

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ALICE, OR THE
MYSTERIES — BOOK
01**

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 01

«Public Domain»

Bulwer-Lytton E. G.

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 01 / E. G. Bulwer-Lytton — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

BOOK I	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	10
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	13

Edward Bulwer Lytton

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 01

BOOK I

"Thee, hid the bowring vales amidst, I call."
—EURIPIDES: *Hel. I. 1116.*

CHAPTER I

*Who art thou, fair one, who usurp'st the place
Of Blanch, the lady of the matchless grace?*

—LAMB.

IT was towards the evening of a day in early April that two ladies were seated by the open windows of a cottage in Devonshire. The lawn before them was gay with evergreens, relieved by the first few flowers and fresh turf of the reviving spring; and at a distance, through an opening amongst the trees, the sea, blue and tranquil, bounded the view, and contrasted the more confined and home-like features of the scene. It was a spot remote, sequestered, shut out from the business and pleasures of the world; as such it suited the tastes and character of the owner.

That owner was the younger of the ladies seated by the window. You would scarcely have guessed, from her appearance, that she was more than seven or eight and twenty, though she exceeded by four or five years that critical boundary in the life of beauty. Her form was slight and delicate in its proportions, nor was her countenance the less lovely because, from its gentleness and repose (not unmingled with a certain sadness) the coarse and the gay might have thought it wanting in expression. For there is a stillness in the aspect of those who have felt deeply, which deceives the common eye, —as rivers are often alike tranquil and profound, in proportion as they are remote from the springs which agitated and swelled the commencement of their course, and by which their waters are still, though invisibly, supplied.

The elder lady, the guest of her companion, was past seventy; her gray hair was drawn back from the forehead, and gathered under a stiff cap of quaker-like simplicity; while her dress, rich but plain, and of no very modern fashion, served to increase the venerable appearance of one who seemed not ashamed of years.

"My dear Mrs. Leslie," said the lady of the house, after a thoughtful pause in the conversation that had been carried on for the last hour, "it is very true; perhaps I was to blame in coming to this place; I ought not to have been so selfish."

"No, my dear friend," returned Mrs. Leslie, gently; "selfish is a word that can never be applied to you; you acted as became you,—agreeably to your own instinctive sense of what is best when at your age,—independent in fortune and rank, and still so lovely,—you resigned all that would have attracted others, and devoted yourself, in retirement, to a life of quiet and unknown benevolence. You are in your sphere in this village,—humble though it be,—consoling, relieving, healing the wretched, the destitute, the infirm; and teaching your Evelyn insensibly to imitate your modest and Christian virtues." The good old lady spoke warmly, and with tears in her eyes; her companion placed her hand in Mrs. Leslie's.

"You cannot make me vain," said she, with a sweet and melancholy smile. "I remember what I was when you first gave shelter to the poor, desolate wanderer and her fatherless child; and I, who was then so poor and destitute, what should I be, if I was deaf to the poverty and sorrows of others,—others, too, who are better than I am. But now Evelyn, as you say, is growing up; the time approaches when she must decide on accepting or rejecting Lord Vargrave. And yet in this village how can she compare him with others; how can she form a choice? What you say is very true; and yet I did not think of it sufficiently. What shall I do? I am only anxious, dear girl, to act so as may be best for her own happiness."

"Of that I am sure," returned Mrs. Leslie; "and yet I know not how to advise. On one hand, so much is due to the wishes of your late husband, in every point of view, that if Lord Vargrave be worthy of Evelyn's esteem and affection, it would be most desirable that she should prefer him to all others. But if he be what I hear he is considered in the world,—an artful, scheming, almost heartless man, of ambitious and hard pursuits,—I tremble to think how completely the happiness of Evelyn's whole life may be thrown away. She certainly is not in love with him, and yet I fear she is one whose nature is but too susceptible of affection. She ought now to see others,—to know her own mind, and not to be hurried, blindfold and inexperienced, into a step that decides existence. This is a duty we owe to her,—nay, even to the late Lord Vargrave, anxious as he was for the marriage. His aim was surely her happiness, and he would not have insisted upon means that time and circumstances might show to be contrary to the end he had in view."

"You are right," replied Lady Vargrave. "When my poor husband lay on his bed of death, just before he summoned his nephew to receive his last blessing, he said to me, 'Providence can counteract all our schemes. If ever it should be for Evelyn's real happiness that my wish for her marriage with Lumley Ferrers should not be fulfilled, to you I must leave the right to decide on what I cannot foresee. All I ask is that no obstacle shall be thrown in the way of my wish; and that the child shall be trained up to consider Lumley as her future husband.' Among his papers was a letter addressed to me to the same effect; and, indeed, in other respects that letter left more to my judgment than I had any right to expect. Oh, I am often unhappy to think that he did not marry one who would have deserved his affection! and—but regret is useless now."

"I wish you could really feel so," said Mrs. Leslie; "for regret of another kind still seems to haunt you; and I do not think you have yet forgotten your early sorrows."

"Ah, how can I?" said Lady Vargrave, with a quivering lip.

At that instant, a light shadow darkened the sunny lawn in front of the casements, and a sweet, gay young voice was heard singing at a little distance; a moment more, and a beautiful girl, in the first bloom of youth, bounded lightly along the grass, and halted opposite the friends.

It was a remarkable contrast,—the repose and quiet of the two persons we have described, the age and gray hairs of one, the resigned and melancholy gentleness written on the features of the other—with the springing step and laughing eyes and radiant bloom of the new comer! As she stood with the setting sun glowing full upon her rich fair hair, her happy countenance and elastic form, it was a vision almost too bright for this weary earth,—a thing of light and bliss, that the joyous Greek might have placed among the forms of Heaven, and worshipped as an Aurora or a Hebe.

"Oh, how can you stay indoors this beautiful evening? Come, dearest Mrs. Leslie; come, Mother, dear Mother, you know you promised you would,—you said I was to call you; see, it will rain no more, and the shower has left the myrtles and the violet-bank so fresh."

"My dear Evelyn," said Mrs. Leslie, with a smile, "I am not so young as you."

"No; but you are just as gay when you are in good spirits—and who can be out of spirits in such weather? Let me call for your chair; let me wheel you—I am sure I can. Down, Sultan; so you have found me out, have you, sir? Be quiet, sir, down!"

This last exhortation was addressed to a splendid dog of the Newfoundland breed, who now contrived wholly to occupy Evelyn's attention.

The two friends looked at this beautiful girl, as with all the grace of youth she shared while she rebuked the exuberant hilarity of her huge playmate; and the elder of the two seemed the most to sympathize with her mirth. Both gazed with fond affection upon an object dear to both. But some memory or association touched Lady Vargrave, and she sighed as she gazed.

CHAPTER II

Is stormy life preferred to this serene?—YOUNG: Satires.

AND the windows were closed in, and night had succeeded to evening, and the little party at the cottage were grouped together. Mrs. Leslie was quietly seated at her tambour-frame; Lady Vargrave, leaning her cheek on her hand, seemed absorbed in a volume before her, but her eyes were not on the page; Evelyn was busily employed in turning over the contents of a parcel of books and music which had just been brought from the lodge where the London coach had deposited it.

"Oh, dear Mamma!" cried Evelyn, "I am so glad; there is something you will like,—some of the poetry that touched you so much set to music."

Evelyn brought the songs to her mother, who roused herself from her reverie, and looked at them with interest.

"It is very strange," said she, "that I should be so affected by all that is written by this person: I, too" (she added, tenderly stroking down Evelyn's luxuriant tresses), "who am not so fond of reading as you are!"

"You are reading one of his books now," said Evelyn, glancing over the open page on the table. "Ah, that beautiful passage upon 'Our First Impressions.' Yet I do not like you, dear Mother, to read his books; they always seem to make you sad."

"There is a charm to me in their thoughts, their manner of expression," said Lady Vargrave, "which sets me thinking, which reminds me of—of an early friend, whom I could fancy I hear talking while I read. It was so from the first time I opened by accident a book of his years ago."

"Who is this author that pleases you so much?" asked Mrs. Leslie, with some surprise; for Lady Vargrave had usually little pleasure in reading even the greatest and most popular masterpieces of modern genius.

"Maltravers," answered Evelyn; "and I think I almost share my mother's enthusiasm."

"Maltravers!" repeated Mrs. Leslie. "He is, perhaps, a dangerous writer for one so young. At your age, dear girl, you have naturally romance and feeling enough of your own without seeking them in books."

"But, dear madam," said Evelyn, standing up for her favourite, "his writings do not consist of romance and feeling only; they are not exaggerated, they are so simple, so truthful."

"Did you ever meet him?" asked Lady Vargrave.

"Yes," returned Mrs. Leslie, "once, when he was a gay, fair-haired boy. His father resided in the next county, and we met at a country-house. Mr. Maltravers himself has an estate near my daughter in B——shire, but he does not live on it; he has been some years abroad,—a strange character!"

"Why does he write no more?" said Evelyn; "I have read his works so often, and know his poetry so well by heart, that I should look forward to something new from him as an event."

"I have heard, my dear, that he has withdrawn much from the world and its objects,—that he has lived greatly in the East. The death of a lady to whom he was to have been married is said to have unsettled and changed his character. Since that event he has not returned to England. Lord Vargrave can tell you more of him than I."

"Lord Vargrave thinks of nothing that is not always before the world," said Evelyn.

"I am sure you wrong him," said Mrs. Leslie, looking up and fixing her eyes on Evelyn's countenance; "for *you* are not before the world."

Evelyn slightly—very slightly—pouted her pretty lip, but made no answer. She took up the music, and seating herself at the piano, practised the airs. Lady Vargrave listened with emotion; and as Evelyn in a voice exquisitely sweet, though not powerful, sang the words, her mother turned away her face, and half unconsciously, a few tears stole silently down her cheek.

When Evelyn ceased, herself affected,—for the lines were impressed with a wild and melancholy depth of feeling,—she came again to her mother's side, and seeing her emotion, kissed away the tears from the pensive eyes. Her own gayety left her; she drew a stool to her mother's feet, and nestling to her, and clasping her hand, did not leave that place till they retired to rest.

And the lady blessed Evelyn, and felt that, if bereaved, she was not alone.

CHAPTER III

*BUT come, thou Goddess, fair and free,
In heaven yclept Euphrosyne!*

.....

*To hear the lark begin his flight,
And, singing, startle the dull night.*

—*L'Allegro.*

*But come, thou Goddess, sage and holy,
Come, divinest Melancholy!*

.....

*There held in holy passion still,
Forget thyself to marble.*

—*Il Penseroso.*

THE early morn of early spring—what associations of freshness and hope in that single sentence! And there a little after sunrise—there was Evelyn, fresh and hopeful as the morning itself, bounding with the light step of a light heart over the lawn. Alone, alone! no governess, with a pinched nose and a sharp voice, to curb her graceful movements, and tell her how young ladies ought to walk. How silently morning stole over the earth! It was as if youth had the day and the world to itself. The shutters of the cottage were still closed, and Evelyn cast a glance upward, to assure herself that her mother, who also rose betimes, was not yet stirring. So she tripped along, singing from very glee, to secure a companion, and let out Sultan; and a few moments afterwards, they were scouring over the grass, and descending the rude steps that wound down the cliff to the smooth sea sands. Evelyn was still a child at heart, yet somewhat more than a child in mind. In the majesty of—

"That hollow, sounding, and mysterious main,"—

in the silence broken but by the murmur of the billows, in the solitude relieved but by the boats of the early fishermen, she felt those deep and tranquillizing influences which belong to the Religion of Nature. Unconsciously to herself, her sweet face grew more thoughtful, and her step more slow. What a complex thing is education! How many circumstances, that have no connection with books and tutors, contribute to the rearing of the human mind! The earth and the sky and the ocean were among the teachers of Evelyn Cameron; and beneath her simplicity of thought was daily filled, from the turns of invisible spirits, the fountain of the poetry of feeling.

This was the hour when Evelyn most sensibly felt how little our real life is chronicled by external events,—how much we live a second and a higher life in our meditations and dreams. Brought up, not more by precept than example, in the faith which unites creature and Creator, this was the hour in which thought itself had something of the holiness of prayer; and if (turning from dreams divine to earlier visions) this also was the hour in which the heart painted and peopled its own fairyland below, of the two ideal worlds that stretch beyond the inch of time on which we stand, Imagination is perhaps holier than Memory.

So now, as the day crept on, Evelyn returned in a more sober mood, and then she joined her mother and Mrs. Leslie at breakfast; and then the household cares—such as they were—devolved upon her, heiress though she was; and, that duty done, once more the straw hat and Sultan were in requisition; and opening a little gate at the back of the cottage, she took the path along the village churchyard that led to the house of the old curate. The burial-ground itself was surrounded and shut

in with a belt of trees. Save the small time-discoloured church and the roofs of the cottage and the minister's house, no building—not even a cotter's hut—was visible there. Beneath a dark and single yew-tree in the centre of the ground was placed a rude seat; opposite to this seat was a grave, distinguished from the rest by a slight palisade. As the young Evelyn passed slowly by this spot, a glove on the long damp grass beside the yew-tree caught her eye. She took it up and sighed,—it was her mother's. She sighed, for she thought of the soft melancholy on that mother's face which her caresses and her mirth never could wholly chase away. She wondered why that melancholy was so fixed a habit, for the young ever wonder why the experienced should be sad.

And now Evelyn had passed the churchyard, and was on the green turf before the minister's quaint, old-fashioned house. The old man himself was at work in his garden; but he threw down his hoe as he saw Evelyn, and came cheerfully up to greet her.

It was easy to see how dear she was to him.

"So you are come for your daily lesson, my young pupil?"

"Yes; but Tasso can wait if the—"

"If the tutor wants to play truant; no, my child; and, indeed, the lesson must be longer than usual to-day, for I fear I shall have to leave you to-morrow for some days."

"Leave us! why?—leave Brook-Green—impossible!"

"Not at all impossible; for we have now a new vicar, and I must turn courtier in my old age, and ask him to leave me with my flock. He is at Weymouth, and has written to me to visit him there. So, Miss Evelyn, I must give you a holiday task to learn while I am away."

Evelyn brushed the tears from her eyes—for when the heart is full of affection the eyes easily run over—and clung mournfully to the old man, as she gave utterance to all her half-childish, half-womanly grief at the thought of parting so soon with him. And what, too, could her mother do without him; and why could he not write to the vicar instead of going to him?

The curate, who was childless and a bachelor, was not insensible to the fondness of his beautiful pupil, and perhaps he himself was a little more *distract* than usual that morning, or else Evelyn was peculiarly inattentive; for certain it is that she reaped very little benefit from the lesson.

Yet he was an admirable teacher, that old man! Aware of Evelyn's quick, susceptible, and rather fanciful character of mind, he had sought less to curb than to refine and elevate her imagination. Himself of no ordinary abilities, which leisure had allowed him to cultivate, his piety was too large and cheerful to exclude literature—Heaven's best gift—from the pale of religion. And under his care Evelyn's mind had been duly stored with the treasures of modern genius, and her judgment strengthened by the criticisms of a graceful and generous taste.

In that sequestered hamlet, the young heiress had been trained to adorn her future station; to appreciate the arts and elegances that distinguish (no matter what the rank) the refined from the low, better than if she had been brought up under the hundred-handed Briareus of fashionable education. Lady Vargrave, indeed, like most persons of modest pretensions and imperfect cultivation, was rather inclined to overrate the advantages to be derived from book-knowledge; and she was never better pleased than when she saw Evelyn opening the monthly parcel from London, and delightedly poring over volumes which Lady Vargrave innocently believed to be reservoirs of inexhaustible wisdom.

But this day Evelyn would not read, and the golden verses of Tasso lost their music to her ear. So the curate gave up the lecture, and placed a little programme of studies to be conned during his absence in her reluctant hand; and Sultan, who had been wistfully licking his paws for the last half-hour, sprang up and caracoled once more into the garden; and the old priest and the young woman left the works of man for those of Nature.

"Do not fear, I will take such care of your garden while you are away," said Evelyn; "and you must write and let us know what day you are to come back."

"My dear Evelyn, you are born to spoil every one—from Sultan to Aubrey."

"And to be spoilt too, don't forget that," cried Evelyn, laughingly shaking back her ringlets. "And now, before you go, will you tell me, as you are so wise, what I can do to make—to make—my mother love me?"

Evelyn's voice faltered as she spoke the last words, and Aubrey looked surprised and moved.

"Your mother love you, my dear Evelyn! What do you mean,—does she not love you?"

"Ah, not as I love her. She is kind and gentle, I know, for she is so to all; but she does not confide in me, she does not trust me; she has some sorrow at heart which I am never allowed to learn and soothe. Why does she avoid all mention of her early days? She never talks to me as if she, too, had once a mother! Why am I never to speak of her first marriage, of my father? Why does she look reproachfully at me, and shun me—yes, shun me, for days together—if—if I attempt to draw her to the past? Is there a secret? If so, am I not old enough to know it?"

Evelyn spoke quickly and nervously, and with quivering lips. Aubrey took her hand, and pressing it, said, after a little pause,—

"Evelyn, this is the first time you have ever thus spoken to me. Has anything chanced to arouse you—shall I call it curiosity, or shall I call it the mortified pride of affection?"

"And you, too, aye harsh; you blame me! No, it is true that I have not thus spoken to you before; but I have long, long thought with grief that I was insufficient to my mother's happiness,—I who love her so dearly. And now, since Mrs. Leslie has been here, I find her conversing with this comparative stranger so much more confidentially than with me. When I come in unexpectedly, they cease their conference, as if I were not worthy to share it; and—and oh, if I could but make you understand that all I desire is that my mother should love me and know me and trust me—"

"Evelyn," said the curate, coldly, "you love your mother, and justly; a kinder and a gentler heart than hers does not beat in a human breast. Her first wish in life is for your happiness and welfare. You ask for confidence, but why not confide in her; why not believe her actuated by the best and the tenderest motives; why not leave it to her discretion to reveal to you any secret grief, if such there be, that preys upon her; why add to that grief by any selfish indulgence of over-susceptibility in yourself? My dear pupil, you are yet almost a child; and they who have sorrowed may well be reluctant to sadden with a melancholy confidence those to whom sorrow is yet unknown. This much, at least, I may tell you,—for this much she does not seek to conceal,—that Lady Vargrave was early inured to trials from which you, more happy, have been saved. She speaks not to you of her relations, for she has none left on earth. And after her marriage with your benefactor, Evelyn, perhaps it seemed to her a matter of principle to banish all vain regret, all remembrance if possible, of an earlier tie."

"My poor, poor mother! Oh, yes, you are right; forgive me. She yet mourns, perhaps, my father, whom I never saw, whom I feel, as it were, tacitly forbid to name,—you did not know him?"

"Him!—whom?"

"My father, my mother's first husband."

"No."

"But I am sure I could not have loved him so well as my benefactor, my real and second father, who is now dead and gone. Oh, how well I remember him,—how fondly!" Here Evelyn stopped and burst into tears.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.