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#211 in our series by Edward Bulwer Lytton

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BOOK IX.

"Woe, woe: all things are clear."--SOPHOCLES: OEd. Tyr. 754.

CHAPTER I.

THE privilege that statesmen ever claim,
Who private interest never yet pursued,
But still pretended 'twas for others' good.

.

From hence on every humorous wind that veered
With shifted sails a several course you steered.

Absalom and Achitophel, Part ii.

LORD VARGRAVE had for more than a fortnight remained at the inn at M-----, too ill to be removed with safety in a season so severe. Even when at last, by easy stages, he reached London, he was subjected to a relapse; and his recovery was slow and gradual. Hitherto unused to sickness, he bore his confinement with extreme impatience; and against the commands of his physician insisted on continuing to transact his official business, and consult with his political friends in his sick-room; for Lumley knew well, that it is most pernicious to public men to be considered failing in health,--turkeys are not more unfeeling to a sick brother than politicians to an ailing statesman; they give out that his head is touched, and see paralysis and epilepsy in every speech and every despatch. The time, too, nearly ripe for his great schemes, made it doubly necessary that he should exert himself, and prevent being shelved with a plausible excuse of tender compassion for his infirmities. As soon therefore as he learned that Legard had left Paris, he thought himself safe for a while in that quarter, and surrendered his thoughts wholly to his ambitious projects. Perhaps, too, with the susceptible vanity of a middle-aged man, who has had his *_bonnes fortunes_*, Lumley deemed, with Rousseau, that a lover, pale and haggard--just raised from the bed of suffering--is more interesting to friendship than attractive to love. He and Rousseau were, I believe, both mistaken; but that is a matter of opinion: they both thought very coarsely of women,--one from having no sentiment, and the other from having a sentiment that was but a disease. At length, just as Lumley was sufficiently recovered to quit his house, to appear at his office, and declare that his illness had wonderfully improved his constitution, intelligence from Paris, the more startling from being wholly unexpected, reached him. From Caroline he learned that Maltravers had proposed to Evelyn, and been accepted. From Maltravers himself he heard the confirmation of the news. The last letter was short, but kind and manly. He addressed Lord Vargrave as Evelyn's guardian; slightly alluded to the scruples he had entertained till Lord Vargrave's suit was broken off; and feeling the subject too delicate for a letter, expressed a desire to confer with Lumley respecting Evelyn's wishes as to certain arrangements in her property.

And for this was it that Lumley had toiled! for this had he visited Lisle Court! and for this had he been stricken down to the bed of pain! Was it only to make his old rival the purchaser, if he so pleased it, of the possessions of his own family? Lumley thought at that moment less of Evelyn than of Lisle Court. As he woke from the stupor and the first fit of rage into which these epistles cast him, the recollection of the story he had heard from Mr. Onslow flashed across him. Were his suspicions true, what a secret he would possess! How fate might yet befriend him! Not a moment was to be lost. Weak, suffering as he still was, he ordered his carriage, and hastened down to Mrs. Leslie.

In the interview that took place, he was careful not to alarm her into discretion. He managed the conference with his usual consummate dexterity. He did not appear to believe that there had been any actual connection between Alice and the supposed Butler. He began by simply asking whether Alice had ever, in early life, been acquainted with a person of that name, and when residing in the neighbourhood of -----.

The change of countenance, the surprised start of Mrs. Leslie, convinced him that his suspicions were true.

"And why do you ask, my lord?" said the old lady. "Is it to ascertain this point that you have done me the honour to visit me?"

"Not exactly, my dear madam," said Lumley, smiling. "But I am going to C----- on business; and besides that I wished to give an account of your health to Evelyn, whom I shall shortly see at Paris, I certainly did desire to know whether it would be any gratification to Lady Vargrave, for whom I have the deepest regard, to renew her acquaintance with the said Mr. Butler."

"What does your lordship know of him? What is he; who is he?"

"Ah, my dear lady, you turn the tables on me, I see,--for my one question you would give me fifty. But, seriously, before I answer you, you must tell me whether Lady Vargrave does know a gentleman of that name; yet, indeed, to save trouble, I may as well inform you, that I know it was under that name that she resided at C-----, when my poor uncle first made her acquaintance. What I ought to ask is this,--supposing Mr. Butler be still alive, and a gentleman of character and fortune, would it please Lady Vargrave to meet with him once more?"

"I cannot tell you," said Mrs. Leslie, sinking back in her chair, much embarrassed.

"Enough, I shall not stir further in the matter. Glad to see you looking so well. Fine place, beautiful trees. Any commands at C-----, or any message for Evelyn?"

Lumley rose to depart.

"Stay," said Mrs. Leslie, recalling all the pining, restless, untiring love that Lady Vargrave had manifested towards the lost, and feeling that

she ought not to sacrifice to slight scruples the chance of happiness for her friend's future years,--"stay; I think this question you should address to Lady Vargrave,--or shall I?"

"As you will,--perhaps I had better write. Good-day," and Vargrave hurried away.

He had satisfied himself, but he had another yet to satisfy,--and that, from certain reasons known but to himself, without bringing the third person in contact with Lady Vargrave. On arriving at C----- he wrote, therefore, to Lady Vargrave as follows:--

MY DEAR FRIEND,--Do not think me impertinent or intrusive--but you know me too well for that. A gentleman of the name of Butler is exceedingly anxious to ascertain if you once lived near -----, in a pretty little cottage,--Dove, or Dale, or Dell cottage (some such appellation),--and if you remember a person of his name. Should you care to give a reply to these queries, send me a line addressed to London, which I shall get on my way to Paris.

Yours most truly,

VARGRAVE.

As soon as he had concluded, and despatched this letter, Vargrave wrote to Mr. Winsley as follows:--

MY DEAR SIR,--I am so unwell as to be unable to call on you, or even to see any one, however agreeable (nay, the more agreeable the more exciting!). I hope, however, to renew our personal acquaintance before quitting C-----. Meanwhile, oblige me with a line to say if I did not understand you to signify that you could, if necessary, prove that Lady Vargrave once resided in this town as Mrs. Butler, a very short time before she married my uncle, under the name of Cameron, in Devonshire; and had she not also at that time a little girl,--an infant, or nearly so,--who must necessarily be the young lady who is my uncle's heiress, Miss Evelyn Cameron. My reason for thus troubling you is obvious. As Miss Cameron's guardian, I have very shortly to wind up certain affairs connected with my uncle's will; and, what is more, there is some property bequeathed by the late Mr. Butler, which may make it necessary to prove identity.

Truly yours,

VARGRAVE.

The answer to the latter communication ran thus:--

"MY LORD,--I am very sorry to hear your lordship is so unwell, and will pay my respects to-morrow. I certainly can swear that the present Lady Vargrave was the Mrs. Butler who resided at C-----, and taught music. And as the child with her was of the same sex, and about the same age as Miss Cameron, there can, I should think, be no difficulty in establishing the identity between that young lady and the child Lady Vargrave had by her first husband, Mr. Butler; but of this, of course, I cannot speak.

"I have the honour, etc."

The next morning Vargrave despatched a note to Mr. Winsley, saying that his health required him to return to town immediately,--and to town, in fact, he hastened. The day after his arrival, he received, in a hurried hand--strangely blurred and blotted, perhaps by tears--this short letter:--

For Heaven's sake, tell me what you mean! Yes, yes, I did once reside at Dale Cottage, I did know one of the name of Butler! Has he discovered the name of bear? Where is he? I implore you to write, or let me see you before you leave England!

ALICE VARGRAVE.

Lumley smiled triumphantly when he read and carefully put up this letter.

"I must now amuse and put her off--at all events for the present."

In answer to Lady Vargrave's letter, he wrote a few lines to say that he had only heard through a third person (a lawyer) of a Mr. Butler residing somewhere abroad, who had wished these inquiries to be made; that he believed it only related to some disposition of property; that, perhaps, the Mr. Butler who made the inquiry was heir to the Mr. Butler she had known; that he could learn nothing else at present, as the purport of her reply must be sent abroad,--the lawyer would or could say nothing more; that directly he received a further communication it should be despatched to her, that he was most affectionately and most truly hers.

The rest of that morning Vargrave devoted to Lord Saxingham and his allies; and declaring, and believing, that he should not be long absent at Paris, he took an early dinner, and was about once more to commit himself to the risks of travel, when, as he crossed the hall, Mr. Douce came hastily upon him.

"My lord--my lord--I must have a word with your I-I-lordship;--you are going to--that is--" (and the little man looked frightened) "you intend to--to go to--that is--ab-ab-ab--"

"Not abscond, Mr. Douce; come into the library: I am in a great hurry, but I have always time for you. What's the matter?"

"Why, then, my lord,--I-I have heard nothing m-m-more from your lordship about the pur-pur--"

"Purchase?--I am going to Paris, to settle all particulars with Miss Cameron; tell the lawyers so."

"May--may--we draw out the money to--to--show--that--that we are in earnest? Otherwise I fear--that is, I suspect--I mean I know, that Colonel Maltravers will be off the bargain."

"Why, Mr. Douce, really I must just see my ward first; but you shall hear from me in a day or two;--and the ten thousand pounds I owe you!"

"Yes, indeed, the ten--ten--ten!--my partner is very--"

"Anxious for it, no doubt! My compliments to him. God bless you!--take care of yourself,--must be off to save the packet;" and Vargrave hurried away, muttering, "Heaven sends money, and the devil sends duns!"

Douce gasped like a fish for breath, as his eyes followed the rapid steps of Vargrave; and there was an angry scowl of disappointment on his small features. Lumley, by this time, seated in his carriage, and wrapped up in his cloak, had forgotten the creditor's existence, and whispered to his aristocratic secretary, as he bent his head out of the carriage window, "I have told Lord Saxingham to despatch you to me, if there is any--the least--necessity for me in London. I leave you behind, Howard, because your sister being at court, and your cousin with our notable premier, you will find out every change in the wind--you understand. And, I say, Howard, don't think I forget your kindness!--you know that no man ever served me in vain! Oh, there's that horrid little Douce behind you,--tell them to drive on!"

CHAPTER II.

HEARD you that?

What prodigy of horror is disclosing?--LILLO: Fatal Curiosity.

THE unhappy companion of Cesarini's flight was soon discovered and recaptured; but all search for Cesarini himself proved ineffectual, not only in the neighbourhood of St. Cloud, but in the surrounding country and in Paris. The only comfort was in thinking that his watch would at least preserve him for some time from the horrors of want; and that by the sale of the trinket, he might be traced. The police, too, were set at work,--the vigilant police of Paris! Still day rolled on day, and no tidings. The secret of the escape was carefully concealed from Teresa; and public cares were a sufficient excuse for the gloom on De Montaigne's brow.

Evelyn heard from Maltravers with mingled emotions of compassion, grief, and awe the gloomy tale connected with the history of the maniac. She

wept for the fate of Florence; she shuddered at the curse that had fallen on Cesarini; and perhaps Maltravers grew dearer to her from the thought that there was so much in the memories of the past that needed a comforter and a soother.

They returned to Paris, affianced and plighted lovers; and then it was that Evelyn sought carefully and resolutely to banish from her mind all recollection, all regret, of the absent Legard: she felt the solemnity of the trust confided in her, and she resolved that no thought of hers should ever be of a nature to gall the generous and tender spirit that had confided its life of life to her care. The influence of Maltravers over her increased in their new and more familiar position, and yet still it partook too much of veneration, too little of passion; but that might be her innocence and youth. He, at least, was sensible of no want,--she had chosen him from the world; and fastidious as he deemed himself, he reposed, without a doubt, on the security of her faith. None of those presentiments which had haunted him when first betrothed to Florence disturbed him now. The affection of one so young and so guileless seemed to bring back to him all his own youth--we are ever young while the young can love us! Suddenly, too, the world took to his eyes a brighter and fairer aspect. Hope, born again, reconciled him to his career and to his race! The more he listened to Evelyn, the more he watched every evidence of her docile but generous nature, the more he felt assured that he had found at last a heart suited to his own. Her beautiful serenity of temper, cheerful, yet never fitful or unquiet, gladdened him with its insensible contagion. To be with Evelyn was like basking in the sunshine of some happy sky! It was an inexpressible charm to one wearied with "the hack sights and sounds" of this jaded world,--to watch the ever-fresh and sparkling the thoughts and fancies which came from a soul so new to life! It enchanted one, painfully fastidious in what relates to the true nobility of character, that, however various the themes discussed, no low or mean thought ever sullied those beautiful lips. It was not the mere innocence of inexperience, but the moral incapability of guile, that charmed him in the companion he had chosen on his path to Eternity! He was also delighted to notice Evelyn's readiness of resources: she had that faculty, without which woman has no independence from the world, no pledge that domestic retirement will not soon languish into wearisome monotony,--the faculty of making trifles contribute to occupation or amusement; she was easily pleased, and yet she so soon reconciled herself to disappointment. He felt, and chid his own dulness for not feeling it before, that, young and surpassingly lovely as she was, she required no stimulant from the heated pursuits and the hollow admiration of the crowd.

"Such," thought he, "are the natures that alone can preserve through years the poetry of the first passionate illusion, that can alone render wedlock the seal that confirms affection, and not the mocking ceremonial that vainly consecrates its grave!"

Maltravers, as we have seen, formally wrote to Lumley some days after their return to Paris. He would have written also to Lady Vargrave, but Evelyn thought it best to prepare her mother by a letter from herself.

Miss Cameron now wanted but a few weeks to the age of eighteen, at which she was to be the sole mistress of her own destiny. On arriving at that age the marriage was to take place. Valerie heard with sincere delight of the new engagement her friend had formed. She eagerly sought every opportunity to increase her intimacy with Evelyn, who was completely won by her graceful kindness; the result of Valerie's examination was, that she did not wonder at the passionate love of Maltravers, but that her deep knowledge of the human heart (that knowledge so remarkable in the women of her country!) made her doubt how far it was adequately returned, how far Evelyn deceived herself. Her first satisfaction became mingled with anxiety, and she relied more for the future felicity of her friend on Evelyn's purity of thought and general tenderness of heart than on the exclusiveness and ardour of her love. Alas! few at eighteen are not too young for the irrevocable step,--and Evelyn was younger than her years! One evening at Madame de Ventadour's Maltravers asked Evelyn if she had yet heard from Lady Vargrave. Evelyn expressed her surprise that she had not, and the conversation fell, as was natural, upon Lady Vargrave herself. "Is she as fond of music as you are?" asked Maltravers.

"Yes, indeed, I think so--and of the songs of a certain person in particular; they always had for her an indescribable charm. Often have I heard her say that to read your writings was like talking to an early friend. Your name and genius seemed to make her solitary connection with the great world. Nay--but you will not be angry--I half think it was her enthusiasm, so strange and rare, that first taught me interest in yourself."

"I have a double reason, then, for loving your mother," said Maltravers, much pleased and flattered. "And does she not like Italian music?"

"Not much; she prefers some rather old-fashioned German airs, very simple, but very touching."

"My own early passion," said Maltravers, more and more interested.

"But there are also one or two English songs which I have occasionally, but very seldom, heard her sing. One in especial affects her so deeply, even when she plays the air, that I have always attached to it a certain mysterious sanctity. I should not like to sing it before a crowd, but to-morrow, when you call on me, and we are alone--"

"Ah, to-morrow I will not fail to remind you."

Their conversation ceased; yet, somehow or other, that night when he retired to rest the recollection of it haunted Maltravers. He felt a vague, unaccountable curiosity respecting this secluded and solitary mother; all concerning her early fate seemed so wrapped in mystery. Cleveland, in reply to his letter, had informed him that all inquiries respecting the birth and first marriage of Lady Vargrave had failed. Evelyn evidently knew but little of either, and he felt a certain delicacy in pressing questions which might be ascribed to the inquisitiveness of a vulgar family pride. Moreover, lovers have so much to say to each other, that he had not time to talk at length to Evelyn

about third persons. He slept ill that night,--dark and boding dreams disturbed his slumber. He rose late and dejected by presentiments he could not master: his morning meal was scarcely over, and he had already taken his hat to go to Evelyn's for comfort and sunshine, when the door opened, and he was surprised by the entrance of Lord Vargrave.

Lumley seated himself with a formal gravity very unusual to him, and as if anxious to waive unnecessary explanations, began as follows, with a serious and impressive voice and aspect:--

"Maltravers, of late years we have been estranged from each other. I do not presume to dictate to you your friendships or your dislikes. Why this estrangement has happened you alone can determine. For my part I am conscious of no offence; that which I was I am still. It is you who have changed. Whether it be the difference of our political opinions, or any other and more secret cause, I know not. I lament, but it is now too late to attempt to remove it. If you suspect me of ever seeking, or even wishing, to sow dissension between yourself and my ill-fated cousin, now no more, you are mistaken. I ever sought the happiness and union of you both. And yet, Maltravers, you then came between me and an early and cherished dream. But I suffered in silence; my course was at least disinterested, perhaps generous: let it pass. A second time you cross my path,--you win from me a heart I had long learned to consider mine. You have no scruple of early friendship, you have no forbearance towards acknowledged and affianced ties. You are my rival with Evelyn Cameron, and your suit has prospered."

"Vargrave," said Maltravers, "you have spoken frankly; and I will reply with an equal candour. A difference of tastes, tempers, and opinions led us long since into opposite paths. I am one who cannot disunite public morality from private virtue. From motives best known to you, but which I say openly I hold to have been those of interest or ambition, you did not change your opinions (there is no sin in that), but retaining them in private, professed others in public, and played with the destinies of mankind as if they were but counters to mark a mercenary game. This led me to examine your character with more searching eyes; and I found it one I could no longer trust. With respect to the Dead, let the pall drop over that early grave,--I acquit you of all blame. He who sinned has suffered more than would atone the crime! You charge me with my love to Evelyn. Pardon me, but I seduced no affection, I have broken no tie. Not till she was free in heart and in hand to choose between us, did I hint at love. Let me think that a way may be found to soften one portion at least of the disappointment you cannot but feel acutely."

"Stay!" said Lord Vargrave (who, plunged in a gloomy revery, had scarcely seemed to hear the last few sentences of his rival): "stay, Maltravers. Speak not of love to Evelyn! A horrible foreboding tells me that, a few hours hence, you would rather pluck out your tongue by the roots than couple the words of love with the thought of that unfortunate girl! Oh, if I were vindictive, what awful triumph would await me now! What retaliation on your harsh judgment, your cold contempt, your momentary and wretched victory over me! Heaven is my witness, that my only sentiment is that of terror and woe! Maltravers, in your earliest youth,

did you form connection with one whom they called Alice Darvil?"

"Alice! merciful Heaven! what of her?"

"Did you never know that the Christian name of Evelyn's mother is Alice?"

"I never asked, I never knew; but it is a common name," faltered Maltravers.

"Listen to me," resumed Vargrave: "with Alice Darvil you lived in the neighbourhood of -----, did you not?"

"Go on, go on!"

"You took the name of Butler; by that name Alice Darvil was afterwards known in the town in which my uncle resided--there are gaps in the history that I cannot of my own knowledge fill up,--she taught music; my uncle became enamoured of her, but he was vain and worldly. She removed into Devonshire, and he married her there, under the name of Cameron, by which name he hoped to conceal from the world the lowness of her origin, and the humble calling she had followed. Hold! do not interrupt me. Alice had one daughter, as was supposed, by a former marriage; that daughter was the offspring of him whose name she bore--yes, of the false Butler!--that daughter is Evelyn Cameron!"

"Liar! devil!" cried Maltravers, springing to his feet, as if a shot had pierced his heart. "Proofs! proofs!"

"Will these suffice?" said Vargrave, as he drew forth the letters of Winsley and Lady Vargrave. Maltravers took them, but it was some moments before he could dare to read. He supported himself with difficulty from falling to the ground; there was a gurgle in his throat like the sound of the death-rattle; at last he read, and dropped the letters from his hand.

"Wait me here," he said very faintly, and moved mechanically to the door.

"Hold!" said Lord Vargrave, laying his hand upon Ernest's arm. "Listen to me for Evelyn's sake, for her mother's. You are about to seek Evelyn,--be it so! I know that you possess the god-like gift of self-control. You will not suffer her to learn that her mother has done that which dishonours alike mother and child? You will not consummate your wrong to Alice Darvil by robbing her of the fruit of a life of penitence and remorse? You will not unveil her shame to her own daughter? Convince yourself, and master yourself while you do so!"

"Fear me not," said Maltravers, with a terrible smile; "I will not afflict my conscience with a double curse. As I have sowed, so must I reap. Wait me here!"

CHAPTER III.

. . . MISERY

That gathers force each moment as it rolls,
And must, at last, o'erwhelm me.--LILLO: Fatal Curiosity.

MALTRIVERS found Evelyn alone; she turned towards him with her usual sweet smile of welcome; but the smile vanished at once, as her eyes met his changed and working countenance; cold drops stood upon the rigid and marble brow, the lips writhed as if in bodily torture, the muscles of the face had fallen, and there was a wildness which appalled her in the fixed and feverish brightness of the eyes.

"You are ill, Ernest,--dear Ernest, you are ill,--your look freezes me!"

"Nay, Evelyn," said Maltravers, recovering himself by one of those efforts of which men who have suffered without sympathy are alone capable,--"nay, I am better now; I have been ill--very ill--but I am better!"

"Hill and I not know of it?" She attempted to take his hand as she spoke. Maltravers recoiled.

"It is fire! it burns! Avaunt!" he cried, frantically. "O Heaven! spare me, spare me!"

Evelyn was not seriously alarmed; she gazed on him with the tenderest compassion. Was this one of those moody and overwhelming paroxysms to which it had been whispered abroad that he was subject? Strange as it may seem, despite her terror, he was dearer to her in that hour--as she believed, of gloom and darkness--than in all the glory of his majestic intellect, or all the blandishments of his soft address.

"What has happened to you?" she said, approaching him again; "have you seen Lord Vargrave? I know that he has arrived, for his servant has been here to say so; has he uttered anything to distress you? or has--" (she added falteringly and timidly)--"has poor Evelyn offended you? Speak to me,--only speak!"

Maltravers turned, and his face was now calm and serene save by its extreme and almost ghastly paleness, no trace of the hell within him could be discovered.

"Pardon me," said he, gently, "I know not this morning what I say or do; think not of it, think not of me,--it will pass away when I hear your voice."

"Shall I sing to you the words I spoke of last night? See, I have them ready; I know them by heart, but I thought you might like to read them, they are so full of simple but deep feeling."

Maltravers took the song from her hands, and bent over the paper; at first, the letters seemed dim and indistinct, for there was a mist before his eyes; but at last a chord of memory was struck,--he recalled the words: they were some of those he had composed for Alice in the first

days of their delicious intercourse,--links of the golden chain, in which he had sought to bind the spirit of knowledge to that of love.

"And from whom," said he, in a faint voice, as he calmly put down the verses,--"from whom did your mother learn these words?"

"I know not; some dear friend, years ago, composed and gave them to her. It must have been one very dear to her, to judge by the effect they still produce."

"Think you," said Maltravers, in a hollow voice, "think you IT WAS YOUR FATHER?"

"My father! She never speaks of him! I have been early taught to shun all allusion to his memory. My father!--it is probable; yes, it may have been my father; whom else could she have loved so fondly?"

There was a long silence; Evelyn was the first to break it.

"I have heard from my mother to-day, Ernest; her letter alarms me,--I scarce know why!"

"Ah! and how--"

"It is hurried and incoherent,--almost wild: she says she has learned some intelligence that has unsettled and unstrung her mind; she has requested me to inquire if any one I am acquainted with has heard of, or met abroad, some person of the name of Butler. You start!--have you known one of that name?"

"!--did your mother never allude to that name before?"

"Never!--and yet, once I remember--"

"What?"

That I was reading an account in the papers of the sudden death of some Mr. Butler; and her agitation made a powerful and strange impression upon me,--in fact, she fainted, and seemed almost delirious when she recovered; she would not rest till I had completed the account, and when I came to the particulars of his age, etc. (he was old, I think) she clasped her hands, and wept; but they seemed tears of joy. The name is so common--whom of that name have you known?"

"It is no matter. Is that your mother's letter; is that her handwriting?"

"Yes;" and Evelyn gave the letter to Maltravers. He glanced over the characters; he had once or twice seen Lady Vargrave's handwriting before, and had recognized no likeness between that handwriting and such early specimens of Alice's art as he had witnessed so many years ago; but now, "trifles light as air" had grown "confirmation strong as proof of Holy Writ,"--he thought he detected Alice in every line of the hurried and

blotted scroll; and when his eye rested on the words, "Your affectionate MOTHER, _Alice_!" his blood curdled in his veins.

"It is strange!" said he, still struggling for self-composure; "strange that I never thought of asking her name before! Alice! her name is Alice?"

"A sweet name, is it not? It accords so well with her simple character--how you would love her!"

As she said this, Evelyn turned to Maltravers with enthusiasm, and again she was startled by his aspect; for again it was haggard, distorted, and convulsed.

"Oh, if you love me," she cried, "do send immediately for advice! And yet; is it illness, Ernest, or is it some grief that you hide from me?"

"It is illness, Evelyn," said Maltravers, rising: and his knees knocked together. "I am not fit even for your companionship,--I will go home."

"And send instantly for advice?"

"Ay; it waits me there already."

"Thank Heaven! and you will write to me one little word--to relieve me? I am so uneasy!"

"I will write to you."

"This evening?"

"Ay!"

"Now go,--I will not detain you."

He walked slowly to the door, but when he reached it he turned, and catching her anxious gaze, he opened his arms; overpowered with strange fear and affectionate sympathy, she burst into passionate tears; and surprised out of the timidity and reserve which had hitherto characterized her pure and meek attachment to him, she fell on his breast, and sobbed aloud. Maltravers raised his hands, and, placing them solemnly on her young head, his lips muttered as if in prayer. He paused, and strained her to his heart; but he shunned that parting kiss, which, hitherto, he had so fondly sought. That embrace was one of agony, and not of rapture; and yet Evelyn dreamed not that he designed it for the last!

Maltravers re-entered the room in which he had left Lord Vargrave, who still awaited his return.

He walked up to Lumley, and held out his hand. "You have saved me from a

dreadful crime,--from an everlasting remorse. I thank you!"

Hardened and frigid as his nature was, Lumley was touched; the movement of Maltravers took him by surprise. "It has been a dreadful duty, Ernest," said he, pressing the hand he held; "but to come, too, from _me_,--your rival!"

"Proceed, proceed, I pray you; explain all this--yet explanation! what do I want to know? Evelyn is my daughter,--Alice's child! For Heaven's sake, give me hope; say it is not so; say that she is Alice's child, but not _mine_! Father! father!--and they call it a holy name--it is a horrible one!"

"Compose yourself, my dear friend: recollect what you have escaped! You will recover this shock. Time, travel--"

"Peace, man,--peace! Now then I am calm! When Alice left me she had no child. I knew not that she bore within her the pledge of our ill-omened and erring love. Verily, the sins of my youth have arisen against me; and the curse has come home to roost!"

"I cannot explain to you all details."

"But why not have told me of this? Why not have warned me; why not have said to me, when my heart could have been satisfied by so sweet a tie, 'Thou hast a daughter: thou art not desolate'? Why reserve the knowledge of the blessing until it has turned to poison? Fiend that you are! you have waited this hour to gloat over the agony from which a word from you a year, nay, a month ago--a little month ago--might have saved me and her!"

Maltravers, as he spoke, approached Vargrave, with eyes sparkling with fierce passion, his hand clenched, his form dilated, the veins on his forehead swelled like cords. Lumley, brave as he was, recoiled.

"I knew not of this secret," said he, deprecatingly, "till a few days before I came hither; and I came hither at once to disclose it to you. Will you listen to me? I knew that my uncle had married a person much beneath him in rank; but he was guarded and cautious, and I knew no more, except that by a first husband that lady had one daughter,--Evelyn. A chain of accidents suddenly acquainted me with the rest."

Here Vargrave pretty faithfully repeated what he had learned from the brewer at C----, and from Mr. Onslow; but when he came to the tacit confirmation of all his suspicions received from Mrs. Leslie, he greatly exaggerated and greatly distorted the account. "Judge, then," concluded Lumley, "of the horror with which I heard that you had declared an attachment to Evelyn, and that it was returned. Ill as I was, I hastened hither: you know the rest. Are you satisfied?"

"I will go to Alice! I will learn from her own lips--yet, how can I meet her again? How say to her, 'I have taken from thee thy last hope,--I have broken thy child's heart'?"

"Forgive me, but I should confess to you, that, from all I can learn from Mrs. Leslie, Lady Vargrave has but one prayer, one hope in life,—that she may never again meet with her betrayer. You may, indeed, in her own letter perceive how much she is terrified by the thought of your discovering her. She has, at length, recovered peace of mind and tranquillity of conscience. She shrinks with dread from the prospect of ever again encountering one once so dear, now associated in her mind with recollections of guilt and sorrow. More than this, she is sensitively alive to the fear of shame, to the dread of detection. If ever her daughter were to know her sin, it would be to her as a death-blow. Yet in her nervous state of health, her ever-quick and uncontrollable feelings, if you were to meet her, she would disguise nothing, conceal nothing. The veil would be torn aside: the menials in her own house would tell the tale, and curiosity circulate, and scandal blacken the story of her early errors. No, Maltravers, at least wait awhile before you see her; wait till her mind can be prepared for such an interview, till precautions can be taken, till you yourself are in a calmer state of mind."

Maltravers fixed his piercing eyes on Lumley while he thus spoke, and listened in deep attention.

"It matters not," said he, after a long pause, "whether these be your real reasons for wishing to defer or prevent a meeting between Alice and myself. The affliction that has come upon me bursts with too clear and scorching a blaze of light for me to see any chance of escape or mitigation. Even if Evelyn were the daughter of Alice by another, she would be forever separated from me. The mother and the child! there is a kind of incest even in that thought! But such an alleviation of my anguish is forbidden to my reason. No, poor Alice, I will not disturb the repose thou hast won at last! Thou shalt never have the grief to know that our error has brought upon thy lover so black a doom! All is over! the world never shall find me again. Nothing is left for me but the desert and the grave!"

"Speak not so, Ernest," said Lord Vargrave, soothingly; "a little while, and you will recover this blow: your control over passion has, even in youth, inspired me with admiration and surprise; and now, in calmer years, and with such incentives to self-mastery, your triumph will come sooner than you think. Evelyn, too, is so young; she has not known you long; perhaps her love, after all, is that caused by some mystic, but innocent working of nature, and she would rejoice to call you 'father.' Happy years are yet in store for you."

Maltravers did not listen to these vain and hollow consolations. With his head drooping on his bosom, his whole form unnerved, the large tears rolling unheeded down his cheeks, he seemed the very picture of a broken-hearted man, whom fate never again could raise from despair. He, who had, for years, so cased himself in pride, on whose very front was engraved the victory over passion and misfortune, whose step had trod the earth in the royalty of the conqueror; the veriest slave that crawls bore not a spirit more humbled, fallen, or subdued! He who had looked with

haughty eyes on the infirmities of others, who had disdained to serve his race because of their human follies and partial frailties,--_he_, even _he_, the Pharisee of Genius,--had but escaped by a chance, and by the hand of the man he suspected and despised, from a crime at which nature herself recoils,--which all law, social and divine, stigmatizes as inexpiable, which the sternest imagination of the very heathen had invented as the gloomiest catastrophe that can befall the wisdom and the pride of mortals! But one step farther, and the fabulous OEdipus had not been more accursed!

Such thoughts as these, unformed, confused, but strong enough to bow him to the dust, passed through the mind of this wretched man. He had been familiar with grief, he had been dull to enjoyment; sad and bitter memories had consumed his manhood: but pride had been left him still; and he had dared in his secret heart to say, "I can defy Fate!" Now the bolt had fallen; Pride was shattered into fragments, Self-abasement was his companion, Shame sat upon his prostrate soul. The Future had no hope left in store. Nothing was left for him but to die!

Lord Vargrave gazed at him in real pain, in sincere compassion; for his nature, wily, deceitful, perfidious though it was, had cruelty only so far as was necessary to the unrelenting execution of his schemes. No pity could swerve him from a purpose; but he had enough of the man within him to feel pity not the less, even for his own victim! At length Maltravers lifted his head, and waved his hand gently to Lord Vargrave.

"All is now explained," said he, in a feeble voice; "our interview is over. I must be alone; I have yet to collect my reason, to commune calmly and deliberately with myself; I have to write to her--to invent, to lie,--I, who believed I could never, never utter, even to an enemy, what was false! And I must not soften the blow to her. I must not utter a word of love,--love, it is incest! I must endeavour brutally to crush out the very affection I created! She must hate me!--oh, _teach_ her to hate me! Blacken my name, traduce my motives,--let her believe them levity or perfidy, what you will. So will she forget me the sooner; so will she the easier bear the sorrow which the father brings upon the child. And _she_ has not sinned! O Heaven, the sin was mine! Let my punishment be a sacrifice that Thou wilt accept for her!"

Lord Vargrave attempted again to console; but this time the words died upon his lips. His arts failed him. Maltravers turned impatiently away and pointed to the door.

"I will see you again," said he, "before I quit Paris; leave your address below."

Vargrave was not, perhaps, unwilling to terminate a scene so painful: he muttered a few incoherent words, and abruptly withdrew. He heard the door locked behind him as he departed. Ernest Maltravers was alone!--what a solitude!

CHAPTER IV.

PITY me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold.--_Hamlet_.

LETTER FROM ERNEST MALTRAVERS TO EVELYN CAMERON.

EVELYN!

All that you have read of faithlessness and perfidy will seem tame to you when compared with that conduct which you are doomed to meet from me. We must part, and for ever. We have seen each other for the last time. It is bootless even to ask the cause. Believe that I am fickle, false, heartless,--that a whim has changed me, if you will. My resolve is unalterable. We meet no more even as friends. I do not ask you either to forgive or to remember me. Look on me as one wholly unworthy even of resentment! Do not think that I write this in madness or in fever or excitement. Judge me not by my seeming illness this morning. I invent no excuse, no extenuation, for my broken faith and perjured vows. Calmly, coldly, and deliberately I write; and thus writing, I renounce your love.

This language is wanton cruelty,--it is fiendish insult,--is it not, Evelyn? Am I not a villain? Are you not grateful for your escape? Do you not look on the past with a shudder at the precipice on which you stood?

I have done with this subject,--I turn to another. We are parted, Evelyn, and forever. Do not fancy,--I repeat, do not fancy that there is any error, any strange infatuation on my mind, that there is any possibility that the sentence can be annulled. It were almost easier to call the dead from the grave than bring us again together, as we were and as we hoped to be. Now that you are convinced of that truth, learn, as soon as you have recovered the first shock of knowing how much wickedness there is on earth,--learn to turn to the future for happier and more suitable ties than those you could have formed with me. You are very young; in youth our first impressions are lively but evanescent,--you will wonder hereafter at having fancied you loved me. Another and a fairer image will replace mine. This is what I desire and pray for. _As soon as I learn that you love another, that you are wedded to another, I will re-appear in the world; till then, I am a wanderer and an exile. Your hand alone can efface from my brow the brand of Cain!_ When I am gone, Lord Vargrave will probably renew his suit. I would rather you married one of your own years,--one whom you could love fondly, one who would chase away every remembrance of the wretch who now forsakes you. But perhaps I have mistaken Lord Vargrave's character; perhaps he may be worthier of you than I deemed (_I_ who set up for the censor of other men!); perhaps he may both win and deserve your affection.

Evelyn, farewell! God, who tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, will watch over you!

ERNEST MALTRAVERS.

CHAPTER V.

OUR acts our angels are, or good or ill,
The fatal shadows that walk by us still.--JOHN FLETCHER.

THE next morning came; the carriage was at the door of Maltravers, to bear him away he cared not whither. Where could he fly from memory? He had just despatched the letter to Evelyn,--a letter studiously written for the object of destroying all the affection to which he had so fondly looked as the last charm of life. He was now only waiting for Vargrave, to whom he had sent, and who hastened to obey the summons.

When Lumley arrived, he was shocked at the alteration which a single night had effected in the appearance of Maltravers; but he was surprised and relieved to find him calm and self-possessed.

"Vargrave," said Maltravers, "whatever our past coldness, henceforth I owe to you an eternal gratitude; and henceforth this awful secret makes between us an indissoluble bond. If I have understood you rightly, neither Alice nor other living being than yourself know that in me, Ernest Maltravers, stands the guilty object of Alice's first love. Let that secret still be kept; relieve Alice's mind from the apprehension of learning that the man who betrayed her yet lives: he will not live long! I leave time and method of explanation to your own judgment and acuteness. Now for Evelyn." Here Maltravers stated generally the tone of the letter he had written. Vargrave listened thoughtfully.

"Maltravers," said he, "it is right to try first the effect of your letter. But if it fail, if it only serve to inflame the imagination and excite the interest, if Evelyn still continue to love you, if that love preys upon her, if it should undermine health and spirit, if it should destroy her?"

Maltravers groaned. Lumley proceeded: "I say this not to wound you, but to provide against all circumstances. I too have spent the night in revolving what is best to be done in such a case; and this is the plan I have formed. Let us, if need be, tell the truth to Evelyn, robbing the truth only of its shame. Nay, nay, listen. Why not say that under a borrowed name and in the romance of early youth you knew and loved Alice (though in innocence and honour)? Your tender age, the difference of rank, forbade your union. Her father, discovering your clandestine correspondence, suddenly removed her from the country, and destroyed all clew for your inquiries. You lost sight of each other,--each was taught to believe the other dead. Alice was compelled by her father to marry Mr. Cameron; and after his death, her poverty and her love for her only child induced her to accept my uncle. You have now learned all,--have learned that Evelyn is the daughter of your first love, the daughter of one who adores you still, and whose life your remembrance has for so many

years embittered. Evelyn herself will at once comprehend all the scruples of a delicate mind; Evelyn herself will recoil from the thought of making the child the rival to the mother. She will understand why you have flown from her; she will sympathize with your struggles; she will recall the constant melancholy of Alice; she will hope that the ancient love may be renewed, and efface all grief; Generosity and Duty alike will urge her to conquer her own affection! And hereafter, when time has restored you both, father and child may meet with such sentiments as father and child may own!"

Maltravers was silent for some minutes; at length he said abruptly, "And you really loved her, Vargrave,--you love her still? Your dearest care must be her welfare."

"It is! indeed, it is!"

"Then I must trust to your discretion; I can have no other confidant; I myself am not fit to judge. My mind is darkened--you may be right--I think so."

"One word more,--she may discredit my tale, if unsupported. Will you write one line to me to say that I am authorized to reveal the secret, and that it is known only to me? I will not use it unless I should think it absolutely required."

Hastily and mechanically Maltravers wrote a few words to the effect of what Lumley had suggested. "I will inform you," he said to Vargrave as he gave him the paper, "of whatever spot may become my asylum; and you can communicate to me all that I dread and long to hear; but let no man know the refuge of despair!"

There was positively a tear in Vargrave's cold eye,--the only tear that had glistened there for many years; he paused irresolute, then advanced, again halted, muttered to himself, and turned aside.

"As for the world," Lumley resumed, after a pause, "your engagement has been public,--some public account of its breach must be invented. You have always been considered a proud man; we will say that it was low birth on the side of both mother and father (the last only just discovered) that broke off the alliance!"

Vargrave was talking to the deaf; what cared Maltravers for the world? He hastened from the room, threw himself into his carriage, and Vargrave was left to plot, to hope, and to aspire.

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