

BULWER-LYTTON'S NOVELS.

ERNEST MALTRAVERS.

BY
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ETC., ETC.

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ERNEST MALTRAVERS.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

"My meaning in't, I protest, was very honest in the behalf of the maid . . . yet, who would have suspected an ambush where I was taken?"
All's Well that Ends Well, Act iv. Scene 3.

SOME four miles distant from one of our northern manufacturing towns, in the year 18—, was a wide and desolate common;—a more dreary spot it is impossible to conceive—the herbage grew up in sickly patches from the midst of a black and stony soil. Not a tree was to be seen in the whole of the comfortless expanse. Nature herself had seemed to desert the solitude, as if scared by the ceaseless din of the neighbouring forges, and even Art, which presses all things into service, had disdained to cull use or beauty from these unpromising demesnes. There was something weird and primeval in the aspect of the place. Especially when in the long nights of winter you beheld the distant fires and lights, which give to the vicinity of certain manufactories so preternatural an appearance, streaming red and wild over the waste. So abandoned by man appeared the spot, that you found it difficult to imagine that it was only from human fires that its bleak and barren desolation was illumined. For miles along the moor you detected no vestige of any habitation; but as you approached the verge nearest to the town, you could just perceive at a little distance from the main road, by which the common was intersected, a small, solitary, and miserable hovel.

Within this lone abode, at the time in which my story opens, were seated two persons. The one was a man of about fifty years of age, and in a squalid and wretched garb, which was yet relieved by an affectation

of ill-sorted finery: a silk handkerchief, which boasted the ornament of a large brooch of false stones, was twisted jauntily round a muscular, but meagre, throat. His tattered breeches were also decorated by buckles, one of pinchbeck, and one of steel. His frame was thin, but broad and sinewy, indicative of considerable strength. His countenance was prematurely marked by deep furrows, and his grizzled hair waved over a low, rugged, and forbidding brow, on which there hung an everlasting frown, that no smile from the lips (and the man smiled often) could chase away. It was a face that spoke of long-continued and hardened vice—it was one on which the past had written indelible characters. The brand of the hangman could not have stamped it more plainly, nor have more unequivocally warned the suspicion of honest or timid men.

He was employed in counting some few and paltry coins, which, though an easy enough matter to ascertain their value, he told and retold, as if the act could increase the amount.

"There must be some mistake here, Alice," he said, in a low and muttered tone; "we can't be so low—you know I had two pounds in the drawer but Monday, and now— Alice, you must have stolen some of the money—curse you!"

The person thus addressed sat at the opposite side of the smouldering and sullen fire: she now looked quietly up—and her face singularly contrasted that of the man.

She seemed about fifteen years of age, and her complexion was remarkably pure and delicate, even despite the sunburnt tinge which her habits of toil had brought it. Her auburn hair hung in loose and natural curls

over her forehead, and its luxuriance was remarkable even in one so young. Her countenance was beautiful, nay, even faultless, in its small and childlike features, but the expression pained you—it was so vacant. In repose it was almost the expression of an idiot—but when she spoke, or smiled, or even moved a muscle, the eyes, colour, lips, kindled into a life which proved that the intellect was still there, though but imperfectly awakened.

"I did not steal any, father," she said, in a quiet voice, "but I should like to have taken some, only I knew you would beat me if I did."

"And what do you want money for?"

"To get food when I'm hungered."

"Nothing else?"

"I don't know."

The girl paused. "Why don't you let me," she said, after a while, "why don't you let me go and work with the other girls at the factory? I should make money there for you and me both."

The man smiled—such a smile—it seemed to bring into sudden play all the revolting characteristics of his countenance.

"Child," he said, "you are just fifteen, and a sad fool you are: perhaps if you went to the factory, you would get away from me; and what should I do without you? No, I think, as you are so pretty, you might get more money another way."

The girl did not seem to understand this allusion, but repeated, vacantly:

"I should like to go to the factory."

"Stuff!" said the man, angrily; "I have three minds to——"

Here he was interrupted by a loud knock at the door of the hovel.

The man grew pale.

"What can that be?" he muttered. "The hour is late—near eleven. Again—again! Ask who knocks, Alice."

The girl stood spell-bound a moment at the door; and as she stood, her form, rounded yet slight, her earnest look, her varying colour, her tender youth, and a singular grace of attitude and gesture, would have inspired an artist with the very ideal of rustic beauty.

After a pause, she placed her lips to a chink in the door, and repeated her father's question.

"Pray pardon me," said a clear, loud, yet

courteous voice; "but seeing a light at your window, I have ventured to ask if any one within will conduct me to ——; I will pay the service handsomely."

"Open the door, Alley," said the owner of the hut.

The girl drew a large wooden bolt from the door, and a tall figure crossed the threshold.

The new-comer was in the first bloom of youth, perhaps about eighteen years of age, and his air and appearance surprised both sire and daughter. Alone, on foot, at such an hour, it was impossible for any one to mistake him for other than a gentleman; yet his dress was plain and somewhat soiled by dust, and he carried a small knapsack on his shoulder. As he entered, he lifted his hat with something of foreign urbanity, and a profusion of fair brown hair fell partially over a high and commanding forehead. His features were handsome without being eminently so, and his aspect at once bold and prepossessing.

"I am much obliged by your civility," he said, advancing carelessly and addressing the man, who surveyed him with a scrutinising eye; "and trust, my good fellow, that you will increase the obligation by accompanying me to ——."

"You can't miss your way well," said the man, surlily; "the lights will direct you."

"They have rather misled me, for they seem to surround the whole common, and there is no path across it that I can discern; however, if you will put me in the right way, I will not trouble you further."

"It is very late," replied the churlish landlord, equivocally.

"The better reason why I should be at ——. Come, my good friend, put on your hat, and I'll give you half-a-guinea for your trouble."

The man advanced; then halted; again surveyed his guest, and said:

"Are you quite alone, sir?"

"Quite."

"Probably you are known at ——?"

"Not I. But what matters that to you? I am a stranger in these parts."

"It is full four miles."

"So far, and I am fearfully tired already!" exclaimed the young man with impatience. As he spoke, he drew out his watch. "Past eleven, too!"

The watch caught the eye of the cottager;

that evil eye sparkled. He passed his hand over his brow.

"I am thinking, sir," he said, in a more civil tone than he had yet assumed, "that if you are so tired, and the hour is so late, you might almost as well——"

"What?" exclaimed the stranger, half stamping petulantly.

"I don't like to mention it: but my poor roof is at your service, and I would go with you to —— at daybreak to-morrow."

The stranger stared at the cottager, and then at the dingy walls of the hut. He was about, very abruptly, to reject the hospitable proposal, when his eye rested suddenly on the form of Alice, who stood, eager-eyed, and open-mouthed, gazing on the handsome intruder. As she caught his eye, she blushed deeply, and turned aside. The view seemed to change the intentions of the stranger. He hesitated a moment; then muttered between his teeth; and, sinking his knapsack to the ground, he cast himself into a chair beside the fire, stretched his limbs, and cried gaily, "So be it, my host; shut up your house again. Bring me a cup of beer, and a crust of bread, and so much for supper! As for bed, this chair will do vastly well."

"Perhaps we can manage better for you than that chair," answered the host. "But our best accommodation must seem bad enough to a gentleman; we are very poor people—hard-working, but very poor."

"Never mind me," answered the stranger, busying himself in stirring the fire; "I am tolerably well accustomed to greater hardships than sleeping on a chair, in an honest man's house; and though you are poor, I will take it for granted you are honest."

The man grinned; and turning to Alice, bade her spread what their larder would afford. Some crusts of bread, some cold potatoes, and some tolerably strong beer, composed all the fare set before the traveller.

Despite his previous boasts, the young man made rather a wry face at these Socratic preparations, while he drew his chair to the board. But his look grew more gay as he caught Alice's eye; and as she lingered by the table, and faltered out some hesitating words of apology, he seized her hand, and squeezing it tenderly—"Prettiest of lasses," said he; and while he spoke he gazed on her with undisguised admiration—"a man who has travelled on foot all day, through the ugliest country

within the three seas, is sufficiently refreshed at night by the sight of so fair a face."

Alice hastily withdrew her hand, and went and seated herself in a corner of the room, whence she continued to look at the stranger with her usual vacant gaze, but with a half smile upon her rosy lips.

Alice's father looked hard at the young people.

"Eat, sir," said he, with a sort of chuckle, "and no fine words; poor Alice is honest, as you said just now."

"To be sure," answered the traveller, employing with great zeal a set of strong, even, and dazzling teeth at the tough crusts; "to be sure she is. I did not mean to offend you; but the fact is, that I am half a foreigner, and abroad, you know, one may say a civil thing to a pretty girl, without hurting her feelings, or her father's either."

"Half a foreigner! why, you talk English as well as I do," said the host, whose intonation and words were, on the whole, a little above his station.

The stranger smiled. "Thank you for the compliment," said he. "What I meant was, that I have been a great deal abroad; in fact, I have just returned from Germany. But I am English-born."

"And going home?"

"Yes."

"Far from hence?"

"About thirty miles, I believe."

"You are young, sir, to be alone?"

The traveller made no answer, but finished his uninviting repast, and drew his chair again to the fire. He then thought he had sufficiently ministered to his host's curiosity to allow him to attend to his own.

"You work at the factories, I suppose?" said he.

"I do, sir—bad times."

"And your pretty daughter?"

"Minds the house."

"Have you no other children?"

"No; one mouth besides my own is as much as I can feed, and that scarcely. But you would like to rest now; you can have my bed, sir—I can sleep here."

"By no means," said the stranger, quickly; "just put a few more coals on the fire, and leave me to make myself comfortable."

The man rose, and did not press his offer, but left the room for a supply of fuel. Alice remained in her corner.