

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ALICE, OR THE
MYSTERIES — BOOK
03**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 03

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Edward Bulwer Lytton

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 03

BOOK III

Harsh things he mitigates, and pride subdues. Ex. SOLON: Eleg.

CHAPTER I

YOU still are what you were, sir!

.....

*... With most quick agility could turn
And return; make knots and undo them,
Give forked counsel.*

—Volpone, or the Fox.

BEFORE a large table, covered with parliamentary papers, sat Lumley Lord Vargrave. His complexion, though still healthy, had faded from the freshness of hue which distinguished him in youth. His features, always sharp, had grown yet more angular: his brows seemed to project more broodingly over his eyes, which, though of undiminished brightness, were sunk deep in their sockets, and had lost much of their quick restlessness. The character of his mind had begun to stamp itself on the physiognomy, especially on the mouth when in repose. It was, a face striking for acute intelligence, for concentrated energy; but there was a something written in it which said, "BEWARE!" It would have inspired any one who had mixed much amongst men with a vague suspicion and distrust.

Lumley had been always careful, though plain, in dress; but there was now a more evident attention bestowed on his person than he had ever manifested in youth,—while there was something of the Roman's celebrated foppery in the skill with which his hair was arranged on his high forehead, so as either to conceal or relieve a partial baldness at the temples. Perhaps, too, from the possession of high station, or the habit of living only amongst the great, there was a certain dignity insensibly diffused over his whole person that was not noticeable in his earlier years, when a certain *ton de garnison* was blended with his ease of manners. Yet, even now, dignity was not his prevalent characteristic; and in ordinary occasions, or mixed society, he still found a familiar frankness a more useful species of simulation. At the time we now treat of, Lord Vargrave was leaning his cheek on one hand, while the other rested idly on the papers methodically arranged before him. He appeared to have suspended his labours, and to be occupied in thought. It was, in truth, a critical period in the career of Lord Vargrave.

From the date of his accession to the peerage, the rise of Lumley Ferrers had been less rapid and progressive than he himself could have foreseen. At first, all was sunshine before him; he had contrived to make himself useful to his party; he had also made himself personally popular. To the ease and cordiality of his happy address, he added the seemingly careless candour so often mistaken for honesty; while, as there was nothing showy or brilliant in his abilities or oratory—nothing that aspired far above the pretensions of others, and aroused envy by mortifying self-love—he created but little jealousy even amongst the rivals before whom he obtained precedence. For some time, therefore, he went smoothly on, continuing to rise in the estimation of his party, and commanding a certain respect from the neutral public, by acknowledged and eminent talents in the details of business; for

his quickness of penetration, and a logical habit of mind, enabled him to grapple with and generalize the minutiae of official labour or of legislative enactments with a masterly success. But as the road became clearer to his steps, his ambition became more evident and daring. Naturally dictatorial and presumptuous, his early suppleness to superiors was now exchanged for a self-willed pertinacity, which often displeased the more haughty leaders of his party, and often wounded the more vain. His pretensions were scanned with eyes more jealous and less tolerant than at first. Proud aristocrats began to recollect that a mushroom peerage was supported but by a scanty fortune; the men of more dazzling genius began to sneer at the red-tape minister as a mere official manager of details; he lost much of the personal popularity which had been one secret of his power. But what principally injured him in the eyes of his party and the public were certain ambiguous and obscure circumstances connected with a short period when himself and his associates were thrown out of office. At this time, it was noticeable that the journals of the Government that succeeded were peculiarly polite to Lord Vargrave, while they covered all his coadjutors with obloquy: and it was more than suspected that secret negotiations between himself and the new ministry were going on, when suddenly the latter broke up, and Lord Vargrave's proper party were reinstated. The vague suspicions that attached to Vargrave were somewhat strengthened in the opinion of the public by the fact that he was at first left out of the restored administration; and when subsequently, after a speech which showed that he could be mischievous if not propitiated, he was readmitted, it was precisely to the same office he had held before,—an office which did not admit him into the Cabinet. Lumley, burning with resentment, longed to decline the offer; but, alas! he was poor, and, what was worse, in debt; "his poverty, but not his will, consented." He was reinstated; but though prodigiously improved as a debater, he felt that he had not advanced as a public man. His ambition inflamed by his discontent, he had, since his return to office, strained every nerve to strengthen his position. He met the sarcasms on his poverty by greatly increasing his expenditure, and by advertising everywhere his engagement to an heiress whose fortune, great as it was, he easily contrived to magnify. As his old house in Great George Street—well fitted for the bustling commoner—was no longer suited to the official and fashionable peer, he had, on his accession to the title, exchanged that respectable residence for a large mansion in Hamilton Place; and his sober dinners were succeeded by splendid banquets. Naturally, he had no taste for such things; his mind was too nervous, and his temper too hard, to take pleasure in luxury or ostentation. But now, as ever he *acted upon a system*. Living in a country governed by the mightiest and wealthiest aristocracy in the world, which, from the first class almost to the lowest, ostentation pervades,—the very backbone and marrow of society,—he felt that to fall far short of his rivals in display was to give them an advantage which he could not compensate either by the power of his connections or the surpassing loftiness of his character and genius. Playing for a great game, and with his eyes open to all the consequences, he cared not for involving his private fortunes in a lottery in which a great prize might be drawn. To do Vargrave justice, money with him had never been an object, but a means; he was grasping, but not avaricious. If men much richer than Lord Vargrave find State distinctions very expensive, and often ruinous, it is not to be supposed that his salary, joined to so moderate a private fortune, could support the style in which he lived. His income was already deeply mortgaged, and debt accumulated upon debt. Nor had this man, so eminent for the management of public business, any of that talent which springs from *justice*, and makes its possessor a skilful manager of his own affairs. Perpetually absorbed in intrigues and schemes, he was too much engaged in cheating others on a large scale to have time to prevent being himself cheated on a small one. He never looked into bills till he was compelled to pay them; and he never calculated the amount of an expense that seemed the least necessary to his purposes. But still Lord Vargrave relied upon his marriage with the wealthy Evelyn to relieve him from all his embarrassments; and if a doubt of the realization of that vision ever occurred to him, still public life had splendid prizes. Nay, should he fail with Miss Cameron, he even thought that, by good management, he might ultimately make it worth while to his colleagues to purchase his absence with the gorgeous bribe of the Governor-Generalship of India.

As oratory is an art in which practice and the dignity of station produce marvellous improvement, so Lumley had of late made effects in the House of Lords of which he had once been judged incapable. It is true that no practice and no station can give men qualities in which they are wholly deficient; but these advantages can bring out in the best light all the qualities they *do* possess. The glow of a generous imagination, the grasp of a profound statesmanship, the enthusiasm of a noble nature,—these no practice could educe from the eloquence of Lumley Lord Vargrave, for he had them not; but bold wit, fluent and vigorous sentences, effective arrangement of parliamentary logic, readiness of retort, plausibility of manner, aided by a delivery peculiar for self-possession and ease, a clear and ringing voice (to the only fault of which, shrillness without passion, the ear of the audience had grown accustomed), and a countenance impressive from its courageous intelligence,—all these had raised the promising speaker into the matured excellence of a nervous and formidable debater. But precisely as he rose in the display of his talents, did he awaken envies and enmities hitherto dormant. And it must be added that, with all his craft and coldness, Lord Vargrave was often a very dangerous and mischievous speaker for the interests of his party. His colleagues had often cause to tremble when he rose: nay, even when the cheers of his own faction shook the old tapestried walls. A man who has no sympathy with the public must commit many and fatal indiscretions when the public, as well as his audience, is to be his judge. Lord Vargrave's utter incapacity to comprehend political morality, his contempt for all the objects of social benevolence, frequently led him into the avowal of doctrines, which, if they did not startle the men of the world whom he addressed (smoothed away, as such doctrines were, by speciousness of manner and delivery), created deep disgust in those even of his own politics who read their naked exposition in the daily papers. Never did Lord Vargrave utter one of those generous sentiments which, no matter whether propounded by Radical or Tory, sink deep into the heart of the people, and do lasting service to the cause they adorn. But no man defended an abuse, however glaring, with a more vigorous championship, or hurled defiance upon a popular demand with a more courageous scorn. In some times, when the anti-popular principle is strong; such a leader may be useful; but at the moment of which we treat he was a most equivocal auxiliary. A considerable proportion of the ministers, headed by the premier himself, a man of wise views and unimpeachable honour, had learned to view Lord Vargrave with dislike and distrust. They might have sought to get rid of him; but he was not one whom slight mortifications could induce to retire of his own accord, nor was the sarcastic and bold debater a person whose resentment and opposition could be despised. Lord Vargrave, moreover, had secured a party of his own,—a party more formidable than himself. He went largely into society; he was the special favourite of the female diplomats, whose voices at that time were powerful suffrages, and with whom, by a thousand links of gallantry and intrigue, the agreeable and courteous minister formed a close alliance. All that *salons* could do for him was done. Added to this, he was personally liked by his royal master; and the Court gave him their golden opinions; while the poorer, the corrupter, and the more bigoted portion of the ministry regarded him with avowed admiration.

In the House of Commons, too, and in the bureaucracy, he had no inconsiderable strength; for Lumley never contracted the habits of personal abruptness and discourtesy common to men in power who wish to keep applicants aloof. He was bland and conciliating to all men of ranks; his intellect and self-complacency raised him far above the petty jealousies that great men feel for rising men. Did any tyro earn the smallest distinction in parliament, no man sought his acquaintance so eagerly as Lord Vargrave; no man complimented, encouraged, "brought on" the new aspirants of his party with so hearty a good will.

Such a minister could not fail of having devoted followers among the able, the ambitious, and the vain. It must also be confessed that Lord Vargrave neglected no baser and less justifiable means to cement his power by placing it on the sure rock of self-interest. No jobbing was too gross for him. He was shamefully corrupt in the disposition of his patronage; and no rebuffs, no taunts from his official brethren, could restrain him from urging the claims of any of his creatures upon the public

purse. His followers regarded this charitable selfishness as the staunchness and zeal of friendship; and the ambition of hundreds was wound up in the ambition of the unprincipled minister.

But besides the notoriety of his public corruption, Lord Vargrave was secretly suspected by some of personal dishonesty,—suspected of selling his State information to stock-jobbers, of having pecuniary interests in some of the claims he urged with so obstinate a pertinacity. And though there was not the smallest evidence of such utter abandonment of honour, though it was probably but a calumnious whisper, yet the mere suspicion of such practices served to sharpen the aversion of his enemies, and justify the disgust of his rivals.

In this position now stood Lord Vargrave: supported by interested, but able and powerful partisans; hated in the country, feared by some of those with whom he served, despised by others, looked up to by the rest. It was a situation that less daunted than delighted him; for it seemed to render necessary and excuse the habits of scheming and manoeuvre which were so genial to his crafty and plotting temper. Like an ancient Greek, his spirit loved intrigue for intrigue's sake. Had it led to no end, it would still have been sweet to him as a means. He rejoiced to surround himself with the most complicated webs and meshes; to sit in the centre of a million plots. He cared not how rash and wild some of them were. He relied on his own ingenuity, promptitude, and habitual good fortune to make every spring he handled conducive to the purpose of the machine—SELF.

His last visit to Lady Vargrave, and his conversation with Evelyn, had left on his mind much dissatisfaction and fear. In the earlier years of his intercourse with Evelyn, his good humour, gallantry, and presents had not failed to attach the child to the agreeable and liberal visitor she had been taught to regard as a relation. It was only as she grew up to womanhood, and learned to comprehend the nature of the tie between them, that she shrank from his familiarity; and then only had he learned to doubt of the fulfilment of his uncle's wish. The last visit had increased this doubt to a painful apprehension. He saw that he was not loved; he saw that it required great address, and the absence of happier rivals, to secure to him the hand of Evelyn; and he cursed the duties and the schemes which necessarily kept him from her side. He had thought of persuading Lady Vargrave to let her come to London, where he could be ever at hand; and as the season was now set in, his representations on this head would appear sensible and just. But then again this was to incur greater dangers than those he would avoid. London!—a beauty and an heiress, in her first *debut* in London! What formidable admirers would flock around her! Vargrave shuddered to think of the gay, handsome, well-dressed, seductive young *elegans*, who might seem, to a girl of seventeen, suitors far more fascinating than the middle-aged politician. This was perilous; nor was this all: Lord Vargrave knew that in London—gaudy, babbling, and remorseless London—all that he could most wish to conceal from the young lady would be dragged to day. He had been the lover, not of one, but of a dozen women, for whom he did not care three straws, but whose favour had served to strengthen him in society, or whose influence made up for his own want of hereditary political connections. The manner in which he contrived to shake off these various Ariadnes, whenever it was advisable, was not the least striking proof of his diplomatic abilities. He never left them enemies. According to his own solution of the mystery, he took care never to play the gallant with Dulcineas under a certain age. "Middle-aged women," he was wont to say, "are very little different from middle-aged men; they see things sensibly, and take things coolly." Now Evelyn could not be three weeks, perhaps three days, in London, without learning of one or the other of these *liaisons*. What an excuse, if she sought one, to break with him! Altogether, Lord Vargrave was sorely perplexed, but not despondent. Evelyn's fortune was more than ever necessary to him, and Evelyn he was resolved to obtain since to that fortune she was an indispensable appendage.

CHAPTER II

YOU shall be Horace, and Tibullus I.—POPE.

LORD VARGRAVE was disturbed from his revery by the entrance of the Earl of Saxingham.

"You are welcome!" said Lumley, "welcome!—the very man I wished to see."

Lord Saxingham, who was scarcely altered since we met with him in the last series of this work, except that he had grown somewhat paler and thinner, and that his hair had changed from iron-gray to snow-white, threw himself in the armchair beside Lumley, and replied,—

"Vargrave, it is really unpleasant, our finding ourselves always thus controlled by our own partisans. I do not understand this new-fangled policy, this squaring of measures to please the Opposition, and throwing sops to that many-headed monster called Public Opinion. I am sure it will end most mischievously."

"I am satisfied of it," returned Lord Vargrave. "All vigour and union seem to have left us; and if they carry the —— question against us, I know not what is to be done."

"For my part, I shall resign," said Lord Saxingham, doggedly; "it is the only alternative left to men of honour."

"You are wrong; I know another alternative."

"What is that?"

"Make a Cabinet of our own. Look ye, my dear lord; you been ill-used; your high character, your long experience, are treated with contempt. It is an affront to you—the situation you hold. You, Privy Seal!—you ought to be Premier; ay, and, if you are ruled by me, Premier you shall be yet."

Lord Saxingham coloured, and breathed hard.

"You have often hinted at this before, Lumley; but you are so partial, so friendly."

"Not at all. You saw the leading article in the —— to-day? That will be followed up by two evening papers within five hours of this time. We have strength with the Press, with the Commons, with the Court,—only let us hold fast together. This —— question, by which they hope to get rid of us, shall destroy them. You shall be Prime Minister before the year is over—by Heaven, you shall!—and then, I suppose, I too may be admitted to the Cabinet!"

"But how?—how, Lumley? You are too rash, too daring."

It has not been my fault hitherto,—but boldness is caution in our circumstances. If they throw us out now, I see the inevitable march of events,—we shall be out for years, perhaps for life. The Cabinet will recede more and more from our principles, our party. Now is the time for a determined stand; now can we make or mar ourselves. I will not resign; the king is with us; our strength shall be known. These haughty imbeciles shall fall into the trap they have dug for us."

Lumley spoke warmly, and with the confidence of a mind firmly assured of success. Lord Saxingham was moved; bright visions flashed across him,—the premiership, a dukedom. Yet he was old and childless, and his honours would die with the last lord of Saxingham!

"See," continued Lumley, "I have calculated our resources as accurately as an electioneering agent would cast up the list of voters. In the Press, I have secured —— and ——, and in the Commons we have the subtle ——, and the vigour of ——, and the popular name of ——, and all the boroughs of ——; in the Cabinet we have ——, and at Court you know our strength. Let us choose our moment; a sudden *coup*, an interview with the king, statement of our conscientious scruples to this atrocious measure. I know the vain, stiff mind of the premier; *he* will lose temper, he will tender his resignation; to his astonishment, it will be accepted. You will be sent for; we will dissolve parliament; we will strain every nerve in the elections; we shall succeed, I know we shall. But be silent in the meanwhile, be cautious: let not a word escape you, let them think us beaten; lull

suspicion asleep; let us lament our weakness, and hint, only hint at our resignation, but with assurances of continued support. I know how to blind them, if you leave it to me."

The weak mind of the old earl was as a puppet in the hands of his bold kinsman. He feared one moment, hoped another; now his ambition was flattered, now his sense of honour was alarmed. There was something in Lumley's intrigue to oust the government with which he served that had an appearance of cunning and baseness, of which Lord Saxingham, whose personal character was high, by no means approved. But Vargrave talked him over with consummate address, and when they parted, the earl carried his head two inches higher,—he was preparing himself for his rise in life.

"That is well! that is well!" said Lumley, rubbing his hands when he was left alone: "the old driveller will be my *locum tenens*

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