

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ALICE, OR THE
MYSTERIES — BOOK
08**

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 08

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BOOK VIII

O Fate! O Heaven!—what have ye then decreed?

SOPHOCLES: OEd. Tyr. 738.

"Insolent pride . . .

.

*The topmost crag of the great precipice
Surmounts—to rush to ruin."*

Ibid. 874.

CHAPTER I

. . . SHE is young, wise, fair,

In these to Nature she's immediate heir.

.

. . . Honours best thrive

When rather from our acts we them derive

Than our foregoers!—All's Well that Ends Well.

LETTER FROM ERNEST MALTRAVERS TO THE HON. FREDERICK CLEVELAND

EVELYN is free; she is in Paris; I have seen her,—I see her daily!

How true it is that we cannot make a philosophy of indifference! The affections are stronger than all our reasonings. We must take them into our alliance, or they will destroy all our theories of self-government. Such fools of fate are we, passing from system to system, from scheme to scheme, vainly seeking to shut out passion and sorrow—forgetting that they are born within us—and return to the soul as the seasons to the earth! Yet,—years, many years ago, when I first looked gravely into my own nature and being here, when I first awakened to the dignity and solemn responsibilities of human life, I had resolved to tame and curb myself into a thing of rule and measure. Bearing within me the wound scarred over but never healed, the consciousness of wrong to the heart that had leaned upon me, haunted by the memory of my lost Alice, I shuddered at new affections bequeathing new griefs. Wrapped in a haughty egotism, I wished not to extend my empire over a wider circuit than my own intellect and passions. I turned from the trader-covetousness of bliss, that would freight the wealth of life upon barks exposed to every wind upon the seas of Fate; I was contented with the hope to pass life alone, honoured, though unloved. Slowly and reluctantly I yielded to the fascinations of

Florence Lascelles. The hour that sealed the compact between us was one of regret and alarm. In vain I sought to deceive myself,—I felt that I did not love. And then I imagined that Love was no longer in my nature,—that I had exhausted its treasures before my time, and left my heart a bankrupt. Not till the last—not till that glorious soul broke out in all its brightness the nearer it approached the source to which it has returned—did I feel of what tenderness she was worthy and I was capable. She died, and the world was darkened! Energy, ambition, my former aims and objects, were all sacrificed at her tomb. But amidst ruins and through the darkness, my soul yet supported me; I could no longer hope, but I could endure. I was resolved that I would not be subdued, and that the world should not hear me groan. Amidst strange and far-distant scenes, amidst hordes to whom my very language was unknown, in wastes and forests, which the step of civilized man, with his sorrows and his dreams, had never trodden, I wrestled with my soul, as the patriarch of old wrestled with the angel,—and the angel was at last the victor! You do not mistake me: you know that it was not the death of Florence alone that worked in me that awful revolution; but with that death the last glory fled from the face of things that had seemed to me beautiful of old. Hers was a love that accompanied and dignified the schemes and aspirations of manhood,—a love that was an incarnation of ambition itself; and all the evils and disappointments that belong to ambition seemed to crowd around my heart like vultures to a feast allured and invited by the dead. But this at length was over; the barbarous state restored me to the civilized. I returned to my equals, prepared no more to be an actor in the strife, but a calm spectator of the turbulent arena. I once more laid my head beneath the roof of my fathers; and if without any clear and definite object, I at least hoped to find amidst "my old hereditary trees" the charm of contemplation and repose. And scarce—in the first hours of my arrival—had I indulged that dream, when a fair face, a sweet voice, that had once before left deep and unobliterated impressions on my heart, scattered all my philosophy to the winds. I saw Evelyn! and if ever there was love at first sight, it was that which I felt for her: I lived in her presence, and forgot the Future! Or, rather, I was with the Past,—in the bowers of my springtide of life and hope! It was an after-birth of youth—my love for that young heart!

It is, indeed, only in maturity that we know how lovely were our earliest years! What depth of wisdom in the old Greek myth, that allotted Hebe as the prize to the god who had been the arch-labourer of life! and whom the satiety of all that results from experience had made enamoured of all that belongs to the Hopeful and the New!

This enchanting child, this delightful Evelyn, this ray of undreamed of sunshine, smiled away all my palaces of ice. I loved, Cleveland,—I loved more ardently, more passionately, more wildly than ever I did of old! But suddenly I learned that she was affianced to another, and felt that it was not for me to question, to seek the annulment of the bond. I had been unworthy to love Evelyn if I had not loved honour more! I fled from her presence, honestly and resolutely; I sought to conquer a forbidden passion; I believed that I had not won affection in return; I believed, from certain expressions that I overheard Evelyn utter to another, that her heart as well as her hand was given to Vargrave. I came hither; you know how sternly and resolutely I strove to eradicate a weakness that seemed without even the justification of hope! If I suffered, I betrayed it not. Suddenly Evelyn appeared again before me!—and suddenly I learned that she was free! Oh, the rapture of that moment! Could you have seen her bright face, her enchanting smile, when we met again! Her ingenuous innocence did not conceal her gladness at seeing me! What hopes broke upon me! Despite the difference of our years, I think she loves me! that in that love I am about at last to learn what blessings there are in life.

Evelyn has the simplicity, the tenderness, of Alice, with the refinement and culture of Florence herself; not the genius, not the daring spirit, not the almost fearful brilliancy of that ill-fated being,—but with a taste as true to the Beautiful, with a soul as sensitive to the Sublime! In Evelyn's presence I feel a sense of peace, of security, of home! Happy! thrice happy! he who will take her to his breast! Of late she has assumed a new charm in my eyes,—a certain pensiveness and abstraction have succeeded to her wonted gayety. Ah, Love is pensive,—is it not, Cleveland? How often I ask

myself that question! And yet, amidst all my hopes, there are hours when I tremble and despond! How can that innocent and joyous spirit sympathize with all that mine has endured and known? How, even though her imagination be dazzled by some prestige around my name, how can I believe that I have awakened her heart to that deep and real love of which it is capable, and which youth excites in youth? When we meet at her home, or amidst the quiet yet brilliant society which is gathered round Madame de Ventadour or the Montaignes, with whom she is an especial favourite; when we converse; when I sit by her, and her soft eyes meet mine,—I feel not the disparity of years; my heart speaks to her, and *that* is youthful still! But in the more gay and crowded haunts to which her presence allures me, when I see that fairy form surrounded by those who have not outlived the pleasures that so naturally dazzle and captivate her, then, indeed, I feel that my tastes, my habits, my pursuits, belong to another season of life, and ask myself anxiously if my nature and my years are those that can make *her* happy? Then, indeed, I recognize the wide interval that time and trial place between one whom the world has wearied, and one for whom the world is new. If she should discover hereafter that youth should love only youth, my bitterest anguish would be that of remorse! I know how deeply I love by knowing how immeasurably dearer her happiness is than my own! I will wait, then, yet a while, I will examine, I will watch well that I do not deceive myself. As yet I think that I have no rivals whom I need fear: surrounded as she is by the youngest and the gayest, she still turns with evident pleasure to me, whom she calls her friend. She will forego the amusements she most loves for society in which we can converse more at ease. You remember, for instance, young Legard? He is here; and, before I met Evelyn, was much at Lady Doltimore's house. I cannot be blind to his superior advantages of youth and person; and there is something striking and prepossessing in the gentle yet manly frankness of his manner,—and yet no fear of his rivalry ever haunts me. True, that of late he has been little in Evelyn's society; nor do I think, in the frivolity of his pursuits, he can have educated his mind to appreciate Evelyn, or be possessed of those qualities which would render him worthy of her. But there is something good in the young man, despite his foibles,—something that wins upon me; and you will smile to learn, that he has even surprised from *me*—usually so reserved on such matters—the confession of my attachment and hopes! Evelyn often talks to me of her mother, and describes her in colours so glowing that I feel the greatest interest in one who has helped to form so beautiful and pure a mind. Can you learn who Lady Vargrave was? There is evidently some mystery thrown over her birth and connections; and, from what I can hear, this arises from their lowliness. You know that, though I have been accused of family pride, it is a pride of a peculiar sort. I am proud, not of the length of a mouldering pedigree, but of some historical quarterings in my escutcheon,—of some blood of scholars and of heroes that rolls in my veins; it is the same kind of pride that an Englishman may feel in belonging to a country that has produced Shakspeare and Bacon. I have never, I hope, felt the vulgar pride that disdains want of birth in others; and I care not three straws whether my friend or my wife be descended from a king or a peasant. It is myself, and not my connections, who alone can disgrace my lineage; therefore, however humble Lady Vargrave's parentage, do not scruple to inform me, should you learn any intelligence that bears upon it.

I had a conversation last night with Evelyn that delighted me. By some accident we spoke of Lord Vargrave; and she told me, with an enchanting candour, of the position in which she stood with him, and the conscientious and noble scruples she felt as to the enjoyment of a fortune, which her benefactor and stepfather had evidently intended to be shared with his nearest relative. In these scruples I cordially concurred; and if I marry Evelyn, my first care will be to carry them into effect,—by securing to Vargrave, as far as the law may permit, the larger part of the income; I should like to say all,—at least till Evelyn's children would have the right to claim it: a right not to be enforced during her own, and, therefore, probably not during Vargrave's life. I own that this would be no sacrifice, for I am proud enough to recoil from the thought of being indebted for fortune to the woman I love. It was that kind of pride which gave coldness and constraint to my regard for Florence; and for the rest, my own property (much increased by the simplicity of my habits of life for the last few years) will suffice

for all Evelyn or myself could require. Ah, madman that I am! I calculate already on marriage, even while I have so much cause for anxiety as to love. But my heart beats,—my heart has grown a dial that keeps the account of time; by its movements I calculate the moments—in an hour I shall see her!

Oh, never, never, in my wildest and earliest visions, could I have fancied that I should love as I love now! Adieu, my oldest and kindest friend! If I am happy at last, it will be something to feel that at last I shall have satisfied your expectations of my youth.

Affectionately yours,

E. MALTRAVERS.

RUE DE ——, PARIS,

January —, 18—.

CHAPTER II

*IN her youth
There is a prone and speechless dialect—
Such as moves men.*

—Measure for Measure.

*Abbess. Haply in private— Adriana. And in assemblies too.—Comedy
of Errors.*

IT was true, as Maltravers had stated, that Legard had of late been little at Lady Doltimore's, or in the same society as Evelyn. With the vehemence of an ardent and passionate nature, he yielded to the jealous rage and grief that devoured him. He saw too clearly, and from the first, that Maltravers adored Evelyn; and in her familiar kindness of manner towards him, in the unlimited veneration in which she appeared to hold his gifts and qualities, he thought that that love might become reciprocal. He became gloomy and almost morose; he shunned Evelyn, he forbore to enter into the lists against his rival. Perhaps the intellectual superiority of Maltravers, the extraordinary conversational brilliancy that he could display when he pleased, the commanding dignity of his manners, even the matured authority of his reputation and years, might have served to awe the hopes, as well as to wound the vanity, of a man accustomed himself to be the oracle of a circle. These might have strongly influenced Legard in withdrawing himself from Evelyn's society; but there was one circumstance, connected with motives much more generous, that mainly determined his conduct. It happened that Maltravers, shortly after his first interview with Evelyn, was riding alone one day in the more sequestered part of the Bois de Boulogne, when he encountered Legard, also alone, and on horseback. The latter, on succeeding to his uncle's fortune, had taken care to repay his debt to Maltravers; he had done so in a short but feeling and grateful letter, which had been forwarded to Maltravers at Paris, and which pleased and touched him. Since that time he had taken a liking to the young man, and now, meeting him at Paris, he sought, to a certain extent, Legard's more intimate acquaintance. Maltravers was in that happy mood when we are inclined to be friends with all men. It is true, however, that, though unknown to himself, that pride of bearing, which often gave to the very virtues of Maltravers an unamiable aspect, occasionally irritated one who felt he had incurred to him an obligation of honour and of life never to be effaced; it made the sense of this obligation more intolerable to Legard; it made him more desirous to acquit himself of the charge. But on this day there was so much cordiality in the greeting of Maltravers, and he pressed Legard in so friendly a manner to join him in his ride, that the young man's heart was softened, and they rode together, conversing familiarly on such topics as were in common between them. At last the conversation fell on Lord and Lady Doltimore; and thence Maltravers, whose soul was full of one thought, turned it indirectly towards Evelyn.

"Did you ever see Lady Vargrave?"

"Never," replied Legard, looking another way; "but Lady Doltimore says she is as beautiful as Evelyn herself, if that be possible; and still so young in form and countenance, that she looks rather like her sister than her mother!"

"How I should like to know her!" said Maltravers, with a sudden energy.

Legard changed the subject. He spoke of the Carnival, of balls, of masquerades, of operas, of reigning beauties!

"Ah," said Maltravers, with a half sigh, "yours is the age for those dazzling pleasures; to me they are 'the twice-told tale.'"

Maltravers meant it not, but this remark chafed Legard. He thought it conveyed a sarcasm on the childishness of his own mind or the levity of his pursuits; his colour mounted, as he replied,—

"It is not, I fear, the slight difference of years between us,—it is the difference of intellect you would insinuate; but you should remember all men have not your resources; all men cannot pretend to genius!"

"My dear Legard," said Maltravers, kindly, "do not fancy that I could have designed any insinuation half so presumptuous and impertinent. Believe me, I envy you, sincerely and sadly, all those faculties of enjoyment which I have worn away. Oh, how I envy you! for, were they still mine, then—then, indeed, I might hope to mould myself into greater congeniality with the beautiful and the young!"

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