

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ALICE, OR THE
MYSTERIES – BOOK
11**

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Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 11

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Edward Bulwer Lytton

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BOOK XI

*"Man is born to be a doer of good."—MARCUS
ANTONINUS, lib. iii.*

CHAPTER I

*His teeth he still did grind,
And grimly gnash, threatening revenge in vain.*

—SPENSER.

IT is now time to return to Lord Vargrave. His most sanguine hopes were realized; all things seemed to prosper. The hand of Evelyn Cameron was pledged to him, the wedding-day was fixed. In less than a week she was to confer upon the ruined peer a splendid dowry, that would smooth all obstacles in the ascent of his ambition. From Mr. Douce he learned that the deeds, which were to transfer to himself the baronial possessions of

the head of the house of Maltravers, were nearly completed; and on his wedding-day he hoped to be able to announce that the happy pair had set out for their princely mansion of Lisle Court. In politics; though nothing could be finally settled till his return, letters from Lord Saxingham assured him that all was auspicious: the court and the heads of the aristocracy daily growing more alienated from the premier, and more prepared for a Cabinet revolution. And Vargrave, perhaps, like most needy men, overrated the advantages he should derive from, and the servile opinions he should conciliate in, his new character of landed proprietor and wealthy peer. He was not insensible to the silent anguish that Evelyn seemed to endure, nor to the bitter gloom that hung on the brow of Lady Doltimore. But these were clouds that foretold no storm,—light shadows that obscured not the serenity of the favouring sky. He continued to seem unconscious to either; to take the coming event as a matter of course, and to Evelyn he evinced so gentle, unfamiliar, respectful, and delicate an attachment, that he left no opening, either for confidence or complaint. Poor Evelyn! her gayety, her enchanting levity, her sweet and infantine playfulness of manner, were indeed vanished. Pale, wan, passive, and smileless, she was the ghost of her former self! But days rolled on, and the evil one drew near; she recoiled, but she never dreamed of resisting. How many equal victims of her age and sex does the altar witness!

One day, at early noon, Lord Vargrave took his way to Evelyn's. He had been to pay a political visit in the Faubourg St.

Germain, and he was now slowly crossing the more quiet and solitary part of the gardens of the Tuileries, his hands clasped behind him, after his old, unaltered habit, and his eyes downcast,—when suddenly a man, who was seated alone beneath one of the trees, and who had for some moments watched his steps with an anxious and wild aspect, rose and approached him. Lord Vargrave was not conscious of the intrusion, till the man laid his hand on Vargrave's arm, and exclaimed,—

"It is he! it is! Lumley Ferrers, we meet again!"

Lord Vargrave started and changed colour, as he gazed on the intruder.

"Ferrers," continued Cesarini (for it was he), and he wound his arm firmly into Lord Vargrave's as he spoke, "you have not changed; your step is light, your cheek healthful; and yet I—you can scarcely recognize me. Oh, I have suffered so horribly since we parted! Why is this? Why have I been so heavily visited, and why have you gone free? Heaven is not just!"

Castruccio was in one of his lucid intervals; but there was that in his uncertain eye, and strange unnatural voice, which showed that a breath might dissolve the avalanche. Lord Vargrave looked anxiously round; none were near: but he knew that the more public parts of the garden were thronged, and through the trees he saw many forms moving in the distance. He felt that the sound of his voice could summon assistance in an instant, and his assurance returned to him.

"My poor friend," said he soothingly, as he quickened his

pace, "it grieves me to the heart to see you look ill; do not think so much of what is past."

"There is no past!" replied Cesarini, gloomily. "The Past is my Present! And I have thought and thought, in darkness and in chains, over all that I have endured, and a light has broken on me in the hours when they told me I was mad! Lumley Ferrers, it was not for my sake that you led me, devil as you are, into the lowest hell! You had some object of your own to serve in separating *her* from Maltravers. You made me your instrument. What was I to you that you should have sinned for *my* sake? Answer me, and truly, if those lips can utter truth!"

"Cesarini," returned Vargrave, in his blandest accents, "another time we will converse on what has been; believe me, my only object was your happiness, combined, it may be, with my hatred of your rival."

"Liar!" shouted Cesarini, grasping Vargrave's arm with the strength of growing madness, while his burning eyes were fixed upon his tempter's changing countenance. "You, too, loved Florence; you, too, sought her hand; *you* were my real rival!"

"Hush! my friend, hush!" said Vargrave, seeking to shake off the grip of the maniac, and becoming seriously alarmed; "we are approaching the crowded part of the gardens, we shall be observed."

"And why are men made my foes? Why is my own sister become my persecutor? Why should she give me up to the torturer and the dungeon? Why are serpents and fiends my

comrades? Why is there fire in my brain and heart; and why do you go free and enjoy liberty and life? Observed! What care *you* for observation? All men search for *me*!"

"Then why so openly expose yourself to their notice; why—"

"Hear me!" interrupted Cesarini. "When I escaped from the horrible prison into which I was plunged; when I scented the fresh air, and bounded over the grass; when I was again free in limbs and spirit,—a sudden strain of music from a village came on my ear, and I stopped short, and crouched down, and held my breath to listen. It ceased; and I thought I had been with Florence, and I wept bitterly! When I recovered, memory came back to me distinct and clear; and I heard a voice say to me, 'Avenge her and thyself!' From that hour the voice has been heard again, morning and night! Lumley Ferrers, I hear it now! it speaks to my heart, it warms my blood, it nerves my hand! On whom should vengeance fall? Speak to me!"

Lumley strode rapidly on. They were now without the grove; a gay throng was before them. "All is safe," thought the Englishman. He turned abruptly and haughtily on Cesarini, and waved his hand; "Begone, madman!" said he, in a loud and stern voice,—"*begone! vex me no more, or I give you into custody. Begone, I say!*"

Cesarini halted, amazed and awed for the moment; and then, with a dark scowl and a low cry, threw himself on Vargrave. The eye and hand of the latter were vigilant and prepared; he grasped the uplifted arm of the maniac, and shouted for help.

But the madman was now in his full fury; he hurled Vargrave to the ground with a force for which the peer was not prepared, and Lumley might never have risen a living man from that spot, if two soldiers, seated close by, had not hastened to his assistance. Cesarini was already kneeling on his breast, and his long bony fingers were fastening upon the throat of his intended victim. Torn from his hold, he glared fiercely on his new assailants; and after a fierce but momentary struggle, wrested himself from their grip. Then, turning round to Vargrave, who had with some effort risen from the ground, he shrieked out, "I shall have thee yet!" and fled through the trees and disappeared.

CHAPTER II

*AH, who is nigh? Come to me, friend or foe!
My parks, my walks, my manors that I had,
Ev'n now forsake me.*

—HENRY VI. Part iii.

LORD VARGRAVE, bold as he was by nature, in vain endeavoured to banish from his mind the gloomy impression which the startling interview with Cesarini had bequeathed. The face, the voice of the maniac, haunted him, as the shape of the warning wraith haunts the mountaineer. He returned at once to his hotel, unable for some hours to collect himself sufficiently to pay his customary visit to Miss Cameron. Inly resolving not to hazard a second meeting with the Italian during the rest of his sojourn at Paris by venturing in the streets on foot, he ordered his carriage towards evening; dined at the Cafe de Paris; and then re-entered his carriage to proceed to Lady Doltimore's house.

"I beg your pardon, my lord," said his servant, as he closed the carriage-door, "but I forgot to say that, a short time after you returned this morning, a strange gentleman asked at the porter's lodge if Mr. Ferrers was not staying at the hotel. The porter said there was no Mr. Ferrers, but the gentleman insisted upon it that he had seen Mr. Ferrers enter. I was in the lodge at the moment, my lord, and I explained—"

"That Mr. Ferrers and Lord Vargrave are one and the same? What sort of looking person?"

"Thin and dark, my lord,—evidently a foreigner. When I said that you were now Lord Vargrave, he stared a moment, and said very abruptly that he recollected it perfectly, and then he laughed and walked away."

"Did he not ask to see me?"

"No, my lord; he said he should take another opportunity. He was a strange-looking gentleman, and his clothes were threadbare."

"Ah, some troublesome petitioner. Perhaps a Pole in distress! Remember I am never at home when he calls. Shut the door. To Lady Doltimore's."

Lumley's heart beat as he threw himself back,—he again felt the grip of the madman at his throat. He saw, at once, that Cesarini had dogged him; he resolved the next morning to change his hotel, and to apply to the police. It was strange how sudden and keen a fear had entered the breast of this callous and resolute man!

On arriving at Lady Doltimore's, he found Caroline alone in the drawing-room. It was a *tete-a-tete* that he by no means desired.

"Lord Vargrave," said Caroline, coldly, "I wished a short conversation with you; and finding you did not come in the morning, I sent you a note an hour ago. Did you receive it?"

"No; I have been from home since six o'clock,—it is now

nine."

"Well, then, Vargrave," said Caroline, with a compressed and writhing lip, and turning very pale, "I tremble to tell you that I fear Doltimore suspects. He looked at me sternly this morning, and said, 'You seem unhappy, madam; this marriage of Lord Vargrave's distresses you!'"

"I warned you how it would be,—your own selfishness will betray and ruin you."

"Do not reproach me, man!" said Lady Doltimore, with great vehemence. "From you at least I have a right to pity, to forbearance, to succour. I will not bear reproach from *you*."

"I reproach you for your own sake, for the faults you commit against yourself; and I must say, Caroline, that after I had generously conquered all selfish feeling, and assisted you to so desirable and even brilliant a position, it is neither just nor high-minded in you to evince so ungracious a reluctance to my taking the only step which can save me from actual ruin. But what does Doltimore suspect? What ground has he for suspicion, beyond that want of command of countenance which it is easy to explain,—and which it is yet easier for a woman and a great lady [here Lumley sneered] to acquire?"

"I know not; it has been put into his head. Paris is so full of slander.

But, Vargrave—Lumley—I tremble, I shudder with terror, if ever Doltimore should discover—"

"Pooh! pooh! Our conduct at Paris has been most guarded,

most discreet. Doltimore is Self-conceit personified,—and Self-conceit is horn-eyed. I am about to leave Paris,—about to marry, from under your own roof; a little prudence, a little self-control, a smiling face, when you wish us happiness, and so forth, and all is safe. Tush! think of it no more! Fate has cut and shuffled the cards for you; the game is yours, unless you revoke. Pardon my metaphor; it is a favourite one,—I have worn it threadbare; but human life *is* so like a rubber at whist. Where is Evelyn?"

"In her own room. Have you no pity for her?"

"She will be very happy when she is Lady Vargrave; and for the rest, I shall neither be a stern nor a jealous husband. She might not have given the same character to the magnificent Maltravers."

Here Evelyn entered; and Vargrave hastened to press her hand, to whisper tender salutations and compliments, to draw the easy-chair to the fire, to place the footstool,—to lavish the *petits soins* that are so agreeable, when they are the small moralities of love.

Evelyn was more than usually pale,—more than usually abstracted. There was no lustre in her eye, no life in her step; she seemed unconscious of the crisis to which she approached. As the myrrh and hyssop which drugged the malefactors of old into forgetfulness of their doom, so there are griefs which stupefy before their last and crowning consummation!

Vargrave conversed lightly on the weather, the news, the last book. Evelyn answered but in monosyllables; and Caroline, with a hand-screen before her face, preserved an unbroken silence.

Thus gloomy and joyless were two of the party, thus gay and animated the third, when the clock on the mantelpiece struck ten; and as the last stroke died, and Evelyn sighed heavily,—for it was an hour nearer to the fatal day,—the door was suddenly thrown open, and pushing aside the servant, two gentlemen entered the room.

Caroline, the first to perceive them, started from her seat with a faint exclamation of surprise. Vargrave turned abruptly, and saw before him the stern countenance of Maltravers.

"My child! my Evelyn!" exclaimed a familiar voice; and Evelyn had already flown into the arms of Aubrey.

The sight of the curate in company with Maltravers explained all at once to Vargrave. He saw that the mask was torn from his face, the prize snatched from his grasp, his falsehood known, his plot counterworked, his villany baffled! He struggled in vain for self-composure; all his resources of courage and craft seemed drained and exhausted. Livid, speechless, almost trembling, he cowered beneath the eyes of Maltravers.

Evelyn, not as yet aware of the presence of her former lover, was the first to break the silence. She lifted her face in alarm from the bosom of the good curate. "My mother—she is well—she lives—what brings you hither?"

"Your mother is well, my child. I have come hither at her earnest request to save you from a marriage with that unworthy man!"

Lord Vargrave smiled a ghastly smile, but made no answer.

"Lord Vargrave," said Maltravers, "you will feel at once that you have no further business under this roof. Let us withdraw,—I have much to thank you for."

"I will not stir!" exclaimed Vargrave, passionately, and stamping on the floor. "Miss Cameron, the guest of Lady Doltimore, whose house and presence you thus rudely profane, is my affianced bride,—affianced with her own consent. Evelyn, beloved Evelyn! mine you are yet; you alone can cancel the bond. Sir, I know not what you have to say, what mystery in your immaculate life to disclose; but unless Lady Doltimore, whom your violence appalls and terrifies, orders me to quit her roof, it is not I,—it is yourself, who are the intruder! Lady Doltimore, with your permission, I will direct your servants to conduct this gentleman to his carriage!"

"Lady Doltimore, pardon me," said Maltravers, coldly; "I will not be urged to any failure of respect to you. My lord, if the most abject cowardice be not added to your other vices, you will not make this room the theatre for our altercation. I invite you, in those terms which no gentleman ever yet refused, to withdraw with me."

The tone and manner of Maltravers exercised a strange control over Vargrave; he endeavoured in vain to keep alive the passion into which he had sought to work himself; his voice faltered, his head sank upon his breast. Between these two personages, none interfered; around them, all present grouped in breathless silence,—Caroline, turning her eyes from one to the other in wonder

and dismay; Evelyn, believing all a dream, yet alive only to the thought that, by some merciful interposition of Providence, she should escape the consequences of her own rashness, clinging to Aubrey, with her gaze riveted on Maltravers; and Aubrey, whose gentle character was borne down and silenced by the powerful and tempestuous passions that now met in collision and conflict, withheld by his abhorrence of Vargrave's treachery from his natural desire to propitiate, and yet appalled by the apprehension of bloodshed, that for the first time crossed him.

There was a moment of dead silence, in which Vargrave seemed to be nerving and collecting himself for such course as might be best to pursue, when again the door opened, and the name of Mr. Howard was announced.

Hurried and agitated, the young secretary, scarcely noticing the rest of the party, rushed to Lord Vargrave.

"My lord! a thousand pardons for interrupting you,—business of such importance! I am so fortunate to find you!"

"What is the matter, sir?"

"These letters, my lord; I have so much to say!"

Any interruption, even an earthquake, at that moment must have been welcome to Vargrave. He bent his head, with a polite smile, linked his arm into his secretary's, and withdrew to the recess of the farthest window. Not a minute elapsed before he turned away with a look of scornful exultation. "Mr. Howard," said he, "go and refresh yourself, and come to me at twelve o'clock to-night; I shall be at home then." The secretary bowed,

and withdrew.

"Now, sir," said Vargrave, to Maltravers, "I am willing to leave you in possession of the field. Miss Cameron, it will be, I fear, impossible for me to entertain any longer the bright hopes I had once formed; my cruel fate compels me to seek wealth in any matrimonial engagement. I regret to inform you that you are no longer the great heiress; the whole of your capital was placed in the hands of Mr. Douce for the completion of the purchase of Lisle Court. Mr. Douce is a bankrupt; he has fled to America. This letter is an express from my lawyer; the house has closed its payments! Perhaps we may hope to obtain sixpence in the pound. I am a loser also; the forfeit money bequeathed to me is gone. I know not whether, as your trustee, I am not accountable for the loss of your fortune (drawn out on my responsibility); probably so. But as I have not now a shilling in the world, I doubt whether Mr. Maltravers will advise you to institute proceedings against me. Mr. Maltravers, to-morrow, at nine o'clock, I will listen to what you have to say. I wish you all good-night." He bowed, seized his hat, and vanished.

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