

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ERNEST  
MALTRAVERS —  
VOLUME 02**

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

**Ernest Maltravers — Volume 02**

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# Edward Bulwer-Lytton

## Ernest Maltravers — Volume 02

### BOOK II

*"He, of wide-blooming youth's fair flower possest,  
Owns the vain thoughts—the heart that cannot rest!"*

*SIMONIDES, /in Tit. Hum/.*

### CHAPTER I

*"Il y eut certainement quelque chose de singulier dans mes sentimens pour  
cette charmante femme."<sup>1</sup>—ROUSSEAU.*

IT was a brilliant ball at the Palazzo of the Austrian embassy at Naples: and a crowd of those loungers, whether young or old, who attach themselves to the reigning beauty, was gathered round Madame de Ventadour. Generally speaking, there is more caprice than taste in the election of a beauty to the Italian throne. Nothing disappoints a stranger more than to see for the first time the woman to whom the world has given the golden apple. Yet he usually falls at last into the popular idolatry, and passes with inconceivable rapidity from indignant scepticism into superstitious veneration. In fact, a thousand things beside mere symmetry of feature go to make up the Cytherea of the hour. — tact in society—the charm of manner—nameless and piquant brilliancy. Where the world find the Graces they proclaim the Venus. Few persons attain pre-eminent celebrity for anything, without some adventitious and extraneous circumstances which have nothing to do with the thing celebrated. Some qualities or some circumstances throw a mysterious or personal charm about them. "Is Mr. So-and-So really such a genius?" "Is Mrs. Such-a-One really such a beauty?" you ask incredulously. "Oh, yes," is the answer. "Do you know all about him or her? Such a thing is said, or such a thing has happened." The idol is interesting in itself, and therefore its leading and popular attribute is worshipped.

Now Madame de Ventadour was at this time the beauty of Naples: and though fifty women in the room were handsomer, no one would have dared to say so. Even the women confessed her pre-eminence—for she was the most perfect dresser that even France could exhibit. And to no pretensions do ladies ever concede with so little demur, as those which depend upon that feminine art which all study, and in which few excel. Women never allow beauty in a face that has an odd-looking bonnet above it, nor will they readily allow any one to be ugly whose caps are unexceptionable. Madame de Ventadour had also the magic that results from intuitive high breeding, polished by habit to the utmost. She looked and moved the /grande dame/, as if Nature had been employed by Rank to make her so. She was descended from one of the most illustrious houses of France; had married at sixteen a man of equal birth, but old, dull, and pompous—a caricature rather than a portrait of that great French /noblesse/, now almost if not wholly extinct. But her virtue was without a blemish—some said from pride, some said from coldness. Her wit was keen and court-like—lively, yet subdued; for her French high breeding was very different from the lethargic and taciturn imperturbability of the English. All silent people can seem conventionally elegant. A groom married a rich lady; he dreaded

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<sup>1</sup> There certainly was something singular in my sentiments for this charming woman.

the ridicule of the guests whom his new rank assembled at his table—an Oxford clergyman gave him this piece of advice, "Wear a black coat and hold your tongue!" The groom took the hint, and is always considered one of the most gentlemanlike fellows in the county. Conversation is the touchstone of the true delicacy and subtle grace which make the ideal of the moral mannerism of a court. And there sat Madame de Ventadour, a little apart from the dancers, with the silent English dandy Lord Taunton, exquisitely dressed and superbly tall, bolt upright behind her chair; and the sentimental German Baron von Schomberg, covered with orders, whiskered and wigged to the last hair of perfection, sighing at her left hand; and the French minister, shrewd, bland, and eloquent, in the chair at her right; and round on all sides pressed, and bowed, and complimented, a crowd of diplomatic secretaries and Italian princes, whose bank is at the gaming-table, whose estates are in their galleries, and who sell a picture, as English gentlemen cut down a wood, whenever the cards grow gloomy. The charming De Ventadour! she had attraction for them all! smiles for the silent, badinage for the gay, politics for the Frenchman, poetry for the German, the eloquence of loveliness for all! She was looking her best—the slightest possible tinge of rouge gave a glow to her transparent complexion, and lighted up those large dark sparkling eyes (with a latent softness beneath the sparkle) seldom seen but in the French—and widely distinct from the unintellectual languish of the Spaniard, or the full and majestic fierceness of the Italian gaze. Her dress of black velvet, and graceful hat with its princely plume, contrasted the alabaster whiteness of her arms and neck. And what with the eyes, the skin, the rich colouring of the complexion, the rosy lips and the small ivory teeth, no one would have had the cold hypercriticism to observe that the chin was too pointed, the mouth too wide, and the nose, so beautiful in the front face, was far from perfect in the profile.

"Pray was Madame in the Strada Nuova to-day?" asked the German, with as much sweetness in his voice as if he had been vowing eternal love.

"What else have we to do with our mornings, we women?" replied Madame de Ventadour. "Our life is a lounge from the cradle to the grave; and our afternoons are but the type of our career. A promenade and a crowd,—/voila tout!/ We never see the world except in an open carriage."

"It is the pleasantest way of seeing it," said the Frenchman, drily.

"I doubt it; the worst fatigue is that which comes without exercise."

"Will you do me the honour to waltz?" said the tall English lord, who had a vague idea that Madame de Ventadour meant she would rather dance than sit still. The Frenchman smiled.

"Lord Taunton enforces your own philosophy," said the minister.

Lord Taunton smiled because every one else smiled; and, besides, he had beautiful teeth: but he looked anxious for an answer.

"Not to-night,—I seldom dance. Who is that very pretty woman? What lovely complexions the English have! And who," continued Madame de Ventadour, without waiting for an answer to the first question, "who is that gentleman,—the young one I mean,—leaning against the door?"

"What, with the dark moustache?" said Lord Taunton. "He is a cousin of mine."

"Oh, no; not Colonel Bellfield; I know him—how amusing he is!—no; the gentleman I mean wears no moustache."

"Oh, the tall Englishman with the bright eyes and high forehead," said the French minister. "He is just arrived—from the East, I believe."

"It is a striking countenance," said Madame de Ventadour; "there is something chivalrous in the turn of the head. Without doubt, Lord Taunton, he is 'noble/'?"

"He is what you call 'noble/,'" replied Lord Taunton—"that is, what we call a 'gentleman;' his name is Maltravers. He lately came of age; and has, I believe, rather a good property."

"Monsieur Maltravers; only Monsieur?" repeated Madame de Ventadour.

"Why," said the French minister, "you understand that the English /gentilhomme/ does not require a De or a title to distinguish him from the /roturier/."

"I know that; but he has an air above a simple /gentilhomme/. There is something /great/ in his look; but it is not, I must own, the conventional greatness of rank: perhaps he would have looked the same had he been born a peasant."

"You don't think him handsome?" said Lord Taunton, almost angrily (for he was one of the Beauty-men, and Beauty-men are sometimes jealous).

"Handsome! I did not say that," replied Madame de Ventadour, smiling; "it is rather a fine head than a handsome face. Is he clever, I wonder?—but all you English, milord, are well educated."

"Yes, profound—profound: we are profound, not superficial," replied Lord Taunton, drawing down his wrist-bands.

"Will Madame de Ventadour allow me to present to her one of my countrymen?" said the English minister approaching—"Mr. Maltravers."

Madame de Ventadour half smiled and half blushed, as she looked up, and saw bent admiringly upon her the proud and earnest countenance she had remarked.

The introduction made—a few monosyllables exchanged. The French diplomatist rose and walked away with the English one. Maltravers succeeded to the vacant chair.

"Have you been long abroad?" asked Madame de Ventadour.

"Only four years; yet long enough to ask whether I should not be most abroad in England."

"You have been in the East—I envy you. And Greece, and Egypt,—all the associations! You have travelled back into the Past; you have escaped, as Madame D'Epinay wished, out of civilisation and into romance."

"Yet Madame D'Epinay passed her own life in making pretty romances out of a very agreeable civilisation," said Maltravers, smiling.

"You know her Memoirs, then," said Madame de Ventadour, slightly colouring. "In the current of a more exciting literature few have had time for the second-rate writings of a past century."

"Are not those second-rate performances often the most charming," said Maltravers, "when the mediocrity of the intellect seems almost as if it were the effect of a touching, though too feeble, delicacy of sentiment? Madame D'Epinay's Memoirs are of this character. She was not a virtuous woman—but she felt virtue and loved it; she was not a woman of genius—but she was tremblingly alive to all the influences of genius. Some people seem born with the temperament and the tastes of genius without its creative power; they have its nervous system, but something is wanting in the intellectual. They feel acutely, yet express tamely. These persons always have in their character an unspeakable kind of pathos—a court civilisation produces many of them—and the French memoirs of the last century are particularly fraught with such examples. This is interesting—the struggle of sensitive minds against the lethargy of a society, dull, yet brilliant, that /glares/ them, as it were, to sleep. It comes home to us; for," added Maltravers, with a slight change of voice, "how many of us fancy we see our own image in the mirror!"

And where was the German baron?—flirting at the other end of the room. And the English lord?—dropping monosyllables to dandies by the doorway. And the minor satellites?—dancing, whispering, making love, or sipping lemonade. And Madame de Ventadour was alone with the young stranger in a crowd of eight hundred persons; and their lips spoke of sentiment, and their eyes involuntarily applied it!

While they were thus conversing, Maltravers was suddenly startled by hearing close behind him, a sharp, significant voice, saying in French, "Hein, hein! I've my suspicions—I've my suspicions."

Madame de Ventadour looked round with a smile. "It is only my husband," said she, quietly; "let me introduce him to you."

Maltravers rose and bowed to a little thin man, most elaborately dressed, and with an immense pair of spectacles upon a long sharp nose.

"Charmed to make your acquaintance, sir!" said Monsieur de Ventadour. "Have you been long in Naples? . . . Beautiful weather—won't last long—hein, hein, I've my suspicions! No news as to your parliament—be dissolved soon! Bad opera in London this year!—hein, hein—I've my suspicions."

This rapid monologue was delivered with appropriate gesture. Each new sentence Mons. de Ventadour began with a sort of bow, and when it dropped in the almost invariable conclusion affirmative of his shrewdness and incredulity, he made a mystical sign with his forefinger by passing it upward in a parallel line with his nose, which at the same time performed its own part in the ceremony by three convulsive twitches, that seemed to shake the bridge to its base.

Maltravers looked with mute surprise upon the connubial partner of the graceful creature by his side, and Mons. de Ventadour, who had said as much as he thought necessary, wound up his eloquence by expressing the rapture it would give him to see Mons. Maltravers at his hotel. Then, turning to his wife, he began assuring her of the lateness of the hour, and the expediency of departure. Maltravers glided away, and as he regained the door was seized by our old friend, Lumley Ferrers. "Come, my dear fellow," said the latter; "I have been waiting for you this half hour. /Allons/. But, perhaps, as I am dying to go to bed, you have made up your mind to stay supper. Some people have no regard for other people's feelings."

"No, Ferrers, I'm at your service;" and the young man descended the stairs and passed along the Chiaja towards their hotel. As they gained the broad and open space on which it stood, with the lovely sea before them, sleeping in the arms of the curving shore, Maltravers, who had hitherto listened in silence to the volubility of his companion, paused abruptly.

"Look at that sea, Ferrers. . . . What a scene!—what delicious air! How soft this moonlight! Can you not fancy the old Greek adventurers, when they first colonised this divine Parthenope—the darling of the ocean—gazing along those waves, and pining no more for Greece?"

"I cannot fancy anything of the sort," said Ferrers. . . . "And, depend upon it, the said gentlemen, at this hour of the night, unless they were on some piratical excursion—for they were cursed ruffians, those old Greek colonists—were fast asleep in their beds."

"Did you ever write poetry, Ferrers?"

"To be sure; all clever men have written poetry once in their lives—small-pox and poetry—they are our two juvenile diseases."

"And did you ever /feel/ poetry!"

"Feel it!"

"Yes, if you put the moon into your verses, did you first feel it shining into your heart?"

"My dear Maltravers, if I put the moon into my verses, in all probability it was to rhyme to noon. 'The night was at her noon'—is a capital ending for the first hexameter—and the moon is booked for the next stage. Come in."

"No, I shall stay out."

"Don't be nonsensical."

"By moonlight there is no nonsense like common sense."

"What! we—who have climbed the Pyramids, and sailed up the Nile, and seen magic at Cairo, and been nearly murdered, bagged, and Bosphorized at Constantinople, is it for us, who have gone through so many adventures, looked on so many scenes, and crowded into four years events that would have satisfied the appetite of a cormorant in romance, if it had lived to the age of a phoenix;—is it for us to be doing the pretty and sighing to the moon, like a black-haired apprentice without a neckcloth on board of the Margate hoy? Nonsense, I say—we have lived too much not to have lived away our green sickness of sentiment."

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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