

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ALICE, OR THE
MYSTERIES — BOOK
07**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 07

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Edward Bulwer Lytton

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 07

BOOK VII

Words of dark import gave suspicion birth.—POTTER.

CHAPTER I

Luce. Is the wind there?

That makes for me.

Isab. Come, I forget a business.

Wit without Money.

LORD VARGRAVE'S travelling-carriage was at his door, and he himself was putting on his greatcoat in his library, when Lord Saxingham entered.

"What! you are going into the country?"

"Yes; I wrote you word,—to see Lisle Court."

"Ay, true; I had forgot. Somehow or other my memory is not so good as it was. But, let me see, Lisle Court is in ——shire. Why, you will pass within ten miles of C——."

"C——! Shall I? I am not much versed in the geography of England,—never learned it at school. As for Poland, Kamschatka, Mexico, Madagascar, or any other place as to which knowledge would be *useful*, I have every inch of the way at my finger's end. But *a propos* of C——, it is the town in which my late uncle made his fortune."

"Ah, so it is. I recollect you were to have stood for C——, but gave it up to Staunch; very handsome in you. Have you any interest there still?"

"I think my ward has some tenants,—a street or two,—one called Richard Street, and the other Templeton Place. I had intended some weeks ago to have gone down there, and seen what interest was still left to our family; but Staunch himself told me that C—— was a sure card."

"So he thought; but he has been with me this morning in great alarm: he now thinks he shall be thrown out. A Mr. Winsley, who has a great deal of interest there, and was a supporter of his, hangs back on account of the —— question. This is unlucky, as Staunch is quite with *us*; and if he were to rat now it would be most unfortunate."

"Winsley! Winsley!—my poor uncle's right-hand man. A great brewer,—always chairman of the Templeton Committee. I know the name, though I never saw the man."

"If you could take C—— in your way?"

"To be sure. Staunch must not be lost. We cannot throw away a single vote, much more one of such weight,—eighteen stone at the least! I'll stop at C—— on pretence of seeing after my ward's houses, and have a quiet conference with Mr. Winsley. Hem! Peers must not interfere in elections, eh? Well, good-by: take care of yourself. I shall be back in a week, I hope,—perhaps less."

In a minute more Lord Vargrave and Mr. George Frederick Augustus Howard, a slim young gentleman of high birth and connections, but who, having, as a portionless cadet, his own way to make in the world, condescended to be his lordship's private secretary, were rattling over the streets the first stage to C——.

It was late at night when Lord Vargrave arrived at the head inn of that grave and respectable cathedral city, in which once Richard Templeton, Esq.,—saint, banker, and politician,—had exercised his dictatorial sway. "Sic transit gloria mundi!" As he warmed his hands by the fire in the large wainscoted apartment into which he was shown, his eye met a full length engraving of his uncle, with a roll of papers in his hand,—meant for a parliamentary bill for the turnpike trusts in the neighbourhood of C——. The sight brought back his recollections of that pious and saturnine relation, and insensibly the minister's thoughts flew to his death-bed, and to the strange secret which in that last hour he had revealed to Lumley,—a secret which had done much in deepening Lord Vargrave's contempt for the forms and conventionalities of decorous life. And here it may be mentioned—though in the course of this volume a penetrating reader may have guessed as much—that, whatever that secret, it did not refer expressly or exclusively to the late lord's singular and ill-assorted marriage. Upon that point much was still left obscure to arouse Lumley's curiosity, had he been a man whose curiosity was very vivacious. But on this he felt but little interest. He knew enough to believe that no further information could benefit himself personally; why should he trouble his head with what never would fill his pockets?

An audible yawn from the slim secretary roused Lord Vargrave from his reverie.

"I envy you, my young friend," said he, good-humouredly. "It is a pleasure we lose as we grow older,—that of being sleepy. However, 'to bed,' as Lady Macbeth says. Faith, I don't wonder the poor devil of a thane was slow in going to bed with such a tigress. Good-night to you."

CHAPTER II

MA fortune va prendre une face nouvelle.¹
RACINE. Androm., Act i. sc. 1.

THE next morning Vargrave inquired the way to Mr. Winsley's, and walked alone to the house of the brewer. The slim secretary went to inspect the cathedral.

Mr. Winsley was a little, thickset man, with a civil but blunt electioneering manner. He started when he heard Lord Vargrave's name, and bowed with great stiffness. Vargrave saw at a glance that there was some cause of grudge in the mind of the worthy man; nor did Mr. Winsley long hesitate before he cleansed his bosom of its perilous stuff.

"This is an unexpected honour, my lord: I don't know how to account for it."

"Why, Mr. Winsley, your friendship with my late uncle can, perhaps, sufficiently explain and apologize for a visit from a nephew sincerely attached to his memory."

"Humph! I certainly did do all in my power to promote Mr. Templeton's interests. No man, I may say, did more; and yet I don't think it was much thought of the moment he turned his back upon the electors of C——. Not that I bear any malice; I am well to do, and value no man's favour, —no man's, my lord!"

"You amaze me! I always heard my poor uncle speak of you in the highest terms."

"Oh, well, it don't signify; pray say no more of it. Can I offer your lordship a glass of wine?"

"No, I am much obliged to you; but we really must set this little matter right. You know that after his marriage my uncle never revisited C——; and that shortly before his death he sold the greater part of his interest in this city. His young wife, I suppose, liked the neighbourhood of London; and when elderly gentlemen *do* marry, you know they are no longer their own masters; but if you had ever come to Fulham—ah! then, indeed, my uncle would have rejoiced to see his old friend."

"Your lordship thinks so," said Mr. Winsley with a sardonic smile. "You are mistaken; I did call at Fulham; and though I sent in my card, Lord Vargrave's servant (he was then My Lord) brought back word that his lordship was not at home."

"But that must have been true; he was out, you may depend on it."

"I saw him at the window, my lord," said Mr. Winsley, taking a pinch of snuff.

"Oh, the deuce! I'm in for it," thought Lumley.—"Very strange, indeed! but how can you account for it? Ah, perhaps the health of Lady Vargrave—she was so very delicate then, and my poor uncle lived for her—you know that he left all his fortune to Miss Cameron?"

"Miss Cameron! Who is she, my lord?"

"Why, his daughter-in-law; Lady Vargrave was a widow,—a Mrs. Cameron."

"Mrs. Cam—I remember now,—they put Cameron in the newspapers; but I thought it was a mistake. But, perhaps" (added Winsley, with a sneer of peculiar malignity),—"perhaps, when your worthy uncle thought of being a peer, he did not like to have it known that he married so much beneath him."

"You quite mistake, my dear sir; my uncle never denied that Mrs. Cameron was a lady of no fortune or connections,—widow to some poor Scotch gentleman, who died I think in India."

"He left her very ill off, poor thing; but she had a great deal of merit, and worked hard; she taught my girls to play—"

"Your girls! did Mrs. Cameron ever reside in C——?"

"To be sure; but she was then called Mrs. Butler—just as pretty a name to my fancy."

"You must make a mistake: my uncle married this lady in Devonshire."

¹ "My fortune is about to take a turn."

"Very possibly," quoth the brewer, doggedly. "Mrs. Butler left the town with her little girl some time before Mr. Templeton married."

"Well, you are wiser than I am," said Lumley, forcing a smile. "But how can you be sure that Mrs. Butler and Mrs. Cameron are one and the same person? You did not go into the house, you could not have seen Lady Vargrave" (and here Lumley shrewdly guessed—if the tale were true—at the cause of his uncle's exclusion of his old acquaintance).

"No! but I saw her ladyship on the lawn," said Mr. Winsley, with another sardonic smile; "and I asked the porter at the lodge as I went out if that was Lady Vargrave, and he said, 'yes.' However, my lord, by-gones are by-gones,—I bear no malice; your uncle was a good man: and if he had but said to me, 'Winsley, don't say a word about Mrs. Butler,' he might have reckoned on me just as much as when in his elections he used to put five thousand pounds in my hands, and say, 'Winsley, no bribery,—it is wicked; let this be given in charity.' Did any one ever know how that money went? Was your uncle ever accused of corruption? But, my lord, surely you will take some refreshment?"

"No, indeed; but if you will let me dine with you tomorrow, you'll oblige me much; and, whatever my uncle's faults (and latterly, poor man, he was hardly in his senses; what a will he made!) let not the nephew suffer for them. Come, Mr. Winsley," and Lumley held out his hand with enchanting frankness, "you know my motives are disinterested; I have no parliamentary interest to serve, we have no constituents for our Hospital of Incurables; and—oh! that's right,—we're friends, I see! Now I must go and look after my ward's houses. Let me see, the agent's name is—is—"

"Perkins, I think, my lord," said Mr. Winsley, thoroughly softened by the charm of Vargrave's words and manner. "Let me put on my hat, and show you his house."

"Will you? That's very kind; give me all the election news by the way—you know I was once within an ace of being your member."

Vargrave learned from his new friend some further particulars relative to Mrs. Butler's humble habits and homely mode of life at C——, which served completely to explain to him why his proud and worldly uncle had so carefully abstained from all intercourse with that city, and had prevented the nephew from standing for its vacant representation. It seemed, however, that Winsley—whose resentment was not of a very active or violent kind—had not communicated the discovery he had made to his fellow townspeople; but had contented himself with hints and aphorisms, whenever he had heard the subject of Mr. Templeton's marriage discussed, which had led the gossips of the place to imagine that he had made a much worse selection than he really had. As to the accuracy of Winsley's assertion, Vargrave, though surprised at first, had but little doubt on consideration, especially when he heard that Mrs. Butler's principal patroness had been the Mrs. Leslie, now the intimate friend of Lady Vargrave. But what had been the career, what the earlier condition and struggles of this simple and interesting creature? With her appearance at C——, commenced all that surmise could invent. Not greater was the mystery that wrapped the apparition of Manco Capac by the lake Titiaca, than that which shrouded the places and the trials whence the lowly teacher of music had emerged amidst the streets of C——.

Weary, and somewhat careless, of conjecture, Lord Vargrave, in dining with Mr. Winsley, turned the conversation upon the business on which he had principally undertaken his journey,—namely, the meditated purchase of Lisle Court.

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