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#213 in our series by Edward Bulwer Lytton

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BOOK XI.

"Man is born to be a doer of good."--MARCUS ANTONINUS, lib. iii.

CHAPTER I.

His teeth he still did grind,
And grimly gnash, threatening revenge in vain.--SPENSER.

IT is now time to return to Lord Vargrave. His most sanguine hopes were realized; all things seemed to prosper. The hand of Evelyn Cameron was pledged to him, the wedding-day was fixed. In less than a week she was to confer upon the ruined peer a splendid dowry, that would smooth all obstacles in the ascent of his ambition. From Mr. Douce he learned that the deeds, which were to transfer to himself the baronial possessions of the head of the house of Maltravers, were nearly completed; and on his wedding-day he hoped to be able to announce that the happy pair had set out for their princely mansion of Lisle Court. In politics; though nothing could be finally settled till his return, letters from Lord Saxingham assured him that all was auspicious: the court and the heads of the aristocracy daily growing more alienated from the premier, and more prepared for a Cabinet revolution. And Vargrave, perhaps, like most needy men, overrated the advantages he should derive from, and the servile opinions he should conciliate in, his new character of landed proprietor and wealthy peer. He was not insensible to the silent anguish that Evelyn seemed to endure, nor to the bitter gloom that hung on the brow of Lady Doltimore. But these were clouds that foretold no storm,--light shadows that obscured not the serenity of the favouring sky. He continued to seem unconscious to either; to take the coming event as a matter of course, and to Evelyn he evinced so gentle, unfamiliar, respectful, and delicate an attachment, that he left no opening, either for confidence or complaint. Poor Evelyn! her gayety, her enchanting levity, her sweet and infantine playfulness of manner, were indeed vanished. Pale, wan, passive, and smileless, she was the ghost of her former self! But days rolled on, and the evil one drew near; she recoiled, but she never dreamed of resisting. How many equal victims of her age and sex does the altar witness!

One day, at early noon, Lord Vargrave took his way to Evelyn's. He had been to pay a political visit in the Faubourg St. Germain, and he was now slowly crossing the more quiet and solitary part of the gardens of the Tuileries, his hands clasped behind him, after his old, unaltered habit, and his eyes downcast,--when suddenly a man, who was seated alone beneath one of the trees, and who had for some moments watched his steps with an anxious and wild aspect, rose and approached him. Lord Vargrave was not conscious of the intrusion, till the man laid his hand on Vargrave's arm, and exclaimed,--

"It is he! it is! Lumley Ferrers, we meet again!"

Lord Vargrave started and changed colour, as he gazed on the intruder.

"Ferrers," continued Cesarini (for it was he), and he wound his arm firmly into Lord Vargrave's as he spoke, "you have not changed; your step is light, your cheek healthful; and yet I--you can scarcely recognize me. Oh, I have suffered so horribly since we parted! Why is this? Why have I been so heavily visited, and why have you gone free? Heaven is not just!"

Castruccio was in one of his lucid intervals; but there was that in his uncertain eye, and strange unnatural voice, which showed that a breath might dissolve the avalanche. Lord Vargrave looked anxiously round; none were near: but he knew that the more public parts of the garden were thronged, and through the trees he saw many forms moving in the distance. He felt that the sound of his voice could summon assistance in an instant, and his assurance returned to him.

"My poor friend," said he soothingly, as he quickened his pace, "it grieves me to the heart to see you look ill; do not think so much of what is past."

"There is no past!" replied Cesarini, gloomily. "The Past is my Present! And I have thought and thought, in darkness and in chains, over all that I have endured, and a light has broken on me in the hours when they told me I was mad! Lumley Ferrers, it was not for my sake that you led me, devil as you are, into the lowest hell! You had some object of your own to serve in separating her from Maltravers. You made me your instrument. What was I to you that you should have sinned for my sake? Answer me, and truly, if those lips can utter truth!"

"Cesarini," returned Vargrave, in his blandest accents, "another time we will converse on what has been; believe me, my only object was your happiness, combined, it may be, with my hatred of your rival."

"Liar!" shouted Cesarini, grasping Vargrave's arm with the strength of growing madness, while his burning eyes were fixed upon his tempter's changing countenance. "You, too, loved Florence; you, too, sought her hand; you were my real rival!"

"Hush! my friend, hush!" said Vargrave, seeking to shake off the grip of the maniac, and becoming seriously alarmed; "we are approaching the crowded part of the gardens, we shall be observed."

"And why are men made my foes? Why is my own sister become my persecutor? Why should she give me up to the torturer and the dungeon? Why are serpents and fiends my comrades? Why is there fire in my brain and heart; and why do you go free and enjoy liberty and life? Observed! What care you for observation? All men search for me!"

"Then why so openly expose yourself to their notice; why--"

"Hear me!" interrupted Cesarini. "When I escaped from the horrible prison into which I was plunged; when I scented the fresh air, and bounded over the grass; when I was again free in limbs and spirit,--a sudden strain of music from a village came on my ear, and I stopped short, and crouched down, and held my breath to listen. It ceased; and I thought I had been with Florence, and I wept bitterly! When I recovered, memory came back to me distinct and clear; and I heard a voice say to me, 'Avenge her and thyself!' From that hour the voice has been heard again, morning and night! Lumley Ferrers, I hear it now! it speaks to my heart, it warms my blood, it nerves my hand! On whom should vengeance fall? Speak to me!"

Lumley strode rapidly on. They were now without the grove; a gay throng was before them. "All is safe," thought the Englishman. He turned abruptly and haughtily on Cesarini, and waved his hand; "Begone, madman!" said he, in a loud and stern voice,--"begone! vex me no more, or I give you into custody. Begone, I say!"

Cesarini halted, amazed and awed for the moment; and then, with a dark scowl and a low cry, threw himself on Vargrave. The eye and hand of the latter were vigilant and prepared; he grasped the uplifted arm of the maniac, and shouted for help. But the madman was now in his full fury; he hurled Vargrave to the ground with a force for which the peer was not prepared, and Lumley might never have risen a living man from that spot, if two soldiers, seated close by, had not hastened to his assistance. Cesarini was already kneeling on his breast, and his long bony fingers were fastening upon the throat of his intended victim. Torn from his hold, he glared fiercely on his new assailants; and after a fierce but momentary struggle, wrested himself from their grip. Then, turning round to Vargrave, who had with some effort risen from the ground, he shrieked out, "I shall have thee yet!" and fled through the trees and disappeared.

CHAPTER II.

AH, who is nigh? Come to me, friend or foe!
My parks, my walks, my manors that I had,
Ev'n now forsake me.--_HENRY VI_. Part iii.

LORD VARGRAVE, bold as he was by nature, in vain endeavoured to banish from his mind the gloomy impression which the startling interview with Cesarini had bequeathed. The face, the voice of the maniac, haunted him, as the shape of the warning wraith haunts the mountaineer. He returned at once to his hotel, unable for some hours to collect himself sufficiently to pay his customary visit to Miss Cameron. Inly resolving not to hazard a second meeting with the Italian during the rest of his sojourn at Paris by venturing in the streets on foot, he ordered his carriage towards evening; dined at the Cafe de Paris; and then re-entered his carriage to proceed to Lady Doltimore's house.

"I beg your pardon, my lord," said his servant, as he closed the carriage-door, "but I forgot to say that, a short time after you returned

this morning, a strange gentleman asked at the porter's lodge if Mr. Ferrers was not staying at the hotel. The porter said there was no Mr. Ferrers, but the gentleman insisted upon it that he had seen Mr. Ferrers enter. I was in the lodge at the moment, my lord, and I explained--"

"That Mr. Ferrers and Lord Vargrave are one and the same? What sort of looking person?"

"Thin and dark, my lord,--evidently a foreigner. When I said that you were now Lord Vargrave, he stared a moment, and said very abruptly that he recollected it perfectly, and then he laughed and walked away."

"Did he not ask to see me?"

"No, my lord; he said he should take another opportunity. He was a strange-looking gentleman, and his clothes were threadbare."

"Ah, some troublesome petitioner. Perhaps a Pole in distress! Remember I am never at home when he calls. Shut the door. To Lady Doltimore's."

Lumley's heart beat as he threw himself back,--he again felt the grip of the madman at his throat. He saw, at once, that Cesarini had dogged him; he resolved the next morning to change his hotel, and to apply to the police. It was strange how sudden and keen a fear had entered the breast of this callous and resolute man!

On arriving at Lady Doltimore's, he found Caroline alone in the drawing-room. It was a *tete-a-tete* that he by no means desired.

"Lord Vargrave," said Caroline, coldly, "I wished a short conversation with you; and finding you did not come in the morning, I sent you a note an hour ago. Did you receive it?"

"No; I have been from home since six o'clock,--it is now nine."

"Well, then, Vargrave," said Caroline, with a compressed and writhing lip, and turning very pale, "I tremble to tell you that I fear Doltimore suspects. He looked at me sternly this morning, and said, 'You seem unhappy, madam; this marriage of Lord Vargrave's distresses you!'"

"I warned you how it would be,--your own selfishness will betray and ruin you."

"Do not reproach me, man!" said Lady Doltimore, with great vehemence. "From you at least I have a right to pity, to forbearance, to succour. I will not bear reproach from *you*."

"I reproach you for your own sake, for the faults you commit against yourself; and I must say, Caroline, that after I had generously conquered all selfish feeling, and assisted you to so desirable and even brilliant a position, it is neither just nor high-minded in you to evince so ungracious a reluctance to my taking the only step which can save me from actual ruin. But what does Doltimore suspect? What ground has he for

suspicion, beyond that want of command of countenance which it is easy to explain,--and which it is yet easier for a woman and a great lady [here Lumley sneered] to acquire?"

"I know not; it has been put into his head. Paris is so full of slander. But, Vargrave--Lumley--I tremble, I shudder with terror, if ever Doltimore should discover--"

"Pooh! pooh! Our conduct at Paris has been most guarded, most discreet. Doltimore is Self-conceit personified,--and Self-conceit is horn-eyed. I am about to leave Paris,--about to marry, from under your own roof; a little prudence, a little self-control, a smiling face, when you wish us happiness, and so forth, and all is safe. Tush! think of it no more! Fate has cut and shuffled the cards for you; the game is yours, unless you revoke. Pardon my metaphor; it is a favourite one,--I have worn it threadbare; but human life is so like a rubber at whist. Where is Evelyn?"

"In her own room. Have you no pity for her?"

"She will be very happy when she is Lady Vargrave; and for the rest, I shall neither be a stern nor a jealous husband. She might not have given the same character to the magnificent Maltravers."

Here Evelyn entered; and Vargrave hastened to press her hand, to whisper tender salutations and compliments, to draw the easy-chair to the fire, to place the footstool,--to lavish the petits soins that are so agreeable, when they are the small moralities of love.

Evelyn was more than usually pale,--more than usually abstracted. There was no lustre in her eye, no life in her step; she seemed unconscious of the crisis to which she approached. As the myrrh and hyssop which drugged the malefactors of old into forgetfulness of their doom, so there are griefs which stupefy before their last and crowning consummation!

Vargrave conversed lightly on the weather, the news, the last book. Evelyn answered but in monosyllables; and Caroline, with a hand-screen before her face, preserved an unbroken silence. Thus gloomy and joyless were two of the party, thus gay and animated the third, when the clock on the mantelpiece struck ten; and as the last stroke died, and Evelyn sighed heavily,--for it was an hour nearer to the fatal day,--the door was suddenly thrown open, and pushing aside the servant, two gentlemen entered the room.

Caroline, the first to perceive them, started from her seat with a faint exclamation of surprise. Vargrave turned abruptly, and saw before him the stern countenance of Maltravers.

"My child! my Evelyn!" exclaimed a familiar voice; and Evelyn had already flown into the arms of Aubrey.

The sight of the curate in company with Maltravers explained all at once to Vargrave. He saw that the mask was torn from his face, the prize

snatched from his grasp, his falsehood known, his plot counterworked, his villainy baffled! He struggled in vain for self-composure; all his resources of courage and craft seemed drained and exhausted. Livid, speechless, almost trembling, he cowered beneath the eyes of Maltravers.

Evelyn, not as yet aware of the presence of her former lover, was the first to break the silence. She lifted her face in alarm from the bosom of the good curate. "My mother--she is well--she lives--what brings you hither?"

"Your mother is well, my child. I have come hither at her earnest request to save you from a marriage with that unworthy man!"

Lord Vargrave smiled a ghastly smile, but made no answer.

"Lord Vargrave," said Maltravers, "you will feel at once that you have no further business under this roof. Let us withdraw,--I have much to thank you for."

"I will not stir!" exclaimed Vargrave, passionately, and stamping on the floor. "Miss Cameron, the guest of Lady Doltimore, whose house and presence you thus rudely profane, is my affianced bride,--affianced with her own consent. Evelyn, beloved Evelyn! mine you are yet; you alone can cancel the bond. Sir, I know not what you have to say, what mystery in your immaculate life to disclose; but unless Lady Doltimore, whom your violence appalls and terrifies, orders me to quit her roof, it is not I,--it is yourself, who are the intruder! Lady Doltimore, with your permission, I will direct your servants to conduct this gentleman to his carriage!"

"Lady Doltimore, pardon me," said Maltravers, coldly; "I will not be urged to any failure of respect to you. My lord, if the most abject cowardice be not added to your other vices, you will not make this room the theatre for our altercation. I invite you, in those terms which no gentleman ever yet refused, to withdraw with me."

The tone and manner of Maltravers exercised a strange control over Vargrave; he endeavoured in vain to keep alive the passion into which he had sought to work himself; his voice faltered, his head sank upon his breast. Between these two personages, none interfered; around them, all present grouped in breathless silence,--Caroline, turning her eyes from one to the other in wonder and dismay; Evelyn, believing all a dream, yet alive only to the thought that, by some merciful interposition of Providence, she should escape the consequences of her own rashness, clinging to Aubrey, with her gaze riveted on Maltravers; and Aubrey, whose gentle character was borne down and silenced by the powerful and tempestuous passions that now met in collision and conflict, withheld by his abhorrence of Vargrave's treachery from his natural desire to propitiate, and yet appalled by the apprehension of bloodshed, that for the first time crossed him.

There was a moment of dead silence, in which Vargrave seemed to be nerving and collecting himself for such course as might be best to

pursue, when again the door opened, and the name of Mr. Howard was announced.

Hurried and agitated, the young secretary, scarcely noticing the rest of the party, rushed to Lord Vargrave.

"My lord! a thousand pardons for interrupting you,--business of such importance! I am so fortunate to find you!"

"What is the matter, sir?"

"These letters, my lord; I have so much to say!"

Any interruption, even an earthquake, at that moment must have been welcome to Vargrave. He bent his head, with a polite smile, linked his arm into his secretary's, and withdrew to the recess of the farthest window. Not a minute elapsed before he turned away with a look of scornful exultation. "Mr. Howard," said he, "go and refresh yourself, and come to me at twelve o'clock to-night; I shall be at home then." The secretary bowed, and withdrew.

"Now, sir," said Vargrave, to Maltravers, "I am willing to leave you in possession of the field. Miss Cameron, it will be, I fear, impossible for me to entertain any longer the bright hopes I had once formed; my cruel fate compels me to seek wealth in any matrimonial engagement. I regret to inform you that you are no longer the great heiress; the whole of your capital was placed in the hands of Mr. Douce for the completion of the purchase of Lisle Court. Mr. Douce is a bankrupt; he has fled to America. This letter is an express from my lawyer; the house has closed its payments! Perhaps we may hope to obtain sixpence in the pound. I am a loser also; the forfeit money bequeathed to me is gone. I know not whether, as your trustee, I am not accountable for the loss of your fortune (drawn out on my responsibility); probably so. But as I have not now a shilling in the world, I doubt whether Mr. Maltravers will advise you to institute proceedings against me. Mr. Maltravers, to-morrow, at nine o'clock, I will listen to what you have to say. I wish you all good-night." He bowed, seized his hat, and vanished.

"Evelyn," said Aubrey, "can you require to learn more; do you not already feel you are released from union with a man without heart and honour?"

"Yes, yes! I am so happy!" cried Evelyn, bursting into tears. "This hated wealth,--I feel not its loss; I am released from all duty to my benefactor. I am free!"

The last tie that had yet united the guilty Caroline to Vargrave was broken,--a woman forgives sin in her lover, but never meanness. The degrading, the abject position in which she had seen one whom she had served as a slave (though, as yet, all his worst villainies were unknown to her), filled her with shame, horror, and disgust. She rose abruptly, and quitted the room. They did not miss her.

Maltravers approached Evelyn; he took her hand, and pressed it to his

lips and heart.

"Evelyn," said he, mournfully, "you require an explanation,--to-morrow I will give and seek it. To-night we are both too unnerved for such communications. I can only now feel joy at your escape, and hope that I may still minister to your future happiness."

"But," said Aubrey, "can we believe this new and astounding statement? Can this loss be so irremediable; may we not yet take precaution, and save, at least, some wrecks of this noble fortune?"

"I thank you for recalling me to the world," said Maltravers, eagerly. "I will see to it this instant; and tomorrow, Evelyn, after my interview with you, I will hasten to London, and act in that capacity still left to me,--your guardian, your friend."

He turned away his face, and hurried to the door.

Evelyn clung more closely to Aubrey. "But you will not leave me to-night? You can stay? We can find you accommodation; do not leave me."

"Leave you, my child! no; we have a thousand things to say to each other. I will not," he added in a whisper, turning to Maltravers, "forestall your communications."

CHAPTER III.

ALACK, 'tis he. Why, he was met even now
As mad as the vexed sea.--_Lear_.

IN the Rue de la Paix there resided an English lawyer of eminence, with whom Maltravers had had previous dealings; to this gentleman he now drove. He acquainted him with the news he had just heard, respecting the bankruptcy of Mr. Douce; and commissioned him to leave Paris, the first moment he could obtain a passport, and to proceed to London.

At all events, he would arrive there some hours before Maltravers; and those hours were something gained. This done, he drove to the nearest hotel, which chanced to be the Hotel de M----, where, though he knew it not, it so happened that Lord Vargrave himself lodged. As his carriage stopped without, while the porter unclosed the gates, a man, who had been loitering under the lamps, darted forward, and prying into the carriage-window, regarded Maltravers earnestly. The latter, pre-occupied and absorbed, did not notice him; but when the carriage drove into the courtyard it was followed by the stranger, who was muffled in a worn and tattered cloak, and whose movements were unheeded amidst the bustle of the arrival. The porter's wife led the way to a second-floor, just left vacant, and the waiter began to arrange the fire. Maltravers threw himself abstractedly upon the sofa, insensible to all around him, when, lifting his eyes, he saw before him the countenance of Cesarini! The

Italian (supposed, perhaps, by the persons of the hotel to be one of the newcomers) was leaning over the back of a chair, supporting his face with his hand, and fixing his eyes with an earnest and sorrowful expression upon the features of his ancient rival. When he perceived that he was recognized, he approached Maltravers, and said in Italian, and in a low voice, "You are the man of all others, whom, save one, I most desired to see. I have much to say to you, and my time is short. Spare me a few minutes."

The tone and manner of Cesarini were so calm and rational that they changed the first impulse of Maltravers, which was that of securing a maniac; while the Italian's emaciated countenance, his squalid garments, the air of penury and want diffused over his whole appearance, irresistibly invited compassion. With all the more anxious and pressing thoughts that weighed upon him, Maltravers could not refuse the conference thus demanded. He dismissed the attendants, and motioned Cesarini to be seated.

The Italian drew near to the fire, which now blazed brightly and cheerily, and, spreading his thin hands to the flame, seemed to enjoy the physical luxury of the warmth. "Cold, cold," he said piteously, as to himself; "Nature is a very bitter protector. But frost and famine are, at least, more merciful than slavery and darkness."

At this moment Ernest's servant entered to know if his master would not take refreshments, for he had scarcely touched food upon the road. And as he spoke, Cesarini turned keenly and wistfully round. There was no mistaking the appeal. Wine and cold meat were ordered: and when the servant vanished, Cesarini turned to Maltravers with a strange smile, and said, "You see what the love of liberty brings men to! They found me plenty in the jail! But I have read of men who feasted merrily before execution--have not you?--and my hour is at hand. All this day I have felt chained by an irresistible destiny to this house. But it was not you I sought; no matter, in the crisis of our doom all its agents meet together. It is the last act of a dreary play!"

The Italian turned again to the fire, and bent over it, muttering to himself.

Maltravers remained silent and thoughtful. Now was the moment once more to place the maniac under the kindly vigilance of his family, to snatch him from the horrors, perhaps, of starvation itself, to which his escape condemned him: if he could detain Cesarini till De Montaigne could arrive!

Agreeably to this thought, he quietly drew towards him the portfolio which had been laid on the table, and, Cesarini's back still turned to him, wrote a hasty line to De Montaigne. When his servant re-entered with the wine and viands, Maltravers followed him out of the room, and bade him see the note sent immediately. On returning, he found Cesarini devouring the food before him with all the voracity of famine. It was a dreadful sight!--the intellect ruined, the mind darkened, the wild, fierce animal alone left!

When Cesarini had appeased his hunger, he drew near to Maltravers, and thus accosted him,--

"I must lead you back to the past. I sinned against you and the dead; but Heaven has avenged you, and me you can pity and forgive. Maltravers, there is another more guilty than I,--but proud, prosperous, and great. _His_ crime Heaven has left to the revenge of man! I bound myself by an oath not to reveal his villany. I cancel the oath now, for the knowledge of it should survive his life and mine. And, mad though they deem me, the mad are prophets, and a solemn conviction, a voice not of earth, tells me that he and I are already in the Shadow of Death."

Here Cesarini, with a calm and precise accuracy of self-possession,--a minuteness of circumstance and detail, that, coming from one whose very eyes betrayed his terrible disease, was infinitely thrilling in its effect,--related the counsels, the persuasions, the stratagems of Lumley. Slowly and distinctly he forced into the heart of Maltravers that sickening record of cold fraud calculating on vehement passion as its tool; and thus he concluded his narration,--

"Now wonder no longer why I have lived till this hour; why I have clung to freedom, through want and hunger, amidst beggars, felons, and outcasts! In that freedom was my last hope,--the hope of revenge!"

Maltravers returned no answer for some moments. At length he said calmly, "Cesarini, there are injuries so great that they defy revenge. Let us alike, since we are alike injured, trust our cause to Him who reads all hearts, and, better than we can do, measures both crime and its excuses. You think that our enemy has not suffered,--that he has gone free. We know not his internal history; prosperity and power are no signs of happiness, they bring no exemption from care. Be soothed and be ruled, Cesarini. Let the stone once more close over the solemn grave. Turn with me to the future; and let us rather seek to be the judges of ourselves, than the executioners of another."

Cesarini listened gloomily, and was about to answer, when--

But here we must return to Lord Vargrave.

CHAPTER IV.

MY noble lord,
Your worthy friends do lack you.--_Macbeth_.

He is about it;
The doors are open.--_Ibid_.

ON quitting Lady Doltimore's house, Lumley drove to his hotel. His secretary had been the bearer of other communications, with the nature of which he had not yet acquainted himself; but he saw by the

superscriptions that they were of great importance. Still, however, even in the solitude and privacy of his own chamber, it was not on the instant that he could divert his thoughts from the ruin of his fortunes: the loss not only of Evelyn's property, but his own claims upon it (for the whole capital had been placed in Douce's hands), the total wreck of his grand scheme, the triumph he had afforded to Maltravers! He ground his teeth in impotent rage, and groaned aloud, as he traversed his room with hasty and uneven strides. At last he paused and muttered: "Well, the spider toils on even when its very power of weaving fresh webs is exhausted; it lies in wait,--it forces itself into the webs of others. Brave insect, thou art my model! While I have breath in my body, the world and all its crosses, Fortune and all her malignity, shall not prevail against me! What man ever yet failed until he himself grew craven, and sold his soul to the arch fiend, Despair! 'Tis but a girl and a fortune lost,--they were gallantly fought for, that is some comfort. Now to what is yet left to me!"

The first letter Lumley opened was from Lord Saxingham. It filled him with dismay. The question at issue had been formally, but abruptly, decided in the Cabinet against Vargrave and his manoeuvres. Some hasty expressions of Lord Saxingham had been instantly caught at by the premier, and a resignation, rather hinted at than declared, had been peremptorily accepted. Lord Saxingham and Lumley's adherents in the Government were to a man dismissed; and at the time Lord Saxingham wrote the premier was with the king.

"Curse their folly!--the puppets! the dolts!" exclaimed Lumley, crushing the letter in his hand. "The moment I leave them, they run their heads against the wall. Curse them! curse myself! curse the man who weaves ropes with sand! Nothing--nothing left for me but exile or suicide! Stay, what is this?" His eye fell on the well-known hand writing of the premier. He tore the envelope, impatient to know the worst. His eyes sparkled as he proceeded. The letter was most courteous, most complimentary, most wooing. The minister was a man consummately versed in the arts that increase, as well as those which purge, a party. Saxingham and his friends were imbeciles, incapables, mostly men who had outlived their day. But Lord Vargrave, in the prime of life--versatile, accomplished, vigorous, bitter, unscrupulous--Vargrave was of another mould, Vargrave was to be dreaded; and therefore, if possible, to be retained. His powers of mischief were unquestionably increased by the universal talk of London that he was about soon to wed so wealthy a lady. The minister knew his man. In terms of affected regret, he alluded to the loss the Government would sustain in the services of Lord Saxingham, etc.; he rejoiced that Lord Vargrave's absence from London had prevented his being prematurely mixed up, by false scruples of honour, in secessions which his judgment must condemn. He treated of the question in dispute with the most delicate address,--confessed the reasonableness of Lord Vargrave's former opposition to it; but contended that it was now, if not wise, inevitable. He said nothing of the justice of the measure he proposed to adopt, but much on the expediency. He concluded by offering to Vargrave, in the most cordial and flattering terms, the very seat in the Cabinet which Lord Saxingham had vacated, with an apology for its inadequacy to his lordship's merits, and a distinct and

definite promise of the refusal of the gorgeous viceroyalty of India, which would be vacant next year by the return of the present governor-general.

Unprincipled as Vargrave was, it is not, perhaps, judging him too mildly to say that, had he succeeded in obtaining Evelyn's hand and fortune, he would have shrunk from the baseness he now meditated. To step coldly into the very post of which he, and he alone, had been the cause of depriving his earliest patron and nearest relative; to profit by the betrayal of his own party; to damn himself eternally in the eyes of his ancient friends; to pass down the stream of history as a mercenary apostate,--from all this Vargrave must have shrunk, had he seen one spot of honest ground on which to maintain his footing. But now the waters of the abyss were closing over his head; he would have caught at a straw; how much more consent to be picked up by the vessel of an enemy! All objection, all scruple, vanished at once. And the "barbaric gold" "of Ormus and of Ind" glittered before the greedy eyes of the penniless adventurer! Not a day was now to be lost. How fortunate that a written proposition, from which it was impossible to recede, had been made to him before the failure of his matrimonial projects had become known! Too happy to quit Paris, he would set off on the morrow, and conclude in person the negotiation. Vargrave glanced towards the clock; it was scarcely past eleven. What revolutions are worked in moments! Within an hour he had lost a wife, a noble fortune, changed the politics of his whole life, stepped into a Cabinet office, and was already calculating how much a governor-general of India could lay by in five years! But it was only eleven o'clock. He had put off Mr. Howard's visit till twelve; he wished so much to see him, and learn all the London gossip connected with the recent events. Poor Mr. Douce! Vargrave had already forgotten _his_ existence!--he rang his bell hastily. It was some time before his servant answered.

Promptitude and readiness were virtues that Lord Vargrave peremptorily demanded in a servant; and as he paid the best price for the articles--less in wages than in plunder--he was generally sure to obtain them.

"Where the deuce have you been? This is the third time I have rung! you ought to be in the anteroom!"

"I beg your lordship's pardon; but I was helping Mr. Maltravers's valet to find a key which he dropped in the courtyard."

"Mr. Maltravers! Is he at this hotel?"

"Yes, my lord; his rooms are just overhead."

"Humph! Has Mr. Howard engaged a lodging here?"

"No, my lord. He left word that he was gone to his aunt, Lady Jane."

"Ah, Lady Jane--lives at Paris--so she does; Rue Chaussee d'Antin--you know the House? Go immediately--go yourself; don't trust to a

messenger--and beg Mr. Howard to return with you. I want to see him instantly."

"Yes, my lord."

The servant went. Lumley was in a mood in which solitude was intolerable. He was greatly excited; and some natural compunctions at the course on which he had decided made him long to escape from thought. So Maltravers was under the same roof! He had promised to give him an interview next day; but next day he wished to be on the road to London. Why not have it over to-night? But could Maltravers meditate any hostile proceedings? Impossible! Whatever his causes of complaint, they were of too delicate and secret a nature for seconds, bullets, and newspaper paragraphs! Vargrave might feel secure that he should not be delayed by any Bois de Boulogne assignation; but it was necessary to his honour (!) that he should not seem to shun the man he had deceived and wronged. He would go up to him at once,--a new excitement would distract his thoughts. Agreeably to this resolution, Lord Vargrave quitted his room, and was about to close the outer door, when he recollected that perhaps his servant might not meet with Howard; that the secretary might probably arrive before the time fixed,--it would be as well to leave his door open. He accordingly stopped, and writing upon a piece of paper, "Dear Howard, send up for me the moment you arrive: I shall be with Mr. Maltravers au second."--Vargrave wafered the affiche to the door, which he then left ajar, and the lamp in the landing-place fell clear and full on the paper.

It was the voice of Vargrave, in the little stone-paved antechamber without, inquiring of the servant if Mr. Maltravers was at home, which had startled and interrupted Cesarini as he was about to reply to Ernest. Each recognized that sharp clear voice; each glanced at the other.

"I will not see him," said Maltravers, hastily moving towards the door; "you are not fit to--"

"Meet him? no!" said Cesarini, with a furtive and sinister glance, which a man versed in his disease would have understood, but which Maltravers did not even observe; "I will retire into your bedroom; my eyes are heavy. I could sleep."

He opened the inner door as he spoke, and had scarcely reclosed it before Vargrave entered.

"Your servant said you were engaged; but I thought you might see an old friend:" and Vargrave coolly seated himself.

Maltravers drew the bolt across the door that separated them from Cesarini; and the two men, whose characters and lives were so strongly contrasted, were now alone.

"You wished an interview,--an explanation," said Lumley; "I shrink from neither. Let me forestall inquiry and complaint. I deceived you knowingly and deliberately, it is quite true,--all stratagems are fair in

love and war. The prize was vast! I believed my career depended on it: I could not resist the temptation. I knew that before long you would learn that Evelyn was not your daughter; that the first communication between yourself and Lady Vargrave would betray me; but it was worth trying a *coup de main*. You have foiled me, and conquered: be it so; I congratulate you. You are tolerably rich, and the loss of Evelyn's fortune will not vex you as it would have done me."

"Lord Vargrave, it is but poor affectation to treat thus lightly the dark falsehood you conceived, the awful curse you inflicted upon me. Your sight is now so painful to me, it so stirs the passions that I would seek to suppress, that the sooner our interview is terminated the better. I have to charge you, also, with a crime,--not, perhaps, baser than the one you so calmly own, but the consequences of which were more fatal: you understand me?"

"I do not."

"Do not tempt me! do not lie!" said Maltravers, still in a calm voice, though his passions, naturally so strong, shook his whole frame. "To your arts I owe the exile of years that should have been better spent; to those arts Cesarini owes the wreck of his reason, and Florence Lascelles her early grave! Ah, you are pale now; your tongue cleaves to your mouth! And think you these crimes will go forever unrequited; think you that there is no justice in the thunderbolts of God?"

"Sir," said Vargrave, starting to his feet, "I know not what you suspect, I care not what you believe! But I am accountable to man, and that account I am willing to render. You threatened me in the presence of my ward; you spoke of cowardice, and hinted at danger. Whatever my faults, want of courage is not one. Stand by your threats,--I am ready to brave them!"

"A year, perhaps a short month, ago," replied Maltravers, and I would have arrogated justice to my own mortal hand; nay, this very night, had the hazard of either of our lives been necessary to save Evelyn from your persecution, I would have incurred all things for her sake! But that is past; from me you have nothing to fear. The proofs of your earlier guilt, with its dreadful results, would alone suffice to warn me from the solemn responsibility of human vengeance. Great Heaven! what hand could dare to send a criminal so long hardened, so black with crime, unatoning, unrepentant, and unprepared, before the judgment-seat of the ALL JUST? Go, unhappy man! may life long be spared to you! Awake! awake from this world, before your feet pass the irrevocable boundary of the next!"

"I came not here to listen to homilies, and the cant of the conventicle," said Vargrave, vainly struggling for a haughtiness of mien that his conscience-stricken aspect terribly belied; "not I; but this wrong world is to be blamed, if deeds that strict morality may not justify, but the effects of which I, no prophet, could not foresee, were necessary for success in life. I have been but as all other men have been who struggle against fortune to be rich and great: ambition must make use of foul ladders."

"Oh," said Maltravers, earnestly, touched involuntarily, and in spite of his abhorrence of the criminal, by the relenting that this miserable attempt at self-justification seemed to denote,--"oh, be warned, while it is yet time; wrap not yourself in these paltry sophistries; look back to your past career; see to what heights you might have climbed, if with those rare gifts and energies, with that subtle sagacity and indomitable courage--your ambition had but chosen the straight, not the crooked, path. Pause! many years may yet, in the course of nature, afford you time to retrace your steps, to atone to thousands the injuries you have inflicted on the few. I know not why I thus address you: but something diviner than indignation urges me; something tells me that you are already on the brink of the abyss!"

Lord Vargrave changed colour, nor did he speak for some moments; then raising his head, with a faint smile, he said, "Maltravers, you are a false soothsayer. At this moment my paths, crooked though they be, have led me far towards the summit of my proudest hopes; the straight path would have left me at the foot of the mountain. You yourself are a beacon against the course you advise. Let us contrast each other. You took the straight path, I the crooked. You, my superior in fortune; you, infinitely above me in genius; you, born to command and never to crouch: how do we stand now, each in the prime of life? You, with a barren and profitless reputation; without rank, without power, almost without the hope of power. I--but you know not my new dignity--I, in the Cabinet of England's ministry, vast fortunes opening to my gaze, the proudest station not too high for my reasonable ambition! You, wedding yourself to some grand chimera of an object, aimless when it eludes your grasp. I, swinging, squirrel-like, from scheme to scheme; no matter if one breaks, another is at hand! Some men would have cut their throats in despair, an hour ago, in losing the object of a seven years' chase,--Beauty and Wealth, both! I open a letter, and find success in one quarter to counterbalance failure in another. Bah! bah! each to his _metier_, Maltravers! For you, honour, melancholy, and, if it please you, repentance also! For me, the onward, rushing life, never looking back to the Past, never balancing the stepping-stones to the Future. Let us not envy each other; if you were not Diogenes, you would be Alexander. Adieu! our interview is over. Will you forget and forgive, and shake hands once more? You draw back, you frown! well, perhaps you are right. If we meet again--"

"It will be as strangers."

"No rash vows! you may return to politics, you may want office. I am of your way of thinking now: and--ha! ha!--poor Lumley Ferrers could make you a Lord of the Treasury; smooth travelling and cheap turnpikes on crooked paths, believe me. Farewell!"

On entering the room into which Cesarini had retired, Maltravers found him flown. His servant said that the gentleman had gone away shortly after Lord Vargrave's arrival. Ernest reproached himself bitterly for

neglecting to secure the door that conducted to the ante-chamber; but still it was probable that Cesarini would return in the morning.

The messenger who had taken the letter to De Montaigne brought back word that the latter was at his villa, but expected at Paris early the next day. Maltravers hoped to see him before his departure; meanwhile he threw himself on his bed, and despite all the anxieties that yet oppressed him, the fatigues and excitements he had undergone exhausted even the endurance of that iron frame, and he fell into a profound slumber.

CHAPTER V.

BY eight to-morrow

Thou shalt be made immortal.

Measure for Measure.

LORD VARGRAVE returned to his apartment to find Mr. Howard, who had but just that instant arrived, warming his white and well-ringed hands by the fire. He conversed with him for half an hour on all the topics on which the secretary could give him information, and then dismissed him once more to the roof of Lady Jane.

As he slowly undressed himself, he saw on his writing-table the note which Lady Doltimore had referred to, and which he had not yet opened. He lazily broke the seal, ran his eye carelessly over its few blotted words of remorse and alarm, and threw it down again with a contemptuous "pshaw!" Thus unequally are the sorrows of a guilty tie felt by the man of the world and the woman of society!

As his servant placed before him his wine and water, Vargrave told him to see early to the preparations for departure, and to call him at nine o'clock.

"Shall I shut that door, my lord?" said the valet, pointing to one that communicated with one of those large closets, or _armoires_, that are common appendages to French bedrooms, and in which wood and sundry other matters are kept.

"No," said Lord Vargrave, petulantly; "you servants are so fond of excluding every breath of air. I should never have a window open, if I did not open it myself. Leave the door as it is, and do not be later than nine to-morrow."

The servant, who slept in a kind of kennel that communicated with the anteroom, did as he was bid; and Vargrave put out his candle, betook himself to bed, and, after drowsily gazing some minutes on the dying embers of the fire, which threw a dim ghastly light over the chamber, fell fast asleep. The clock struck the first hour of morning, and in that house all seemed still.

The next morning, Maltravers was disturbed from his slumber by De Montaigne, who, arriving, as was often his wont, at an early hour from his villa, had found Ernest's note of the previous evening.

Maltravers rose and dressed himself; and while De Montaigne was yet listening to the account which his friend gave of his adventure with Cesarini, and the unhappy man's accusation of his accomplice, Ernest's servant entered the room very abruptly.

"Sir," said he, "I thought you might like to know. What is to be done? The whole hotel is in confusion, Mr. Howard has been sent for, and Lord Doltimore. So very strange, so sudden!"

"What is the matter? Speak plain."

"Lord Vargrave, sir,--poor Lord Vargrave--"

"Lord Vargrave!"

"Yes, sir; the master of the hotel, hearing you knew his lordship, would be so glad if you would come down. Lord Vargrave, sir, is dead,--found dead in his bed!"

Maltravers was rooted to the spot with amaze and horror. Dead! and but last night so full of life and schemes and hope and ambition.

As soon as he recovered himself, he hurried to the spot, and De Montaigne followed. The latter, as they descended the stairs, laid his hand on Ernest's arm and detained him.

"Did you say that Castruccio left the apartment while Vargrave was with you, and almost immediately after his narrative of Vargrave's instigation to his crime?"

"Yes."

The eyes of the friends met; a terrible suspicion possessed both. "No; it is impossible!" exclaimed Maltravers. "How could he obtain entrance, how pass Lord Vargrave's servants? No, no; think of it not!"

They hurried down the stairs; they reached the other door of Vargrave's apartment. The notice to Howard, with the name of Vargrave underscored, was still on the panels. De Montaigne saw and shuddered.

They were in the room by the bedside. A group were collected round; they gave way as the Englishman and his friend approached; and the eyes of Maltravers suddenly rested on the face of Lord Vargrave, which was locked, rigid, and convulsed.

There was a buzz of voices which had ceased at the entrance of Maltravers; it was now renewed. A surgeon had been summoned--the nearest surgeon,--a young Englishman of no great repute or name. He was making inquiries as he bent over the corpse.

"Yes, sir," said Lord Vargrave's servant, "his lordship told me to call him at nine o'clock. I came in at that hour, but his lordship did not move nor answer me. I then looked to see if he were very sound asleep, and I saw that the pillows had got somehow over his face, and his head seemed to lie very low; so I moved the pillows, and I saw that his lordship was dead."

"Sir," said the surgeon, turning to Maltravers, "you were a friend of his lordship, I hear. I have already sent for Mr. Howard and Lord Doltimore. Shall I speak with you a minute?"

Maltravers nodded assent. The surgeon cleared the room of all but himself, De Montaigne, and Maltravers.

"Has that servant lived long with Lord Vargrave?" asked the surgeon.

"I believe so,--yes; I recollect his face. Why?"

"And you think him safe and honest?"

"I don't know; I know nothing of him."

"Look here, sir,"--and the surgeon pointed to a slight discoloration on one side the throat of the dead man. "This may be accidental--purely natural; his lordship may have died in a fit; there are no certain marks of outward violence, but murder by suffocation might still--"

"But who besides the servant could gain admission? Was the outer door closed?"

"The servant can take oath that he shut the door before going to bed, and that no one was with his lordship, or in the rooms, when Lord Vargrave retired to rest. Entrance from the windows is impossible. Mind, sir, I do not think I have any right to suspect any one. His lordship had been in very ill health a short time before; had had, I hear, a rush of blood to the head. Certainly, if the servant be innocent, we can suspect no one else. You had better send for more experienced practitioners."

De Montaigne, who had hitherto said nothing, now looked with a hurried glance around the room: he perceived the closet-door, which was ajar, and rushed to it, as by an involuntary impulse. The closet was large, but a considerable pile of wood, and some lumber of odd chairs and tables, took up a great part of the space. De Montaigne searched behind and amidst this litter with trembling haste,--no trace of secreted murder was visible. He returned to the bedroom with a satisfied and relieved expression of countenance. He then compelled himself to approach the body, from which he had hitherto recoiled.

"Sir," said he, almost harshly, as he turned to the surgeon, "what idle doubts are these? Cannot men die in their beds, of sudden death, no blood to stain their pillows, no loop-hole for crime to pass through, but we must have science itself startling us with silly terrors? As for the

servant, I will answer for his innocence; his manner, his voice attest it." The surgeon drew back, abashed and humbled, and began to apologize, to qualify, when Lord Doltimore abruptly entered.

"Good heavens!" said he, "what is this? What do I hear? Is it possible? Dead! So suddenly!" He cast a hurried glance at the body, shivered, and sickened, and threw himself into a chair, as if to recover the shock. When again he removed his hand from his face, he saw lying before him on the table an open note. The character was familiar; his own name struck his eye,--it was the note which Caroline had sent the day before. As no one heeded him, Lord Doltimore read on, and possessed himself of the proof of his wife's guilt unseen.

The surgeon, now turning from De Montaigne, who had been rating him soundly for the last few moments, addressed himself to Lord Doltimore. "Your lordship," said he, "was, I hear, Lord Vargrave's most intimate friend at Paris."

"I _his_ intimate friend?" said Doltimore, colouring highly, and in a disdainful accent. "Sir, you are misinformed."

"Have you no orders to give, then, my lord?"

"None, sir. My presence here is quite useless. Good-day to you, gentlemen."

"With whom, then, do the last duties rest?" said the surgeon, turning to Maltravers and De Montaigne. "With the late lord's secretary?--I expect him every moment; and here he is, I suppose,"--as Mr. Howard, pale, and evidently overcome by his agitation, entered the apartment. Perhaps, of all the human beings whom the ambitious spirit of that senseless clay had drawn around it by the webs of interest, affection, or intrigue, that young man, whom it had never been a temptation to Vargrave to deceive or injure, and who missed only the gracious and familiar patron, mourned most his memory, and defended most his character. The grief of the poor secretary was now indeed overmastering. He sobbed and wept like a child.

When Maltravers retired from the chamber of death, De Montaigne accompanied him; but soon quitting him again, as Ernest bent his way to Evelyn, he quietly rejoined Mr. Howard, who readily grasped at his offers of aid in the last melancholy duties and directions.

CHAPTER VI.

IF we do meet again, why, we shall smile.--_Julius Caesar_.

THE interview with Evelyn was long and painful. It was reserved for Maltravers to break to her the news of the sudden death of Lord Vargrave, which shocked her unspeakably; and this, which made their first topic, removed much constraint and deadened much excitement in those which followed.

Vargrave's death served also to relieve Maltravers from a most anxious embarrassment. He need no longer fear that Alice would be degraded in the eyes of Evelyn. Henceforth the secret that identified the erring Alice Darvil with the spotless Lady Vargrave was safe, known only to Mrs. Leslie and to Aubrey. In the course of nature, all chance of its disclosure must soon die with them; and should Alice at last become his wife, and should Cleveland suspect (which was not probable) that Maltravers had returned to his first love, he knew that he might depend on the inviolable secrecy of his earliest friend.

The tale that Vargrave had told to Evelyn of his early--but, according to that tale, guiltless--passion for Alice, he tacitly confirmed; and he allowed that the recollection of her virtues, and the intelligence of her sorrows and unextinguishable affection, had made him recoil from a marriage with her supposed daughter. He then proceeded to amaze his young listener with the account of the mode in which he had discovered her real parentage, of which the banker had left it to Alice's discretion to inform her, after she had attained the age of eighteen. And then, simply, but with manly and ill-controlled emotion, he touched upon the joy of Alice at beholding him again, upon the endurance and fervour of her love, upon her revulsion of feeling at learning that, in her unforgotten lover, she beheld the recent suitor of her adopted child.

"And now," said Maltravers, in conclusion, "the path to both of us remains the same. To Alice is our first duty. The discovery I have made of your real parentage does not diminish the claims which Alice has on me, does not lessen the grateful affection that is due to her from yourself. Yes, Evelyn, we are not the less separated forever. But when I learned the wilful falsehood which the unhappy man, now hurried to his last account, to whom your birth was known, had imposed upon me,--namely, that you were the child of Alice,--and when I learned also that you had been hurried into accepting his hand, I trembled at your union with one so false and base. I came hither resolved to frustrate his schemes and to save you from an alliance, the motives of which I foresaw, and to which my own letter, my own desertion, had perhaps urged you. New villainies on the part of this most perverted man came to my ear: but he is dead; let us spare his memory. For you--oh, still let me deem myself your friend,--your more than brother; let me hope now that I have planted no thorn in that breast, and that your affection does not shrink from the cold word of friendship."

"Of all the wonders that you have told me," answered Evelyn, as soon as she could recover the power of words, "my most poignant sorrow is, that I have no rightful claim to give a daughter's love to her whom I shall ever idolize as my mother. Oh, now I see why I thought her affection measured and lukewarm. And have I--I destroyed her joy at seeing you again? But you--you will hasten to console, to reassure her! She loves you still,--she will be happy at last; and that--that thought--oh, that thought compensates for all!"

There was so much warmth and simplicity in Evelyn's artless manner, it was so evident that her love for him had not been of that ardent nature

which would at first have superseded every other thought in the anguish of losing him forever, that the scale fell from the eyes of Maltravers, and he saw at once that his own love had blinded him to the true character of hers. He was human; and a sharp pang shot across his breast. He remained silent for some moments; and then resumed, compelling himself as he spoke to fix his eyes steadfastly on hers.

"And now, Evelyn--still may I so call you?--I have a duty to discharge to another. You are loved"--and he smiled, but the smile was sad--"by a younger and more suitable lover than I am. From noble and generous motives he suppressed that love,--he left you to a rival; the rival removed, dare he venture to explain to you his own conduct, and plead his own motives? George Legard--" Maltravers paused. The cheek on which he gazed was tinged with a soft blush, Evelyn's eyes were downcast, there was a slight heaving beneath the robe.

Maltravers suppressed a sigh and continued. He narrated his interview with Legard at Dover; and, passing lightly over what had chanced at Venice, dwelt with generous eloquence on the magnanimity with which his rival's gratitude had been displayed. Evelyn's eyes sparkled, and the smile just visited the rosy lips and vanished again. The worst because it was the least selfish fear of Maltravers was gone, and no vain doubt of Evelyn's too keen regret remained to chill his conscience in obeying its earliest and strongest duties.

"Farewell!" he said, as he rose to depart; "I will at once return to London, and assist in the effort to save your fortune from this general wreck: LIFE calls us back to its cares and business--farewell, Evelyn! Aubrey will, I trust, remain with you still."

"Remain! Can I not return then to my--to her--yes, let me call her _mother_ still?"

"Evelyn," said Maltravers, in a very low voice, "spare me, spare her that pain! Are we yet fit to--" He paused; Evelyn comprehended him, and hiding her face with her hands, burst into tears.

When Maltravers left the room, he was met by Aubrey, who, drawing him aside, told him that Lord Doltimore had just informed him that it was not his intention to remain at Paris, and had more than delicately hinted at a wish for the departure of Miss Cameron. In this emergency, Maltravers bethought himself of Madame de Ventadour.

No house in Paris was a more eligible refuge, no friend more zealous; no protector would be more kind, no adviser more sincere. To her then he hastened. He briefly informed her of Vargrave's sudden death; and suggested that for Evelyn to return at once to a sequestered village in England might be a severe trial to spirits already broken; and declared truly, that though his marriage with Evelyn was broken off, her welfare was no less dear to him than heretofore. At his first hint, Valerie, who took a cordial interest in Evelyn for her own sake, ordered her carriage, and drove at once to Lady Doltimore's. His lordship was out, her ladyship was ill, in her own room, could see no one, not even her guest.

Evelyn in vain sent up to request an interview; and at last, contenting herself with an affectionate note of farewell, accompanied Aubrey to the home of her new hostess.

Gratified at least to know her with one who would be sure to win her affection and soothe her spirits, Maltravers set out on his solitary return to England.

Whatever suspicious circumstances might or might not have attended the death of Lord Vargrave, certain it is that no evidence confirmed and no popular rumour circulated them. His late illness, added to the supposed shock of the loss of the fortune he had anticipated with Miss Cameron, aided by the simultaneous intelligence of the defeat of the party with whom it was believed he had indissolubly entwined his ambition, sufficed to account satisfactorily enough for the melancholy event. De Montaigne, who had been long, though not intimately, acquainted with the deceased, took upon himself all the necessary arrangements, and superintended the funeral; after which ceremony, Howard returned to London; and in Paris, as in the grave, all things are forgotten! But still in De Montaigne's breast there dwelt a horrible fear. As soon as he had learned from Maltravers the charge the maniac brought against Vargrave, there came upon him the recollection of that day when Cesarini had attempted De Montaigne's life, evidently mistaking him in his delirium for another,--and the sullen, cunning, and ferocious character which the insanity had ever afterwards assumed. He had learned from Howard that the outer door had been left ajar when Lord Vargrave was with Maltravers. The writing on the panel, the name of Vargrave, would have struck Castruccio's eye as he descended the stairs; the servant was from home, the apartments deserted; he might have won his way into the bedchamber, concealed himself in the _armoire_, and in the dead of the night, and in the deep and helpless sleep of his victim, have done the deed. What need of weapons--the suffocating pillows would stop speech and life. What so easy as escape,--to pass into the anteroom; to unbolt the door; to descend into the courtyard; to give the signal to the porter in his lodge, who, without seeing him, would pull the _cordon_, and give him egress unobserved?

All this was so possible, so probable.

De Montaigne now withdrew all inquiry for the unfortunate; he trembled at the thought of discovering him, of verifying his awful suspicions, of beholding a murderer in the brother of his wife! But he was not doomed long to entertain fear for Cesarini; he was not fated ever to change suspicion into certainty. A few days after Lord Vargrave's burial, a corpse was drawn from the Seine. Some tablets in the pockets, scrawled over with wild, incoherent verses, gave a clew to the discovery of the dead man's friends: and, exposed at the Morgue, in that bleached and altered clay, De Montaigne recognized the remains of Castruccio Cesarini. "He died and made no sign!"

SINGULA quaeque locum teneant sortita.*--HORACE: *_Ars Poetica_*.

* "To each lot its appropriate place."

MALTRAVERS and the lawyers were enabled to save from the insolvent bank but a very scanty portion of that wealth in which Richard Templeton had rested so much of pride. The title extinct, the fortune gone--so does Fate laugh at our posthumous ambition! Meanwhile Mr. Douce, with considerable plunder, had made his way to America: the bank owed nearly half a million; the purchase money for Lisle Court, which Mr. Douce had been so anxious to get into his clutches, had not sufficed to stave off the ruin,--but a great part of it sufficed to procure competence for himself. How inferior in wit, in acuteness, in stratagem, was Douce to Vargrave; and yet Douce had gulled him like a child! Well said the shrewd small philosopher of France--"On peut etre plus fin qu'un autre, mais pas plus fin que tous les autres."*

* One may be more sharp than one's neighbour, but one can't be sharper than all one's neighbours.--ROCHEFOUCAULD.

To Legard, whom Maltravers had again encountered at Dover, the latter related the downfall of Evelyn's fortunes; and Maltravers loved him when he saw that, far from changing his affection, the loss of wealth seemed rather to raise his hopes. They parted; and Legard set out for Paris.

But was Maltravers all the while forgetful of Alice? He had not been twelve hours in London before he committed to a long and truthful letter all his thoughts, his hopes, his admiring and profound gratitude. Again, and with solemn earnestness, he implored her to accept his hand, and to confirm at the altar the tale which had been told to Evelyn. Truly he said that the shock which his first belief in Vargrave's falsehood had occasioned, his passionate determination to subdue all trace of a love then associated with crime and horror, followed so close by his discovery of Alice's enduring faith and affection, had removed the image of Evelyn from the throne it had hitherto held in his desires and thoughts; truly he said that he was now convinced that Evelyn would soon be consoled for his loss by another, with whom she would be happier than with him; truly and solemnly he declared that if Alice rejected him still, if even Alice were no more, his suit to Evelyn never could be renewed, and Alice's memory would usurp the place of all living love!

Her answer came: it pierced him to the heart. It was so humble, so grateful, so tender still. Unknown to herself, love yet coloured every word; but it was love pained, galled, crushed, and trampled on; it was love, proud from its very depth and purity. His offer was refused.

Months passed away. Maltravers yet trusted to time. The curate had returned to Brook-Green, and his letters fed Ernest's hopes and assured his doubts. The more leisure there was left him for reflection, the fainter became those dazzling and rainbow hues in which Evelyn had been robed and surrounded, and the brighter the halo that surrounded his earliest love. The more he pondered on Alice's past history, and the

singular beauty of her faithful attachment, the more he was impressed with wonder and admiration, the more anxious to secure to his side one to whom Nature had been so bountiful in all the gifts that make woman the angel and star of life.

Months passed. From Paris the news that Maltravers received confirmed all his expectations,--the suit of Legard had replaced his own. It was then that Maltravers began to consider how far the fortune of Evelyn and her destined husband was such as to preclude all anxiety for their future lot. Fortune is so indeterminate in its gauge and measurement. Money, the most elastic of materials, falls short or exceeds, according to the extent of our wants and desires. With all Legard's good qualities he was constitutionally careless and extravagant; and Evelyn was too inexperienced, and too gentle, perhaps, to correct his tendencies. Maltravers learned that Legard's income was one that required an economy which he feared that, in spite of all his reformation, Legard might not have the self-denial to enforce. After some consideration, he resolved to add secretly to the remains of Evelyn's fortune such a sum as might, being properly secured to herself and children, lessen whatever danger could arise from the possible improvidence of her husband, and guard against the chance of those embarrassments which are among the worst disturbers of domestic peace. He was enabled to effect this generosity unknown to both of them, as if the sum bestowed were collected from the wrecks of Evelyn's own wealth and the profits of the sale of the houses in C-----, which of course had not been involved in Douce's bankruptcy. And then if Alice were ever his, her jointure, which had been secured on the property appertaining to the villa at Fulham, would devolve upon Evelyn. Maltravers could never accept what Alice owed to another. Poor Alice! No! not that modest wealth which you had looked upon complacently as one day or other to be his.

Lord Doltimore is travelling in the East,--Lady Doltimore, less adventurous, has fixed her residence in Rome. She has grown thin, and taken to antiquities and rouge. Her spirits are remarkably high--not an uncommon effect of laudanum.

CHAPTER THE LAST.

ARRIVED at last
Unto the wished haven.--SHAKSPEARE.

IN the August of that eventful year a bridal party were assembled at the cottage of Lady Vargrave. The ceremony had just been performed, and Ernest Maltravers had bestowed upon George Legard the hand of Evelyn Templeton.

If upon the countenance of him who thus officiated as a father to her he had once wooed as a bride an observant eye might have noted the trace of mental struggles, it was the trace of struggles past; and the calm had once more settled over the silent deeps. He saw from the casement the carriage that was to bear away the bride to the home of another,--the gay

faces of the village group, whose intrusion was not forbidden, and to whom that solemn ceremonial was but a joyous pageant; and when he turned once more to those within the chamber, he felt his hand clasped in Legard's.

"You have been the preserver of my life, you have been the dispenser of my earthly happiness; all now left to me to wish for is, that you may receive from Heaven the blessings you have given to others!"

"Legard, never let her know a sorrow that you can guard her from; and believe that the husband of Evelyn will be dear to me as a brother!"

And as a brother blesses some younger and orphan sister bequeathed and intrusted to a care that should replace a father's, so Maltravers laid his hand lightly on Evelyn's golden tresses, and his lips moved in prayer. He ceased; he pressed his last kiss upon her forehead, and placed her hand in that of her young husband. There was silence; and when to the ear of Maltravers it was broken, it was by the wheels of the carriage that bore away the wife of George Legard!

The spell was dissolved forever. And there stood before the lonely man the idol of his early youth, Alice,--still, perhaps, as fair, and once young and passionate, as Evelyn; pale, changed, but lovelier than of old, if heavenly patience and holy thought, and the trials that purify and exalt, can shed over human features something more beautiful than bloom.

The good curate alone was present, besides these two survivors of the error and the love that make the rapture and the misery of so many of our kind; and the old man, after contemplating them a moment, stole unperceived away.

"Alice," said Maltravers, and his voice trembled, "hitherto, from motives too pure and too noble for the practical affections and ties of life, you have rejected the hand of the lover of your youth. Here again I implore you to be mine! Give to my conscience the balm of believing that I can repair to you the evils and the sorrows I have brought upon you. Nay, weep not; turn not away. Each of us stands alone; each of us needs the other. In your heart is locked up all my fondest associations, my brightest memories. In you I see the mirror of what I was when the world was new, ere I had found how Pleasure palls upon us, and Ambition deceives! And me, Alice--ah, you love me still! Time and absence have but strengthened the chain that binds us. By the memory of our early love, by the grave of our lost child that, had it lived, would have united its parents, I implore you to be mine!"

"Too generous!" said Alice, almost sinking beneath the emotions that shook that gentle spirit and fragile form, "how can I suffer your _compassion_--for it is but compassion--to deceive yourself? You are of another station than I believed you. How can you raise the child of destitution and guilt to your own rank? And shall I--I--who, Heaven knows! would save you from all regret--bring to you now, when years have so changed and broken the little charm I could ever have possessed, this blighted heart and weary spirit? Oh, no, no!" and Alice paused abruptly,

and the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Be it as you will," said Maltravers, mournfully; "but, at least, ground your refusal upon better motives. Say that now, independent in fortune, and attached to the habits you have formed, you would not hazard your happiness in my keeping,--perhaps you are right. To my happiness you would indeed contribute; your sweet voice might charm away many a memory and many a thought of the baffled years that have intervened since we parted; your image might dissipate the solitude which is closing round the Future of a disappointed and anxious life. With you, and with you alone, I might yet find a home, a comforter, a charitable and soothing friend. This you could give to me; and with a heart and a form alike faithful to a love that deserved not so enduring a devotion. But I--what can I bestow on you? Your station is equal to my own; your fortune satisfies your simple wants. 'Tis true the exchange is not equal, Alice. Adieu!"

"Cruel!" said Alice, approaching him with timid steps. "If I could--I, so untutored, so unworthy--if I could comfort you in a single care!"

She said no more, but she had said enough; and Maltravers, clasping her to his bosom, felt once more that heart which never, even in thought, had swerved from its early worship, beating against his own!

He drew her gently into the open air. The ripe and mellow noonday of the last month of summer glowed upon the odorous flowers, and the broad sea, that stretched beyond and afar, wore upon its solemn waves a golden and happy smile.

"And ah," murmured Alice, softly, as she looked up from his breast, "I ask not if you have loved others since we parted--man's faith is so different from ours--I only ask if you love me now?"

"More! oh, immeasurably more, than in our youngest days!" cried Maltravers, with fervent passion. "More fondly, more reverently, more trustfully, than I ever loved living being!--even her, in whose youth and innocence I adored the memory of thee! Here have I found that which shames and bankrupts the Ideal! Here have I found a virtue, that, coming at once from God and Nature, has been wiser than all my false philosophy and firmer than all my pride! You, cradled by misfortune,--your childhood reared amidst scenes of fear and vice, which, while they seared back the intellect, had no pollution for the soul,--your very parent your tempter and your foe; you, only not a miracle and an angel by the stain of one soft and unconscious error,--you, alike through the equal trials of poverty and wealth, have been destined to rise above all triumphant; the example of the sublime moral that teaches us with what mysterious beauty and immortal holiness the Creator has endowed our human nature when hallowed by our human affections! You alone suffice to shatter into dust the haughty creeds of the Misanthrope and Pharisee! And your fidelity to my erring self has taught me ever to love, to serve, to compassionate, to respect the community of God's creatures to which--noble and elevated though you are--you yet belong!"

He ceased, overpowered with the rush of his own thoughts. And Alice was too blessed for words. But in the murmur of the sunlit leaves, in the breath of the summer air, in the song of the exulting birds, and the deep and distant music of the heaven-surrounded seas, there went a melodious voice that seemed as if Nature echoed to his words, and blest the reunion of her children.

Maltravers once more entered upon the career so long suspended. He entered with an energy more practical and steadfast than the fitful enthusiasm of former years; and it was noticeable amongst those who knew him well, that while the firmness of his mind was not impaired, the haughtiness of his temper was subdued. No longer despising Man as he is, and no longer exacting from all things the ideal of a visionary standard, he was more fitted to mix in the living World, and to minister usefully to the great objects that refine and elevate our race. His sentiments were, perhaps, less lofty, but his actions were infinitely more excellent, and his theories infinitely more wise.

Stage after stage we have proceeded with him through the MYSTERIES OF LIFE. The Eleusinia are closed, and the crowning libation poured.

And Alice!--Will the world blame us if you are left happy at the last? We are daily banishing from our law-books the statutes that disproportion punishment to crime. Daily we preach the doctrine that we demoralize wherever we strain justice into cruelty. It is time that we should apply to the Social Code the Wisdom we recognize in Legislation! It is time that we should do away with the punishment of death for inadequate offences, even in books; it is time that we should allow the morality of atonement, and permit to Error the right to hope, as the reward of submission to its suffering. Nor let it be thought that the close to Alice's career can offer temptation to the offence of its commencement. Eighteen years of sadness, a youth consumed in silent sorrow over the grave of Joy, have images that throw over these pages a dark and warning shadow that will haunt the young long after they turn from the tale that is about to close! If Alice had died of a broken heart, if her punishment had been more than she could bear, _then_, as in real life, you would have justly condemned my moral; and the human heart, in its pity for the victim, would have lost all recollection of the error.--My tale is done.

THE END.

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