ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

ALICE, OR THE MYSTERIES — BOOK 02

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 02

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=35008361
Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 02:

Содержание

BOOK II 4
CHAPTER I 4
CHAPTER II 8
CHAPTER III 16
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 19

Edward Bulwer Lytton
Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 02

BOOK II

"The hour arrived—years having rolled away
When his return the Gods no more delay.
Lo! Ithaca the Fates award; and there
New trials meet the Wanderer."

HOMER: Od. lib. i, 16.

CHAPTER I

THERE is continual spring and harvest here—
Continual, both meeting at one time;
For both the boughs do laughing blossoms bear,
And with fresh colours deck the wanton prime;
And eke at once the heavy trees they climb,
Which seem to labour under their fruit's load.

SPENSER: The Garden of Adonis.

Vis boni
In ipsa inesset forma.

—TERENCE.

BEAUTY, thou art twice blessed; thou blessest the gazer and the possessor; often at once the effect and the cause of goodness! A sweet disposition, a lovely soul, an affectionate nature, will speak in the eyes, the lips, the brow, and become the cause of beauty. On the other hand, they who have a gift that commands love, a key that opens all hearts, are ordinarily inclined to look with happy eyes upon the world,—to be cheerful and serene, to hope and to confide. There is more wisdom than the vulgar dream of in our admiration of a fair face.

Evelyn Cameron was beautiful,—a beauty that came from the heart, and went to the heart; a beauty, the very spirit of which was love! Love smiled on her dimpled lips, it reposed on her open brow, it played in the profuse and careless ringlets of darkest yet sunniest auburn, which a breeze could lift from her delicate and virgin cheek; Love, in all its tenderness, in all its kindness, its unsuspecting truth,—Love coloured every thought, murmured in her low melodious voice, in all its symmetry and glorious womanhood. Love swelled the swan-like neck, and moulded the rounded limb.

She was just the kind of person that takes the judgment by storm: whether gay or grave, there was so charming and

irresistible a grace about her. She seemed born, not only to captivate the giddy, but to turn the heads of the sage. Roxalana was nothing to her. How, in the obscure hamlet of Brook-Green, she had learned all the arts of pleasing it is impossible to say. In her arch smile, the pretty toss of her head, the half shyness, half freedom, of her winning ways, it was as if Nature had made her to delight one heart, and torment all others.

Without being learned, the mind of Evelyn was cultivated and well informed. Her heart, perhaps, helped to instruct her understanding; for by a kind of intuition she could appreciate all that was beautiful and elevated. Her unvitiated and guileless taste had a logic of its own: no schoolman had ever a quicker penetration into truth, no critic ever more readily detected the meretricious and the false. The book that Evelyn could admire was sure to be stamped with the impress of the noble, the lovely, or the true!

But Evelyn had faults,—the faults of her age; or, rather, she had tendencies that might conduce to error. She was of so generous a nature that the very thought of sacrificing her self for another had a charm. She ever acted from impulse,—impulses pure and good, but often rash and imprudent. She was yielding to weakness, persuaded into anything, so sensitive, that even a cold look from one moderately liked cut her to the heart; and by the sympathy that accompanies sensitiveness, no pain to her was so great as the thought of giving pain to another. Hence it was that Vargrave might form reasonable hopes of his ultimate success. It

was a dangerous constitution for happiness! How many chances must combine to preserve to the mid-day of characters like this the sunshine of their dawn! The butterfly that seems the child of the summer and the flowers—what wind will not chill its mirth, what touch will not brush away its hues?

CHAPTER II

THESE, on a general survey, are the modes
Of pulpit oratory which agree
With no unlettered audience.

—POLWHELE.

MRS. LESLIE had returned from her visit to the rectory to her own home, and Evelyn had now been some weeks at Mrs. Merton's. As was natural, she had grown in some measure reconciled and resigned to her change of abode. In fact, no sooner did she pass Mrs. Merton's threshold, than, for the first time, she was made aware of her consequence in life.

The Rev. Mr. Merton was a man of the nicest perception in all things appertaining to worldly consideration. The second son of a very wealthy baronet (who was the first commoner of his county) and of the daughter of a rich and highly-descended peer, Mr. Merton had been brought near enough to rank and power to appreciate all their advantages. In early life he had been something of a "tuft-hunter;" but as his understanding was good and his passions not very strong, he had soon perceived that that vessel of clay, a young man with a moderate fortune, cannot long sail down the same stream with the metal vessels of rich earls and extravagant dandies. Besides, he was destined for the Church—because there was one of the finest livings

in England in the family. He therefore took orders at six and twenty; married Mrs. Leslie's daughter, who had thirty thousand pounds: and settled at the rectory of Merton, within a mile of the family seat. He became a very respectable and extremely popular man. He was singularly hospitable, and built a new wing —containing a large dining-room and six capital bed-rooms— to the rectory, which had now much more the appearance of a country villa than a country parsonage. His brother, succeeding to the estates, and residing chiefly in the neighbourhood, became, like his father before him, member for the county, and was one of the country gentlemen most looked up to in the House of Commons. A sensible and frequent, though uncommonly prosy speaker, singularly independent (for he had a clear fourteen thousand pounds a year, and did not desire office), and valuing himself on not being a party man, so that his vote on critical questions was often a matter of great doubt, and, therefore, of great moment, Sir John Merton gave considerable importance to the Rev. Charles Merton. The latter kept up all the more select of his old London acquaintances; and few country houses, at certain seasons of the year, were filled more aristocratically than the pleasant rectory-house. Mr. Merton, indeed, contrived to make the Hall a reservoir for the parsonage, and periodically drafted off the *elite* of the visitors at the former to spend a few days at the latter. This was the more easily done, as his brother was a widower, and his conversation was all of one sort,—the state of the nation and the agricultural interest. Mr. Merton was upon

very friendly terms with his brother, looked after the property in the absence of Sir John, kept up the family interest, was an excellent electioneerer, a good speaker at a pinch, an able magistrate,—a man, in short, most useful in the county; on the whole, he was more popular than his brother, and almost as much looked up to—perhaps, because he was much less ostentatious. He had very good taste, had the Rev. Charles Merton!—his table plentiful, but plain—his manners affable to the low, though agreeably sycophantic to the high; and there was nothing about him that ever wounded self-love. To add to the attractions of his house, his wife, simple and good-tempered, could talk with anybody, take off the bores, and leave people to be comfortable in their own way: while he had a large family of fine children of all ages, that had long given easy and constant excuse under the name of "little children's parties," for getting up an impromptu dance or a gypsy dinner,—enlivening the neighbourhood, in short. Caroline was the eldest; then came a son, attached to a foreign ministry, and another, who, though only nineteen, was a private secretary to one of our Indian satraps. The acquaintance of these young gentlemen, thus engaged, it was therefore Evelyn's misfortune to lose the advantage of cultivating,—a loss which both Mr. and Mrs. Merton assured her was very much to be regretted. But to make up to her for such a privation there were two lovely little girls, one ten, and the other seven years old, who fell in love with Evelyn at first sight. Caroline was one of the beauties of the county, clever and conversable, "drew young

men," and set the fashion to young ladies, especially when she returned from spending the season with Lady Elizabeth.

It was a delightful family!

In person, Mr. Merton was of the middle height; fair, and inclined to stoutness, with small features, beautiful teeth, and great suavity of address. Mindful still of the time when he had been "about town," he was very particular in his dress: his black coat, neatly relieved in the evening by a white underwaistcoat, and a shirt-front admirably plaited, with plain studs of dark enamel, his well-cut trousers, and elaborately polished shoes—he was good-humouredly vain of his feet and hands—won for him the common praise of the dandies (who occasionally honoured him with a visit to shoot his game, and flirt with his daughter), "That old Merton was a most gentlemanlike fellow—so d———-d neat for a parson!"

Such, mentally, morally, and physically, was the Rev. Charles Merton, rector of Merton, brother of Sir John, and possessor of an income that, what with his rich living, his wife's fortune, and his own, which was not inconsiderable, amounted to between four and five thousand pounds a year, which income, managed with judgment as well as liberality, could not fail to secure to him all the good things of this world,—the respect of his friends amongst the rest. Caroline was right when she told Evelyn that her papa was very different from a mere country parson.

Now this gentleman could not fail to see all the claims that Evelyn might fairly advance upon the esteem, nay, the

veneration of himself and family: a young beauty, with a fortune of about a quarter of a million, was a phenomenon that might fairly be called celestial. Her pretensions were enhanced by her engagement to Lord Vargrave,—an engagement which might be broken; so that, as he interpreted it, the *worst* that could happen to the young lady was to marry an able and rising Minister of State,—a peer of the realm; but she was perfectly free to marry a still greater man, if she could find him; and who knows but what perhaps the *attache*, if he could get leave of absence? Mr. Merton was too sensible to pursue that thought further for the present.

The good man was greatly shocked at the too familiar manner in which Mrs. Merton spoke to this high-fated heiress, at Evelyn's travelling so far without her own maid, at her very primitive wardrobe—poor, ill-used child! Mr. Merton was a connoisseur in ladies' dress. It was quite painful to see that the unfortunate girl had been so neglected. Lady Vargrave must be a very strange person. He inquired compassionately whether she was allowed any pocket money; and finding, to his relief, that in that respect Miss Cameron was munificently supplied, he suggested that a proper abigail should be immediately engaged; that proper orders to Madame Devy should be immediately transmitted to London, with one of Evelyn's dresses, as a pattern for nothing but length and breadth. He almost stamped with vexation when he heard that Evelyn had been placed in one of the neat little rooms generally appropriated to young lady visitors.

"She is quite contented, my dear Mr. Merton; she is so simple;

she has not been brought up in the style you think for."

"Mrs. Merton," said the rector, with great solemnity, "Miss Cameron may know no better now; but what will she think of us hereafter? It is my maxim to recollect what people will be, and show them that respect which may leave pleasing impressions when they have it in their power to show us civility in return."

With many apologies, which quite overwhelmed poor Evelyn, she was transferred from the little chamber, with its French bed and bamboo-coloured washhand-stand, to an apartment with a buhl wardrobe and a four-post bed with green silk curtains, usually appropriated to the regular Christmas visitant, the Dowager Countess of Chipperton. A pretty morning room communicated with the sleeping apartment, and thence a private staircase conducted into the gardens. The whole family were duly impressed and re-impressed with her importance. No queen could be made more of. Evelyn mistook it all for pure kindness, and returned the hospitality with an affection that extended to the whole family, but particularly to the two little girls, and a beautiful black spaniel. Her dresses came down from London; her abigail arrived; the buhl wardrobe was duly filled,—and Evelyn at last learned that it is a fine thing to be rich. An account of all these proceedings was forwarded to Lady Vargrave, in a long and most complacent letter, by the rector himself. The answer was short, but it contented the excellent clergyman; for it approved of all he had done, and begged that Miss Cameron might have everything that seemed proper to her station.

By the same post came two letters to Evelyn herself,—one from Lady Vargrave, one from the curate. They transported her from the fine room and the buhl wardrobe to the cottage and the lawn; and the fine abigail, when she came to dress her young lady's hair, found her weeping.

It was a matter of great regret to the rector that it was that time of year when—precisely because the country is most beautiful—every one worth knowing is in town. Still, however, some stray guests found their way to the rectory for a day or two, and still there were some aristocratic old families in the neighbourhood, who never went up to London: so that two days in the week the rector's wine flowed, the whist-tables were set out, and the piano called into requisition.

Evelyn—the object of universal attention and admiration—was put at her ease by her station itself; for good manners come like an instinct to those on whom the world smiles. Insensibly she acquired self-possession and the smoothness of society; and if her child-like playfulness broke out from all conventional restraint, it only made more charming and brilliant the great heiress, whose delicate and fairy cast of beauty so well became her graceful *abandon* of manner, and who looked so unequivocally ladylike to the eyes that rested on Madame Devy's blondes and satins.

Caroline was not so gay as she had been at the cottage. Something seemed to weigh upon her spirits: she was often moody and thoughtful. She was the only one in the family not

good-tempered; and her peevish replies to her parents, when no visitor imposed a check on the family circle, inconceivably pained Evelyn, and greatly contrasted the flow of spirits which distinguished her when she found somebody worth listening to. Still Evelyn—who, where she once liked, found it difficult to withdraw regard—sought to overlook Caroline's blemishes, and to persuade herself of a thousand good qualities below the surface; and her generous nature found constant opportunity of venting itself in costly gifts, selected from the London parcels, with which the officious Mr. Merton relieved the monotony of the rectory. These gifts Caroline could not refuse without paining her young friend. She took them reluctantly, for, to do her justice, Caroline, though ambitious, was not mean.

Thus time passed in the rectory, in gay variety and constant entertainment; and all things combined to spoil the heiress, if, indeed, goodness ever is spoiled by kindness and prosperity. Is it to the frost or to the sunshine that the flower opens its petals, or the fruit ripens from the blossom?

CHAPTER III

Rod. How sweet these solitary places are!
. . . . . .
Ped. What strange musick
Was that we heard afar off?
Curio. We've told you what he is, what time we've sought him,
His nature and his name.

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER. The Pilgrim.

ONE day, as the ladies were seated in Mrs. Merton's morning-room, Evelyn, who had been stationed by the window hearing the little Cecilia go through the French verbs, and had just finished that agreeable task, exclaimed,—

"Do tell me to whom that old house belongs, with the picturesque gable-end and Gothic turrets, there, just peeping through the trees,—I have always forgot to ask you."

"Oh, my dear Miss Cameron," said Mrs. Merton, "that is Burleigh; have you not been there? How stupid in Caroline not to show it to you! It is one of the lions of the place. It belongs to a man you have often heard of,—Mr. Maltravers."

"Indeed!" cried Evelyn; and she gazed with new interest on the gray melancholy pile, as the sunshine brought it into strong contrast with the dark pines around it. "And Mr. Maltravers himself—?"

"Is still abroad, I believe; though I did hear the other day that he was shortly expected at Burleigh. It is a curious old place, though much neglected. I believe, indeed, it has not been furnished since the time of Charles the First. (Cissy, my love, don't stoop so.) Very gloomy, in my opinion; and not any fine room in the house, except the library, which was once a chapel. However, people come miles to see it."

"Will you go there to-day?" said Caroline, languidly; "it is a very pleasant walk through the glebe-land and the wood,—not above half a mile by the foot-path."

"I should like it so much."

"Yes," said Mrs. Merton, "and you had better go before he returns,—he is so strange. He does not allow it to be seen when he is down. But, indeed, he has only been once at the old place since he was of age. (Sophy, you will tear Miss Cameron's scarf to pieces; do be quiet, child.) That was before he was a great man; he was then very odd, saw no society, only dined once with us, though Mr. Merton paid him every attention. They show the room in which he wrote his books."

"I remember him very well, though I was then but a child," said Caroline,—"a handsome, thoughtful face."

"Did you think so, my dear? Fine eyes and teeth, certainly, and a commanding figure, but nothing more."

"Well," said Caroline, "if you like to go, Evelyn, I am at your service."

"And—I—Evy, dear—I—may go," said Cecilia, clinging to

Evelyn.

"And me, too," lisped Sophia, the youngest hope,—"there's such a pretty peacock."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.