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ERNEST MALTRAVERS — VOLUME 08

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Ernest Maltravers — Volume 08

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton
Ernest Maltravers
— Volume 08

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."[1]

—OVID.

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

[1] Neighbourhood caused the acquaintance and first introduction.

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 unholier 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."[2]

SALLUST.

"/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

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

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."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.