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BOOK VIII.

Whither come Wisdom's queen
And the snare-weaving Love?
EURIP. /Iphig. in Aul./ I. 1310.

CHAPTER I.

"Notitiam primosque gradus vicinia fecit."*—OVID.

* Neighbourhood caused the acquaintance and first introduction.

CLEVELAND'S villa /was/ full, and of persons usually called agreeable. Amongst the rest was Lady Florence Lascelles. The wise old man had ever counselled Maltravers not to marry too young; but neither did he wish him to put off that momentous epoch of life till all the bloom of heart and emotion was passed away. He thought, with the old lawgivers, that thirty was the happy age for forming a connection, in the choice of which, with the reason of manhood, ought, perhaps, to be blended the passion of youth. And he saw that few men were more capable than Maltravers of the true enjoyments of domestic life. He had long thought, also, that none were more calculated to sympathise with Ernest's views, and appreciate his peculiar character, than the gifted and brilliant Florence Lascelles. Cleveland looked with toleration on her many eccentricities of thought and conduct,—eccentricities which he imagined would rapidly melt away beneath the influence of that attachment which usually operates so great a change in women; and, where it is strongly and intensely felt, moulds even those of the most obstinate character into compliance or similitude with the sentiments or habits of its object.

The stately self-control of Maltravers was, he conceived, precisely that quality that gives to men an unconscious command over the very thoughts of the woman whose affection they win: while, on the other hand, he hoped that the fancy and enthusiasm of Florence would tend to render sharper and more practical an ambition, which seemed to the sober man of the world too apt to refine upon the

means, and to /cui bono/ the objects of worldly distinction. Besides, Cleveland was one who thoroughly appreciated the advantages of wealth and station; and the rank and the dower of Florence were such as would force Maltravers into a position in social life, which could not fail to make new exactions upon talents which Cleveland fancied were precisely those adapted rather to command than to serve. In Ferrers he recognised a man to /get/ into power—in Maltravers one by whom power, if ever attained, would be wielded with dignity, and exerted for great uses. Something, therefore, higher than mere covetousness for the vulgar interests of Maltravers made Cleveland desire to secure to him the heart and hand of the great heiress; and he fancied that, whatever might be the obstacle, it would not be in the will of Lady Florence herself. He prudently resolved, however, to leave matters to their natural course. He hinted nothing to one party or the other. No place for falling in love like a large country house, and no time for it, amongst the indolent well-born, like the close of a London season, when, jaded by small cares, and sickened of hollow intimacies, even the coldest may well yearn for the tones of affection—the excitement of an honest emotion.

Somehow or other it happened that Florence and Ernest, after the first day or two, were constantly thrown together. She rode on horseback, and Maltravers was by her side—they made excursions on the river, and they sat on the same bench in the gliding pleasure-boat. In the evenings, the younger guests, with the assistance of the neighbouring families, often got up a dance in a temporary pavilion built out of the dining-room. Ernest never danced. Florence did at first. But once, as she was conversing with Maltravers, when a gay guardsman came to claim her promised hand in the waltz, she seemed struck by a grave change in Ernest's face.

"Do you never waltz?" she asked, while the guardsman was searching for a corner wherein safely to deposit his hat.

"No," said he; "yet there is no impropriety in /my/ waltzing."

"And you mean that there is in mine?"

"Pardon me—I did not say so."

"But you think it."

"Nay, on consideration, I am glad, perhaps, that you do waltz."

"You are mysterious."

"Well then, I mean, that you are precisely the woman I would never fall in love with. And I feel the danger is lessened, when I see you destroy any one of my illusions, or, I ought to say, attack any one of my prejudices."

Lady Florence coloured; but the guardsman and the music left her no time for reply. However, after that night she waltzed no more. She was unwell—she declared she was ordered not to dance, and so quadrilles were relinquished as well as the waltz.

Maltravers could not but be touched and flattered by this regard for his opinion; but Florence contrived to testify it so as to forbid acknowledgment, since another motive had been found for it. The second evening after that commemorated by Ernest's candid rudeness, they chanced to meet in the conservatory, which was connected with the ball-room; and Ernest, pausing to inquire after her health, was struck by the listless and dejected sadness which spoke in her tone and countenance as she replied to him.

"Dear Lady Florence," said he, "I fear you are worse than you will confess. You should shun these draughts. You owe it to your friends to be more careful of yourself."

"Friends!" said Lady Florence, bitterly—"I have no friends!—even my poor father would not absent himself from a cabinet dinner a week after I was dead. But that is the condition of public life—its hot and searing blaze puts out the lights of all lesser but not unholy affections.—Friends! Fate, that made Florence Lascelles the envied heiress, denied her brothers, sisters; and the hour of her birth lost her even the love of a mother! Friends! where shall I find them?"

As she ceased, she turned to the open casement, and stepped out into the verandah, and by the trembling of her voice Ernest felt that she had done so to hide or to suppress her tears.

"Yet," said he, following her, "there is one class of more distant friends, whose interest Lady Florence Lascelles cannot fail to secure, however she may disdain it. Among the humblest of that class, suffer me to rank myself. Come, I assume the privilege of advice—the night air is a luxury you must not indulge."

"No, no, it refreshes me—it soothes. You misunderstand me, I have no illness that still skies and

sleeping flowers can increase."

Maltravers, as is evident, was not in love with Florence, but he could not fail, brought, as he had lately been, under the direct influence of her rare and prodigal gifts, mental and personal, to feel for her a strong and even affectionate interest—the very frankness with which he was accustomed to speak to her, and the many links of communion there necessarily were between himself and a mind so naturally powerful and so richly cultivated, had already established their acquaintance upon an intimate footing.

"I cannot restrain you, Lady Florence," said he, half smiling, "but my conscience will not let me be an accomplice. I will turn king's evidence, and hunt out Lord Saxingham to send him to you."

Lady Florence, whose face was averted from his, did not appear to hear him.

"And you, Mr. Maltravers," turning quickly round—"you—have you friends? Do you feel that there are, I do not say public, but private affections and duties, for which life is made less a possession than a trust?"

"Lady Florence—no!—I have friends, it is true, and Cleveland is of the nearest; but the life within life—the second self, in whom we vest the right and mastery over our own being—I know it not. But is it," he added, after a pause, "a rare privation? Perhaps it is a happy one. I have learned to lean on my own soul, and not look elsewhere for the reeds that a wind can break."

"Ah, it is a cold philosophy—you may reconcile yourself to its wisdom in the world, in the hum and shock of men; but in solitude, with Nature—ah, no! While the mind alone is occupied, you may be contented with the pride of stoicism; but there are moments when the /heart/ wakens as from a sleep—wakens like a frightened child—to feel itself alone and in the dark."

Ernest was silent, and Florence continued, in an altered voice: "This is a strange conversation—and you must think me indeed a wild, romance-reading person, as the world is apt to call me. But if I live—I—pshaw!—life denies ambition to women."

"If a woman like you, Lady Florence, should ever love, it will be one in whose career you may perhaps find that noblest of all ambitions—the ambition women only feel—the ambition for another!"

"Ah! but I shall never love," said Lady Florence, and her cheek grew pale as the starlight shone on it; "still, perhaps," she added quickly, "I may at least know the blessing of friendship. Why now," and here, approaching Maltravers, she laid her hand with a winning frankness on his arm—"why now, should not we be to each other as if love, as you call it, were not a thing for earth—and friendship supplied its place?—there is no danger of our falling in love with each other! You are not vain enough to expect it in me, and I, you know, am a coquette; let us be friends, confidants—at least till you marry, or I give another the right to control my friendships and monopolise my secrets."

Maltravers was startled—the sentiment Florence addressed to him, he, in words not dissimilar, had once addressed to Valerie.

"The world," said he, kissing the hand that yet lay on his arm, "the world will—"

"Oh, you men!—the world, the world!—Everything gentle, everything pure, everything noble, high-wrought and holy—is to be squared, and cribbed, and maimed to the rule and measure of the world! The world—are you, too, its slave? Do you not despise its hollow cant—its methodical hypocrisy?"

"Heartily!" said Ernest Maltravers, almost with fierceness. "No man ever so scorned its false gods and its miserable creeds—its war upon the weak—its fawning upon the great—its ingratitude to benefactors—its sordid league with mediocrity against excellence. Yes, in proportion as I love mankind, I despise and detest that worse than Venetian oligarchy which mankind set over them and call 'THE WORLD.'"

And then it was, warmed by the excitement of released feelings, long and carefully shrouded, that this man, ordinarily so calm and self-possessed, poured burningly and passionately forth all those tumultuous and almost tremendous thoughts, which, however much we may regulate, control, or disguise them, lurk deep within the souls of all of us, the seeds of the eternal war between the natural man and the artificial; between our wilder genius and our social conventionalities;—thoughts that from time to time break forth into the harbingers of vain and fruitless revolutions, impotent struggles against destiny;—thoughts that good and wise men would be slow to promulge and propagate, for they are of a fire which burns as well as brightens, and which spreads from heart to heart—as a spark spreads amidst flax;—thoughts which are rifest where natures are most high, but belong to truths that virtue dare not tell aloud. And as Maltravers spoke, with his eyes flashing almost intolerable light—his breast

heaving, his form dilated, never to the eyes of Florence Lascelles did he seem so great: the chains that bound the strong limbs of his spirit seemed snapped asunder, and all his soul was visible and towering, as a thing that has escaped slavery, and lifts its crest to heaven, and feels that it is free.

That evening saw a new bond of alliance between these two persons,—young, handsome, and of opposite sexes, they agreed to be friends, and nothing more. Fools!

CHAPTER II.

"Idem velle, et idem nolle, ea demum firma amicitia est."*
SALLUST.

*To will the same thing and not to will the same thing, that at length is firm friendship.

"/Carlos./ That letter.
/Princess Eboli./ Oh, I shall die. Return it instantly."
SCHILLER: /Don Carlos/.

IT seemed as if the compact Maltravers and Lady Florence had entered into removed whatever embarrassment and reserve had previously existed. They now conversed with an ease and freedom not common in persons of different sexes before they have passed their grand climacteric. Ernest, in ordinary life, like most men of warm emotions and strong imagination, if not taciturn, was at least guarded. It was as if a weight were taken from his breast, when he found one person who could understand him best when he was most candid. His eloquence—his poetry—his intense and concentrated enthusiasm found a voice. He could talk to an individual as he would have written to the public—a rare happiness to the men of books.

Florence seemed to recover her health and spirits as by a miracle; yet she was more gentle, more subdued, than of old—there was less effort to shine, less indifference whether she shocked. Persons who had not met her before, wondered why she was dreaded in society. But at times a great natural irritability of temper—a quick suspicion of the motives of those around her—an imperious and obstinate vehemence of will, were visible to Maltravers, and served, perhaps, to keep him heart-whole. He regarded her through the eyes of the intellect, not those of the passions—he thought not of her as a woman—her very talents, her very grandeur of idea and power of purpose, while they delighted him in conversation, diverted his imagination from dwelling on her beauty. He looked on her as something apart from her sex;—a glorious creature spoilt by being a woman. He once told her so, laughing, and Florence considered it a compliment. Poor Florence, her scorn of her sex avenged her sex, and robbed her of her proper destiny!

Cleveland silently observed their intimacy, and listened with a quiet smile to the gossips who pointed out /tetes-a-tetes/ by the terrace, and loiterings by the lawn, and predicted what would come of it all. Lord Saxingham was blind. But his daughter was of age, in possession of her princely fortune, and had long made him sensible of her independence of temper. His lordship, however, thoroughly misunderstood the character of her pride, and felt fully convinced she would marry no one less than a duke; as for flirtations, he thought them natural and innocent amusements. Besides, he was very little at Temple Grove. He went to London every morning, after breakfasting in his own room—came back to dine, play at whist, and talk good-humoured nonsense to Florence in his dressing-room, for the three minutes that took place between his sipping his wine-and-water and the appearance of his valet. As for the other guests, it was not their business to do more than gossip with each other; and so Florence and Maltravers went on their way unmolested, though not unobserved. Maltravers, not being himself in love, never fancied that Lady Florence loved him, or that she would be in any danger of doing so. This is a mistake a man often commits—a woman never. A woman always knows when she is loved, though she often imagines she is loved when she is not. Florence was not happy, for happiness is a calm feeling. But she was excited with a vague, wild, intoxicating emotion.

She had learned from Maltravers that she had been misinformed by Ferrers, and that no other claimed empire over his heart; and whether or not he loved her, still for the present they seemed all in all to each other; she lived but for the present day, she would not think of the morrow.

Since that severe illness which had tended so much to alter Ernest's mode of life, he had not come before the public as an author. Latterly, however, the old habit had broken out again. With the comparative idleness of recent years, the ideas and feelings which crowd so fast on the poetical temperament, once indulged, had accumulated within him to an excess that demanded vent. For with some, to write is not a vague desire, but an imperious destiny. The fire is kindled and must break forth; the wings are fledged, and the birds must leave their nest. The communication of thought to man is

implanted as an instinct in those breasts to which Heaven has intrusted the solemn agencies of genius. In the work which Maltravers now composed he consulted Florence: his confidence delighted her—it was a compliment she could appreciate. Wild, fervid, impassioned, was that work—a brief and holiday creation—the youngest and most beloved of the children of his brain. And as day by day the bright design grew into shape, and thought and imagination found themselves "local habitations," Florence felt as if she were admitted into the palace of the genii, and made acquainted with the mechanism of those spells and charms with which the preternatural powers of mind design the witchery of the world. Ah, how different in depth and majesty were those intercommunications of idea between Ernest Maltravers and a woman scarcely inferior to himself in capacity and acquirement, from that bridge of shadowy and dim sympathies which the enthusiastic boy had once built up between his own poetry of knowledge and Alice's poetry of love!

It was one late afternoon in September, when the sun was slowly going down its western way, that Lady Florence, who had been all that morning in her own room, paying off, as she said, the dull arrears of correspondence, rather on Lord Saxingham's account than her own; for he punctiliously exacted from her the most scrupulous attention to cousins fifty times removed, provided they were rich, clever, well off, or in any way of consequence:—it was one afternoon that, relieved from these avocations, Lady Florence strolled through the grounds with Cleveland. The gentlemen were still in the stubble-fields, the ladies were out in barouches and pony phaetons, and Cleveland and Lady Florence were alone.

Apropos of Florence's epistolary employment, their conversation fell upon that most charming species of literature, which joins with the interest of a novel the truth of a history—the French memoir and letter-writers. It was a part of literature in which Cleveland was thoroughly at home.

"Those agreeable and polished gossips," said he, "how well they contrived to introduce nature into art! Everything artificial seemed so natural to them. They even feel by a kind of clockwork, which seems to go better than the heart itself. Those pretty sentiments, those delicate gallantries, of Madame de Sevigne to her daughter, how amiable they are; but, somehow or other, I can never fancy them the least motherly. What an ending for a maternal epistle is that elegant compliment—'Songez que de tons les coeurs ou vous regnez, il n'y en a aucun ou votre empire soit si bien etabli que dans le mien.'* I can scarcely fancy Lord Saxingham writing so to you, Lady Florence."

* Think that of all the hearts over which you reign, there is not one in which your empire can be so well established as in mine.

"No, indeed," replied Lady Florence, smiling. "Neither papas nor mammas in England are much addicted to compliment; but I confess I like preserving a sort of gallantry even in our most familiar connections—why should we not carry the imagination into all the affections?"

"I can scarce answer the why," returned Cleveland; "but I think it would destroy the reality. I am rather of the old school. If I had a daughter, and asked her to get my slippers, I am afraid I should think it a little wearisome if I had, in receiving them, to make /des belles phrases/ in return."

While they were thus talking, and Lady Florence continued to press her side of the question, they passed through a little grove that conducted to an arm of the stream which ornamented the grounds, and by its quiet and shadowy gloom was meant to give a contrast to the livelier features of the domain. Here they came suddenly upon Maltravers. He was walking by the side of the brook, and evidently absorbed in thought.

It was the trembling of Lady Florence's hand as it lay on Cleveland's arm, that induced him to stop short in an animated commentary on Rochefoucauld's character of Cardinal de Retz, and look round.

"Ha, most meditative Jacques!" said he; "and what new moral hast thou been conning in our Forest of Ardennes?"

"Oh, I am glad to see you; I wished to consult you, Cleveland. But first, Lady Florence, to convince you and our host that my rambles have not been wholly fruitless, and that I could not walk from Dan to Beersheba and find all barren, accept my offering—a wild rose that I discovered in the thickest part of the wood. It is not a civilised rose. Now, Cleveland, a word with you."

"And now, Mr. Maltravers, I am /de trop/," said Lady Florence.

"Pardon me, I have no secrets from you in this matter—or rather these matters; for there are two to be discussed. In the first place, Lady Florence, that poor Cesarini,—you know and like him—nay, no blushes."

"Did I blush?—then it was in recollection of an old reproach of yours."

"At its justice?—well, no matter. He is one for whom I always felt a lively interest. His very morbidity of temperament only increases my anxiety for his future fate. I have received a letter from De Montaigne, his brother-in-law, who seems seriously uneasy about Castruccio. He wishes him to leave England at once, as the sole means of restoring his broken fortunes. De Montaigne has the opportunity of procuring him a diplomatic situation, which may not again occur—and—but you know the man—what shall we do? I am sure he will not listen to me; he looks on me as an interested rival for fame."

"Do you think I have any subtler eloquence?" said Cleveland. "No, I am an author, too. Come, I think your ladyship must be the arch-negotiator."

"He has genius, he has merit," said Maltravers, pleadingly; "he wants nothing but time and experience to wean him from his foibles. /Will/ you try to save him, Lady Florence?"

"Why? nay, I must not be obdurate; I will see him when I go to town. It is like you, Mr. Maltravers, to feel this interest in one—"

"Who does not like me, you would say; but he will some day or other. Besides, I owe him deep gratitude. In his weaker qualities I have seen many which all literary men might incur, without strict watch over themselves; and let me add, also, that his family have great claims on me."

"You believe in the soundness of his heart, and in the integrity of his honour?" said Cleveland, inquiringly.

"Indeed I do; these are, these must be, the redeeming qualities of poets."

Maltravers spoke warmly; and such at that time was his influence over Florence, that his words formed—alas, too fatally!—her estimate of Castruccio's character, which had at first been high, but which his own presumption had latterly shaken. She had seen him three or four times in the interval between the receipt of his apologetic letter and her visit to Cleveland, and he had seemed to her rather sullen than humbled. But she felt for the vanity she herself had wounded.

"And now," continued Maltravers, "for my second subject of consultation. But that is political; will it weary Lady Florence?"

"Oh, no; to politics I am never indifferent: they always inspire me with contempt or admiration, according to the motives of those who bring the science into action. Pray say on."

"Well," said Cleveland, "one confidant at a time; you will forgive me, for I see my guests coming across the lawn, and I may as well make a diversion in your favour. Ernest can consult /me/ at any time."

Cleveland walked away; but the intimacy between Maltravers and Florence was of so frank a nature that there was nothing embarrassing in the thought of a /tete-a-tete/.

"Lady Florence," said Ernest, "there is no one in the world with whom I can confer so cheerfully as with you. I am almost glad of Cleveland's absence, for, with all his amiable and fine qualities, 'the world is too much with him,' and we do not argue from the same data. Pardon my prelude—now to my position. I have received a letter from Mr. ———. That statesman, whom none but those acquainted with the chivalrous beauty of his nature can understand or appreciate, sees before him the most brilliant career that ever opened in this country to a public man not born an aristocrat. He has asked me to form one of the new administration that he is about to create: the place offered to me is above my merits, nor suited to what I have yet done, though, perhaps, it be suited to what I may yet do. I make that qualification, for you know," added Ernest, with a proud smile, "that I am sanguine and self-confident."

"You accept the proposal?"

"Nay,—should I not reject it? Our politics are the same only for the moment, our ultimate objects are widely different. To serve with Mr. ———, I must make an unequal compromise—abandon nine opinions to promote one. Is not this a capitulation of that great citadel, one's own conscience? No man will call me inconsistent, for, in public life, to agree with another on a party question is all that is required; the thousand questions not yet ripened, and lying dark and concealed in the future, are not inquired into and divined; but I own I shall deem myself worse than inconsistent. For this is my dilemma,—if I use this noble spirit merely to advance one object, and then desert him where he halts, I am treacherous to him; if I halt with him, but one of my objects effected, I am treacherous to myself. Such are my views. It is with pain I arrive at them, for, at first, my heart beat with a selfish ambition."

"You are right, you are right," exclaimed Florence, with glowing cheeks; "how could I doubt you? I

comprehend the sacrifice you make; for a proud thing is it to soar above the predictions of foes in that palpable road to honour which the world's hard eyes can see, and the world's cold heart can measure; but prouder is it to feel that you have never advanced one step to the goal, which remembrance would retract. No, my friend, wait your time, confident that it must come, when conscience and ambition can go hand-in-hand—when the broad objects of a luminous and enlarged policy lie before you like a chart, and you can calculate every step of the way without peril of being lost. Ah, let them still call loftiness of purpose and whiteness of soul the dreams of a theorist,—even if they be so, the Ideal in this case is better than the Practical. Meanwhile your position is not one to forfeit lightly. Before you is that throne in literature which it requires no doubtful step to win, if you have, as I believe, the mental power to attain it. An ambition that may indeed be relinquished, if a more troubled career can better achieve those public purposes at which both letters and policy should aim, but which is not to be surrendered for the rewards of a place-man, or the advancement of a courtier."

It was while uttering these noble and inspiring sentiments, that Florence Lascelles suddenly acquired in Ernest's eyes a loveliness with which they had not before invested her.

"Oh," he said, as, with a sudden impulse, he lifted her hand to his lips, "blessed be the hour in which you gave me your friendship! These are the thoughts I have longed to hear from living lips, when I have been tempted to believe patriotism a delusion, and virtue but a name."

Lady Florence heard, and her whole form seemed changed,—she was no longer the majestic sibyl, but the attached, timorous, delighted woman.

It so happened that in her confusion she dropped from her hand the flower Maltravers had given her, and involuntarily glad of a pretext to conceal her countenance, she stooped to take it from the ground. In so doing, a letter fell from her bosom—and Maltravers, as he bent forwards to forestall her own movement, saw that the direction was to himself, and in the handwriting of his unknown correspondent. He seized the letter, and gazed in flattered and entranced astonishment, first on the writing, next on the detected writer. Florence grew deadly pale, and covering her face with her hands, burst into tears.

"O fool that I was," cried Ernest, in the passion of the moment, "not to know—not to have felt that there were not two Florences in the world! But if the thought had crossed me, I would not have dared to harbour it."

"Go, go," sobbed Florence; "leave me, in mercy leave me!"

"Not till you bid me rise," said Ernest, in emotion scarcely less deep than hers, as he sank on his knee at her feet.

Need I go on?—When they left that spot, a soft confession had been made—deep vows interchanged, and Ernest Maltravers was the accepted suitor of Florence Lascelles.

CHAPTER III.

"A hundred fathers would in my situation tell you that, as you are of noble extraction, you should marry a nobleman. But I do not say so. I will not sacrifice my child to any prejudice."

KOTZEBUE. /Lover's Vows/.

"Take heed, my lord; the welfare of us all
Hangs on the cutting short that fraudulent man."

SHAKSPEARE. /Henry VI./

"Oh, how this spring of love resembleth
Th' uncertain glory of an April day;
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by and by a cloud takes all away!"

SHAKSPEARE. /The Two Gentlemen of Verona/.

WHEN Maltravers was once more in his solitary apartment, he felt as in a dream. He had obeyed an impulse, irresistible, perhaps, but one with which the /conscience of his heart/ was not satisfied. A voice whispered to him, "Thou hast deceived her and thyself—thou dost not love her!" In vain he recalled her beauty, her grace, her genius—her singular and enthusiastic passion for himself—the voice still replied, "Thou dost not love. Bid farewell for ever to thy fond dreams of a life more blessed than that of mortals.

From the stormy sea of the future are blotted out eternally for thee—Calypso and her Golden Isle. Thou canst no more paint on the dim canvas of thy desires the form of her with whom thou couldst dwell for ever. Thou hast been unfaithful to thine own ideal—thou hast given thyself for ever and for ever to another—thou hast renounced hope—thou must live as in a prison, with a being with whom thou hast not the harmony of love."

"No matter," said Maltravers, almost alarmed, and starting from these thoughts, "I am betrothed to one who loves me—it is folly and dishonour to repent and to repine. I have gone through the best years of youth without finding the Egeria with whom the cavern would be sweeter than a throne. Why live to the grave a vain and visionary Nympholept? Out of the real world could I have made a nobler choice?"

While Maltravers thus communed with himself, Lady Florence passed into her father's dressing-room, and there awaited his return from London. She knew his worldly views—she knew also the pride of her affianced, and, she felt that she alone could mediate between the two.

Lord Saxingham at last returned—busy, bustling, important, and good-humoured as usual. "Well, Flory, well?—glad to see you—quite blooming, I declare,—never saw you with such a colour—monstrous like me, certainly. We always had fine complexions and fine eyes in our family. But I'm rather late—first bell rung—we /ci-devant jeunes hommes/ are rather long dressing, and you are not dressed yet, I see."

"My dearest father, I wished to speak with you on a matter of much importance."

"Do you?—what, immediately?"

"Yes."

"Well—what is it?—your Slingsby property, I suppose."

"No, my dear father—pray sit down and hear me patiently."

Lord Saxingham began to be both alarmed and curious—he seated himself in silence, and looked anxiously in the face of his daughter.

"You have always been very indulgent to me," commenced Florence, with a half smile, "and I have had my own way more than most young ladies. Believe me, my dear father. I am most grateful not only for your affection but your esteem. I have been a strange wild girl, but I am now about to reform; and as the first step, I ask your consent to give myself a preceptor and a guide—"

"A what!" cried Lord Saxingham.

"In other words, I am about to—to—well, the truth must out—to marry."

"Has the Duke of ——— been here to-day?"

"Not that I know of. But it is no duke to whom I have promised my hand—it is a nobler and rarer dignity that has caught my ambition. Mr. Maltravers has—"

"Mr. Maltravers!—Mr. Devil!—the girl's mad!—don't talk to me, child, I won't consent to any such nonsense. A country gentleman—very respectable, very clever, and all that, but it's no use talking—my mind's made up. With your fortune, too!"

"My dear father, I will not marry without your consent, though my fortune is settled on me, and I am of age."

"There's a good child—and now let me dress—we shall be late."

"No, not yet," said Lady Florence, throwing her arm carelessly round her father's neck—"I shall marry Mr. Maltravers, but it will be with your full approval. Just consider, if I married the Duke of ———, he would expect all my fortune, such as it is. Ten thousand a year is at my disposal; if I marry Mr. Maltravers, it will be settled on you—I always meant it—it is a poor return for your kindness, your indulgence—but it will show that your own Flory is not ungrateful."

"I won't hear."

"Stop—listen to reason. You are not rich—you are entitled but to a small pension if you ever resign office, and your official salary, I have often heard you say, does not prevent you from being embarrassed. To whom should a daughter give from her superfluities but to a parent?—from whom should a parent receive, but from a child, who can never repay his love?—Ah, this is nothing; but you—you who have never crossed her lightest whim—do not you destroy all the hopes of happiness your Florence can ever form."

Florence wept, and Lord Saxingham, who was greatly moved, let fall a few tears also. Perhaps it is too much to say that the pecuniary part of the proffered arrangement entirely won him over; but still the way it was introduced softened his heart. He possibly thought that it was better to have a good and grateful daughter in a country gentleman's wife, than a sullen and thankless one in a duchess. However that may be, certain it is, that before Lord Saxingham began his toilet, he promised to make no obstacle to the marriage, and all he asked in return was, that at least three months (but that, indeed, the lawyers would require) should elapse before it took place; and on this understanding Florence left him, radiant and joyous as Flora herself, when the sun of spring makes the world a garden. Never had she thought so little of her beauty, and never had it seemed so glorious, as that happy evening. But Maltravers was pale and thoughtful, and Florence in vain sought his eyes during the dinner, which seemed to her insufferably long. Afterwards, however, they met and conversed apart the rest of the evening; and the beauty of Florence began to produce upon Ernest's heart its natural effect; and that evening—ah, how Florence treasured the remembrance of every hour, every minute of its annals!

It would have been amusing to witness the short conversation between Lord Saxingham and Maltravers, when the latter sought the earl at night in his lordship's room. To Lord Saxingham's surprise, not a word did Maltravers utter of his own subordinate pretensions to Lady Florence's hand. Coldly, drily, and almost haughtily, did he make the formal proposals, "as if [as Lord Saxingham afterwards said to Ferrers] the man were doing me the highest possible honour in taking my daughter, the beauty of London, with fifty thousand a year, off my hands." But this was quite Maltravers!—if he had been proposing to the daughter of a country curate, without a sixpence, he would have been the humblest of the humble. The earl was embarrassed and discomposed—he was almost awed by the Siddons-like countenance and Coriolanus-like air of his future son-in-law—he even hinted nothing of the compromise as to time which he had made with his daughter. He thought it better to leave it to Lady Florence to arrange that matter. They shook hands frigidly and parted. Maltravers went next into Cleveland's room, and communicated all to the delighted old man, whose congratulations were so fervid that Maltravers felt it would be a sin not to fancy himself the happiest, man in the world. That night he wrote his refusal of the appointment offered him.

The next day, Lord Saxingham went to his office in Downing Street as usual, and Lady Florence and Ernest found an opportunity to ramble through the grounds alone.

There it was that occurred those confessions, sweet alike to utter and to hear. Then did Florence speak of her early years—of her self-formed and solitary mind—of her youthful dreams and reveries. Nothing around her to excite interest or admiration, or the more romantic, the higher, or the softer qualities of her nature, she turned to contemplation and to books. It is the combination of the faculties with the affections, exiled from action, and finding no worldly vent, which produces Poetry, the child of passion and of thought. Hence, before the real cares of existence claim them, the young, who are abler yet lonelier than their fellows, are nearly always poets; and Florence was a poetess. In minds like this, the first book that seems to embody and represent their own most cherished and beloved trains of sentiment and ideas, ever creates a reverential and deep enthusiasm. The lonely, and proud, and melancholy soul of Maltravers, which made itself visible in all his creations, became to Florence like a revealer of the secrets of her own nature. She conceived an intense and mysterious interest in the man whose mind exercised so pervading a power over her own. She made herself acquainted with his pursuits, his career—she fancied she found a symmetry and harmony between the actual being and the breathing genius—she imagined she understood what seemed dark and obscure to others. He whom she had never seen grew to her a never-absent friend. His ambition, his reputation, were to her like a possession of her own. So at length, in the folly of her young romance, she wrote to him, and dreaming of no discovery, anticipating no result, the habit once indulged became to her that luxury which writing for the eye of the world is to an author oppressed with the burthen of his own thoughts. At length she saw him, and he did not destroy her illusion. She might have recovered from the spell if she had found him ready at once to worship at her shrine. The mixture of reserve and frankness—frankness of language, reserve of manner—which belonged to Maltravers, piqued her. Her vanity became the auxiliary to her imagination. At length they met at Cleveland's house; their intercourse became more unrestrained—their friendship was established, and she discovered that she had wilfully implicated her happiness in indulging her dreams; yet even then she believed that Maltravers loved her, despite his silence upon the subject of love. His manner, his words bespoke his interest in her, and his voice was ever soft when he spoke to women; for he had much of the old chivalric respect and tenderness for the sex. What was general it was natural that she should apply individually—she who had walked the world but to fascinate and to conquer. It was probable that her great wealth and social position imposed a check on the delicate pride of Maltravers—she hoped so—she believed it—yet she felt her danger, and her own pride at last took alarm. In such a moment she had resumed the character of the unknown correspondent—she had written to Maltravers—addressed her letter to his own house, and meant the next day to have gone to London, and posted it there. In this letter she had spoken of his visit to Cleveland, of his position with herself. She exhorted him, if he loved her, to confess, and if not, to fly.

She had written artfully and eloquently—she was desirous of expediting her own fate; and then, with that letter in her bosom, she had met Maltravers, and the reader has learned the rest. Something of all this the blushing and happy Florence now revealed: and when she ended with uttering the woman's soft fear that she had been too bold, is it wonderful that Maltravers, clasping her to his bosom, felt the gratitude, and the delighted vanity, which seemed even to himself like love? And into love those feelings rapidly and deliciously will merge, if fate and accident permit!

And now they were by the side of the water; and the sun was gently setting as on the eve before. It was about the same hour, the fairest of an autumn day; none were near—the slope of the hill hid the house from their view. Had they been in the desert they could not have been more alone. It was not silence that breathed around them, as they sat on that bench with the broad beech spreading over them its trembling canopy of leaves;—but those murmurs of living nature which are sweeter than silence itself—the songs of birds—the tinkling bell of the sheep on the opposite bank—the wind sighing through the trees, and the gentle heaving of the glittering waves that washed the odorous reed and water-lily at their feet. They had both been for some moments silent; and Florence now broke the pause, but in tones more low than usual.

"Ah!" said she, turning towards him, "these hours are happier than we can find in that crowded world whither your destiny must call us. For me, ambition seems for ever at an end. I have found all; I am no longer haunted with the desire of gaining a vague something,—a shadowy empire, that we call fame or power. The sole thought that disturbs the calm current of my soul, is the fear to lose a particle of the rich possession I have gained."

"May your fears ever be as idle!"

"And you really love me! I repeat to myself ever and ever that one phrase. I could once have borne to lose you, now it would be my death. I despaired of ever being loved for myself; my wealth was a fatal dower; I suspected avarice in every vow, and saw the base world lurk at the bottom of every heart that offered itself at my shrine. But you, Ernest,—you, I feel, never could weigh gold in the balance—and you—if you love—love me for myself."

"And I shall love thee more with every hour."

"I know not that: I dread that you will love me less when you know me more. I fear I shall seem to you exacting—I am jealous already. I was jealous even of Lady T——, when I saw you by her side this morning. I would have your every look—monopolise your every word."

This confession did not please Maltravers, as it might have done if he had been more deeply in love. Jealousy, in a woman of so vehement and imperious a nature, was indeed a passion to be dreaded.

"Do not say so, dear Florence," said he, with a very grave smile; "for love should have implicit confidence as its bond and nature—and jealousy is doubt, and doubt is the death of love."

A shade passed over Florence's too expressive face, and she sighed heavily.

It was at this time that Maltravers, raising his eyes, saw the form of Lumley Ferrers approaching towards them from the opposite end of the terrace: at the same instant, a dark cloud crept over the sky, the waters seemed overcast and the breeze fell: a chill and strange presentiment of evil shot across Ernest's heart, and, like many imaginative persons, he was unconsciously superstitious as to presentiments.

"We are no longer alone," said he, rising; "your cousin has doubtless learned our engagement, and comes to congratulate your suitor."

"Tell me," he continued musingly, as they walked on to meet Ferrers, "are you very partial to Lumley? what think you of his character?—it is one that perplexes me; sometimes I think it has changed since we parted in Italy—sometimes I think it has not changed, but ripened."

"Lumley, I have known from a child," replied Florence, "and see much to admire and like in him; I admire his boldness and candour; his scorn of the world's littleness and falsehood; I like his good-nature—his gaiety—and fancy his heart better than it may seem to the superficial observer."

"Yet he appears to me selfish and unprincipled."

"It is from a fine contempt for the vices and follies of men that he has contracted the habit of consulting his own resolute will—and, believing everything done in this noisy stage of action a cheat, he has accommodated his ambition to the fashion. Though without what is termed genius, he will obtain a distinction and power that few men of genius arrive at."

"Because /genius/ is essentially honest," said Maltravers. "However, you teach me to look on him more indulgently. I suspect the real frankness of men whom I know to be hypocrites in public life—but, perhaps, I judge by too harsh a standard."

"Third persons," said Ferrers, as he now joined them, "are seldom unwelcome in the country; and I flatter myself that I am the exact thing wanting to complete the charm of this beautiful landscape."

"You are ever modest, my cousin."

"It is my weak side, I know; but I shall improve with years and wisdom. What say you, Maltravers?" and Ferrers passed his arm affectionately through Ernest's.

"By the by, I am too familiar—I am sunk in the world. I am a thing to be sneered at by you old-family people. I am next heir to a bran-new Brummagem peerage. 'Gad, I feel brassy already!'"

"What, is Mr. Templeton—"

"Mr. Templeton is no more; he is defunct, extinguished—out of the ashes rises the phoenix Lord Vargrave. We had thought of a more sounding title; De Courval has a nobler sound,—but my good uncle has nothing of the Norman about him: so we dropped the De as ridiculous—Vargrave is euphonious and appropriate. My uncle has a manor of that name—Baron Vargrave of Vargrave."

"Ah—I congratulate you."

"Thank you. Lady Vargrave may destroy all my hopes yet. But nothing venture, nothing have. My uncle will be gazetted to-day. Poor man, he will be delighted; and as he certainly owes it much to me, he will, I suppose, be very grateful—or hate me ever afterwards—that is a toss up. A benefit conferred is a complete hazard between the thumb of pride and the forefinger of affection. Heads gratitude, tails hatred! There, that's a simile in the fashion of the old writers: 'Well of English undefiled!' humph!"

"So that beautiful child is Mrs. Templeton's, or rather Lady Vargrave's, daughter by a former marriage?" said Maltravers, abstractedly.

"Yes, it is astonishing how fond he is of her. Pretty little creature—confoundedly artful though. By the way, Maltravers, we had an unexpectedly stormy night the last of the session—strong division—ministers hard pressed. I made quite a good speech for them. I suppose, however, there will be some change—the moderates will be taken in. Perhaps by next session I may congratulate you."

Ferrers looked hard at Maltravers while he spoke. But Ernest replied coldly, and evasively, and they were now joined by a party of idlers, lounging along the lawn in expectation of the first dinner-bell. Cleveland was in high consultation about the proper spot for a new fountain; and he summoned Maltravers to give his opinion whether it should spring from the centre of a flower-bed or beneath the drooping shade of a large willow. While this interesting discussion was going on, Ferrers drew aside his cousin, and pressing her hand affectionately, said, in a soft and tender voice:

"My dear Florence—for in such a time permit me to be familiar—I understand from Lord Saxingham, whom I met in London, that you are engaged to Maltravers. Busy as I was, I could not rest without coming hither to offer my best and most earnest wish for your happiness. I may seem a careless, I am considered a selfish, person; but my heart is warm to those who really interest it. And never did brother offer up for the welfare of a beloved sister prayers more anxious and fond, than those that poor Lumley Ferrers, breathes for Florence Lascelles."

Florence was startled and melted—the whole tone and manner of Lumley were so different from those he usually assumed. She warmly returned the pressure of his hand, and thanked him briefly, but with emotion.

"No one is great and good enough for you, Florence," continued Ferrers—"no one. But I admire your disinterested and generous choice. Maltravers and I have not been friends lately; but I respect him, as all must. He has noble qualities, and he has great ambition. In addition to the deep and ardent love that you cannot fail to inspire, he will owe you eternal gratitude. In this aristocratic country, your hand secures to him the most brilliant fortunes, the most proud career. His talents will now be measured by a very different standard. His merits will not pass through any subordinate grades, but leap at once into the highest posts; and, as he is even more proud than ambitious, how he must bless one who raises him, without effort, into positions of eminent command!"

"Oh, he does not think of such worldly advantages—he, the too pure, the too refined!" said Florence, with trembling eagerness. "He has no avarice, nothing mercenary in his nature!"

"No; there you indeed do him justice,—there is not a particle of baseness in his mind—I did not say

there was. The very greatness of his aspirations, his indignant and scornful pride, lift him above the thought of your wealth, your rank,—except as means to an end."

"You mistake still," said Florence, faintly smiling, but turning pale.

"No," resumed Ferrers, not appearing to hear her, and as if pursuing his own thoughts. "I always predicted that Maltravers would make a distinguished connection in marriage. He would not permit himself to love the lowborn or the poor. His affections are in his pride as much as in his heart. He is a great creature—you have judged wisely—and may Heaven bless you!"

With these words, Ferrers left her, and Florence, when she descended to dinner, wore a moody and clouded brow. Ferrers stayed three days at the house. He was peculiarly cordial to Maltravers, and spoke little to Florence. But that little never failed to leave upon her mind a jealous and anxious irritability, to which she yielded with morbid facility. In order perfectly to understand Florence Lascelles, it must be remembered that, with all her dazzling qualities, she was not what is called a lovable person. A certain hardness in her disposition, even as a child, had prevented her winding into the hearts of those around her. Deprived of her mother's care—having little or no intercourse with children of her own age—brought up with a starched governess, or female relations, poor and proud—she never had contracted the softness of manner which the reciprocation of household affections usually produces. With a haughty consciousness of her powers, her birth, her position, advantages always dinned into her ear, she grew up solitary, unsocial, and imperious. Her father was rather proud than fond of her—her servants did not love her—she had too little consideration for others, too little blandness and suavity to be loved by inferiors—she was too learned and too stern to find pleasure in the conversation and society of young ladies of her own age:—she had no friends. Now, having really strong affection, she felt all this, but rather with resentment than grief—she longed to be loved, but did not seek to be so—she felt as if it was her fate not to be loved—she blamed Fate, not herself.

When, with all the proud, pure, and generous candour of her nature, she avowed to Ernest her love for him, she naturally expected the most ardent and passionate return; nothing less could content her. But the habit and experience of all the past made her eternally suspicious that she was not loved; it was wormwood and poison to her to fancy that Maltravers had ever considered her advantages of fortune, except as a bar to his pretensions and a check on his passion. It was the same thing to her, whether it was the pettiest avarice or the loftiest aspirations that actuated her lover, if he had been actuated in his heart by any sentiment but love; and Ferrers, to whose eye her foibles were familiar, knew well how to make his praises of Ernest arouse against Ernest all her exacting jealousies and irritable doubts.

"It is strange," said he, one evening, as he was conversing with Florence, "how complete and triumphant a conquest you have effected over Ernest! Will you believe it?—he conceived a prejudice against you when he first saw you—he even said that you were made to be admired, not to be loved."

"Ha!—did he so?—true, true—he has almost said the same thing to me."

"But now how he must love you! Surely he has all the signs."

"And what are the signs, most learned Lumley?" said Florence, forcing a smile.

"Why, in the first place, you will doubtless observe that he never takes his eyes from you—with whomsoever he converses, whatever his occupation, those eyes, restless and pining, wander around for one glance from you."

Florence sighed, and looked up—at the other end of the room, her lover was conversing with Cleveland, and his eyes never wandered in search of her.

Ferrers did not seem to notice this practical contradiction of his theory, but went on.

"Then surely his whole character is changed—that brow has lost its calm majesty, that deep voice its assured and tranquil tone. Has he not become humble, and embarrassed, and fretful, living only on your smile, reproachful if you look upon another—sorrowful if your lip be less smiling—a thing of doubt, and dread, and trembling agitation—slave to a shadow—no longer lord of the creation? Such is love, such is the love you should inspire, such is the love Maltravers is capable of—for I have seen him testify it to another. "But," added Lumley, quickly, and as if afraid he had said too much, "Lord Saxingham is looking out for me to make up his whist-table. I go to-morrow—when shall you be in town?"

"In the course of the week," said poor Florence mechanically; and Lumley walked away.

In another moment, Maltravers, who had been more observant than he seemed, joined her where she sat.

"Dear Florence," said he, tenderly, "you look pale—I fear you are not so well this evening."

"No affectation of an interest you do not feel, pray," said Florence, with a scornful lip but swimming eyes.

"Do not feel, Florence!"

"It is the first time, at least, that you have observed whether I am well or ill. But it is no matter."

"My dear Florence,—why this tone?—how have I offended you? Has Lumley said—"

"Nothing but in your praise. Oh, be not afraid, you are one of those of whom all speak highly. But do not let me detain you here; let us join our host—you have left him alone."

Lady Florence waited for no reply, nor did Maltravers attempt to detain her. He looked pained, and when she turned round to catch a glance, that she hoped would be reproachful, he was gone. Lady Florence became nervous and uneasy, talked she knew not what, and laughed hysterically. She, however, deceived Cleveland into the notion that she was in the best possible spirits. By and by she rose, and passed through the suite of rooms: her heart was with Maltravers—still he was not visible. At length she entered the conservatory, and there she observed him, through the open casements, walking slowly, with folded arms, upon the moonlit lawn. There was a short struggle in her breast between woman's pride and woman's love; the last conquered, and she joined him.

"Forgive me, Ernest," she said, extending her hand, "I was to blame."

Ernest kissed the fair hand, and answered touchingly:

"Florence, you have the power to wound me, be forbearing in its exercise. Heaven knows that I would not, from the vain desire of showing command over you, inflict upon you a single pang. Ah! do not fancy that in lovers' quarrels there is any sweetness that compensates the sting."

"I told you I was too exacting, Ernest. I told you you would not love me so well when you knew me better."

"And were a false prophetess. Florence, every day, every hour I love you more—better than I once thought I could."

"Then," cried this wayward girl, anxious to pain herself, "then once you did not love me?"

"Florence, I will be candid—I did not. You are now rapidly obtaining an empire over me, greater than my reason should allow. But, beware: if my love be really a possession you desire,—beware how you arm my reason against you. Florence, I am a proud man. My very consciousness of the more splendid alliances you could form renders me less humble a lover than you might find in others. I were not worthy of you if I were not tenacious of my self-respect."

"Ah!" said Florence, to whose heart these words went home, "forgive me but this once. I shall not forgive myself so soon."

And Ernest drew her to his heart, and felt that, with all her faults, a woman whom he feared he could not render as happy as her sacrifices to him deserved was becoming very dear to him. In his heart he knew that she was not formed to render him happy; but that was not his thought, his fear. Her love had rooted out all thought of self from that generous breast. His only anxiety was to requite her.

They walked along the sward, silent, thoughtful; and Florence melancholy, yet blessed.

"That serene heaven, those lovely stars," said Maltravers at last, "do they not preach to us the Philosophy of Peace? Do they not tell us how much of calm belongs to the dignity of man, and the sublime essence of the soul. Petty distractions and self-wrought cares are not congenial to our real nature; their very disturbance is a proof that they are at war with our natures. Ah, sweet Florence, let us learn from yon skies, over which, in the faith of the poets of old, brooded the wings of primaevial and serenest Love, what earthly love should be,—a thing pure as light, and peaceful as immortality, watching over the stormy world, that it shall survive, and high above the clouds and vapours that roll below. Let little minds introduce into the holiest of affections all the bitterness and tumult of common life! Let us love as beings who will one day be inhabitants of the stars!"

CHAPTER IV.

"A slippery and subtle knave; a finder out of occasions, that has an eye can stamp and counterfeit

advantages."—/Othello/.

"Knavery's plain face is never seen till used."-/Ibid./

"You see, my dear Lumley," said Lord Saxingham, as the next day the two kinsmen were on their way to London in the earl's chariot, "you see that at the best this marriage of Flory's is a cursed bore."

"Why, indeed, it has its disadvantages. Maltravers is a gentleman and a man of genius; but gentlemen are plentiful, and his genius only tells against us, since he is not even of our politics."

"Exactly—my own son-in-law voting against me!"

"A practicable, reasonable man would change; not so Maltravers—and all the estates, and all the parliamentary influence, and all the wealth that ought to go with the family and with the party, go out of the family and against the party. You are quite right, my dear lord—it is a cursed bore."

"And she might have had the Duke of ——, a man with a rental of L100,000 a year. It is too ridiculous. This Maltravers, d——d disagreeable fellow, too, eh?"

"Stiff and stately—much changed for the worse of late years—grown conceited and set up."

"Do you know, Lumley, I would rather, of the two, have had you for my son-in-law?"

Lumley half started. "Are you serious, my lord? I have not Ernest's fortune—I cannot make such settlements: my lineage, too, at least on my mother's side, is less ancient."

"Oh, as to settlements, Flory's fortune ought to be settled on herself,—and as compared with that fortune, what could Mr. Maltravers pretend to settle? Neither she nor any children she may have could want his L4,000 a year, if he settled it all. As for family, connections tell more nowadays than Norman descent,—and for the rest, you are likely to be old Templeton's heir, to have a peerage (a large sum of ready money is always useful)—are rising in the House—one of our own set—will soon be in office—and, flattery apart, a devilish good fellow into the bargain. Oh, I would sooner a thousand times that Flory had taken a fancy to you."

Lumley Ferrers bowed his head but said nothing. He fell into a reverie, and Lord Saxingham took up his official red box, became deep in its contents, and forgot all about the marriage of his daughter.

Lumley pulled the check-string as the carriage entered Pall Mall, and desired to be set down at "The Travellers." While Lord Saxingham was borne on to settle the affairs of the nation, not being able to settle those of his own household, Ferrers was inquiring the address of Castruccio Cesarini. The porter was unable to give it him. The Signor generally called every day for his notes, but no one at the club knew where he lodged. Ferrers wrote, and left with the porter a line requesting Cesarini to call on him as soon as possible, and he bent his way to his house in Great George Street. He went straight into his library, unlocked his escritoire, and took out that letter which, the reader will remember, Maltravers had written to Cesarini, and which Lumley had secured; carefully did he twice read over this effusion, and the second time his face brightened and his eyes sparkled. It is now time to lay this letter before the reader: it ran thus:—

/"Private and confidential."/

"MY DEAR CESARINI:

"The assurance of your friendly feelings is most welcome to me. In much of what you say of marriage, I am inclined, though with reluctance, to agree. As to Lady Florence herself, few persons are more calculated to dazzle, perhaps to fascinate. But is she a person to make a home happy—to sympathise where she has been accustomed to command—to comprehend, and to yield to the waywardness and irritability common to our fanciful and morbid race—to content herself with the homage of a single heart? I do not know her enough to decide the question; but I know her enough to feel deep solicitude and anxiety for your happiness, if centred in a nature so imperious and so vain. But you will remind me of her fortune, her station. You will say that such are the sources from which, to an ambitious mind, happiness may well be drawn! Alas! I fear that the man who marries Lady Florence must indeed confine his dreams of felicity to those harsh and disappointing realities. But, Cesarini, these are not words which, were we more intimate, I would address to you. I doubt the reality of those affections which you ascribe to her and suppose devoted to yourself. She is evidently fond of conquest. She sports with the victims she makes. Her vanity dupes others, perhaps to be duped itself at last. I will not say more to you.

"Yours,

"Hurrah!" cried Ferrers, as he threw down the letter, and rubbed his hands with delight. "I little thought, when I schemed for this letter, that chance would make it so inestimably serviceable. There is less to alter than I thought for—the clumsiest botcher in the world could manage it. Let me look again. Hem, hem—the first phrase to alter is this: 'I know her enough to feel deep solicitude and anxiety for /your/ happiness if centred in a nature so imperious and vain'—scratch out 'your,' and put 'my.' All the rest good, good—till we come to 'affections which you ascribe to her, and suppose devoted to /yourself/'—for '/yourself/' write '/myself/'—the rest will do. Now, then, the date—we must change it to the present month, and the work is done. I wish that Italian blockhead would come. If I can but once make an irreparable breach between her and Maltravers, I think I cannot fail of securing his place; her pique, her resentment, will hurry her into taking the first who offers, by way of revenge. And by Jupiter, even if I fail (which I am sure I shall not), it will be something to keep Flory as lady paramount for a duke of our own party. I shall gain immensely by such a connection; but I lose everything and gain nothing by her marrying Maltravers—of opposite politics too—whom I begin to hate like poison. But no duke shall have her—Florence Ferrers, the only alliteration I ever liked—yet it would sound rough in poetry."

Lumley then deliberately drew towards him his inkstand—"No penknife!—Ah, true, I never mend pens—sad waste—must send out for one." He rang the bell, ordered a penknife to be purchased, and the servant was still out when a knock at the door was heard, and in a minute more Cesarini entered.

"Ah," said Lumley, assuming a melancholy air, "I am glad that you are arrived; you will excuse my having written to you so unceremoniously. You received my note—sit down, pray—and how are you? you look delicate—can I offer you anything?"

"Wine," said Cesarini, laconically, "wine; your climate requires wine."

Here the servant entered with the penknife, and was ordered to bring wine and sandwiches. Lumley then conversed lightly on different matters till the wine appeared; he was rather surprised to observe Cesarini pour out and drink off glass upon glass, with an evident craving for the excitement. When he had satisfied himself, he turned his dark eyes to Ferrers, and said, "You have news to communicate—I see it in your brow. I am now ready to hear all."

"Well, then listen to me; you were right in your suspicions; jealousy is ever a true diviner. I make no doubt Othello was quite right, and Desdemona was no better than she should be. Maltravers has proposed to my cousin; and been accepted."

Cesarini's complexion grew perfectly ghastly; his whole frame shook like a leaf—for a moment he seemed paralysed.

"Curse him!" said he, at last, drawing a deep breath, and betwixt his grinded teeth—"curse him, from the depths of the heart he has broken!"

"And after such a letter to you!—do you remember it?—here it is. He warns you against Lady Florence, and then secures her to himself—is this treachery?"

"Treachery black as hell! I am an Italian," cried Cesarini, springing to his feet, and with all the passions of his climate in his face, "and I will be avenged! Bankrupt in fortune, ruined in hopes, blasted in heart—I have still the godlike consolation of the desperate—I have revenge."

"Will you call him out?" asked Lumley, musingly and calmly. "Are you a dead shot? If so, it is worth thinking about; if not, it is a mockery—your shot misses, his goes in the air, seconds interpose, and you both walk away devilish glad to get off so well. Duels are humbug."

"Mr. Ferrers," said Cesarini, fiercely, "this is not a matter of jest."

"I do not make it a jest; and what is more, Cesarini," said Ferrers, with a concentrated energy far more commanding than the Italian's fury, "what is more, I so detest Maltravers, I am so stung by his cold superiority, so wroth with his success, so loathe the thought of his alliance, that I would cut off this hand to frustrate that marriage! I do not jest, man; but I have method and sense in my hatred—it is our English way."

Cesarini stared at the speaker gloomily, clenched his hand, and strode rapidly to and fro the room.

"You would be avenged, so would I. Now what shall be the means?" said Ferrers.

"I will stab him to the heart—I will—"

"Cease these tragic flights. Nay, frown and stamp not; but sit down, and be reasonable, or leave me and act for yourself."

"Sir," said Cesarini, with an eye that might have alarmed a man less resolute than Ferrers, "have a care how you presume on my distress."

"You are in distress, and you refuse relief; you are bankrupt in fortune, and you rave like a poet, when you should be devising and plotting for the attainment of boundless wealth. Revenge and ambition may both be yours; but they are prizes never won but by a cautious foot as well as a bold hand."

"What would you have me do? and what but his life would content me?"

"Take his life if you can—I have no objection—go and take it; only just observe this, that if you miss your aim, or he, being the stronger man, strike you down, you will be locked up in a madhouse for the next year or two at least; and that is not the place in which I should like to pass the winter—but as you will."

"You!—you!—But what are you to me? I will go. Good day, sir."

"Stay a moment," said Ferrers, when he saw Cesarini about to leave the room; "stay, take this chair, and listen to me—you had better—"

Cesarini hesitated, and then, as it were, mechanically obeyed.

"Read that letter which Maltravers wrote to you. You have finished—well—now observe—if Florence sees that letter she will not and cannot marry the man who wrote it—you must show it to her."

"Ah, my guardian angel, I see it all! Yes, there are words in this letter no woman so proud could ever pardon. Give me it again, I will go at once."

"Pshaw! You are too quick; you have not remarked that this letter was written five months ago, before Maltravers knew much of Lady Florence. He himself has confessed to her that he did not then love her—so much the more would she value the conquest she has now achieved. Florence would smile at this letter, and say, 'Ah, he judges me differently now.'"

"Are you seeking to madden me? What do you mean? Did you not just now say that, did she see that letter, she would never marry the writer?"

"Yes, yes, but the letter must be altered. We must erase the date;—we must date it from to-day;—to-day—Maltravers returns to-day. We must suppose it written, not in answer to a letter from you, demanding his advice and opinion as to your marriage with Lady Florence, but in answer to a letter of yours in which you congratulate him on his approaching marriage to her. By the substitution of one pronoun for another, in two places, the letter will read as well one way as another. Read it again, and see; or stop, I will be the lecturer."

Here Ferrers read over the letter, which, by the trifling substitutions he proposed, might indeed bear the character he wished to give it.

"Does the light break in upon you now?" said Ferrers. Are you prepared to go through a part that requires subtlety, delicacy, address, and, above all, self-control?—qualities that are the common attributes of your countrymen."

"I will do all, fear me not. It may be villainous, it may be base; but I care not, Maltravers shall not rival, master, eclipse me in all things."

"Where are you lodging?"

"Where?—out of town a little way."

"Take up your home with me for a few days. I cannot trust you out of my sight. Send for your luggage; I have a room at your service."

Cesarini at first refused; but a man who resolves on a crime feels the awe of solitude, and the necessity of a companion. He went himself to bring his effects, and promised to return to dinner.

"I must own," said Lumley, resettling himself at his desk, "this is the dirtiest trick that ever I played; but the glorious end sanctifies the paltry means. After all, it is the mere prejudice of gentlemanlike education."

A very few seconds, and with the aid of the knife to erase, and the pen to re-write, Ferrers completed his task, with the exception of the change of date, which, on second thoughts, he reserved as a matter to be regulated by circumstances.

"I think I have hit off his /m/'s and /y/'s tolerably," said he, "considering I was not brought up to this sort of thing. But the alteration would be visible on close inspection. Cesarini must read the letter to her, then if she glances over it herself it will be with bewildered eyes and a dizzy brain. Above all, he must not leave it with her, and must bind her to the closest secrecy. She is honourable and will keep her word; and so now that matter is settled. I have just time before dinner to canter down to my uncle's and wish the old fellow joy."

CHAPTER V.

"And then my lord has much that he would state
All good to you."—CRABBE: /Tales of the Heart/.

LORD VARGRAVE was sitting alone in his library, with his account-books before him. Carefully did he cast up the various sums which, invested in various speculations, swelled his income. The result seemed satisfactory—and the rich man threw down his pen with an air of triumph.

"I will invest L120,000 in land—only L120,000. I will not be tempted to sink more. I will have a fine house—a house fitting for a nobleman—a fine old Elizabethan house—a house of historical interest. I must have woods and lakes—and a deer-park, above all. Deer are very gentlemanlike things, very. De Clifford's place is to be sold, I know; they ask too much for it, but ready money is tempting. I can bargain—bargain, I am a good hand at a bargain. Should I be now Lord Baron Vargrave, if I had always given people what they asked? I will double my subscriptions to the Bible Society and the Philanthropic, and the building of new churches. The world shall not say Richard Templeton does not deserve his greatness. I will—Come in. Who's there?—come in."

The door gently opened—the meek face of the new peeress appeared. "I disturb you—I beg your pardon—I—"

"Come in, my dear, come in—I want to talk to you—I want to talk to your ladyship—sit down, pray."

Lady Vargrave obeyed.

"You see," said the peer, crossing his legs, and caressing his left foot with both hands, while he surveyed his stately person to and fro in his chair—"you see that the honour conferred upon me will make a great change in our mode of life, Mrs. Temple—I mean Lady Vargrave. This villa is all very well—my country house is not amiss for a country gentleman—but now we must support our rank. The landed estate I already possess will go with the title—go to Lumley—I shall buy another at my own disposal, one that I can feel /thoroughly mine/—it shall be a splendid place, Lady Vargrave."

"This place is splendid to me," said Lady Vargrave, timidly.

"This place—nonsense—you must learn loftier ideas, Lady Vargrave; you are young, you can easily contract new habits, more, easily, perhaps, than myself. You are naturally ladylike, though I say it—you have good taste, you don't talk much, you don't show your ignorance—quite right. You must be presented at court, Lady Vargrave—we must give great dinners, Lady Vargrave. Balls are sinful, so is the opera, at least I fear so—yet an opera-box would be a proper appendage to your rank, Lady Vargrave."

"My dear Mr. Templeton—"

"Lord Vargrave, if your ladyship pleases."

"I beg pardon. May you live long to enjoy your honours; but I, my dear lord—I am not fit to share them: it is only in our quiet life that I can forget what—what I was. You terrify me when you talk of court—of—"

"Stuff, Lady Vargrave! stuff; we accustom ourselves to these things. Do I look like a man who has stood behind a counter? rank is a glove that stretches to the hand that wears it. And the child, dear child,—dear Evelyn, she shall be the admiration of London, the beauty, the heiress, the—oh, she will do me honour!"

"She will, she will!" said Lady Vargrave, and the tears gushed from her eyes.

Lord Vargrave was softened.

"No mother ever deserved more from a child than you from Evelyn."

"I would hope I have done my duty," said Lady Vargrave, drying her tears.

"Papa, papa!" cried an impatient voice, tapping at the window, "come and play, papa—come and play at ball, papa!"

And there, by the window, stood that beautiful child, glowing with health and mirth—her light hair tossed from her forehead, her sweet mouth dimpled with smiles.

"My darling, go on the lawn,—don't over-exert yourself—you have not quite recovered that horrid sprain—I will join you immediately—bless you!"

"Don't be long, papa—nobody plays so nicely as you do;" and, nodding and laughing from very glee, away scampered the young fairy. Lord Vargrave turned to his wife.

"What think you of my nephew—of Lumley?" said he, abruptly.

"He seems all that is amiable, frank, and kind."

Lord Vargrave's brow became thoughtful. "I think so too," he said, after a short pause; "and I hope you will approve of what I mean to do. You see Lumley was brought up to regard himself as my heir—I owe something to him, beyond the poor estate which goes with, but never can adequately support, /my/ title. Family honours, hereditary rank, must be properly regarded. But that dear girl—I shall leave her the bulk of my fortune. Could we not unite the fortune and the title? It would secure the rank to her, it would incorporate all my desires—all my duties."

"But," said Lady Vargrave, with evident surprise, "if I understand you rightly, the disparity of years—"

"And what then, what then, Lady Vargrave? Is there no disparity of years between /us/?—a greater disparity than between Lumley and that tall girl. Lumley is a mere youth, a youth still, five-and-thirty; he will be little more than forty when they marry; I was between fifty and sixty when I married you, Lady Vargrave. I don't like boy and girl marriages: a man should be older than his wife. But you are so romantic, Lady Vargrave. Besides, Lumley is so gay and good-looking, and wears so well. He has been very nearly forming another attachment; but that, I trust, is out of his head now. They must like each other. You will not gainsay me, Lady Vargrave, and if anything happens to me—life is uncertain—"

"Oh, do not speak so—my friend, my benefactor!"

"Why, indeed," resumed his lordship, mildly, "thank Heaven, I am very well—feel younger than ever I did—but still life is uncertain; and if you survive me, you will not throw obstacles in the way of my grand scheme?"

"I—no,—no—of course you have the right in all things over her destiny; but so young—so soft-hearted, if she should love one of her own years—"

"Love!—pooh! love does not come into girls' heads unless it is put there. We will bring her up to love Lumley. I have another reason—a cogent one—our secret!—to him it can be confided—it should not go out of our family. Even in my grave I could not rest if a slur were cast on my respectability—my name."

Lord Vargrave spoke solemnly and warmly; then muttering to himself, "Yes, it is for the best," he took up his hat and quitted the room. He joined his stepchild on the lawn. He romped with her—he played with her—that stiff, stately man!—he laughed louder than she did, and ran almost as fast. And when she was fatigued and breathless, he made her sit down beside him, in a little summer-house, and, fondly stroking down her disordered tresses, said, "You tire me out, child; I am growing too old to play with you. Lumley must supply my place. You love Lumley?"

"Oh, dearly, he is so good-humoured, so kind: he has given me such a beautiful doll, with such eyes!"

"You shall be his little wife—you would like to be his little wife?"

"Wife! why, poor mamma is a wife, and she is not so happy as I am."

"Your mamma has bad health, my dear," said Lord Vargrave, a little discomposed. "But it is a fine thing to be a wife and have a carriage of your own, and a fine house, and jewels, and plenty of money, and be your own mistress; and Lumley will love you dearly."

"Oh, yes, I should like all that."

"And you will have a protector, child, when I am no more."

The tone, rather than the words, of her stepfather struck a damp into that childish heart. Evelyn lifted her eyes, gazed at him earnestly, and then, throwing her arms round him, burst into tears.

Lord Vargrave wiped his own eyes, and covered her with kisses.

"Yes, you shall be Lumley's wife, his honoured wife, heiress to my rank as to my fortunes."

"I will do all that papa wishes."

"You will be Lady Vargrave, then, and Lumley will be your husband," said the stepfather, impressively. "Think over what I have said. Now let us join mamma. But, as I live, here is Lumley himself. However, it is not yet the time to sound him:—I hope that he has no chance with that Lady Florence."

CHAPTER VI.

"Fair encounter

Of two most rare affections."—/Tempest/.

MEANWHILE the betrothed were on their road to London. The balmy and serene beauty of the day had induced them to perform the short journey on horseback. It is somewhere said, that lovers are never so handsome as in each other's company, and neither Florence nor Ernest ever looked so well as on horseback. There was something in the stateliness and grace of both, something even in the aquiline outline of their features and the haughty bend of the neck, that made a sort of likeness between these young persons, although there was no comparison as to their relative degrees of personal advantage: the beauty of Florence defied all comparison. And as they rode from Cleveland's porch, where the other guests yet lingering were assembled to give the farewell greeting, there was a general conviction of the happiness destined to the affianced ones,—a general impression that both in mind and person they were eminently suited to each other. Their position was that which is ever interesting, even in more ordinary people, and at that moment they were absolutely popular with all who gazed on them; and when the good old Cleveland turned away with tears in his eyes and murmured "Bless them!" there was not one of the party who would have hesitated to join the prayer.

Florence felt a nameless dejection as she quitted a spot so consecrated by grateful recollections.

"When shall we be again so happy?" said she, softly, as she turned back to gaze upon the landscape, which, gay with flowers and shrubs, and the bright English verdure, smiled behind them like a garden.

"We will try and make my old hall, and its gloomy shades, remind us of these fairer scenes, my Florence."

"Ah! describe to me the character of your place. We shall live there principally, shall we not? I am sure I shall like it much better than Marsden Court, which is the name of that huge pile of arches and columns in Vanbrugh's heaviest taste, which will soon be yours."

"I fear we shall never dispose of all your mighty retinue, grooms of the chamber, and Patagonian footmen, and Heaven knows who besides, in the holes and corners of Burleigh," said Ernest smiling. And then he went on to describe the old place with something of a well-born country gentleman's not displeasing pride; and Florence listened, and they planned, and altered, and added, and improved, and laid out a map for the future. From that topic they turned to another, equally interesting to Florence. The work in which Maltravers had been engaged was completed, was in the hands of the printer, and Florence amused herself with conjectures as to the criticisms it would provoke. She was certain that all that had most pleased her would be /caviare/ to the multitude. She never would believe that any one could understand Maltravers but herself. Thus time flew on till they passed that part of the road in which had occurred Ernest's adventure with Mrs. Templeton's daughter. Maltravers paused abruptly in the midst of his glowing periods, as the spot awakened its associations and reminiscences, and looked round anxiously and inquiringly. But the fair apparition was not again visible; and whatever impression the place produced, it gradually died away as they entered the suburbs of the great metropolis. Two other gentlemen and a young lady of thirty-three (I had almost forgotten them) were of the party, but they had the tact to linger a little behind during the greater part of the road, and the young lady, who was a wit and a flirt, found gossip and sentiment for both the cavaliers.

"Will you come to us this evening?" asked Florence, timidly.

"I fear I shall not be able. I have several matters to arrange before I leave town for Burleigh, which I must do next week. Three months, dearest Florence, will scarcely suffice to make Burleigh put on its best looks to greet its new mistress; and I have already appointed the great modern magicians of draperies and ormolu to consult how we may make Aladdin's palace fit for the reception of the new princess. Lawyers, too!—in short, I expect to be fully occupied. But to-morrow, at three, I shall be with you, and we can ride out, if the day be fine."

"Surely," said Florence, "yonder is Signor Cesarini—how haggard and altered he appears!"

Maltravers, turning his eyes towards the spot to which Florence pointed, saw Cesarini emerging from a lane, with a porter behind him carrying some books and a trunk. The Italian, who was talking and gesticulating as to himself, did not perceive them.

"Poor Castruccio! he seems leaving his lodging," thought Maltravers. "By this time I fear he will have spent the last sum I conveyed to him—I must remember to find him out and replenish his stores.—Do not forget," said he aloud, "to see Cesarini, and urge him to accept the appointment we spoke of."

"I will not forget it—I will see him to-morrow before we meet. Yet it is a painful task, Ernest."

"I allow it. Alas! Florence, you owe him some reparation. He undoubtedly once conceived himself entitled to form hopes the vanity of which his ignorance of our English world and his foreign birth prevented him from suspecting."

"Believe me, I did not give him the right to form such expectations."

"But you did not sufficiently discourage them. Ah, Florence, never underrate the pangs of hope crushed, of love contemned."

"Dreadful!" said Florence, almost shuddering. "It is strange, but my conscience never so smote me before. It is since I loved that I feel, for the first time, how guilty a creature is—"

"A coquette!" interrupted Maltravers. "Well, let us think of the past no more; but if we can restore a gifted man, whose youth promised much, to an honourable independence and a healthful mind, let us do so. Me, Cesarini never can forgive; he will think I have robbed him of you. But we men—the woman we have once loved, even after she rejects us, ever has some power over us, and your eloquence, which has so often roused me, cannot fail to impress a nature yet more excitable."

Maltravers, on quitting Florence at her own door, went home, summoned his favourite servant, gave him Cesarini's address at Chelsea, bade him find out where he was, if he had left his lodgings; and leave at his present home, or (failing its discovery) at the "Travellers," a cover, which he made his servant address, inclosing a bank-note of some amount. If the reader wonder why Maltravers thus constituted himself the unknown benefactor of the Italian, I must tell him that he does not understand Maltravers. Cesarini was not the only man of letters whose faults he pitied, whose wants he relieved. Though his name seldom shone in the pompous list of public subscriptions—though he disdained to affect the Maecenas and the patron, he felt the brotherhood of mankind, and a kind of gratitude for those who aspired to rise or to delight their species. An author himself, he could appreciate the vast debt which the world owes to authors, and pays but by calumny in life and barren laurels after death. He whose profession is the Beautiful succeeds only through the Sympathies. Charity and compassion are virtues taught with difficulty to ordinary men; to true genius they are but the instincts which direct it to the destiny it is born to fulfil—viz., the discovery and redemption of new tracts in our common nature. Genius—the Sublime Missionary—goes forth from the serene Intellect of the Author to live in the wants, the griefs, the infirmities of others, in order that it may learn their language; and as its highest achievement is Pathos, so its most absolute requisite is Pity!

CHAPTER VII.

"/Don John./ How canst thou cross this marriage?

"/Borachio./ Not honestly, my lord; but so covertly, that no dishonesty shall appear in me, my lord."—/Much Ado about Nothing/.

FERRERS and Cesarini were both sitting over their wine, and both had sunk into silence, for they had only one subject in common, when a note was brought to Lumley from Lady Florence.—"This is lucky enough!" said he, as he read it. "Lady Florence wishes to see you, and incloses me a note for you, which she asks me to address and forward to you. There it is."

Cesarini took the note with trembling hands: it was very short, and merely expressed a desire to see him the next day at two o'clock.

"What can it be?" he exclaimed; "can she want to apologise, to explain?"

"No, no, no! Florence will not do that; but, from certain words she dropped in talking with me, I guess that she has some offer to your worldly advantage to propose to you. Ha! by the way, a thought strikes me."

Lumley eagerly rang the bell. "Is Lady Florence's servant waiting for an answer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well—detain him."

"Now, Cesarini, assurance is made doubly sure. Come into the next room. There, sit down at my desk, and write, as I shall dictate, to Maltravers."

"I!"

"Yes, now do put yourself in my hands—write, write. When you have finished, I will explain."

Cesarini obeyed, and the letter was as follows:

"DEAR MALTRAVERS,

"I have learned your approaching marriage with Lady Florence Lascelles. Permit me to congratulate you. For myself, I have overcome a vain and foolish passion; and can contemplate your happiness without a sigh.

"I have reviewed all my old prejudices against marriage, and believe it to be a state which nothing but the most perfect congeniality of temper, pursuits, and minds, can render bearable. How rare is such congeniality! In your case it may exist. The affections of that beautiful being are doubtless ardent—and they are yours!

"Write me a line by the bearer to assure me of your belief in my sincerity.

"Yours,

"C. CESARINI."

"Copy out this letter, I want its ditto—quick. Now seal and direct the duplicate," continued Ferrers; "that's right; go into the hall, give it yourself to Lady Florence's servant, and beg him to take it to Seamore Place, wait for an answer, and bring it here; by which time you will have a note ready for Lady Florence. Say I will mention this to her ladyship, and give the man half-a-crown. There, begone."

"I do not understand a word of this," said Cesarini, when he returned: "will you explain?"

"Certainly; the copy of the note you have despatched to Maltravers I shall show to Lady Florence this evening, as a proof of your sobered and generous feelings; observe, it is so written, that the old letter of your rival may seem an exact reply to it. To-morrow a reference to this note of yours will bring out our scheme more easily; and if you follow my instructions, you will not seem to /volunteer/ showing our handiwork, as we at first intended; but rather to yield it to her eyes, from a generous impulse, from an irresistible desire to save her from an unworthy husband and a wretched fate. Fortune has been dealing our cards for us, and has turned up the ace. Three to one now on the odd trick. Maltravers, too, is at home. I called at his house, on returning from my uncle's, and learned that he would not stir out all the evening."

In due time came the answer from Ernest: it was short and hurried; but full of all the manly kindness of his nature; it expressed admiration and delight at the tone of Cesarini's letter; it revoked all former expressions derogatory to Lady Florence; it owned the harshness and error of his first impressions; it used every delicate argument that could soothe and reconcile Cesarini; and concluded by sentiments of friendship and desire of service, so cordial, so honest, so free from the affectation of patronage, that even Cesarini himself, half insane as he was with passion, was almost softened. Lumley saw the change in his countenance—snatched the letter from his hand—read it—threw it into the fire—and saying, "We must guard against accidents," clapped the Italian affectionately on the shoulder, and added, "Now you can have no remorse; for a more Jesuitical piece of insulting hypocritical cant I never read. Where's

your note to Lady Florence? Your compliments, you will be with her at two. There, now the rehearsal's over, the scenes arranged, and I'll dress, and open the play for you with a prologue."

CHAPTER VIII.

"Aestuat ingens

Imo in corde pudor, mixtoque insania luctu,
Et furis agitatus amor, et conscia virtus."*—VIRGIL.

* Deep in her inmost heart is stirred the immense shame, and madness with commingled grief, and love agitated by rage, and conscious virtue.

THE next day, punctual to his appointment, Cesarini repaired to his critical interview with Lady Florence. Her countenance, which, like that of most persons whose temper is not under their command, ever too faithfully expressed what was within, was unusually flushed. Lumley had dropped words and hints which had driven sleep from her pillow and repose from her mind.

She rose from her seat with nervous agitation as Cesarini entered and made his grave salutation. After a short and embarrassed pause, she recovered, however, her self-possession, and with all a woman's delicate and dexterous tact, urged upon the Italian the expediency of accepting the offer of honourable independence now extended to him.

"You have abilities," she said, in conclusion, "you have friends, you have youth; take advantage of those gifts of nature and fortune, and fulfil such a career as," added Lady Florence, with a smile, "Dante did not consider incompatible with poetry."

"I cannot object to any career," said Cesarini, with an effort, "that may serve to remove me from a country that has no longer any charms for me. I thank you for your kindness; I will obey you. May you be happy; and yet—no, ah! no—happy you must be! Even he, sooner or later, must see you with my eyes."

"I know," replied Florence, falteringly, "that you have wisely and generously mastered a past illusion. Mr. Ferrers allowed me to see the letter you wrote to Er—to Mr. Maltravers; it was worthy of you: it touched me deeply; but I trust you will outlive your prejudices against—"

"Stay," interrupted Cesarini; "did Ferrers communicate to you the answer to that letter?"

"No, indeed."

"I am glad of it."

"Why?"

"Oh, no matter. Heaven bless you; farewell."

"No; I implore you, do not go yet; what was there in that letter that it could pain me to see? Lumley hinted darkly; but would not speak out: be more frank."

"I cannot: it would be treachery to Maltravers, cruelty to you; yet would it be cruel?"

"No, it would not; it would be kindness and mercy; show me the letter—you have it with you."

"You could not bear it; you would hate me for the pain it would give you. Let me depart."

"Man, you wrong Maltravers. I see it now. You would darkly slander him whom you cannot openly defame. Go; I was wrong to listen to you—go!"

"Lady Florence, beware how you taunt me into undeceiving you. Here is the letter, it is his handwriting; will you read it? I warn you not."

"I will believe nothing but the evidence of my own eyes; give it me."

"Stay then; on two conditions. First, that you promise me sacredly that you will not disclose to Maltravers, without my consent, that you have seen this letter. Think not I fear his anger. No! but in the mortal encounter that must ensue, if you thus betray me, your character would be lowered in the world's eyes, and even I (my excuse unknown) might not appear to have acted with honour in obeying your desire, and warning you, while there is yet time, of bartering love for avarice. Promise me."

"I do, I do most solemnly."

"Secondly, assure me that you will not ask to keep the letter, but will immediately restore it to me."

"I promise it. Now then."

"Take the letter."

Florence seized and rapidly read the fatal and garbled document: her brain was dizzy, her eyes clouded, her ears rang as with the sound of water, she was sick and giddy with emotion; but she read enough. This letter was written, then, in answer to Castruccio's of last night; it avowed dislike of her character; it denied the sincerity of her love; it more than hinted the mercenary nature of his own feelings. Yes, even there, where she had garnered up her heart, she was not Florence, the lovely and beloved woman; but Florence, the wealthy and high-born heiress. The world which she had built upon the faith and heart of Maltravers crumbled away at her feet. The letter dropped from her hands; her whole form seemed to shrink and shrivel up; her teeth were set, and her cheek was as white as marble.

"O God!" cried Cesarini, stung with remorse. "Speak to me, speak to me, Florence! I did wrong; forget that hateful letter! I have been false—false!"

"Ah, false—say so again—no, no, I remember he told me—he, so wise, so deep a judge of human character, that he would be sponsor for your faith—, that your honour and heart were incorruptible. It is true; I thank you—you have saved me from a terrible fate."

"O, Lady Florence, dear—too dear—yet, would that—alas! she does not listen to me," muttered Castruccio, as Florence, pressing her hands to her temples, walked wildly to and fro the room. At length she paused opposite to Cesarini, looked him full in the face, returned him the letter without a word, and pointed to the door.

"No, no, do not bid me leave you yet," said Cesarini, trembling with repentant emotion, yet half beside himself with jealous rage at her love for his rival.

"My friend, go," said Florence, in a tone of voice singularly subdued and soft. "Do not fear me; I have more pride in me than even affection; but there are certain struggles in a woman's breast which she could never betray to any one—any one but a mother. God help me, I have none! Go; when next we meet, I shall be calm."

She held out her hand as she spoke, the Italian dropped on his knee, kissed it convulsively, and, fearful of trusting himself further, vanished from the room.

He had not been long gone before Maltravers was seen riding through the street. As he threw himself from his horse, he looked up at the window, and kissed his hand at Lady Florence, who stood there watching his arrival, with feelings indeed far different from those he anticipated. He entered the room lightly and gaily.

Florence stirred not to welcome him. He approached and took her hand; she withdrew it with a shudder.

"Are you not well, Florence?"

"I am well, for I have recovered."

"What do you mean? why do you turn from me?"

Lady Florence fixed her eyes on him, eyes that literally blazed; her lip quivered with scorn.

"Mr. Maltravers, at length I know you. I understand the feelings with which you have sought a union between us. O God! why, why was I thus cursed with riches—why made a thing of barter and merchandise, and avarice, and low ambition? Take my wealth, take it, Mr. Maltravers, since that is what you prize. Heaven knows I can cast it willingly away; but leave the wretch whom you long deceived, and who now, wretch though she be, renounces and despises you!"

"Lady Florence, do I hear aright? Who has accused me to you?"

"None, sir, none; I would have believed none. Let it suffice that I am convinced that our union can be happy to neither: question me no further; all intercourse between us is for ever over!"

"Pause," said Maltravers, with cold and grave solemnity; "another word, and the gulf will become impassable. Pause."

"Do not," exclaimed the unhappy lady, stung by what she considered the assurance of a hardened hypocrisy—"do not affect this haughty superiority; it dupes me no longer. I was your slave while I loved you: the tie is broken. I am free, and I hate and scorn you! Mercenary and sordid as you are, your baseness of spirit revives the differences of our rank. Henceforth, Mr. Maltravers, I am Lady Florence Lascelles, and by that title alone will you know me. Begone, Sir!"

As she spoke, with passion distorting every feature of her face, all her beauty vanished away from the eyes of the proud Maltravers, as if by witchcraft: the angel seemed transformed into the fury; and cold, bitter, and withering was the eye which he fixed upon that altered countenance.

"Mark me, Lady Florence Lascelles," said he, very calmly, "you have now said what you can never recall. Neither in man nor in woman did Ernest Maltravers ever forget or forgive a sentence which accused him of dishonour. I bid you farewell for ever; and with my last words I condemn you to the darkest of all dooms—the remorse that comes too late!" Slowly he moved away; and as the door closed upon that towering and haughty form, Florence already felt that his curse was working to its fulfilment. She rushed to the window—she caught one last glimpse of him as his horse bore him rapidly away. Ah! when shall they meet again?

CHAPTER IX.

"And now I live—O wherefore do I live?
And with that pang I prayed to be no more."
WORDSWORTH.

IT was about nine o'clock that evening, and Maltravers was alone in his room. His carriage was at the door—his servants were arranging the luggage—he was going that night to Burleigh. London—society—the world—were grown hateful to him. His galled and indignant spirit demanded solitude. At this time, Lumley Ferrers entered.

"You will pardon my intrusion," said the latter, with his usual frankness—"but—"

"But what, sir? I am engaged."

"I shall be very brief. Maltravers, you are my old friend. I retain regard and affection for you, though our different habits have of late estranged us. I come to you from my cousin—from Florence—there has been some misunderstanding between you. I called on her to-day after you left the house. Her grief affected me. I have only just quitted her. She has been told by some gossip or other some story or other—women are credulous, foolish creatures;—undeceive her, and, I dare say, all may be settled."

"Ferrers, if a man had spoken to me as Lady Florence did, his blood or mine must have flowed. And do you think that words that might have plunged me into the guilt of homicide if uttered by a man, I could ever pardon in one whom I had dreamed of for a wife? Never!"

"Pooh, pooh—women's words are wind. Don't throw away so splendid a match for such a trifle."

"Do you too, sir, mean to impute mercenary motives to me?"

"Heaven forbid! You know I am no coward, but I really don't want to fight you. Come, be reasonable."

"I dare say you mean well, but the breach is final—all recurrence to it is painful and superfluous. I must wish you good evening."

"You have positively decided?"

"I have."

"Even if Lady Florence made the *amende honorable*?"

"Nothing on the part of Lady Florence could alter my resolution. The woman whom an honourable man—an English gentleman—makes the partner of his life, ought never to listen to a syllable against his fair name: his honour is hers, and if her lips, that should breathe comfort in calumny, only serve to retail the lie—she may be beautiful, gifted, wealthy, and high-born, but he takes a curse to his arms. That curse I have escaped."

"And this I am to say to my cousin?"

"As you will. And now stay, Lumley Ferrers, and hear me. I neither accuse nor suspect you, I desire not to pierce your heart, and in this case I cannot fathom your motives; but if it should so have

happened that you have, in any way, ministered to Lady Florence Lascelles' injurious opinions of my faith and honour, you will have much to answer for, and sooner or later there will come a day of reckoning between you and me."

"Mr. Maltravers, there can be no quarrel between us, with my cousin's fair name at stake, or else we should not now part without preparations for a more hostile meeting. I can bear your language. /I/, too, though no philosopher, can forgive. Come, man, you are heated—it is very natural;—let us part friends—your hand."

"If you can take my hand, Lumley, you are innocent, and I have wronged you."

Lumley smiled, and cordially pressed the hand of his old friend.

As he descended the stairs, Maltravers followed, and just as Lumley turned into Curzon Street, the carriage whirled rapidly past him, and by the lamps he saw the pale and stern face of Maltravers.

It was a slow, drizzling rain,—one of those unwholesome nights frequent in London towards the end of autumn. Ferrers, however, insensible to the weather, walked slowly and thoughtfully towards his cousin's house. He was playing for a mighty stake, and hitherto the cast was in his favour, yet he was uneasy and perturbed. His conscience was tolerably proof to all compunction, as much from the levity as from the strength of his nature; and (Maltravers removed) he trusted in his knowledge of the human heart, and the smooth speciousness of his manner, to win, at last, in the hand of Lady Florence, the object of his ambition. It was not on her affection, it was on her pique, her resentment, that he relied. "When a woman fancies herself slighted by the man she loves, the first person who proposes must be a clumsy wooer indeed, if he does not carry her away." So reasoned Ferrers, but yet he was ruffled and disquieted; the truth must be spoken,—able, bold, sanguine, and scornful as he was, his spirit quailed before that of Maltravers; he feared the lion of that nature when fairly aroused: his own character had in it something of a woman's—an unprincipled, gifted, aspiring, and subtle woman's,—and in Maltravers—stern, simple, and masculine—he recognised the superior dignity of the "lords of the creation;" he was overawed by the anticipation of a wrath and revenge which he felt he merited, and which he feared might be deadly.

While gradually, however, his spirit recovered its usual elasticity, he came in the vicinity of Lord Saxingham's house, and suddenly, by a corner of the street, his arm was seized: to his inexpressible astonishment he recognised in the muffled figure that accosted him the form of Florence Lascelles.

"Good heavens!" he cried, "is it possible?—You, alone in the streets, at this hour, in such a night, too! How very wrong—how very imprudent!"

"Do not talk to me—I am almost mad as it is: I could not rest—I could not brave quiet, solitude,—still less, the face of my father—I could not!—but quick, what says he?—What excuse has he? Tell me everything—I will cling to a straw."

"And is this the proud Florence Lascelles?"

"No,—it is the humbled Florence Lascelles. I have done with pride—speak to me!"

"Ah, what a treasure is such a heart! How can he throw it away?"

"Does he deny?"

"He denies nothing—he expresses himself rejoiced to have escaped—such was his expression—a marriage in which his heart never was engaged. He is unworthy of you—forget him."

Florence shivered, and as Ferrers drew her arm in his own, her ungloved hand touched his, and the touch was like that of ice.

"What will the servants think?—what excuse can we make?" said Ferrers, when they stood beneath the porch. Florence did not reply; but as the door opened, she said softly,—

"I am ill—ill," and clung to Ferrers with that unnerved and heavy weight which betokens faintness.

The light glared on her—the faces of the lacqueys betokened their undisguised astonishment. With a violent effort, Florence recovered herself, for she had not yet done with pride, swept through the hall with her usual stately step, slowly ascended the broad staircase, and gained the solitude of her own room, to fall senseless on the floor.

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