

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ERNEST
MALTRAVERS —
VOLUME 09**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

Ernest Maltravers — Volume 09

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Ernest Maltravers — Volume 09

BOOK IX

I go, the bride of Acheron.

—*SOPH. /Antig./*

These things are in the Future.

—*Ib./ 1333.*

CHAPTER I

* * * *"There the action lies*

*In its true nature * * * **

* * * *What then? What rests?*

Try what repentance can!"

—*/Hamlet/.*

"I doubt he will be dead or ere I come."

—*/King John/.*

IT was a fine afternoon in December, when Lumley Ferrers turned from Lord Saxingham's door. The knockers were muffled—the windows on the third story were partially closed. There was sickness in that house.

Lumley's face was unusually grave; it was even sad. "So young—so beautiful," he muttered. "If ever I loved woman, I do believe I loved her:—that love must be my excuse. . . . I repent of what I have done—but I could not foresee that a mere lover's stratagem was to end in such effects—the metaphysician was very right when he said, 'We only sympathise with feelings we know ourselves.' A little disappointment in love could not have hurt me much—it is d——d odd it should hurt her so. I am altogether out of luck: old Templeton—I beg his pardon, Lord Vargrave—(by-the-by, he gets heartier every day—what a constitution he has!) seems cross with me. He did not like the idea that I should marry Lady Florence—and when I thought that vision might have been realised, hinted that I was disappointing some expectations he had formed; I can't make out what he means. Then, too, the government have offered that place to Maltravers instead of to me. In fact, my star is not in the ascendant. Poor Florence, though,—I would really give a great deal to know her restored to health!—I have done a villainous thing, but I thought it only a clever one. However, regret is a fool's passion. By Jupiter!—talking of fools, here comes Cesarini."

Wan, haggard, almost spectral, his hat over his brows, his dress neglected, his air reckless and fierce, Cesarini crossed the way, and thus accosted Lumley:

"We have murdered her, Ferrers; and her ghost will haunt us to our dying day!"

"Talk prose; you know I am no poet. What do you mean?"

"She is worse to-day," groaned Cesarini, in a hollow voice. "I wander like a lost spirit round the house; I question all who come from it. Tell me—oh, tell me, is there hope?"

"I do, indeed, trust so," replied Ferrers, fervently. "The illness has only of late assumed an alarming appearance. At first it was merely a severe cold, caught by imprudent exposure one rainy night. Now they fear it has settled on the lungs; but if we could get her abroad, all might be well."

"You think so, honestly?"

"I do. Courage, my friend; do not reproach yourself; it has nothing to do with us. She was taken ill of a cold, not of a letter, man!"

"No, no; I judge her heart by my own. Oh, that I could recall the past! Look at me; I am the wreck of what I was; day and night the recollection of my falsehood haunts me with remorse."

"Pshaw!—we will go to Italy together, and in your beautiful land love will replace love."

"I am half resolved, Ferrers."

"Ha!—to do what?"

"To write—to reveal all to her."

The hardy complexion of Ferrers grew livid; his brow became dark with a terrible expression.

"Do so, and fall the next day by my hand; my aim in slighter quarrel never erred."

"Do you dare to threaten me?"

"Do you dare to betray me? Betray one who, if he sinned, sinned on your account—in your cause; who would have secured to you the loveliest bride, and the most princely dower in England; and whose only offence against you is that he cannot command life and health?"

"Forgive me," said the Italian, with great emotion,—*"forgive me, and do not misunderstand; I would not have betrayed /you/—there is honour among villains. I would have confessed only my own crime; I would never have revealed yours—why should I?—it is unnecessary."*

"Are you in earnest—are you sincere?"

"By my soul!"

"Then, indeed, you are worthy of my friendship. You will assume the whole forgery—an ugly word, but it avoids circumlocution—to be your own?"

"I will."

Ferrers paused a moment, and then stopped suddenly short.

"You will swear this!"

"By all that is holy."

"Then mark me, Cesarini; if to-morrow Lady Florence be worse, I will throw no obstacle in the way of your confession, should you resolve to make it; I will even use that influence which you leave me, to palliate your offence, to win your pardon. And yet to resign your hopes—to surrender one so loved to the arms of one so hated—it is magnanimous—it is noble—it is above my standard! Do as you will."

Cesarini was about to reply, when a servant on horseback abruptly turned the corner, almost at full speed. He pulled in—his eye fell upon Lumley—he dismounted.

"Oh, Mr. Ferrers," said the man breathlessly, "I have been to your house; they told me I might find you at Lord Saxingham's—I was just going there—"

"Well, well, what is the matter?"

"My poor master, sir—my lord, I mean—"

"What of him?"

"Had a fit, sir—the doctors are with him—my mistress—for my lord can't speak—sent me express for you."

"Lend me your horse—there, just lengthen the stirrups."

While the groom was engaged at the saddle, Ferrers turned to Cesarini. "Do nothing rashly," said he; "I would say, if I might, nothing at all, without consulting me; but mind, I rely, at all events, on your promise—your oath."

"You may," said Cesarini, gloomily.

"Farewell, then," said Lumley, as he mounted; and in a few moments he was out of sight.

CHAPTER II

"O world, thou wast the forest to this hart,

** * * * **

Dost thou here lie?"

—/Julius Caesar/.

AS Lumley leapt from his horse at his uncle's door, the disorder and bustle of those demesnes, in which the severe eye of the master usually preserved a repose and silence as complete as if the affairs of life were carried on by clockwork, struck upon him sensibly. Upon the trim lawn the old women employed in cleaning and weeding the walks were all assembled in a cluster, shaking their heads ominously in concert, and carrying on their comments in a confused whisper. In the hall, the housemaid (and it was the first housemaid whom Lumley had ever seen in that house, so invisibly were the wheels of the domestic machine carried on) was leaning on her broom, "swallowing with open mouth a footman's news." It was as if, with the first slackening of the rigid rein, human nature broke loose from the conventual stillness in which it had ever paced its peaceful path in that formal mansion.

"How is he?"

"My lord is better, sir; he has spoken, I believe."

At this moment a young face, swollen and red with weeping, looked down from the stairs; and presently Evelyn rushed breathlessly into the hall.

"Oh, come up—come up—cousin Lumley; he cannot, cannot die in your presence; you always seem so full of life! He cannot die; you do not think he will die? Oh, take me with you, they won't let me go to him!"

"Hush, my dear little girl, hush; follow me lightly—that is right."

Lumley reached the door, tapped gently—entered; and the child also stole in unobserved or at least unprevented. Lumley drew aside the curtains; the new lord was lying on his bed, with his head propped by pillows, his eyes wide open, with a glassy, but not insensible stare, and his countenance fearfully changed.

Lady Vargrave was kneeling on the other side of the bed, one hand clasped in her husband's, the other bathing his temples, and her tears falling, without sob or sound, fast and copiously down her pale fair cheeks.

Two doctors were conferring in the recess of the window; an apothecary was mixing drugs at a table; and two of the oldest female servants of the house were standing near the physicians, trying to overhear what was said.

"My dear, dear uncle, how are you?" asked Lumley.

"Ah, you are come, then," said the dying man, in a feeble yet distinct voice; "that is well—I have much to say to you."

"But not now—not now—you are not strong enough," said the wife, imploringly.

The doctors moved to the bedside. Lord Vargrave waved his hand, and raised his head.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I feel as if death were hastening upon me; I have much need, while my senses remain, to confer with my nephew. Is the present a fitting time?—if I delay, are you sure that I shall have another?"

The doctors looked at each other.

"My lord," said one, "it may perhaps settle and relieve your mind to converse with your nephew; afterwards you may more easily compose yourself to sleep."

"Take this cordial, then," said the other doctor.

The sick man obeyed. One of the physicians approached Lumley, and beckoned him aside.

"Shall we send for his lordship's lawyer?" whispered the leech.

"I am his heir-at-law," thought Lumley. "Why, /no/, my dear sir—no, I think not, unless he expresses a desire to see him; doubtless my poor uncle has already settled his worldly affairs. What is his state?"

The doctor shook his head. "I will speak to you, sir, after you have left his lordship."

"What is the matter there?" cried the patient, sharply and querulously.

"Clear the room—I would be alone with my nephew."

The doctors disappeared; the old women reluctantly followed; when, suddenly, the little Evelyn sprang forward and threw herself on the breast of the dying man, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"My poor child!—my sweet child—my own, own darling!" gasped out Lord Vargrave, folding his weak arms round her; "bless you—bless you! and God will bless you. My wife," he added, with a voice far more tender than Lumley had ever before heard him address to Lady Vargrave, "if these be the last words I utter to you, let them express all the gratitude I feel for you, for duties never more piously discharged: you did not love me, it is true; and in health and pride that knowledge often made me unjust to you. I have been severe—you have had much to bear—forgive me."

"Oh! do not talk thus; you have been nobler, kinder than my deserts.

How much I owe you—how little I have done in return!"

"I cannot bear this; leave me, my dear, leave me. I may live yet—I hope I may—I do not want to die. The cup may pass from me. Go—go—and you, my child."

"Ah, let /me/ stay."

Lord Vargrave kissed the little creature, as she clung to his neck, with passionate affection, and then, placing her in her mother's arms, fell back exhausted on his pillow. Lumley, with handkerchief to his eyes, opened the door to Lady Vargrave, who sobbed bitterly, and carefully closing it, resumed his station by his uncle.

When Lumley Ferrers left the room, his countenance was gloomy and excited rather than sad. He hurried to the room which he usually occupied, and remained there for some hours while his uncle slept—a long and sound sleep. But the mother and the stepchild (now restored to the sick-room) did not desert their watch.

It wanted about an hour to midnight, when the senior physician sought the nephew.

"Your uncle asks for you, Mr. Ferrers; and I think it right to say that his last moments approach. We have done all that can be done."

"Is he fully aware of his danger?"

"He is; and has spent the last two hours in prayer—it is a Christian's death-bed, sir."

"Humph!" said Ferrers, as he followed the physician. The room was darkened—a single lamp, carefully shaded, burned on a table, on which lay the Book of Life in Death: and with awe and grief on their faces, the mother and the child were kneeling beside the bed.

"Come here, Lumley," faltered forth the fast-dying man.

"There are none here but you three—nearest and dearest to me?—That is well. Lumley, then, you know all—my wife, he knows all. My child, give your hand to your cousin—so you are now plighted. When you grow up, Evelyn, you will know that it is my last wish and prayer that you should be the wife of Lumley Ferrers. In giving you this angel, Lumley, I atone to you for all seeming injustice. And to you, my child, I secure the rank and honours to which I have painfully climbed, and which I am forbidden to enjoy. Be kind to her, Lumley—you have a good and frank heart—let it be her shelter—she has never known a harsh word. God bless you all, and God forgive me—pray for me. Lumley, to-morrow you will be Lord Vargrave, and by and by" (here a ghastly, but exultant smile flitted over the speaker's countenance), "you will be my Lady—Lady Vargrave. Lady—so—so—Lady Var—"

The words died on his trembling lips; he turned round, and, though he continued to breathe for more than an hour, Lord Vargrave never uttered another syllable.

CHAPTER III

*"Hopes and fears
Start up alarmed, and o'er life's narrow verge
Look down—on what?—a fathomless abyss."*

—YOUNG.

"Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!"

/Much Ado about Nothing/.

THE wound which Maltravers had received was peculiarly severe and rankling. It is true that he had never been what is called violently in love with Florence Lascelles; but from the moment in which he had been charmed and surprised into the character of a declared suitor, it was consonant with his scrupulous and loyal nature to view only the bright side of Florence's gifts and qualities, and to seek to enamour his grateful fancy with her beauty, her genius, and her tenderness for himself. He had thus forced and formed his thoughts and hopes to centre all in one object; and Florence and the Future had grown words which conveyed the same meaning to his mind. Perhaps he felt more bitterly her sudden and stunning accusations, couched as they were in language so unqualified, because they fell upon his pride rather than his affection, and were not softened away by the thousand excuses and remembrances which a passionate love would have invented and recalled. It was a deep, concentrated sense of injury and insult, that hardened and soured his whole nature—wounded vanity, wounded pride, and wounded honour.

And the blow, too, came upon him at a time when he was most dissatisfied with all other prospects. He was disgusted with the littleness of the agents and springs of political life—he had formed a weary contempt for the barrenness of literary reputation. At thirty years of age he had necessarily outlived the sanguine elasticity of early youth, and he had already broken up many of those later toys in business and ambition which afford the rattle and the hobby-horse to our maturer manhood. Always asking for something too refined and too exalted for human life, every new proof of unworthiness in men and things saddened or revolted a mind still too fastidious for that quiet contentment with the world as it is, which we must all learn before we can make our philosophy practical and our genius as fertile of the harvest as it may be prodigal of the blossom. Haughty, solitary, and unsocial, the ordinary resources of mortified and disappointed men were not for Ernest Maltravers. Rigidly secluded in his country retirement, he consumed the days in moody wanderings; and in the evenings he turned to books with a spirit disdainful and fatigued. So much had he already learned, that books taught him little that he did not already know. And the biographies of authors, those ghost-like beings who seem to have had no life but in the shadow of their own haunting and imperishable thoughts, dimmed the inspiration he might have caught from their pages. Those slaves of the Lamp, those Silkworms of the Closet, how little had they enjoyed, how little had they lived! Condemned to a mysterious fate by the wholesale destinies of the world, they seemed born but to toil and to spin thoughts for the common crowd—and, their task performed in drudgery and in darkness, to die when no further service could be wrung from their exhaustion. Names had they been in life, and as names they lived for ever, in life as in death, airy and unsubstantial phantoms. It pleased Maltravers at this time to turn a curious eye towards the obscure and half-extinct philosophies of the ancient world. He compared the Stoics with the Epicureans—those Epicureans who had given their own version to the simple and abstemious utilitarianism of their master. He asked which was the wiser, to

sharpen pain or to deaden pleasure—to bear all or to enjoy all; and, by a natural reaction which often happens to us in life, this man, hitherto so earnest, active-spirited, and resolved on great things, began to yearn for the drowsy pleasures of indolence. The garden grew more tempting than the porch. He seriously revolved the old alternative of the Grecian demi-god—might it not be wiser to abandon the grave pursuits to which he had been addicted, to dethrone the august but severe ideal in his heart, to cultivate the light loves and voluptuous trifles of the herd, and to plant the brief space of youth yet left to him with the myrtle and the rose? As water flows over water, so new schemes rolled upon new—sweeping away every momentary impression, and leaving the surface facile equally to receive and to forget. Such is the common state with men of imagination in those crises of life, when some great revolution of designs and hopes unsettles elements too susceptible of every changing wind. And thus the weak are destroyed, while the strong relapse, after terrible but unknown convulsions, into that solemn harmony and order from which destiny and God draw their uses to mankind.

It was from this irresolute contest between antagonist principles that Maltravers was aroused by the following letter from Florence Lascelles:

"For three days and three sleepless nights I have debated with myself whether or not I ought to address you. Oh, Ernest, were I what I was, in health, in pride, I might fear that, generous as you are, you would misconstrue my appeal; but that is now impossible. Our union never can take place, and my hopes bound themselves to one sweet and melancholy hope, that you will remove from my last hours the cold and dark shadow of your resentment. We have both been cruelly deceived and betrayed. Three days ago I discovered the perfidy that has been practised against us. And then, ah! then, with all the weak human anguish of discovering it too late (/your curse is fulfilled/, Ernest!), I had at least one moment of proud, of exquisite rapture. Ernest Maltravers, the hero of my dreams, stood pure and lofty as of old—a thing it was not unworthy to love, to mourn, to die for. A letter in your handwriting had been shown to me, garbled and altered, as it seems—but I detected not the imposture—it was yourself, yourself alone, brought in false and horrible witness against yourself! And could you think that any other evidence, the words, the oaths of others, would have convicted you in my eyes? There you wronged me. But I deserved it—I had bound myself to secrecy—the seal is taken from my lips in order to be set upon my tomb. Ernest, beloved Ernest—beloved till the last breath is extinct—till the last throb of this heart is stilled—write me one word of comfort and of pardon. You will believe what I have imperfectly written, for you ever trusted my faith, if you have blamed my faults. I am now comparatively happy—a word from you will, make me blest. And Fate has, perhaps, been more merciful to both, than in our shortsighted and querulous human vision, we might, perhaps, believe; for now that the frame is brought low—and in the solitude of my chamber I can duly and humbly commune with mine own heart, I see the aspect of those faults which I once mistook for virtues—and feel that, had we been united, I, loving you ever, might not have constituted your happiness, and so have known the misery of losing your affection. May He who formed you for glorious and yet all unaccomplished purposes strengthen you, when these eyes can no longer sparkle at your triumphs, or weep at your lightest sorrow. You will go on in your broad and luminous career:—a few years, and my remembrance will have left but the vestige of a dream behind. But, but—I can write no more. God bless you!"

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