

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ALICE, OR THE
MYSTERIES – BOOK
09**

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 09

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Edward Bulwer Lytton

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BOOK IX

*"Woe, woe: all things are clear."—SOPHOCLES:
OEd. Tyr. 754.*

CHAPTER I

*THE privilege that statesmen ever claim,
Who private interest never yet pursued,
But still pretended 'twas for others' good.*

.....

*From hence on every humorous wind that veered
With shifted sails a several course you steered.*

Absalom and Achitophel, Part ii.

LORD VARGRAVE had for more than a fortnight remained at the inn at M——, too ill to be removed with safety in a season so severe. Even when at last, by easy stages, he reached London, he was subjected to a relapse; and his recovery was slow and

gradual. Hitherto unused to sickness, he bore his confinement with extreme impatience; and against the commands of his physician insisted on continuing to transact his official business, and consult with his political friends in his sick-room; for Lumley knew well, that it is most pernicious to public men to be considered failing in health,—turkeys are not more unfeeling to a sick brother than politicians to an ailing statesman; they give out that his head is touched, and see paralysis and epilepsy in every speech and every despatch. The time, too, nearly ripe for his great schemes, made it doubly necessary that he should exert himself, and prevent being shelved with a plausible excuse of tender compassion for his infirmities. As soon therefore as he learned that Legard had left Paris, he thought himself safe for a while in that quarter, and surrendered his thoughts wholly to his ambitious projects. Perhaps, too, with the susceptible vanity of a middle-aged man, who has had his *bonnes fortunes*, Lumley deemed, with Rousseau, that a lover, pale and haggard—just raised from the bed of suffering—is more interesting to friendship than attractive to love. He and Rousseau were, I believe, both mistaken; but that is a matter of opinion: they both thought very coarsely of women,—one from having no sentiment, and the other from having a sentiment that was but a disease. At length, just as Lumley was sufficiently recovered to quit his house, to appear at his office, and declare that his illness had wonderfully improved his constitution, intelligence from Paris, the more startling from being wholly unexpected, reached

him. From Caroline he learned that Maltravers had proposed to Evelyn, and been accepted. From Maltravers himself he heard the confirmation of the news. The last letter was short, but kind and manly. He addressed Lord Vargrave as Evelyn's guardian; slightly alluded to the scruples he had entertained till Lord Vargrave's suit was broken off; and feeling the subject too delicate for a letter, expressed a desire to confer with Lumley respecting Evelyn's wishes as to certain arrangements in her property.

And for this was it that Lumley had toiled! for this had he visited Lisle Court! and for this had he been stricken down to the bed of pain! Was it only to make his old rival the purchaser, if he so pleased it, of the possessions of his own family? Lumley thought at that moment less of Evelyn than of Lisle Court. As he woke from the stupor and the first fit of rage into which these epistles cast him, the recollection of the story he had heard from Mr. Onslow flashed across him. Were his suspicions true, what a secret he would possess! How fate might yet befriend him! Not a moment was to be lost. Weak, suffering as he still was, he ordered his carriage, and hastened down to Mrs. Leslie.

In the interview that took place, he was careful not to alarm her into discretion. He managed the conference with his usual consummate dexterity. He did not appear to believe that there had been any actual connection between Alice and the supposed Butler. He began by simply asking whether Alice had ever, in early life, been acquainted with a person of that name, and

when residing in the neighbourhood of ——-. The change of countenance, the surprised start of Mrs. Leslie, convinced him that his suspicions were true.

"And why do you ask, my lord?" said the old lady. "Is it to ascertain this point that you have done me the honour to visit me?"

"Not exactly, my dear madam," said Lumley, smiling. "But I am going to C——- on business; and besides that I wished to give an account of your health to Evelyn, whom I shall shortly see at Paris, I certainly did desire to know whether it would be any gratification to Lady Vargrave, for whom I have the deepest regard, to renew her acquaintance with the said Mr. Butler."

"What does your lordship know of him? What is he; who is he?"

"Ah, my dear lady, you turn the tables on me, I see,—for my one question you would give me fifty. But, seriously, before I answer you, you must tell me whether Lady Vargrave does know a gentleman of that name; yet, indeed, to save trouble, I may as well inform you, that I know it was under that name that she resided at C——-, when my poor uncle first made her acquaintance. What I ought to ask is this,—supposing Mr. Butler be still alive, and a gentleman of character and fortune, would it please Lady Vargrave to meet with him once more?"

"I cannot tell you," said Mrs. Leslie, sinking back in her chair, much embarrassed.

"Enough, I shall not stir further in the matter. Glad to see you

looking so well. Fine place, beautiful trees. Any commands at C——, or any message for Evelyn?"

Lumley rose to depart.

"Stay," said Mrs. Leslie, recalling all the pining, restless, untiring love that Lady Vargrave had manifested towards the lost, and feeling that she ought not to sacrifice to slight scruples the chance of happiness for her friend's future years,— "stay; I think this question you should address to Lady Vargrave,—or shall I?"

"As you will,—perhaps I had better write. Good-day," and Vargrave hurried away.

He had satisfied himself, but he had another yet to satisfy,—and that, from certain reasons known but to himself, without bringing the third person in contact with Lady Vargrave. On arriving at C—— he wrote, therefore, to Lady Vargrave as follows:—

MY DEAR FRIEND,—Do not think me impertinent or intrusive—but you know me too well for that. A gentleman of the name of Butler is exceedingly anxious to ascertain if you once lived near ——, in a pretty little cottage,—Dove, or Dale, or Dell cottage (some such appellation),—and if you remember a person of his name. Should you care to give a reply to these queries, send me a line addressed to London, which I shall get on my way to Paris.

Yours most truly,
VARGRAVE.

As soon as he had concluded, and despatched this letter,

Vargrave wrote to Mr. Winsley as follows:—

MY DEAR SIR,—I am so unwell as to be unable to call on you, or even to see any one, however agreeable (nay, the more agreeable the more exciting!). I hope, however, to renew our personal acquaintance before quitting C——. Meanwhile, oblige me with a line to say if I did not understand you to signify that you could, if necessary, prove that Lady Vargrave once resided in this town as Mrs. Butler, a very short time before she married my uncle, under the name of Cameron, in Devonshire; and had she not also at that time a little girl,—an infant, or nearly so,—who must necessarily be the young lady who is my uncle's heiress, Miss Evelyn Cameron. My reason for thus troubling you is obvious. As Miss Cameron's guardian, I have very shortly to wind up certain affairs connected with my uncle's will; and, what is more, there is some property bequeathed by the late Mr. Butler, which may make it necessary to prove identity.

Truly yours,

VARGRAVE.

The answer to the latter communication ran thus:—

"MY LORD,—I am very sorry to hear your lordship is so unwell, and will pay my respects to-morrow. I certainly can swear that the present Lady Vargrave was the Mrs. Butler who resided at C——, and taught music. And as the child with her was of the same sex, and about the same age as Miss Cameron, there can, I should think, be no difficulty in establishing the identity between that young lady and the child Lady Vargrave had by her

first husband, Mr. Butler; but of this, of course, I cannot speak.

"I have the honour, etc."

The next morning Vargrave despatched a note to Mr. Winsley, saying that his health required him to return to town immediately,—and to town, in fact, he hastened. The day after his arrival, he received, in a hurried hand—strangely blurred and blotted, perhaps by tears—this short letter:—

For Heaven's sake, tell me what you mean! Yes, yes, I did once reside at Dale Cottage, I did know one of the name of Butler! Has *he* discovered the name *I* bear? Where is he? I implore you to write, or let me see you before you leave England!

ALICE VARGRAVE.

Lumley smiled triumphantly when he read and carefully put up this letter.

"I must now amuse and put her off—at all events for the present."

In answer to Lady Vargrave's letter, he wrote a few lines to say that he had only heard through a third person (a lawyer) of a Mr. Butler residing somewhere abroad, who had wished these inquiries to be made; that he believed it only related to some disposition of property; that, *perhaps*, the Mr. Butler who made the inquiry was heir to the Mr. Butler she had known; that he could learn nothing else at present, as the purport of her reply must be sent abroad,—the lawyer would or could say nothing more; that directly he received a further communication it should

be despatched to her, that he was most affectionately and most truly hers.

The rest of that morning Vargrave devoted to Lord Saxingham and his allies; and declaring, and believing, that he should not be long absent at Paris, he took an early dinner, and was about once more to commit himself to the risks of travel, when, as he crossed the hall, Mr. Douce came hastily upon him.

"My lord—my lord—I must have a word with your l-l-lordship;—you are going to—that is—" (and the little man looked frightened) "you intend to—to go to—that is—ab-ab-ab—"

"Not abscond, Mr. Douce; come into the library: I am in a great hurry, but I have always time for *you*. What's the matter?"

"Why, then, my lord,—I—I have heard nothing m-m-more from your lordship about the pur-pur—"

"Purchase?—I am going to Paris, to settle all particulars with Miss Cameron; tell the lawyers so."

"May—may—we draw out the money to—to—show—that—that we are in earnest? Otherwise I fear—that is, I suspect—I mean I know, that Colonel Maltravers will be off the bargain."

"Why, Mr. Douce, really I must just see my ward first; but you shall hear from me in a day or two;—and the ten thousand pounds I owe you!"

"Yes, indeed, the ten—ten—ten!—my partner is very—"

"Anxious for it, no doubt! My compliments to him. God bless you!—take care of yourself,—must be off to save the packet;"

and Vargrave hurried away, muttering, "Heaven sends money, and the devil sends duns!"

Douce gasped like a fish for breath, as his eyes followed the rapid steps of Vargrave; and there was an angry scowl of disappointment on his small features. Lumley, by this time, seated in his carriage, and wrapped up in his cloak, had forgotten the creditor's existence, and whispered to his aristocratic secretary, as he bent his head out of the carriage window, "I have told Lord Saxingham to despatch you to me, if there is any—the least—necessity for me in London. I leave you behind, Howard, because your sister being at court, and your cousin with our notable premier, you will find out every change in the wind—you understand. And, I say, Howard, don't think I forget your kindness!—you know that no man ever served me in vain! Oh, there's that horrid little Douce behind you,—tell them to drive on!"

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