if bereaved, she was not alone.

CHAPTER III.

BUT come, thou Goddess, fair and free,
In heaven yclept Euphrosyne!

.

To hear the lark begin his flight,
And, singing, startle the dull night.-- *L'Allegro* .

But come, thou Goddess, sage and holy,
Come, divinest Melancholy!

.

There held in holy passion still,
Forget thyself to marble.--_Il Penseroso_.

THE early morn of early spring--what associations of freshness and hope in that single sentence! And there a little after sunrise--there was Evelyn, fresh and hopeful as the morning itself, bounding with the light step of a light heart over the lawn. Alone, alone! no governess, with a pinched nose and a sharp voice, to curb her graceful movements, and tell her how young ladies ought to walk. How silently morning stole over the earth! It was as if youth had the day and the world to itself. The shutters of the cottage were still closed, and Evelyn cast a glance upward, to assure herself that her mother, who also rose betimes, was not yet stirring. So she tripped along, singing from very glee, to secure a companion, and let out Sultan; and a few moments afterwards, they were scouring over the grass, and descending the rude steps that wound down the cliff to the smooth sea sands. Evelyn was still a child at heart, yet somewhat more than a child in mind. In the majesty of--

"That hollow, sounding, and mysterious main,"--

in the silence broken but by the murmur of the billows, in the solitude relieved but by the boats of the early fishermen, she felt those deep and tranquillizing influences which belong to the Religion of Nature. Unconsciously to herself, her sweet face grew more thoughtful, and her step more slow. What a complex thing is education! How many circumstances, that have no connection with books and tutors, contribute to the rearing of the human mind! The earth and the sky and the ocean were among the teachers of Evelyn Cameron; and beneath her simplicity of thought was daily filled, from the turns of invisible spirits, the fountain of the poetry of feeling.

This was the hour when Evelyn most sensibly felt how little our real life is chronicled by external events,--how much we live a second and a higher life in our meditations and dreams. Brought up, not more by precept than example, in the faith which unites creature and Creator, this was the hour in which thought itself had something of the holiness of prayer; and if (turning from dreams divine to earlier visions) this also was the hour in which the heart painted and peopled its own fairyland below, of the two ideal worlds that stretch beyond the inch of time on which we stand, Imagination is perhaps holier than Memory.

So now, as the day crept on, Evelyn returned in a more sober mood, and then she joined her mother and Mrs. Leslie at breakfast; and then the household cares--such as they were--devolved upon her, heiress though she was; and, that duty done, once more the straw hat and Sultan were in requisition; and opening a little gate at the back of the cottage, she took the path along the village churchyard that led to the house of the old curate. The burial-ground itself was surrounded and shut in with a belt of trees. Save the small time-discoloured church and the roofs of the cottage and the minister's house, no building--not even a cotter's hut--was visible there. Beneath a dark and single yew-tree in the centre of the ground was placed a rude seat; opposite to this seat was a grave, distinguished from the rest by a slight palisade. As the young Evelyn

passed slowly by this spot, a glove on the long damp grass beside the yew-tree caught her eye. She took it up and sighed,--it was her mother's. She sighed, for she thought of the soft melancholy on that mother's face which her caresses and her mirth never could wholly chase away. She wondered why that melancholy was so fixed a habit, for the young ever wonder why the experienced should be sad.

And now Evelyn had passed the churchyard, and was on the green turf before the minister's quaint, old-fashioned house. The old man himself was at work in his garden; but he threw down his hoe as he saw Evelyn, and came cheerfully up to greet her.

It was easy to see how dear she was to him.

"So you are come for your daily lesson, my young pupil?"

"Yes; but Tasso can wait if the--"

"If the tutor wants to play truant; no, my child; and, indeed, the lesson must be longer than usual to-day, for I fear I shall have to leave you to-morrow for some days."

"Leave us! why?--leave Brook-Green--impossible!"

"Not at all impossible; for we have now a new vicar, and I must turn courtier in my old age, and ask him to leave me with my flock. He is at Weymouth, and has written to me to visit him there. So, Miss Evelyn, I must give you a holiday task to learn while I am away."

Evelyn brushed the tears from her eyes--for when the heart is full of affection the eyes easily run over--and clung mournfully to the old man, as she gave utterance to all her half-childish, half-womanly grief at the thought of parting so soon with him. And what, too, could her mother do without him; and why could he not write to the vicar instead of going to him?

The curate, who was childless and a bachelor, was not insensible to the fondness of his beautiful pupil, and perhaps he himself was a little more distract than usual that morning, or else Evelyn was peculiarly inattentive; for certain it is that she reaped very little benefit from the lesson.

Yet he was an admirable teacher, that old man! Aware of Evelyn's quick, susceptible, and rather fanciful character of mind, he had sought less to curb than to refine and elevate her imagination. Himself of no ordinary abilities, which leisure had allowed him to cultivate, his piety was too large and cheerful to exclude literature--Heaven's best gift--from the pale of religion. And under his care Evelyn's mind had been duly stored with the treasures of modern genius, and her judgment strengthened by the criticisms of a graceful and generous taste.

In that sequestered hamlet, the young heiress had been trained to adorn her future station; to appreciate the arts and elegances that distinguish

(no matter what the rank) the refined from the low, better than if she had been brought up under the hundred-handed Briareus of fashionable education. Lady Vargrave, indeed, like most persons of modest pretensions and imperfect cultivation, was rather inclined to overrate the advantages to be derived from book-knowledge; and she was never better pleased than when she saw Evelyn opening the monthly parcel from London, and delightedly poring over volumes which Lady Vargrave innocently believed to be reservoirs of inexhaustible wisdom.

But this day Evelyn would not read, and the golden verses of Tasso lost their music to her ear. So the curate gave up the lecture, and placed a little programme of studies to be conned during his absence in her reluctant hand; and Sultan, who had been wistfully licking his paws for the last half-hour, sprang up and caracoled once more into the garden; and the old priest and the young woman left the works of man for those of Nature.

"Do not fear, I will take such care of your garden while you are away," said Evelyn; "and you must write and let us know what day you are to come back."

"My dear Evelyn, you are born to spoil every one--from Sultan to Aubrey."

"And to be spoilt too, don't forget that," cried Evelyn, laughingly shaking back her ringlets. "And now, before you go, will you tell me, as you are so wise, what I can do to make--to make--my mother love me?"

Evelyn's voice faltered as she spoke the last words, and Aubrey looked surprised and moved.

"Your mother love you, my dear Evelyn! What do you mean,--does she not love you?"

"Ah, not as I love her. She is kind and gentle, I know, for she is so to all; but she does not confide in me, she does not trust me; she has some sorrow at heart which I am never allowed to learn and soothe. Why does she avoid all mention of her early days? She never talks to me as if she, too, had once a mother! Why am I never to speak of her first marriage, of my father? Why does she look reproachfully at me, and shun me--yes, shun me, for days together--if--if I attempt to draw her to the past? Is there a secret? If so, am I not old enough to know it?"

Evelyn spoke quickly and nervously, and with quivering lips. Aubrey took her hand, and pressing it, said, after a little pause,--

"Evelyn, this is the first time you have ever thus spoken to me. Has anything chanced to arouse your--shall I call it curiosity, or shall I call it the mortified pride of affection?"

"And you, too, aye harsh; you blame me! No, it is true that I have not thus spoken to you before; but I have long, long thought with grief that I was insufficient to my mother's happiness,--I who love her so dearly. And now, since Mrs. Leslie has been here, I find her conversing with this

comparative stranger so much more confidentially than with me. When I come in unexpectedly, they cease their conference, as if I were not worthy to share it; and--and oh, if I could but make you understand that all I desire is that my mother should love me and know me and trust me--"

"Evelyn," said the curate, coldly, "you love your mother, and justly; a kinder and a gentler heart than hers does not beat in a human breast. Her first wish in life is for your happiness and welfare. You ask for confidence, but why not confide in her; why not believe her actuated by the best and the tenderest motives; why not leave it to her discretion to reveal to you any secret grief, if such there be, that preys upon her; why add to that grief by any selfish indulgence of over-susceptibility in yourself? My dear pupil, you are yet almost a child; and they who have sorrowed may well be reluctant to sadden with a melancholy confidence those to whom sorrow is yet unknown. This much, at least, I may tell you,--for this much she does not seek to conceal,--that Lady Vargrave was early inured to trials from which you, more happy, have been saved. She speaks not to you of her relations, for she has none left on earth. And after her marriage with your benefactor, Evelyn, perhaps it seemed to her a matter of principle to banish all vain regret, all remembrance if possible, of an earlier tie."

"My poor, poor mother! Oh, yes, you are right; forgive me. She yet mourns, perhaps, my father, whom I never saw, whom I feel, as it were, tacitly forbid to name,--you did not know him?"

"Him!--whom?"

"My father, my mother's first husband."

"No."

"But I am sure I could not have loved him so well as my benefactor, my real and second father, who is now dead and gone. Oh, how well I remember him,--how fondly!" Here Evelyn stopped and burst into tears.

"You do right to remember him thus; to love and revere his memory,--a father indeed he was to you. But now, Evelyn, my own dear child, hear me. Respect the silent heart of your mother; let her not think that her misfortunes, whatever they may be, can cast a shadow over you,--you, her last hope and blessing. Rather than seek to open the old wounds, suffer them to heal, as they must, beneath the influences of religion and time; and wait the hour when without, perhaps, too keen a grief, your mother can go back with you into the past."

"I will, I will! Oh, how wicked, how ungracious I have been! It was but an excess of love, believe it, dear Mr. Aubrey, believe it."

"I do believe it, my poor Evelyn; and now I know that I may trust in you. Come, dry those bright eyes, or they will think I have been a hard taskmaster, and let us go to the cottage."

They walked slowly and silently across the humble garden into the

churchyard, and there, by the old yew-tree, they saw Lady Vargrave. Evelyn, fearful that the traces of her tears were yet visible, drew back; and Aubrey, aware of what passed within her, said,--

"Shall I join your mother, and tell her of my approaching departure? And perhaps in the meanwhile you will call at our poor pensioner's in the village,--Dame Newman is so anxious to see you; we will join you there soon."

Evelyn smiled her thanks, and kissing her hand to her mother with seeming gayety, turned back and passed through the glebe into the little village. Aubrey joined Lady Vargrave, and drew her arm in his.

Meanwhile Evelyn thoughtfully pursued her way. Her heart was full, and of self-reproach. Her mother had, then, known cause for sorrow; and perhaps her reserve was but occasioned by her reluctance to pain her child. Oh, how doubly anxious would Evelyn be hereafter to soothe, to comfort, to wean that dear mother from the past! Though in this girl's character there was something of the impetuosity and thoughtlessness of her years, it was noble as well as soft; and now the woman's trustfulness conquered all the woman's curiosity.

She entered the cottage of the old bedridden crone whom Aubrey had referred to. It was as a gleam of sunshine,--that sweet comforting face; and here, seated by the old woman's side, with the Book of the Poor upon her lap, Evelyn was found by Lady Vargrave. It was curious to observe the different impressions upon the cottagers made by the mother and daughter. Both were beloved with almost equal enthusiasm; but with the first the poor felt more at home. They could talk to her more at ease: she understood them so much more quickly; they had no need to beat about the bush to tell the little peevish complaints that they were half-ashamed to utter to Evelyn. What seemed so light to the young, cheerful beauty, the mother listened to with so grave and sweet a patience. When all went right, they rejoiced to see Evelyn; but in their little difficulties and sorrows nobody was like "my good Lady!"

So Dame Newman, the moment she saw the pale countenance and graceful shape of Lady Vargrave at the threshold, uttered an exclamation of delight. Now she could let out all that she did not like to trouble the young lady with; now she could complain of east winds, and rheumatiz, and the parish officers, and the bad tea they sold poor people at Mr. Hart's shop, and the ungrateful grandson who was so well to do and who forgot he had a grandmother alive!

CHAPTER IV.

TOWARDS the end of the week we received a card from the town ladies. _Vicar of Wakefield_.

THE curate was gone, and the lessons suspended; otherwise--as like each to each as sunshine or cloud permitted--day followed day in the calm

retreat of Brook-Green,--when, one morning, Mrs. Leslie, with a letter in her hand, sought Lady Vargrave, who was busied in tending the flowers of a small conservatory which she had added to the cottage, when, from various motives, and one in especial powerful and mysterious, she exchanged for so sequestered a home the luxurious villa bequeathed to her by her husband.

To flowers--those charming children of Nature, in which our age can take the same tranquil pleasure as our youth--Lady Vargrave devoted much of her monotonous and unchequered time. She seemed to love them almost as living things; and her memory associated them with hours as bright and as fleeting as themselves.

"My dear friend," said Mrs. Leslie, "I have news for you. My daughter, Mrs. Merton, who has been in Cornwall on a visit to her husband's mother, writes me word that she will visit us on her road home to the Rectory in B----shire. She will not put you much out of the way," added Mrs. Leslie, smiling, "for Mr. Merton will not accompany her; she only brings her daughter Caroline, a lively, handsome, intelligent girl, who will be enchanted with Evelyn. All you will regret is, that she comes to terminate my visit, and take me away with her. If you can forgive that offence, you will have nothing else to pardon."

Lady Vargrave replied with her usual simple kindness; but she was evidently nervous at the visit of a stranger (for she had never yet seen Mrs. Merton), and still more distressed at the thought of losing Mrs. Leslie a week or two sooner than had been anticipated. However, Mrs. Leslie hastened to reassure her. Mrs. Merton was so quiet and good-natured, the wife of a country clergyman with simple tastes; and after all, Mrs. Leslie's visit might last as long, if Lady Vargrave would be contented to extend her hospitality to Mrs. Merton and Caroline.

When the visit was announced to Evelyn, her young heart was susceptible only of pleasure and curiosity. She had no friend of her own age; she was sure she should like the grandchild of her dear Mrs. Leslie.

Evelyn, who had learned betimes, from the affectionate solicitude of her nature, to relieve her mother of such few domestic cares as a home so quiet, with an establishment so regular, could afford, gayly busied herself in a thousand little preparations. She filled the rooms of the visitors with flowers (not dreaming that any one could fancy them unwholesome), and spread the tables with her own favourite books, and had the little cottage piano in her own dressing-room removed into Caroline's--Caroline must be fond of music. She had some doubts of transferring a cage with two canaries into Caroline's room also; but when she approached the cage with that intention, the birds chirped so merrily, and seemed so glad to see her, and so expectant of sugar, that her heart smote her for her meditated desertion and ingratitude. No, she could not give up the canaries; but the glass bowl with the goldfish--oh, that would look so pretty on its stand just by the casement; and the fish--dull things!--would not miss her.

The morning, the noon, the probable hour of the important arrival came at

last; and after having three times within the last half-hour visited the rooms, and settled and unsettled and settled again everything before arranged, Evelyn retired to her own room to consult her wardrobe, and Margaret,--once her nurse, now her abigail. Alas! the wardrobe of the destined Lady Vargrave--the betrothed of a rising statesman, a new and now an ostentatious peer; the heiress of the wealthy Templeton--was one that many a tradesman's daughter would have disdained. Evelyn visited so little; the clergyman of the place, and two old maids who lived most respectably on a hundred and eighty pounds a year, in a cottage, with one maidservant, two cats, and a footboy, bounded the circle of her acquaintance. Her mother was so indifferent to dress; she herself had found so many other ways of spending money!--but Evelyn was not now more philosophical than others of her age. She turned from muslin to muslin--from the coloured to the white, from the white to the coloured--with pretty anxiety and sorrowful suspense. At last she decided on the newest, and when it was on, and the single rose set in the lustrous and beautiful hair, Carson herself could not have added a charm. Happy age! Who wants the arts of the milliner at seventeen?

"And here, miss; here's the fine necklace Lord Vargrave brought down when my lord came last; it will look so grand!"

The emeralds glittered in their case; Evelyn looked at them irresolutely; then, as she looked, a shade came over her forehead, and she sighed, and closed the lid.

"No, Margaret, I do not want it; take it away."

"Oh, dear, miss! what would my lord say if he were down! And they are so beautiful! they will look so fine! Deary me, how they sparkle! But you will wear much finer when you are my lady."

"I hear Mamma's bell; go, Margaret, she wants you."

Left alone, the young beauty sank down abstractedly, and though the looking-glass was opposite, it did not arrest her eye; she forgot her wardrobe, her muslin dress, her fears, and her guests.

"Ah," she thought, "what a weight of dread I feel here when I think of Lord Vargrave and this fatal engagement; and every day I feel it more and more. To leave my dear, dear mother, the dear cottage--oh! I never can. I used to like him when I was a child; now I shudder at his name. Why is this? He is kind; he condescends to seek to please. It was the wish of my poor father,--for father he really was to me; and yet--oh that he had left me poor and free!"

At this part of Evelyn's meditation the unusual sound of wheels was heard on the gravel; she started up, wiped the tears from her eyes, and hurried down to welcome the expected guests.

TELL me, Sophy, my dear, what do you think of our new visitors?
Vicar of Wakefield.

MRS. MERTON and her daughter were already in the middle drawing-room, seated on either side of Mrs. Leslie,--the former a woman of quiet and pleasing exterior, her face still handsome, and if not intelligent, at least expressive of sober good-nature and habitual content; the latter a fine dark-eyed girl, of decided countenance, and what is termed a showy style of beauty,--tall, self-possessed, and dressed plainly indeed, but after the approved fashion. The rich bonnet of the large shape then worn; the Chantilly veil; the gay French _Cachemire_; the full sleeves, at that time the unnatural rage; the expensive yet unassuming _robe de soie_; the perfect _chaussure_; the air of society, the easy manner, the tranquil but scrutinizing gaze,--all startled, discomposed, and half-frightened Evelyn.

Miss Merton herself, if more at her ease, was equally surprised by the beauty and unconscious grace of the young fairy before her, and rose to greet her with a well-bred cordiality, which at once made a conquest of Evelyn's heart.

Mrs. Merton kissed her cheek, and smiled kindly on her, but said little. It was easy to see that she was a less conversable and more homely person than Caroline.

When Evelyn conducted them to their rooms, the mother and daughter detected at a glance the care that had provided for their comforts; and something eager and expectant in Evelyn's eyes taught the good-nature of the one and the good breeding of the other to reward their young hostess by various little exclamations of pleasure and satisfaction.

"Dear, how nice! What a pretty writing-desk!" said one--"And the pretty goldfish!" said the other--"And the piano, too, so well placed;" and Caroline's fair fingers ran rapidly over the keys. Evelyn retired, covered with smiles and blushes. And then Mrs. Merton permitted herself to say to the well-dressed abigail,--

"Do take away those flowers, they make me quite faint."

"And how low the room is,--so confined!" said Caroline, when the lady's lady withdrew with the condemned flowers. "And I see no Pysche. However, the poor people have done their best."

"Sweet person, Lady Vargrave!" said Mrs. Merton,--"so interesting, so beautiful; and how youthful in appearance!"

"No _tournure_--not much the manner of the world," said Caroline.

"No; but something better."

"Hem!" said Caroline. "The girl is very pretty, though too small."

"Such a smile, such eyes,--she is irresistible! and what a fortune! She will be a charming friend for you, Caroline."

"Yes, she maybe useful, if she marry Lord Vargrave; or, indeed, if she make any brilliant match. What sort of a man is Lord Vargrave?"

"I never saw him; they say, most fascinating."

"Well, she is very happy," said Caroline, with a sigh.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO lovely damsels cheer my lonely walk.--LAMB: Album Verses.

AFTER dinner there was still light enough for the young people to stroll through the garden. Mrs. Merton, who was afraid of the damp, preferred staying within; and she was so quiet, and made herself so much at home, that Lady Vargrave, to use Mrs. Leslie's phrase, was not the least "put out" by her. Besides, she talked of Evelyn, and that was a theme very dear to Lady Vargrave, who was both fond and proud of Evelyn.

"This is very pretty indeed,--the view of the sea quite lovely!" said Caroline. "You draw?"

"Yes, a little."

"From Nature?"

"Oh, yes."

"What, in Indian ink?"

"Yes; and water-colours."

"Oh! Why, who could have taught you in this little village; or, indeed, in this most primitive county?"

"We did not come to Brook-Green till I was nearly fifteen. My dear mother, though very anxious to leave our villa at Fulham, would not do so on my account, while masters could be of service to me; and as I knew she had set her heart on this place, I worked doubly hard."

"Then she knew this place before?"

"Yes; she had been here many years ago, and took the place after my poor father's death,--I always call the late Lord Vargrave my father. She used to come here regularly once a year without me; and when she returned, I thought her even more melancholy than before."

"What makes the charm of the place to Lady Vargrave?" asked Caroline, with some interest.

"I don't know; unless it be its extreme quiet, or some early association."

"And who is your nearest neighbour?"

"Mr. Aubrey, the curate. It is so unlucky, he is gone from home for a short time. You can't think how kind and pleasant he is,--the most amiable old man in the world; just such a man as Bernardin St. Pierre would have loved to describe."

"Agreeable, no doubt, but dull--good curates generally are."

"Dull? not the least; cheerful even to playfulness, and full of information. He has been so good to me about books; indeed, I have learned a great deal from him."

"I dare say he is an admirable judge of sermons."

"But Mr. Aubrey is not severe," persisted Evelyn, earnestly; "he is very fond of Italian literature, for instance; we are reading Tasso together."

"Oh! pity he is old--I think you said he was old. Perhaps there is a son, the image of the sire?"

"Oh, no," said Evelyn, laughing innocently; "Mr. Aubrey never married."

"And where does the old gentleman live?"

"Come a little this way; there, you can just see the roof of his house, close by the church."

"I see; it is *_tant soit peu triste_* to have the church so near you."

"_Do_ you think so? Ah, but you have not seen it; it is the prettiest church in the county; and the little burial-ground--so quiet, so shut in; I feel better every time I pass it. Some places breathe of religion."

"You are poetical, my dear little friend."

Evelyn, who *_had_* poetry in her nature, and therefore sometimes it broke out in her simple language, coloured and felt half-ashamed.

"It is a favourite walk with my mother," said she, apologetically; "she often spends hours there alone: and so, perhaps, I think it a prettier spot than others may. It does not seem to me to have anything of gloom in it; when I die, I should like to be buried there."

Caroline laughed slightly. "That is a strange wish; but perhaps you have been crossed in love?"

"!!--oh, you are laughing at me!"

"You do not remember Mr. Cameron, your real father, I suppose?"

"No; I believe he died before I was born."

"Cameron is a Scotch name: to what tribe of Camerons do you belong?"

"I don't know," said Evelyn, rather embarrassed; "indeed I know nothing of my father's or mother's family. It is very odd, but I don't think we have any relations. You know when I am of age that I am to take the name of Templeton."

"Ah, the name goes with the fortune; I understand. Dear Evelyn, how rich you will be! I do so wish I were rich!"

"And I that I were poor," said Evelyn, with an altered tone and expression of countenance.

"Strange girl! what can you mean?"

Evelyn said nothing, and Caroline examined her curiously.

"These notions come from living so much out of the world, my dear Evelyn. How you must long to see more of life!"

"! not in the least. I should never like to leave this place,--I could live and die here."

"You will think otherwise when you are Lady Vargrave. Why do you look so grave? Do you not love Lord Vargrave?"

"What a question!" said Evelyn, turning away her head, and forcing a laugh.

"It is no matter whether you do or not: it is a brilliant position. He has rank, reputation, high office; all he wants is money, and that you will give him. Alas! I have no prospect so bright. I have no fortune, and I fear my face will never buy a title, an opera-box, and a house in Grosvenor Square. I wish I were the future Lady Vargrave."

"I am sure I wish you were," said Evelyn, with great naivete; "you would suit Lord Vargrave better than I should."

Caroline laughed.

"Why do you think so?"

"Oh, his way of thinking is like yours; he never says anything I can sympathize with."

"A pretty compliment to me! Depend upon it, my dear, you will sympathize with me when you have seen as much of the world. But Lord Vargrave--is he too old?"

"No, I don't think of his age; and indeed he looks younger than he is."

"Is he handsome?"

"He is what may be called handsome,--you would think so."

"Well, if he comes here, I will do my best to win him from you; so look to yourself."

"Oh, I should be so grateful; I should like him so much, if he would fall in love with you!"

"I fear there is no chance of that."

"But how," said Evelyn, hesitatingly, after a pause,--"how is it that you have seen so much more of the world than I have? I thought Mr. Merton lived a great deal in the country."

"Yes, but my uncle, Sir John Merton, is member for the county; my grandmother on my father's side--Lady Elizabeth, who has Tregony Castle (which we have just left) for her jointure-house--goes to town almost every season, and I have spent three seasons with her. She is a charming old woman,--quite the grand dame. I am sorry to say she remains in Cornwall this year. She has not been very well; the physicians forbid late hours and London; but even in the country we are very gay. My uncle lives near us, and though a widower, has his house full when down at Merton Park; and Papa, too, is rich, very hospitable and popular, and will, I hope, be a bishop one of these days--not at all like a mere country parson; and so, somehow or other, I have learned to be ambitious,--we are an ambitious family on Papa's side. But, alas! I have not your cards to play. Young, beautiful, and an heiress! Ah, what prospects! You should make your mamma take you to town."

"To town! she would be wretched at the very idea. Oh, you don't know us."

"I can't help fancying, Miss Evelyn," said Caroline, archly, "that you are not so blind to Lord Vargrave's perfections and so indifferent to London, only from the pretty innocent way of thinking, that so prettily and innocently you express. I dare say, if the truth were known, there is some handsome young rector, besides the old curate, who plays the flute, and preaches sentimental sermons in white kid gloves."

Evelyn laughed merrily,--so merrily that Caroline's suspicions vanished. They continued to walk and talk thus till the night came on, and then they went in; and Evelyn showed Caroline her drawings, which astonished that young lady, who was a good judge of accomplishments. Evelyn's performance on the piano astonished her yet more; but Caroline consoled herself on this point, for her voice was more powerful, and she sang French songs with much more spirit. Caroline showed talent in all she undertook; but Evelyn, despite her simplicity, had genius, though as yet scarcely developed, for she had quickness, emotion, susceptibility, imagination. And the difference between talent and genius lies rather in

the heart than the head.

CHAPTER VII.

DOST thou feel

The solemn whispering influence of the scene

Oppressing thy young heart, that thou dost draw

More closely to my side?--F. HEMANS: *_Wood Walk and Hymn_*.

CAROLINE and Evelyn, as was natural, became great friends. They were not kindred to each other in disposition; but they were thrown together, and friendship thus forced upon both. Unsuspecting and sanguine, it was natural to Evelyn to admire; and Caroline was, to her inexperience, a brilliant and imposing novelty. Sometimes Miss Merton's worldliness of thought shocked Evelyn; but then Caroline had a way with her as if she were not in earnest,--as if she were merely indulging an inclination towards irony; nor was she without a certain vein of sentiment that persons a little hackneyed in the world and young ladies a little disappointed that they are not wives instead of maids, easily acquire. Trite as this vein of sentiment was, poor Evelyn thought it beautiful and most feeling. Then, Caroline was clever, entertaining, cordial, with all that superficial superiority that a girl of twenty-three who knows London readily exercises over a country girl of seventeen. On the other hand, Caroline was kind and affectionate towards her. The clergyman's daughter felt that she could not be always superior, even in fashion, to the wealthy heiress.

One evening, as Mrs. Leslie and Mrs. Merton sat under the veranda of the cottage, without their hostess, who had gone alone into the village, and the young ladies were confidentially conversing on the lawn, Mrs. Leslie said rather abruptly, "Is not Evelyn a delightful creature? How unconscious of her beauty; how simple, and yet so naturally gifted!"

"I have never seen one who interested me more," said Mrs. Merton, settling her *_pelerine_*; "she is extremely pretty."

"I am so anxious about her," resumed Mrs. Leslie, thoughtfully. "You know the wish of the late Lord Vargrave that she should marry his nephew, the present lord, when she reaches the age of eighteen. She only wants nine or ten months of that time; she has seen nothing of the world: she is not fit to decide for herself; and Lady Vargrave, the best of human creatures, is still herself almost too inexperienced in the world to be a guide for one so young placed in such peculiar circumstances, and of prospects so brilliant. Lady Vargrave at heart is a child still, and will be so even when as old as I am."

"It is very true," said Mrs. Merton. "Don't you fear that the girls will catch cold? The dew is falling, and the grass must be wet."

"I have thought," continued Mrs. Leslie, without heeding the latter part of Mrs. Merton's speech, "that it would be a kind thing to invite Evelyn

to stay with you a few months at the Rectory. To be sure, it is not like London; but you see a great deal of the world. The society at your house is well selected, and at times even brilliant; she will meet young people of her own age, and young people fashion and form each other."

"I was thinking myself that I should like to invite her," said Mrs. Merton; "I will consult Caroline."

"Caroline, I am sure, would be delighted; the difficulty lies rather in Evelyn herself."

"You surprise me! she must be moped to death here."

"But will she leave her mother?"

"Why, Caroline often leaves me," said Mrs. Merton.

Mrs. Leslie was silent, and Evelyn and her new friend now joined the mother and daughter.

"I have been trying to persuade Evelyn to pay us a little visit," said Caroline; "she could accompany us so nicely; and if she is still strange with us, dear grandmamma goes too,--I am sure we can make her at home."

"How odd!" said Mrs. Merton; "we were just saying the same thing. My dear Miss Cameron, we should be so happy to have you."

"And I should be so happy to go, if Mamma would but go too."

As she spoke, the moon, just risen, showed the form of Lady Vargrave slowly approaching the house. By the light, her features seemed more pale than usual; and her slight and delicate form, with its gliding motion and noiseless step, had in it something almost ethereal and unearthly.

Evelyn turned and saw her, and her heart smote her. Her mother, so wedded to the dear cottage--and had this gay stranger rendered that dear cottage less attractive,--she who had said she could live and die in its humble precincts? Abruptly she left her new friend, hastened to her mother, and threw her arms fondly round her.

"You are pale; you have over-fatigued yourself. Where have you been? Why did you not take me with you?"

Lady Vargrave pressed Evelyn's hand affectionately.

"You care for me too much," said she. "I am but a dull companion for you; I was so glad to see you happy with one better suited to your gay spirits. What can we do when she leaves us?"

"Ah, I want no companion but my own, own mother. And have I not Sultan, too?" added Evelyn, smiling away the tear that had started to her eyes.

CHAPTER VIII.

FRIEND after friend departs;
Who hath not lost a friend?
There is no union here of hearts
That finds not here an end.--J. MONTGOMERY.

THAT night Mrs. Leslie sought Lady Vargrave in her own room. As she entered gently she observed that, late as the hour was, Lady Vargrave was stationed by the open window, and seemed intently gazing on the scene below. Mrs. Leslie reached her side unperceived. The moonlight was exceedingly bright; and just beyond the garden, from which it was separated but by a slight fence, lay the solitary churchyard of the hamlet, with the slender spire of the holy edifice rising high and tapering into the shining air. It was a calm and tranquillizing scene; and so intent was Lady Vargrave's abstracted gaze, that Mrs. Leslie was unwilling to disturb her reverie.

At length Lady Vargrave turned; and there was that patient and pathetic resignation written in her countenance which belongs to those whom the world can deceive no more, and who have fixed their hearts in the life beyond.

Mrs. Leslie, whatever she thought or felt, said nothing, except in kindly remonstrance on the indiscretion of braving the night air. The window was closed; they sat down to confer.

Mrs. Leslie repeated the invitation given to Evelyn, and urged the advisability of accepting it. "It is cruel to separate you," said she; "I feel it acutely. Why not, then, come with Evelyn? You shake your head: why always avoid society? So young, yet you give yourself too much to the past!"

Lady Vargrave rose, and walked to a cabinet at the end of the room; she unlocked it, and beckoned to Mrs. Leslie to approach. In a drawer lay carefully folded articles of female dress,--rude, homely, ragged,--the dress of a peasant girl.

"Do these remind you of your first charity to me?" she said touchingly: "they tell me that I have nothing to do with the world in which you and yours, and Evelyn herself, should move."

"Too tender conscience!--your errors were but those of circumstances, of youth;--how have they been redeemed! none even suspect them. Your past history is known but to the good old Aubrey and myself. No breath, even of rumour, tarnishes the name of Lady Vargrave."

"Mrs. Leslie," said Lady Vargrave, reclosing the cabinet, and again seating herself, "my world lies around me; I cannot quit it. If I were of use to Evelyn, then indeed I would sacrifice, brave all; but I only cloud her spirits. I have no advice to give her, no instruction to

bestow. When she was a child I could watch over her; when she was sick, I could nurse her; but now she requires an adviser, a guide; and I feel too sensibly that this task is beyond my powers. I, a guide to youth and innocence,--_I_! No, I have nothing to offer her, dear child! but my love and my prayers. Let your daughter take her, then,--watch over her, guide, advise her. For me--unkind, ungrateful as it may seem--were she but happy, I could well bear to be alone!"

"But she--how will she, who loves you so, submit to this separation?"

"It will not be long; and," added Lady Vargrave, with a serious, yet sweet smile, "she had better be prepared for that separation which must come at last. As year by year I outlive my last hope,--that of once more beholding _him_,--I feel that life becomes feebler and feebler, and I look more on that quiet churchyard as a home to which I am soon returning. At all events, Evelyn will be called upon to form new ties that must estrange her from me; let her wean herself from one so useless to her, to all the world,--now, and by degrees."

"Speak not thus," said Mrs. Leslie, strongly affected; "you have many years of happiness yet in store for you. The more you recede from youth, the fairer life will become to you."

"God is good to me," said the lady, raising her meek eyes; "and I have already found it so. I am contented."

CHAPTER IX.

THE greater part of them seemed to be charmed with his presence.
MACKENZIE: _The Man of the World_.

IT was with the greatest difficulty that Evelyn could at last be persuaded to consent to the separation from her mother; she wept bitterly at the thought. But Lady Vargrave, though touched, was firm, and her firmness was of that soft, imploring character which Evelyn never could resist. The visit was to last some months, it is true, but she would return to the cottage; she would escape, too--and this, perhaps, unconsciously reconciled her more than aught else--the periodical visit of Lord Vargrave. At the end of July, when the parliamentary session at that unreformed era usually expired, he always came to Brook-Green for a month. His last visits had been most unwelcome to Evelyn, and this next visit she dreaded more than she had any of the former ones. It is strange,--the repugnance with which she regarded the suit of her affianced!--she, whose heart was yet virgin; who had never seen any one who, in form, manner, and powers to please, could be compared to the gay Lord Vargrave. And yet a sense of honour, of what was due to her dead benefactor, her more than father,--all combated that repugnance, and left her uncertain what course to pursue, uncalculating as to the future. In the happy elasticity of her spirits, and with a carelessness almost approaching to levity, which, to say truth, was natural to her, she did not often recall the solemn engagement that must soon be ratified or

annulled; but when that thought did occur, it saddened her for hours, and left her listless and despondent. The visit to Mrs. Merton was, then, finally arranged, the day of departure fixed, when, one morning, came the following letter from Lord Vargrave himself:--

To the LADY VARGRAVE, etc.

MY DEAR FRIEND,--I find that we have a week's holiday in our do-nothing Chamber, and the weather is so delightful, that I long to share its enjoyment with those I love best. You will, therefore, see me almost as soon as you receive this; that is, I shall be with you at dinner on the same day. What can I say to Evelyn? Will you, dearest Lady Vargrave, make her accept all the homage which, when uttered by me, she seems half inclined to reject?

In haste, most affectionately yours,

VARGRAVE.

HAMILTON PLACE, April 30, 18--.

This letter was by no means welcome, either to Mrs. Leslie or to Evelyn. The former feared that Lord Vargrave would disapprove of a visit, the real objects of which could scarcely be owned to him; the latter was reminded of all she desired to forget. But Lady Vargrave herself rather rejoiced at the thought of Lumley's arrival. Hitherto, in the spirit of her passive and gentle character, she had taken the engagement between Evelyn and Lord Vargrave almost as a matter of course. The will and wish of her late husband operated most powerfully on her mind; and while Evelyn was yet in childhood, Lumley's visits had ever been acceptable, and the playful girl liked the gay and good-humoured lord, who brought her all sorts of presents, and appeared as fond of dogs as herself. But Evelyn's recent change of manner, her frequent fits of dejection and thought, once pointed out to Lady Vargrave by Mrs. Leslie, aroused all the affectionate and maternal anxiety of the former. She was resolved to watch, to examine, to scrutinize, not only Evelyn's reception of Vargrave, but, as far as she could, the manner and disposition of Vargrave himself. She felt how solemn a trust was the happiness of a whole life; and she had that romance of heart, learned from Nature, not in books, which made her believe that there could be no happiness in a marriage without love.

The whole family party were on the lawn, when, an hour earlier than he was expected, the travelling carriage of Lord Vargrave was whirled along the narrow sweep that conducted from the lodge to the house. Vargrave, as he saw the party, kissed his hand from the window; and leaping from the carriage, when it stopped at the porch, hastened to meet his hostess.

"My dear Lady Vargrave, I am so glad to see you! You are looking charmingly; and Evelyn?--oh, there she is; the dear coquette, how lovely she is! how she has improved! But who [sinking his voice], who are those

ladies?"

"Guests of ours,--Mrs. Leslie, whom you have often heard us speak of, but never met--"

"Yes; and the others?"

"Her daughter and grandchild."

"I shall be delighted to know them."

A more popular manner than Lord Vargrave's it is impossible to conceive. Frank and prepossessing, even when the poor and reckless Mr. Ferrers, without rank or reputation, his smile, the tone of his voice, his familiar courtesy,--apparently so inartificial and approaching almost to a boyish bluntness of good-humour,--were irresistible in the rising statesman and favoured courtier.

Mrs. Merton was enchanted with him; Caroline thought him, at the first glance, the most fascinating person she had ever seen; even Mrs. Leslie, more grave, cautious, and penetrating, was almost equally pleased with the first impression; and it was not till, in his occasional silence, his features settled into their natural expression that she fancied she detected in the quick suspicious eye and the close compression of the lips the tokens of that wily, astute, and worldly character, which, in proportion as he had risen in his career, even his own party reluctantly and mysteriously assigned to one of their most prominent leaders.

When Vargrave took Evelyn's hand, and raised it with meaning gallantry to his lips, the girl first blushed deeply, and then turned pale as death; nor did the colour thus chased away soon return to the transparent cheek. Not noticing signs which might bear a twofold interpretation, Lumley, who seemed in high spirits, rattled away on a thousand matters,--praising the view, the weather, the journey, throwing out a joke here and a compliment there, and completing his conquest over Mrs. Merton and Caroline.

"You have left London in the very height of its gayety, Lord Vargrave," said Caroline, as they sat conversing after dinner.

"True, Miss Merton; but the country is in the height of its gayety too."

"Are you so fond of the country, then?"

"By fits and starts; my passion for it comes in with the early strawberries, and goes out with the hautboys. I lead so artificial a life; but then I hope it is a useful one. I want nothing but a home to make it a happy one."

"What is the latest news?--dear London! I am so sorry Grandmamma, Lady Elizabeth, is not going there this year, so I am compelled to rusticate. Is Lady Jane D----- to be married at last?"

"Commend me to a young lady's idea of news,--always marriage! Lady Jane

D----! yes, she is to be married, as you say--_at last_! While she was a beauty, our cold sex was shy of her; but she has now faded into plainness,--the proper colour for a wife."

"Complimentary!"

"Indeed it is--for you beautiful women we love too much for our own happiness--heigho!--and a prudent marriage means friendly indifference, not rapture and despair. But give me beauty and love; I never was prudent: it is not my weakness."

Though Caroline was his sole supporter in this dialogue, Lord Vargrave's eyes attempted to converse with Evelyn, who was unusually silent and abstracted. Suddenly Lord Vargrave seemed aware that he was scarcely general enough in his talk for his hearers. He addressed himself to Mrs. Leslie, and glided back, as it were, into a former generation. He spoke of persons gone and things forgotten; he made the subject interesting even to the young, by a succession of various and sparkling anecdotes. No one could be more agreeable; even Evelyn now listened to him with pleasure, for to all women wit and intellect have their charm. But still there was a cold and sharp levity in the tone of the man of the world that prevented the charm sinking below the surface. To Mrs. Leslie he seemed unconsciously to betray a laxity of principle; to Evelyn, a want of sentiment and heart. Lady Vargrave, who did not understand a character of this description, listened attentively, and said to herself, "Evelyn may admire, but I fear she cannot love him." Still, time passed quickly in Lumley's presence, and Caroline thought she had never spent so pleasant an evening.

When Lord Vargrave retired to his room, he threw himself in his chair, and yawned with exceeding fervour. His servant arranged his dressing-robe, and placed his portfolios and letter-boxes on the table.

"What o'clock is it?" said Lumley.

"Very early, my lord; only eleven."

"The devil! The country air is wonderfully exhausting. I am very sleepy; you may go."

"This little girl," said Lumley, stretching himself, "is preternaturally shy. I must neglect her no longer--yet it is surely all safe? She has grown monstrous pretty; but the other girl is more amusing, more to my taste, and a much easier conquest, I fancy. Her great dark eyes seem full of admiration for my lordship. Sensible young woman! she may be useful in piquing Evelyn."

CHAPTER X.

Julio. Wilt thou have him?--_The Maid in the Mill_.

LORD VARGRAVE heard the next morning, with secret distaste and displeasure, of Evelyn's intended visit to the Mertons. He could scarcely make any open objection to it; but he did not refrain from many insinuations as to its impropriety.

"My dear friend," said he to Lady Vargrave, "it is scarcely right in you (pardon me for saying it) to commit Evelyn to the care of comparative strangers. Mrs. Leslie, indeed, you know; but Mrs. Merton, you allow, you have now seen for the first time. A most respectable person doubtless; but still, recollect how young Evelyn is, how rich; what a prize to any younger sons in the Merton family (if such there be). Miss Merton herself is a shrewd, worldly girl; and if she were of our sex would make a capital fortune-hunter. Don't think my fear is selfish; I do not speak for myself. If I were Evelyn's brother, I should be yet more earnest in my remonstrance."

"But, Lord Vargrave, poor Evelyn is dull here; my spirits infect hers. She ought to mix more with those of her own age, to see more of the world before--before--"

"Before her marriage with me? Forgive me, but is not that my affair? If I am contented, nay, charmed with her innocence, if I prefer it to all the arts which society could teach her, surely you would be acquitted for leaving her in the beautiful simplicity that makes her chief fascination? She will see enough of the world as Lady Vargrave."

"But if she should resolve never to be Lady Vargrave--?"

Lumley started, bit his lip, and frowned. Lady Vargrave had never before seen on his countenance the dark expression it now wore. He recollected and recovered himself, as he observed her eye fixed upon him, and said, with a constrained smile,--

"Can you anticipate an event so fatal to my happiness, so unforeseen, so opposed to all my poor uncle's wishes, as Evelyn's rejection of a suit pursued for years, and so solemnly sanctioned in her very childhood?"

"She must decide for herself," said Lady Vargrave. "Your uncle carefully distinguished between a wish and a command. Her heart is as yet untouched. If she can love you, may you deserve her affection."

"It shall be my study to do so. But why this departure from your roof just when we ought to see most of each other? It cannot be that you would separate us?"

"I fear, Lord Vargrave, that if Evelyn were to remain here, she would decide against you. I fear if you press her now, such now may be her premature decision. Perhaps this arises from too fond an attachment for her home; perhaps even a short absence from her home--from me--may more reconcile her to a permanent separation."

Vargrave could say no more, for here they were joined by Caroline and Mrs. Merton; but his manner was changed, nor could he recover the gayety

of the previous night.

When, however, he found time for meditation, he contrived to reconcile himself to the intended visit. He felt that it was easy to secure the friendship of the whole of the Merton family; and that friendship might be more useful to him than the neutral part adopted by Lady Vargrave. He should, of course, be invited to the rectory; it was much nearer London than Lady Vargrave's cottage, he could more often escape from public cares to superintend his private interest. A country neighbourhood, particularly at that season of the year, was not likely to abound in very dangerous rivals. Evelyn would, he saw, be surrounded by a _worldly_ family, and he thought that an advantage; it might serve to dissipate Evelyn's romantic tendencies, and make her sensible of the pleasures of the London life, the official rank, the gay society that her union with him would offer as an equivalent for her fortune. In short, as was his wont, he strove to make the best of the new turn affairs had taken.

Though guardian to Miss Cameron, and one of the trustees for the fortune she was to receive on attaining her majority, he had not the right to dictate as to her residence. The late lord's will had expressly and pointedly corroborated the natural and lawful authority of Lady Vargrave in all matters connected with Evelyn's education and home. It may be as well, in this place, to add, that to Vargrave and the co-trustee, Mr.

Gustavus Douce, a banker of repute and eminence, the testator left large discretionary powers as to the investment of the fortune. He had stated it as his wish that from one hundred and twenty to one hundred and thirty thousand pounds should be invested in the purchase of a landed estate; but he had left it to the discretion of the trustees to increase that sum, even to the amount of the whole capital, should an estate of adequate importance be in the market, while the selection of time and purchase was unreservedly confided to the trustees. Vargrave had hitherto objected to every purchase in the market,--not that he was insensible to the importance and consideration of landed property, but because, till he himself became the legal receiver of the income, he thought it less trouble to suffer the money to lie in the Funds, than to be pestered with all the onerous details in the management of an estate that might never be his. He, however, with no less ardour than his deceased relative, looked forward to the time when the title of Vargrave should be based upon the venerable foundation of feudal manors and seignorial acres.

"Why did you not tell me Lord Vargrave was so charming?" said Caroline to Evelyn, as the two girls were sauntering, in familiar _tete-a-tete_, along the gardens. "You will be very happy with such a companion."

Evelyn made no answer for a few moments, and then, turning abruptly round to Caroline, and stopping short, she said, with a kind of tearful eagerness, "Dear Caroline, you are so wise, so kind too; advise me, tell me what is best. I am very unhappy."

Miss Merton was moved and surprised by Evelyn's earnestness.

"But what is it, my poor Evelyn," said she; "why are you unhappy?--you whose fate seems to me so enviable."

"I cannot love Lord Vargrave; I recoil from the idea of marrying him. Ought I not fairly to tell him so? Ought I not to say that I cannot fulfil the wish that--oh, there's the thought which leaves me so irresolute!--His uncle bequeathed to me--me who have no claim of relationship--the fortune that should have been Lord Vargrave's, in the belief that my hand would restore it to him. It is almost a fraud to refuse him. Am I not to be pitied?"

"But why can you not love Lord Vargrave? If past the _premiere jeunesse_, he is still handsome. He is more than handsome,--he has the air of rank, an eye that fascinates, a smile that wins, the manners that please, the abilities that command, the world! Handsome, clever, admired, distinguished--what can woman desire more in her lover, her husband? Have you ever formed some fancy, some ideal of the one you could love, and how does Lord Vargrave fall short of the vision?"

"Have I ever formed an ideal?--oh, yes!" said Evelyn, with a beautiful enthusiasm that lighted up her eyes, blushed in her cheek, and heaved her bosom beneath its robe; "something that in loving I could also revere,--a mind that would elevate my own; a heart that could sympathize with my weakness, my follies, my romance, if you will; and in which I could treasure my whole soul."

"You paint a schoolmaster, not a lover!" said Caroline. "You do not care, then, whether this hero be handsome or young?"

"Oh, yes, he should be both," said Evelyn, innocently; "and yet," she added, after a pause, and with an infantine playfulness of manner and countenance, "I know you will laugh at me, but I think I could be in love with more than one at the same time!"

"A common case, but a rare confession!"

"Yes; for if I might ask for the youth and outward advantages that please the eye, I could also love with a yet deeper love that which would speak to my imagination,--Intellect, Genius, Fame! Ah, these have an immortal youth and imperishable beauty of their own!"

"You are a very strange girl."

"But we are on a very strange subject--it is all an enigma!" said Evelyn, shaking her wise little head with a pretty gravity, half mock, half real. "Ah, if Lord Vargrave should love you--and you--oh, you _would_ love him, and then I should be free, and so happy!"

They were then on the lawn in sight of the cottage windows, and Lumley, lifting his eyes from the newspaper, which had just arrived and been seized with all a politician's avidity, saw them in the distance. He threw down the paper, mused a moment or two, then took up his hat and joined them; but before he did so, he surveyed himself in the glass. "I think I look young enough still," thought he.

"Two cherries on one stalk," said Lumley, gayly: "by the by, it is not a complimentary simile. What young lady would be like a cherry?--such an uninteresting, common, charity-boy sort of fruit. For my part, I always associate cherries with the image of a young gentleman in corduroys and a skeleton jacket, with one pocket full of marbles, and the other full of worms for fishing, with three-halfpence in the left paw, and two cherries on one stalk (Helena and Hermia) in the right."

"How droll you are!" said Caroline, laughing.

"Much obliged to you, and don't envy your discrimination, 'Melancholy marks me for its own.' You ladies,--ah, yours is the life for gay spirits and light hearts; to us are left business and politics, law, physic, and murder, by way of professions; abuse, nicknamed fame; and the privilege of seeing how universal a thing, among the great and the wealthy, is that pleasant vice, beggary,--which privilege is proudly entitled 'patronage and power.' Are we the things to be gay,--'droll,' as you say? Oh, no, all our spirits are forced, believe me. Miss Cameron, did you ever know that wretched species of hysterical affection called 'forced spirits'? Never, I am sure; your ingenuous smile, your laughing eyes, are the index to a happy and a sanguine heart."

"And what of me?" asked Caroline, quickly, and with a slight blush.

"You, Miss Merton? Ah, I have not yet read your character,--a fair page, but an unknown letter. You, however, have seen the world, and know that we must occasionally wear a mask." Lord Vargrave sighed as he spoke, and relapsed into sudden silence; then looking up, his eyes encountered Caroline's, which were fixed upon him. Their gaze flattered him; Caroline turned away, and busied herself with a rose-bush. Lumley gathered one of the flowers, and presented it to her. Evelyn was a few steps in advance.

"There is no thorn in this rose," said he; "may the offering be an omen. You are now Evelyn's friend, oh, be mine; she is to be your guest. Do not scorn to plead for me."

"Can you want a pleader?" said Caroline, with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Charming Miss Merton, love is diffident and fearful; but it must now find a voice, to which may Evelyn benignly listen. What I leave unsaid--would that my new friend's eloquence could supply."

He bowed slightly, and joined Evelyn. Caroline understood the hint, and returned alone and thoughtfully to the house.

"Miss Cameron--Evelyn--ah, still let me call you so, as in the happy and more familiar days of your childhood, I wish you could read my heart at this moment. You are about to leave your home; new scenes will surround, new faces smile on you; dare I hope that I may still be remembered?"

He attempted to take her hand as he spoke; Evelyn withdrew it gently.

"Ah, my lord," said she, in a very low voice, "if remembrance were all that you asked of me--"

"It is all,--favourable remembrance, remembrance of the love of the past, remembrance of the bond to come."

Evelyn shivered. "It is better to speak openly," said she.

"Let me throw myself on your generosity. I am not insensible to your brilliant qualities, to the honour of your attachment; but--but--as the time approaches in which you will call for my decision, let me now say, that I cannot feel for you--those--those sentiments, without which you could not desire our union,--without which it were but a wrong to both of us to form it. Nay, listen to me. I grieve bitterly at the tenor of your too generous uncle's will; can I not atone to you? Willingly would I sacrifice the fortune that, indeed, ought to be yours; accept it, and remain my friend."

"Cruel Evelyn! and can you suppose that it is your fortune I seek? It is yourself. Heaven is my witness, that, had you no dowry but your hand and heart, it were treasure enough to me. You think you cannot love me. Evelyn, you do not yet know yourself. Alas! your retirement in this distant village, my own unceasing avocations, which chain me, like a slave, to the galley-oar of politics and power, have kept us separate. You do not know me. I am willing to hazard the experiment of that knowledge. To devote my life to you, to make you partaker of my ambition, my career, to raise you to the highest eminence in the matronage of England, to transfer pride from myself to you, to love and to honour and to prize you,--all this will be my boast; and all this will win love for me at last. Fear not, Evelyn,--fear not for your happiness; with me you shall know no sorrow. Affection at home, splendour abroad, await you. I have passed the rough and arduous part of my career; sunshine lies on the summit to which I climb. No station in England is too high for me to aspire to,--prospects, how bright with you, how dark without you! Ah, Evelyn! be this hand mine--the heart shall follow!"

Vargrave's words were artful and eloquent; the words were calculated to win their way, but the manner, the tone of voice, wanted earnestness and truth. This was his defect; this characterized all his attempts to seduce or to lead others, in public or in private life. He had no heart, no deep passion, in what he undertook. He could impress you with the conviction of his ability, and leave the conviction imperfect, because he could not convince you that he was sincere. That best gift of mental power--_earnestness--was wanting to him; and Lord Vargrave's deficiency of heart was the true cause why he was not a great man. Still, Evelyn was affected by his words; she suffered the hand he now once more took to remain passively in his, and said timidly, "Why, with sentiments so generous and confiding, why do you love me, who cannot return your affection worthily? No, Lord Vargrave; there are many who must see you with juster eyes than mine,--many fairer, and even wealthier. Indeed, indeed, it cannot be. Do not be offended, but think that the fortune left to me was on one condition I cannot, ought not to fulfil. Failing

that condition, in equity and honour it reverts to you."

"Talk not thus, I implore you, Evelyn; do not imagine me the worldly calculator that my enemies deem me. But, to remove at once from your mind the possibility of such a compromise between your honour and repugnance--repugnance! have I lived to say that word?--know that your fortune is not at your own disposal. Save the small forfeit that awaits your non-compliance with my uncle's dying prayer, the whole is settled peremptorily on yourself and your children; it is entailed,--you cannot alienate it. Thus, then, your generosity can never be evinced but to him on whom you bestow your hand. Ah, let me recall that melancholy scene. Your benefactor on his death-bed, your mother kneeling by his side, your hand clasped in mine, and those lips, with their latest breath, uttering at once a blessing and a command."

"Ah, cease, cease, my lord!" said Evelyn, sobbing.

"No; bid me not cease before you tell me you will be mine. Beloved Evelyn, I may hope,--you will not resolve against me?"

"No," said Evelyn, raising her eyes and struggling for composure; "I feel too well what should be my duty; I will endeavor to perform it. Ask me no more now. I will struggle to answer you as you wish hereafter."

Lord Vargrave, resolved to push to the utmost the advantage he had gained, was about to reply when he heard a step behind him; and turning round, quickly and discomposed, beheld a venerable form approaching them. The occasion was lost: Evelyn also turned; and seeing who was the intruder, sprang towards him almost with a cry of joy.

The new comer was a man who had passed his seventieth year; but his old age was green, his step light, and on his healthful and benignant countenance time had left but few furrows. He was clothed in black; and his locks, which were white as snow, escaped from the broad hat, and almost touched his shoulders.

The old man smiled upon Evelyn, and kissed her forehead fondly. He then turned to Lord Vargrave, who, recovering his customary self-possession, advanced to meet him with extended hand.

"My dear Mr. Aubrey, this is a welcome surprise. I heard you were not at the vicarage, or I would have called on you."

"Your lordship honours me," replied the curate. "For the first time for thirty years I have been thus long absent from my cure; but I am now returned, I hope, to end my days among my flock."

"And what," asked Vargrave,--"what--if the question be not presumptuous--occasioned your unwilling absence?"

"My lord," replied the old man, with a gentle smile, "a new vicar has been appointed. I went to him, to proffer an humble prayer that I might remain amongst those whom I regarded as my children. I have buried one

generation, I have married another, I have baptized a third."

"You should have had the vicarage itself; you should be better provided for, my dear Mr. Aubrey; I will speak to the Lord Chancellor."

Five times before had Lord Vargrave uttered the same promise, and the curate smiled to hear the familiar words.

"The vicarage, my lord, is a family living, and is now vested in a young man who requires wealth more than I do. He has been kind to me, and re-established me among my flock; I would not leave them for a bishopric. My child," continued the curate, addressing Evelyn with great affection, "you are surely unwell,--you are paler than when I left you."

Evelyn clung fondly to his arm, and smiled--her old gay smile--as she replied to him. They took the way towards the house.

The curate remained with them for an hour. There was a mingled sweetness and dignity in his manner which had in it something of the primitive character we poetically ascribe to the pastors of the Church. Lady Vargrave seemed to vie with Evelyn which should love him the most. When he retired to his home, which was not many yards distant from the cottage, Evelyn, pleading a headache, sought her chamber, and Lumley, to soothe his mortification, turned to Caroline, who had seated herself by his side. Her conversation amused him, and her evident admiration flattered. While Lady Vargrave absented herself, in motherly anxiety, to attend on Evelyn, while Mrs. Leslie was occupied at her frame, and Mrs. Merton looked on, and talked indolently to the old lady of rheumatism and sermons, of children's complaints and servants' misdemeanours,--the conversation between Lord Vargrave and Caroline, at first gay and animated, grew gradually more sentimental and subdued; their voices took a lower tone, and Caroline sometimes turned away her head and blushed.

CHAPTER XI.

THERE stands the Messenger of Truth--there stands
The Legate of the skies.--COWPER.

FROM that night Lumley found no opportunity for private conversation with Evelyn; she evidently shunned to meet with him alone. She was ever with her mother or Mrs. Leslie or the good curate, who spent much of his time at the cottage; for the old man had neither wife nor children, he was alone at home, he had learned to make his home with the widow and her daughter. With them he was an object of the tenderest affection, of the deepest veneration. Their love delighted him, and he returned it with the fondness of a parent and the benevolence of a pastor. He was a rare character, that village priest!

Born of humble parentage, Edward Aubrey had early displayed abilities which attracted the notice of a wealthy proprietor, who was not displeased to affect the patron. Young Aubrey was sent to school, and

thence to college as a sizar: he obtained several prizes, and took a high degree. Aubrey was not without the ambition and the passions of youth: he went into the world, ardent, inexperienced, and without a guide. He drew back before errors grew into crimes, or folly became a habit. It was nature and affection that reclaimed and saved him from either alternative,--fame or ruin. His widowed mother was suddenly stricken with disease. Blind and bedridden, her whole dependence was on her only son. This affliction called forth a new character in Edward Aubrey. This mother had stripped herself of so many comforts to provide for him,--he devoted his youth to her in return. She was now old and imbecile. With the mingled selfishness and sentiment of age, she would not come to London,--she would not move from the village where her husband lay buried, where her youth had been spent. In this village the able and ambitious young man buried his hopes and his talents; by degrees the quiet and tranquillity of the country life became dear to him. As steps in a ladder, so piety leads to piety, and religion grew to him a habit. He took orders and entered the Church. A disappointment in love ensued; it left on his mind and heart a sober and resigned melancholy, which at length mellowed into content. His profession and its sweet duties became more and more dear to him; in the hopes of the next world he forgot the ambition of the present. He did not seek to shine,--

"More skilled to raise the wretched than to rise."

His own birth made the poor his brothers, and their dispositions and wants familiar to him. His own early errors made him tolerant to the faults of others,--few men are charitable who remember not that they have sinned. In our faults lie the germs of virtues. Thus gradually and serenely had worn away his life--obscure but useful, calm but active,--a man whom "the great prizes" of the Church might have rendered an ambitious schemer, to whom a modest confidence gave the true pastoral power,--to conquer the world within himself, and to sympathize with the wants of others. Yes, he was a rare character, that village priest!

CHAPTER XII.

TOUT notre raisonnement se reduit a ceder au sentiment.*--PASCAL.

* "All our reasoning reduces itself to yielding to sentiment."

LORD VARGRAVE, who had no desire to remain alone with the widow when the guests were gone, arranged his departure for the same day as that fixed for Mrs. Merton's; and as their road lay together for several miles, it was settled that they should all dine at----, whence Lord Vargrave would proceed to London. Failing to procure a second chance-interview with Evelyn, and afraid to demand a formal one--for he felt the insecurity of the ground he stood on--Lord Vargrave, irritated and somewhat mortified, sought, as was his habit, whatever amusement was in his reach. In the conversation of Caroline Merton--shrewd, worldly, and ambitious--he found the sort of plaything that he desired. They were thrown much together; but to Vargrave, at least, there appeared no danger in the intercourse;

and perhaps his chief object was to pique Evelyn, as well as to gratify his own spleen.

It was the evening before Evelyn's departure; the little party had been for the last hour dispersed; Mrs. Merton was in her own room, making to herself gratuitous and unnecessary occupation in seeing her woman _pack up_. It was just the kind of task that delighted her. To sit in a large chair and see somebody else at work--to say languidly, "Don't crumple that scarf, Jane; and where shall we put Miss Caroline's blue bonnet?"--gave her a very comfortable notion of her own importance and habits of business,--a sort of title to be the superintendent of a family and the wife of a rector. Caroline had disappeared, so had Lord Vargrave; but the first was supposed to be with Evelyn, the second, employed in writing letters,--at least, it was so when they had been last observed. Mrs. Leslie was alone in the drawing-room, and absorbed in anxious and benevolent thoughts on the critical situation of her young favourite, about to enter an age and a world the perils of which Mrs. Leslie had not forgotten.

It was at this time that Evelyn, forgetful of Lord Vargrave and his suit, of every one, of everything but the grief of the approaching departure, found herself alone in a little arbour that had been built upon the cliff to command the view of the sea below. That day she had been restless, perturbed; she had visited every spot consecrated by youthful recollections; she had clung with fond regret to every place in which she had held sweet converse with her mother. Of a disposition singularly warm and affectionate, she had often, in her secret heart, pined for a more yearning and enthusiastic love than it seemed in the subdued nature of Lady Vargrave to bestow. In the affection of the latter, gentle and never fluctuating as it was, there seemed to her a something wanting, which she could not define. She had watched that beloved face all the morning. She had hoped to see the tender eyes fixed upon her, and hear the meek voice exclaim, "I cannot part with my child!" All the gay pictures which the light-hearted Caroline drew of the scenes she was to enter had vanished away--now that the hour approached when her mother was to be left alone. Why was she to go? It seemed to her an unnecessary cruelty.

As she thus sat, she did not observe that Mr. Aubrey, who had seen her at a distance, was now bending his way to her; and not till he had entered the arbour, and taken her hand, did she waken from those reveries in which youth, the Dreamer and the Desirer, so morbidly indulges.

"Tears, my child?" said the curate. "Nay, be not ashamed of them; they become you in this hour. How we shall miss you! and you, too, will not forget us?"

"Forget you! Ah, no, indeed! But why should I leave you? Why will you not speak to my mother, implore her to let me remain? We were so happy till these strangers came. We did not think there was any other world,--_here_ there is world enough for me!"

"My poor Evelyn," said Mr. Aubrey, gently, "I have spoken to your mother

and to Mrs. Leslie; they have confided to me all the reasons for your departure, and I cannot but subscribe to their justice. You do not want many months of the age when you will be called upon to decide whether Lord Vargrave shall be your husband. Your mother shrinks from the responsibility of influencing your decision; and here, my child, inexperienced, and having seen so little of others, how can you know your own heart?"

"But, oh, Mr. Aubrey," said Evelyn, with an earnestness that overcame embarrassment, "have I a choice left to me? Can I be ungrateful, disobedient to him who was a father to me? Ought I not to sacrifice my own happiness? And how willingly would I do so, if my mother would smile on me approvingly!"

"My child," said the curate, gravely, "an old man is a bad judge of the affairs of youth; yet in this matter, I think your duty plain. Do not resolutely set yourself against Lord Vargrave's claim; do not persuade yourself that you must be unhappy in a union with him. Compose your mind, think seriously upon the choice before you, refuse all decision at the present moment; wait until the appointed time arrives, or, at least, more nearly approaches. Meanwhile, I understand that Lord Vargrave is to be a frequent visitor at Mrs. Merton's; there you will see him with others, his character will show itself. Study his principles, his disposition; examine whether he is one whom you can esteem and render happy: there may be a love without enthusiasm, and yet sufficient for domestic felicity, and for the employment of the affections. You will insensibly, too, learn from other parts of his character which he does not exhibit to us. If the result of time and examination be that you can cheerfully obey the late lord's dying wish, unquestionably it will be the happier decision. If not, if you still shrink from vows at which your heart now rebels, as unquestionably you may, with an acquitted conscience, become free. The best of us are imperfect judges of the happiness of others. In the woe or weal of a whole life, we must decide for ourselves. Your benefactor could not mean you to be wretched; and if he now, with eyes purified from all worldly mists, look down upon you, his spirit will approve your choice; for when we quit the world, all worldly ambition dies with us. What now to the immortal soul can be the title and the rank which on earth, with the desires of earth, your benefactor hoped to secure to his adopted child? This is my advice. Look on the bright side of things, and wait calmly for the hour when Lord Vargrave can demand your decision."

The words of the priest, which well defined her duty, inexpressibly soothed and comforted Evelyn; and the advice upon other and higher matters, which the good man pressed upon a mind so softened at that hour to receive religious impressions, was received with gratitude and respect. Subsequently their conversation fell upon Lady Vargrave,--a theme dear to both of them. The old man was greatly touched by the poor girl's unselfish anxiety for her mother's comfort, by her fears that she might be missed, in those little attentions which filial love alone can render; he was almost yet more touched when, with a less disinterested feeling, Evelyn added mournfully,--

"Yet why, after all, should I fancy she will so miss me? Ah, though I will not _dare_ complain of it, I feel still that she does not love me as I love her."

"Evelyn," said the curate, with mild reproach, "have I not said that your mother has known sorrow? And though sorrow does not annihilate affection, it subdues its expression, and moderates its outward signs."

Evelyn sighed, and said no more.

As the good old man and his young friend returned to the cottage, Lord Vargrave and Caroline approached them, emerging from an opposite part of the grounds. The former hastened to Evelyn with his usual gayety and frank address; and there was so much charm in the manner of a man, whom _apparently_ the world and its cares had never rendered artificial or reserved, that the curate himself was impressed by it. He thought that Evelyn might be happy with one amiable enough for a companion and wise enough for a guide. But old as he was, he had loved, and he knew that there are instincts in the heart which defy all our calculations.

While Lumley was conversing, the little gate that made the communication between the gardens and the neighbouring churchyard, through which was the nearest access to the village, creaked on its hinges, and the quiet and solitary figure of Lady Vargrave threw its shadow over the grass.

CHAPTER XIII.

AND I can listen to thee yet,
Can lie upon the plain;
And listen till I do beget
That golden time again.--WORDSWORTH.

IT was past midnight--hostess and guests had retired to repose--when Lady Vargrave's door opened gently. The lady herself was kneeling at the foot of the bed; the moonlight came through the half-drawn curtains of the casement, and by its ray her pale, calm features looked paler, and yet more hushed.

Evelyn, for she was the intruder, paused at the threshold till her mother rose from her devotions, and then she threw herself on Lady Vargrave's breast, sobbing as if her heart would break. Hers were the wild, generous, irresistible emotions of youth. Lady Vargrave, perhaps, had known them once; at least, she could sympathize with them now.

She strained her child to her bosom; she stroked back her hair, and kissed her fondly, and spoke to her soothingly.

"Mother," sobbed Evelyn, "I could not sleep, I could not rest. Bless me again, kiss me again; tell me that you love me--you cannot love me as I do you; but tell me that I am dear to you; tell me you will regret me, but not too much; tell me--" Here Evelyn paused, and could say no more.

"My best, my kindest Evelyn," said Lady Vargrave, "there is nothing on earth I love like you. Do not fancy I am ungrateful."

"Why do you say ungrateful?--your own child,--your only child!" And Evelyn covered her mother's face and hands with passionate tears and kisses.

At that moment, certain it is that Lady Vargrave's heart reproached her with not having, indeed, loved this sweet girl as she deserved. True, no mother was more mild, more attentive, more fostering, more anxious for a daughter's welfare; but Evelyn was right. The gushing fondness, the mysterious entering into every subtle thought and feeling, which should have characterized the love of such a mother to such a child, had been to outward appearance wanting. Even in this present parting there had been a prudence, an exercise of reasoning, that savoured more of duty than love. Lady Vargrave felt all this with remorse; she gave way to emotions new to her,--at least to exhibit; she wept with Evelyn, and returned her caresses with almost equal fervour. Perhaps, too, she thought at that moment of what love that warm nature was susceptible; and she trembled for her future fate. It was as a full reconciliation--that mournful hour--between feelings on either side, which something mysterious seemed to have checked before; and that last night the mother and the child did not separate,--the same couch contained them: and when, worn out with some emotions which she could not reveal, Lady Vargrave fell into the sleep of exhaustion, Evelyn's arm was round her, and Evelyn's eyes watched her with pious and anxious love as the gray morning dawned.

She left her mother still sleeping, when the sun rose, and went silently down into the dear room below, and again busied herself in a thousand little provident cares, which she wondered she had forgot before.

The carriages were at the door before the party had assembled at the melancholy breakfast-table. Lord Vargrave was the last to appear.

"I have been like all cowards," said he, seating himself,--"anxious to defer an evil as long as possible; a bad policy, for it increases the worst of all pains,--that of suspense."

Mrs. Merton had undertaken the duties that appertain to the "hissing urn." "You prefer coffee, Lord Vargrave? Caroline, my dear--"

Caroline passed the cup to Lord Vargrave, who looked at her hand as he took it--there was a ring on one of those slender fingers never observed there before. Their eyes met, and Caroline coloured. Lord Vargrave turned to Evelyn, who, pale as death, but tearless and speechless, sat beside her mother; he attempted in vain to draw her into conversation. Evelyn, who desired to restrain her feelings, would not trust herself to speak.

Mrs. Merton, ever undisturbed and placid, continued to talk on: to offer congratulations on the weather,--it was such a lovely day; and they should be off so early; it would be so well arranged,--they should be in

such good time to dine at-----, and then go three stages after dinner; the moon would be up.

"But," said Lord Vargrave, "as I am to go with you as far as-----, where our roads separate, I hope I am not condemned to go alone, with my red box, two old newspapers, and the blue devils. Have pity on me."

"Perhaps you will take Grandmamma, then?" whispered Caroline, archly.

Lumley shrugged his shoulders, and replied in the same tone,--

"Yes,--provided you keep to the proverb, 'Les extremes se touchent,' and the lovely grandchild accompany the venerable grandmamma."

"What would Evelyn say?" retorted Caroline.

Lumley sighed, and made no answer.

Mrs. Merton, who had hung fire while her daughter was carrying on this "aside," now put in,--

"Suppose I and Caroline take your _britzka_, and you go in our old coach with Evelyn and Mrs. Leslie?"

Lumley looked delightedly at the speaker, and then glanced at Evelyn; but Mrs. Leslie said very gravely, "No, _we_ shall feel too much in leaving this dear place to be gay companions for Lord Vargrave. We shall all meet at dinner; or," she added, after a pause, "if this be uncourteous to Lord Vargrave, suppose Evelyn and myself take his carriage and, he accompanies you?"

"Agreed," said Mrs. Merton, quietly; "and now I will just go and see about the strawberry-plants and slips--it was so kind in you, dear Lady Vargrave, to think of them."

An hour had elapsed, and Evelyn was gone! She had left her maiden home, she had wept her last farewell on her mother's bosom, the sound of the carriage-wheels had died away; but still Lady Vargrave lingered on the threshold, still she gazed on the spot where the last glimpse of Evelyn had been caught. A sense of dreariness and solitude passed into her soul: the very sunlight, the spring, the songs of the birds, made loneliness more desolate.

Mechanically, at last, she moved away, and with slow steps and downcast eyes passed through the favourite walk that led into the quiet burial-ground. The gate closed upon her, and now the lawn, the gardens, the haunts of Evelyn, were solitary as the desert itself; but the daisy opened to the sun, and the bee murmured along the blossoms, not the less blithely for the absence of all human life. In the bosom of Nature there beats no heart for man!

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK, ALICE BY LYTTON, BOOK I ***

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