

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ALICE, OR THE
MYSTERIES — BOOK
04**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 04

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Edward Bulwer Lytton

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 04

BOOK IV

"A virtuous woman is man's greatest pride."—SIMONIDES.

CHAPTER I

ABROAD uneasy, nor content at home.

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And Wisdom shows the ill without the cure.

HAMMOND: Elegies.

TWO or three days after the interview between Lord Vargrave and Maltravers, the solitude of Burleigh was relieved by the arrival of Mr. Cleveland. The good old gentleman, when free from attacks of the gout, which were now somewhat more frequent than formerly, was the same cheerful and intelligent person as ever. Amiable, urbane, accomplished, and benevolent, there was just enough worldliness in Cleveland's nature to make his views sensible as far as they went, but to bound their scope. Everything he said was so rational; and yet, to an imaginative person, his conversation was unsatisfactory, and his philosophy somewhat chilling.

"I cannot say how pleased and surprised I am at your care of the fine old place," said he to Maltravers, as, leaning on his cane and his *ci-devant* pupil's arm, he loitered observantly through the grounds; "I see everywhere the presence of the Master."

And certainly the praise was deserved. The gardens were now in order, the dilapidated fences were repaired, the weeds no longer encumbered the walks. Nature was just assisted and relieved by Art, without being oppressed by too officious a service from her handmaid. In the house itself some suitable and appropriate repairs and decorations—with such articles of furniture as combined modern comfort with the ancient and picturesque shapes of a former fashion—had redeemed the mansion from all appearance of dreariness and neglect; while still was left to its quaint halls and chambers the character which belonged to their architecture and associations. It was surprising how much a little exercise of simple taste had effected.

"I am glad you approve what I have done," said Maltravers. "I know not how it was, but the desolation of the place when I returned to it reproached me. We contract friendship with places as with human beings, and fancy they have claims upon us; at least, that is my weakness."

"And an amiable one it is, too,—I share it. As for me, I look upon Temple Grove as a fond husband upon a fair wife. I am always anxious to adorn it, and as proud of its beauty as if it could understand and thank me for my partial admiration. When I leave you I intend going to Paris, for the purpose of attending a sale of the pictures and effects of M. de ——-. These auctions are to me what a jeweller's shop is to a lover; but then, Ernest, I am an old bachelor."

"And I, too, am an Arcadian," said Maltravers, with a smile.

"Ah, but you are not too old for repentance. Burleigh now requires nothing but a mistress."

"Perhaps it may soon receive that addition. I am yet undecided whether I shall sell it."

"Sell it! sell Burleigh!—the last memorial of your mother's ancestry! the classic retreat of the graceful Digbys! Sell Burleigh!"

"I had almost resolved to do so when I came hither; then I forswore the intention: now again I sometimes sorrowfully return to the idea."

"And in Heaven's name, why?"

"My old restlessness returns. Busy myself as I will here, I find the range of action monotonous and confined. I began too soon to draw around me the large circumference of literature and action; and the small provincial sphere seems to me a sad going back in life. Perhaps I should not feel this, were my home less lonely; but as it is—no, the wanderer's ban is on me, and I again turn towards the lands of excitement and adventure."

"I understand this, Ernest; but why is your home so solitary? You are still at the age in which wise and congenial unions are the most frequently formed; your temper is domestic; your easy fortune and sobered ambition allow you to choose without reference to worldly considerations. Look round the world, and mix with the world again, and give Burleigh the mistress it requires."

Maltravers shook his head, and sighed.

"I do not say," continued Cleveland, wrapped in the glowing interest of the theme, "that you should marry a mere girl, but an amiable woman, who, like yourself, has seen something of life, and knows how to reckon on its cares, and to be contented with its enjoyments."

"You have said enough," said Maltravers, impatiently; "an experienced woman of the world, whose freshness of hope and heart is gone! What a picture! No, to me there is something inexpressibly beautiful in innocence and youth. But you say justly,—my years are not those that would make a union with youth desirable or well suited."

"I do *not* say that," said Cleveland, taking a pinch of snuff; "but you should avoid great disparity of age,—not for the sake of that disparity itself, but because with it is involved discord of temper, pursuits. A *very* young woman, new to the world, will not be contented with home alone; you are at once too gentle to curb her wishes, and a little too stern and reserved—pardon me for saying so—to be quite congenial to very early and sanguine youth."

"It is true," said Maltravers, with a tone of voice that showed he was struck with the remark; "but how have we fallen on this subject? let us change it. I have no idea of marriage,—the gloomy reminiscence of Florence Lascelles chains me to the past."

"Poor Florence, she might once have suited you; but now you are older, and would require a calmer and more malleable temper."

"Peace, I implore you!"

The conversation was changed; and at noon Mr. Merton, who had heard of Cleveland's arrival, called at Burleigh to renew an old acquaintance. He invited them to pass the evening at the rectory; and Cleveland, hearing that whist was a regular amusement, accepted the invitation for his host and himself. But when the evening came, Maltravers pleaded indisposition, and Cleveland was obliged to go alone.

When the old gentleman returned about midnight, he found Maltravers awaiting him in the library; and Cleveland, having won fourteen points, was in a very gay, conversable humour.

"You perverse hermit!" said he, "talk of solitude, indeed, with so pleasant a family a hundred yards distant! You deserve to be solitary,—I have no patience with you. They complain bitterly of your desertion, and say you were, at first, the *enfant de la maison*."

"So you like the Mertons? The clergyman is sensible, but commonplace."

"A very agreeable man, despite your cynical definition, and plays a very fair rubber. But Vargrave is a first-rate player."

"Vargrave is there still?"

"Yes, he breakfasts with us to-morrow,—he invited himself."

"Humph!"

"He played one rubber; the rest of the evening he devoted himself to the prettiest girl I ever saw,—Miss Cameron. What a sweet face! so modest, yet so intelligent! I talked with her a good deal during the deals in which I cut out. I almost lost my heart to her."

"So Lord Vargrave devoted himself to Miss Cameron?"

"To be sure,—you know they are to be married soon. Merton told me so. She is very rich. He is the luckiest fellow imaginable, that Vargrave! But he is much too old for her: she seems to think so too. I can't explain why I think it; but by her pretty reserved manner I saw that she tried to keep the gay minister at a distance: but it would not do. Now, if you were ten years younger, or Miss Cameron ten years older, you might have had some chance of cutting out your old friend."

"So you think I also am too old for a lover?"

"For a lover of a girl of seventeen, certainly. You seem touchy on the score of age, Ernest."

"Not I;" and Maltravers laughed.

"No? There was a young gentleman present, who, I think, Vargrave might really find a dangerous rival,—a Colonel Legard,—one of the handsomest men I ever saw in my life; just the style to turn a romantic young lady's head; a mixture of the wild and the thoroughbred; black curls, superb eyes, and the softest manners in the world. But, to be sure, he has lived all his life in the best society. Not so his friend, Lord Doltimore, who has a little too much of the green-room lounge and French *café* manner for my taste."

"Doltimore, Legard, names new to me; I never met them at the rectory."

"Possibly they are staying at Admiral Legard's, in the neighbourhood. Miss Merton made their acquaintance at Knaresdean. A good old lady—the most perfect Mrs. Grundy one would wish to meet with—who owns the monosyllabic appellation of Hare (and who, being my partner, trumped my king!) assured me that Lord Doltimore was desperately in love with Caroline Merton. By the way, now, there is a young lady of a proper age for you,—handsome and clever, too."

"You talk of antidotes to matrimony; and so Miss Cameron—"

"Oh, no more of Miss Cameron now, or I shall sit up all night; she has half turned my head. I can't help pitying her,—married to one so careless and worldly as Lord Vargrave, thrown so young into the whirl of London. Poor thing! she had better have fallen in love with Legard,—which I dare say she will do, after all. Well, good-night!"

CHAPTER II

*PASSION, as frequently is seen,
Subsiding, settles into spleen;
Hence, as the plague of happy life,
I ran away from party strife.*

—MATTHEW GREEN.

*Here nymphs from hollow oaks relate
The dark decrees and will of fate.*

—*Ibid.*

ACCORDING to his engagement, Vargrave breakfasted the next morning at Burleigh. Maltravers at first struggled to return his familiar cordiality with equal graciousness. Condemning himself for former and unfounded suspicions, he wrestled against feelings which he could not or would not analyze, but which made Lumley an unwelcome visitor, and connected him with painful associations, whether of the present or the past. But there were points on which the penetration of Maltravers served to justify his prepossessions.

The conversation, chiefly sustained by Cleveland and Vargrave, fell on public questions; and as one was opposed to the other, Vargrave's exposition of views and motives had in them so much of the self-seeking of the professional placeman, that they might well have offended any man tinged by the lofty mania of political Quixotism. It was with a strange mixture of feelings that Maltravers listened: at one moment he proudly congratulated himself on having quitted a career where such opinions seemed so well to prosper: at another, his better and juster sentiments awoke the long-dormant combative faculty, and he almost longed for the turbulent but sublime arena, in which truths are vindicated and mankind advanced.

The interview did not serve for that renewal of intimacy which Vargrave appeared to seek, and Maltravers rejoiced when the placeman took his departure.

Lumley, who was about to pay a morning visit to Lord Doltimore, had borrowed Mr. Merton's stanhope, as being better adapted than any statelier vehicle to get rapidly through the cross-roads which led to Admiral Legard's house; and as he settled himself in the seat, with his servant by his side, he said laughingly, "I almost fancy myself naughty master Lumley again in this young-man-kind of two-wheeled cockle-boat: not dignified, but rapid, eh?"

And Lumley's face, as he spoke, had in it so much of frank gayety, and his manner was so simple, that Maltravers could with difficulty fancy him the same man who, five minutes before, had been uttering sentiments that might have become the oldest-hearted intriguer whom the hot-bed of ambition ever reared.

As soon as Lumley was gone, Maltravers left Cleveland alone to write letters (Cleveland was an exemplary and voluminous correspondent) and strolled with his dogs into the village. The effect which the presence of Maltravers produced among his peasantry was one that seldom failed to refresh and soothe his more bitter and disturbed thoughts. They had gradually (for the poor are quick-sighted) become sensible of his *justice*,—a finer quality than many that seem more amiable. They felt that his real object was to make them better and happier; and they had learned to see that the means he adopted generally advanced the end. Besides, if sometimes stern, he was never capricious or unreasonable; and then, too, he would listen patiently and advise kindly. They were a little in awe of him, but the

awe only served to make them more industrious and orderly,—to stimulate the idle man, to reclaim the drunkard. He was one of the favourers of the small-allotment system,—not, indeed, as panacea, but as one excellent stimulant to exertion and independence; and his chosen rewards for good conduct were in such comforts as served to awaken amongst those hitherto passive, dogged, and hopeless a desire to better and improve their condition. Somehow or other, without direct alms, the goodwife found that the little savings in the cracked teapot or the old stocking had greatly increased since the squire's return, while her husband came home from his moderate cups at the alehouse more sober and in better temper. Having already saved something was a great reason why he should save more. The new school, too, was so much better conducted than the old one; the children actually liked going there; and now and then there were little village feasts connected with the schoolroom; play and work were joint associations.

And Maltravers looked into his cottages, and looked at the allotment-ground; and it was pleasant to him to say to himself, "I am not altogether without use in life." But as he pursued his lonely walk, and the glow of self-approval died away with the scenes that called it forth, the cloud again settled on his brow; and again he felt that in solitude the passions feed upon the heart. As he thus walked along the green lane, and the insect life of summer rustled audibly among the shadowy hedges and along the thick grass that sprang up on either side, he came suddenly upon a little group that arrested all his attention.

It was a woman, clad in rags, bleeding, and seemingly insensible, supported by the overseer of the parish and a labourer.

"What is the matter?" asked Maltravers.

"A poor woman has been knocked down and run over by a gentleman in a gig, your honour," replied the overseer. "He stopped, half an hour ago, at my house to tell me that she was lying on the road; and he has given me two sovereigns for her, your honour. But, poor cretur! she was too heavy for me to carry her, and I was forced to leave her and call Tom to help me."

"The gentleman might have stayed to see what were the consequences of his own act," muttered Maltravers, as he examined the wound in the temple, whence the blood flowed copiously.

"He said he was in a great hurry, your honour," said the village official, overhearing Maltravers. "I think it was one of the grand folks up at the parsonage; for I know it was Mr. Merton's bay horse,—he is a hot 'un!"

"Does the poor woman live in the neighbourhood? Do you know her?" asked Maltravers, turning from the contemplation of this new instance of Vargrave's selfishness of character.

"No; the old body seems quite a stranger here,—a tramper, or beggar, I think, sir. But it won't be a settlement if we take her in; and we can carry her to the Chequers, up the village, your honour."

"What is the nearest house,—your own?"

"Yes; but we be so busy now!"

"She shall not go to your house, and be neglected; and as for the public-house, it is too noisy: we must move her to the Hall."

"Your honour!" ejaculated the overseer, opening his eyes.

"It is not very far; she is severely hurt. Get a hurdle, lay a mattress on it. Make haste, both of you; I will wait here till you return."

The poor woman was carefully placed on the grass by the road-side, and Maltravers supported her head, while the men hastened to obey his orders.

CHAPTER III

*ALSE from that forked hill, the boasted seat
Of studious Peace and mild Philosophy,
Indignant murmurs mote be heard to threat.*

—WEST.

MR. CLEVELAND wanted to enrich one of his letters with a quotation from Ariosto, which he but imperfectly remembered. He had seen the book he wished to refer to in the little study the day before; and he quitted the library to search for it.

As he was tumbling over some volumes that lay piled on the writing-table, he felt a student's curiosity to discover what now constituted his host's favourite reading. He was surprised to observe that the greater portion of the works that, by the doubled leaf and the pencilled reference, seemed most frequently consulted, were not of a literary nature,—they were chiefly scientific; and astronomy seemed the chosen science. He then remembered that he had heard Maltravers speaking to a builder, employed on the recent repairs, on the subject of an observatory. "This is very strange," thought Cleveland; "he gives up literature, the rewards of which are in his reach, and turns to science, at an age too late to discipline his mind to its austere training."

Alas! Cleveland did not understand that there are times in life when imaginative minds seek to numb and to blunt imagination. Still less did he feel that, when we perversely refuse to apply our active faculties to the catholic interests of the world, they turn morbidly into channels of research the least akin to their real genius. By the collision of minds alone does each mind discover what is its proper product: left to ourselves, our talents become but intellectual eccentricities.

Some scattered papers, in the handwriting of Maltravers, fell from one of the volumes. Of these, a few were but algebraical calculations, or short scientific suggestions, the value of which Mr. Cleveland's studies did not enable him to ascertain; but in others they were wild snatches of mournful and impassioned verse, which showed that the old vein of poetry still flowed, though no longer to the daylight. These verses Cleveland thought himself justified in glancing over; they seemed to portray a state of mind which deeply interested, and greatly saddened him. They expressed, indeed, a firm determination to bear up against both the memory and the fear of ill; but mysterious and hinted allusions here and there served to denote some recent and yet existent struggle, revealed by the heart only to the genius. In these partial and imperfect self-communings and confessions, there was the evidence of the pining affections, the wasted life, the desolate hearth of the lonely man. Yet so calm was Maltravers himself, even to his early friend, that Cleveland knew not what to think of the reality of the feelings painted. Had that fervid and romantic spirit been again awakened by a living object? If so, where was the object found? The dates affixed to the verses were most recent. But whom had Maltravers seen? Cleveland's thoughts turned to Caroline Merton, to Evelyn; but when he had spoken of both, nothing in the countenance, the manner, of Maltravers had betrayed emotion. And once the heart of Maltravers had so readily betrayed itself! Cleveland knew not how pride, years, and suffering school the features, and repress the outward signs of what pass within. While thus engaged, the door of the study opened abruptly, and the servant announced Mr. Merton.

"A thousand pardons," said the courteous rector. "I fear we disturb you; but Admiral Legard and Lord Doltimore, who called on us this morning, were so anxious to see Burleigh, I thought I might take the liberty. We have come over quite in a large party,—taken the place by storm. Mr. Maltravers is out, I hear; but you will let us see the house. My allies are already in the hall, examining the armour."

Cleveland, ever sociable and urbane, answered suitably, and went with Mr. Merton into the hall, where Caroline, her little sisters, Evelyn, Lord Doltimore, Admiral Legard, and his nephew were assembled.

"Very proud to be my host's representative and your guide," said Cleveland. "Your visit, Lord Doltimore, is indeed an agreeable surprise.

Lord Vargrave left us an hour or so since to call on you at Admiral Legard's: we buy our pleasure with his disappointment."

"It is very unfortunate," said the admiral, a bluff, harsh-looking old gentleman; "but we were not aware, till we saw Mr. Merton, of the honour Lord Vargrave has done us. I can't think how we missed him on the road."

"My dear uncle," said Colonel Legard, in a peculiarly sweet and agreeable tone of voice, "you forget we came three miles round by the high road; and Mr. Merton says that Lord Vargrave took the short cut by Langley End. My uncle, Mr. Cleveland, never feels in safety upon land, unless the road is as wide as the British Channel, and the horses go before the wind at the rapid pace of two knots and a half an hour!"

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