

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ALICE, OR THE
MYSTERIES — BOOK
10**

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 10

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Содержание

BOOK X	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	10
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

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BOOK X

"A dream!"—HOMER, I, 3.

CHAPTER I

*QUALIS ubi in lucem coluber
... Mala gramina pastus.¹*

—VIRGIL.

Pars minima est ipsa puella sui.²

—OVID.

IT would be superfluous, and, perhaps, a sickening task, to detail at length the mode and manner in which Vargrave coiled his snares round the unfortunate girl whom his destiny had marked out for his prey. He was right in foreseeing that, after the first amazement caused by the letter of Maltravers, Evelyn would feel resentment crushed beneath her certainty of his affection her incredulity at his self-accusations, and her secret conviction that some reverse, some misfortune he was unwilling she should share, was the occasion of his farewell and flight. Vargrave therefore very soon communicated to Evelyn the tale he had suggested to Maltravers. He reminded her of the habitual sorrow, the evidence of which was so visible in Lady Vargrave; of her indifference to the pleasures of the world; of her sensitive shrinking from all recurrence to her early fate. "The secret of this," said he, "is in a youthful and most fervent attachment; your mother loved a young stranger above her in rank, who (his head being full of German romance) was then roaming about the country on pedestrian and adventurous excursions, under the assumed name of Butler. By him she was most ardently beloved in return. Her father, perhaps, suspected the rank of her lover, and was fearful of her honour being compromised. He was a strange man, that father! and I know not his real character and motives; but he suddenly withdrew his daughter from the suit and search of her lover,—they saw each other no more; her lover mourned her as one dead. In process of time your mother was constrained by her father to marry Mr. Cameron, and was left a widow with an only child,—yourself: she was poor;—very poor! and her love and anxiety for you at last induced her to listen to the addresses of my late uncle; for your sake she married again; again death dissolved the tie! But still, unceasingly and faithfully, she recalled that first love, the memory of which darkened and embittered all her life, and still she lived upon the hope to meet with the lost again. At last, and most recently, it was my fate to discover that the object of this unconquerable affection lived,—was still free in hand if not in heart: you behold the lover of your mother in Ernest Maltravers! It devolved on me (an invidious—a reluctant duty) to inform Maltravers of the identity of Lady Vargrave with the Alice of his boyish passion; to prove to him her

¹ "As when a snake glides into light, having fed on pernicious pastures."

² "The girl is the least part of himself."

suffering, patient, unsubdued affection; to convince him that the sole hope left to her in life was that of one day or other beholding him once again. You know Maltravers,—his high-wrought, sensitive, noble character; he recoiled in terror from the thought of making his love to the daughter the last and bitterest affliction to the mother he had so loved; knowing too how completely that mother had entwined herself round your affections, he shuddered at the pain and self-reproach that would be yours when you should discover to whom you had been the rival, and whose the fond hopes and dreams that your fatal beauty had destroyed. Tortured, despairing, and half beside himself, he has fled from this ill-omened passion, and in solitude he now seeks to subdue that passion. Touched by the woe, the grief, of the Alice of his youth, it is his intention, as soon as he can know you restored to happiness and content, to hasten to your mother, and offer his future devotion as the fulfilment of former vows. On you, and you alone, it depends to restore Maltravers to the world,—on you alone it depends to bless the remaining years of the mother who so dearly loves you!"

It may be easily conceived with what sensations of wonder, compassion, and dismay, Evelyn listened to this tale, the progress of which her exclamations, her sobs, often interrupted. She would write instantly to her mother, to Maltravers. Oh, how gladly she would relinquish his suit: How cheerfully promise to rejoice in that desertion which brought happiness to the mother she had so loved!

"Nay," said Vargrave, "your mother must not know, till the intelligence can be breathed by his lips, and softened by his protestations of returning affection, that the mysterious object of her early romance is that Maltravers whose vows have been so lately offered to her own child. Would not such intelligence shock all pride, and destroy all hope? How could she then consent to the sacrifice which Maltravers is prepared to make? No! not till you are another's—not (to use the words of Maltravers) till you are a happy and beloved wife—must your mother receive the returning homage of Maltravers; not till then can she know where that homage has been recently rendered; not till then can Maltravers feel justified in the atonement he meditates. He is willing to sacrifice himself; he trembles at the thought of sacrificing you! Say nothing to your mother, till from her own lips she tells you that she has learned all."

Could Evelyn hesitate; could Evelyn doubt? To allay the fears, to fulfil the prayers of the man whose conduct appeared so generous, to restore him to peace and the world; above all, to pluck from the heart of that beloved and gentle mother the rankling dart, to shed happiness over her fate, to reunite her with the loved and lost,—what sacrifice too great for this?

Ah, why was Legard absent? Why did she believe him capricious, light, and false? Why had she shut her softest thoughts from her soul? But he—the true lover—was afar, and his true love unknown! and Vargrave, the watchful serpent, was at hand.

In a fatal hour, and in the transport of that enthusiasm which inspires alike our more rash and our more sublime deeds, which makes us alike dupes and martyrs,—the enthusiasm that tramples upon self, that forfeits all things to a high-wrought zeal for others, Evelyn consented to become the wife of Vargrave! Nor was she at first sensible of the sacrifice,—sensible of anything but the glow of a noble spirit and an approving conscience. Yes, thus, and thus alone, did she obey both duties,—that, which she had well-nigh abandoned, to her dead benefactor, and that to the living mother. Afterwards came a dread reaction; and then, at last, that passive and sleep-like resignation, which is Despair under a milder name. Yes,—such a lot had been predestined from the first; in vain had she sought to fly it: Fate had overtaken her, and she must submit to the decree!

She was most anxious that the intelligence of the new bond might be transmitted instantly to Maltravers. Vargrave promised, but took care not to perform. He was too acute not to know that in so sudden a step Evelyn's motives would be apparent, and his own suit indelicate and ungenerous. He was desirous that Maltravers should learn nothing till the vows had been spoken, and the indissoluble chain forged. Afraid to leave Evelyn, even for a day, afraid to trust her in England to an interview with her mother,—he remained at Paris, and hurried on all the requisite preparations. He sent to Douce, who came in person, with the deeds necessary for the transfer of the money for the purchase of Lisle

Court, which was now to be immediately completed. The money was to be lodged in Mr. Douce's bank till the lawyers had completed their operations; and in a few weeks, when Evelyn had attained the allotted age, Vargrave trusted to see himself lord alike of the betrothed bride, and the hereditary lands of the crushed Maltravers. He refrained from stating to Evelyn who was the present proprietor of the estate to become hers; he foresaw all the objections she would form;—and, indeed, she was unable to think, to talk, of such matters. One favour she had asked, and it had been granted,—that she was to be left unmolested to her solitude till the fatal day. Shut up in her lonely room, condemned not to confide her thoughts, to seek for sympathy even in her mother,—the poor girl in vain endeavoured to keep up to the tenor of her first enthusiasm, and reconcile herself to a step, which, however, she was heroine enough not to retract or to repent, even while she recoiled from its contemplation.

Lady Doltimore, amazed at what had passed,—at the flight of Maltravers, the success of Lumley,—unable to account for it, to extort explanation from Vargrave or from Evelyn, was distracted by the fear of some villanous deceit which she could not fathom. To escape herself she plunged yet more eagerly into the gay vortex. Vargrave, suspicious, and fearful of trusting to what she might say in her nervous and excited temper if removed from his watchful eye, deemed himself compelled to hover round her. His manner, his conduct, were most guarded; but Caroline herself, jealous, irritated, unsettled, evinced at times a right both to familiarity and anger, which drew upon her and himself the sly vigilance of slander. Meanwhile Lord Doltimore, though too cold and proud openly to notice what passed around him, seemed disturbed and anxious. His manner to Vargrave was distant; he shunned all *tete-a-tetes* with his wife. Little, however, of this did Lumley heed. A few weeks more, and all would be well and safe. Vargrave did not publish his engagement with Evelyn: he sought carefully to conceal it till the very day was near at hand; but it was whispered abroad; some laughed, some believed. Evelyn herself was seen nowhere. De Montaigne had, at first, been indignantly incredulous at the report that Maltravers had broken off a connection he had so desired from a motive so weak and unworthy as that of mere family pride. A letter from Maltravers, who confided to him and Vargrave alone the secret of his retreat, reluctantly convinced him that the wise are but pompous fools; he was angry and disgusted; and still more so when Valerie and Teresa (for female friends stand by us right or wrong) hinted at excuses, or surmised that other causes lurked behind the one alleged. But his thoughts were much drawn from this subject by increasing anxiety for Cesarini, whose abode and fate still remained an alarming mystery.

It so happened that Lord Doltimore, who had always had a taste for the antique, and who was greatly displeased with his own family-seat because it was comfortable and modern, fell, from *ennui*, into a habit, fashionable enough in Paris, of buying curiosities and cabinets,— high-back chairs and oak-carvings; and with this habit returned the desire and the affection for Burleigh. Understanding from Lumley that Maltravers had probably left his native land forever, he imagined it extremely probable that the latter would now consent to the sale, and he begged Vargrave to forward a letter from him to that effect.

Vargrave made some excuse, for he felt that nothing could be more indelicate than such an application forwarded through his hands at such a time; and Doltimore, who had accidentally heard De Montaigne confess that he knew the address of Maltravers, quietly sent his letter to the Frenchman, and, without mentioning its contents, begged him to forward it. De Montaigne did so. Now it is very strange how slight men and slight incidents bear on the great events of life; but that simple letter was instrumental to a new revolution in the strange history of Maltravers.

CHAPTER II

*QUID frustra simulacra fugacia captas?—
Quod petis est nusquam.*³

—*OVID: Met. iii. 432.*

TO no clime dedicated to the indulgence of majestic griefs or to the soft melancholy of regret—not to thy glaciers, or thy dark-blue lakes, beautiful Switzerland, mother of many exiles; nor to thy fairer earth and gentler heaven, sweet Italy,—fled the agonized Maltravers. Once, in his wanderings, he had chanced to pass by a landscape so steeped in sullen and desolate gloom, that it had made a powerful and uneffaced impression upon his mind: it was amidst those swamps and morasses that formerly surrounded the castle of Gil de Retz, the ambitious Lord, the dreaded Necromancer, who perished at the stake, after a career of such power and splendour as seemed almost to justify the dark belief in his preternatural agencies.⁴

Here, in a lonely and wretched inn, remote from other habitations, Maltravers fixed himself. In gentler griefs there is a sort of luxury in bodily discomfort; in his inexorable and unmitigated anguish, bodily discomfort was not felt. There is a kind of magnetism in extreme woe, by which the body itself seems laid asleep, and knows no distinction between the bed of Damians and the rose-couch of the Sybarite. He left his carriage and servants at a post-house some miles distant. He came to this dreary abode alone; and in that wintry season, and that most disconsolate scene, his gloomy soul found something congenial, something that did not mock him, in the frowns of the haggard and dismal Nature. Vain would it be to describe what he then felt, what he then endured. Suffice it that, through all, the diviner strength of man was not wholly crushed, and that daily, nightly, hourly, he prayed to the Great Comforter to assist him in wrestling against a guilty love. No man struggles so honestly, so ardently as he did, utterly in vain; for in us all, if we would but cherish it, there is a spirit that must rise at last—a crowned, if bleeding conqueror—over Fate and all the Demons!

One day after a prolonged silence from Vargrave, whose letters all breathed comfort and assurance in Evelyn's progressive recovery of spirit and hope, his messenger returned from the post-town with a letter in the hand of De Montaigne. It contained, in a blank envelope (De Montaigne's silence told him how much he had lost in the esteem of his friend), the communication of Lord Doltimore. It ran thus:—

MY DEAR SIR,—As I hear that your plans are likely to make you a long resident on the Continent, may I again inquire if you would be induced to dispose of Burleigh? I am willing to give more than its real value, and would raise a mortgage on my own property sufficient to pay off, at once, the whole purchase-money. Perhaps you may be the more induced to the sale from the circumstance of having an example in the head of your family, Colonel Maltravers, as I learn through Lord Vargrave, having resolved to dispose of Lisle Court. Waiting your answer,

*I am, dear Sir, truly yours,
DOLTIMORE.*

"Ay," said Maltravers, bitterly, crushing the letter in his hand, "let our name be blotted out from the land, and our hearths pass to the stranger. How could I ever visit the place where I first saw *her*?"

³ "Why, in vain, do you catch at fleeting shadows? That which you seek is nowhere."

⁴ See, for description of this scenery, and the fate of De Retz, the high-wrought and glowing romance by Mr. Ritchie called "The Magician."

He resolved at once,—he would write to England, and place the matter in the hands of agents. This was but a short-lived diversion to his thoughts, and their cloudy darkness soon gathered round him again.

What I am now about to relate may appear, to a hasty criticism, to savour of the Supernatural; but it is easily accounted for by ordinary agencies, and it is strictly to the letter of the truth.

In his sleep that night a dream appeared to Maltravers. He thought he was alone in the old library at Burleigh, and gazing on the portrait of his mother; as he so gazed, he fancied that a cold and awful tremor seized upon him, that he in vain endeavoured to withdraw his eyes from the canvas—his sight was chained there by an irresistible spell. Then it seemed to him that the portrait gradually changed,—the features the same, but the bloom vanished into a white and ghastly hue; the colours of the dress faded, their fashion grew more large and flowing, but heavy and rigid as if cut in stone,—the robes of the grave. But on the face there was a soft and melancholy smile, that took from its livid aspect the natural horror; the lips moved, and, it seemed as if without a sound, the released soul spoke to that which the earth yet owned.

"Return," it said, "to thy native land, and thine own home. Leave not the last relic of her who bore and yet watches over thee to stranger hands. Thy good Angel shall meet thee at thy hearth!"

The voice ceased. With a violent effort Maltravers broke the spell that had forbidden his utterance. He called aloud, and the dream vanished: he was broad awake, his hair erect, the cold dew on his brow. The pallet, rather than bed on which he lay, was opposite to the window, and the wintry moonlight streamed wan and spectral into the cheerless room. But between himself and the light there seemed to stand a shape, a shadow, that into which the portrait had changed in his dream,—that which had accosted and chilled his soul. He sprang forward, "My mother! even in the grave canst thou bless thy wretched son! Oh, leave me not—say that thou—" The delusion vanished, and Maltravers fell back insensible.

It was long in vain, when, in the healthful light of day, he revolved this memorable dream, that Maltravers sought to convince himself that dreams need no ministers from heaven or hell to bring the gliding falsehoods along the paths of sleep; that the effect of that dream itself, on his shattered nerves, his excited fancy, was the real and sole raiser of the spectre he had thought to behold on waking. Long was it before his judgment could gain the victory, and reason disown the empire of a turbulent imagination; and even when at length reluctantly convinced, the dream still haunted him, and he could not shake it from his breast. He longed anxiously for the next night; it came, but it brought neither dreams nor sleep, and the rain beat, and the winds howled, against the casement. Another night, and the moon was again bright; and he fell into a deep sleep; no vision disturbed or hallowed it. He woke ashamed of his own expectation. But the event, such as it was, by giving a new turn to his thoughts, had roused and relieved his spirit, and misery sat upon him with a lighter load. Perhaps, too, to that still haunting recollection was mainly owing a change in his former purpose. He would still sell the old Hall; but he would first return, and remove that holy portrait, with pious hands; he would garner up and save all that had belonged to her whose death had been his birth. Ah, never had she known for what trials the infant had been reserved!

CHAPTER III

*THE weary hours steal on
And flaky darkness breaks.*

—Richard III.

ONCE more, suddenly and unlooked for, the lord of Burleigh appeared at the gates of his deserted hall! and again the old housekeeper and her satellites were thrown into dismay and consternation. Amidst blank and welcomeless faces, Maltravers passed into his study: and as soon as the logs burned and the bustle was over, and he was left alone, he took up the light and passed into the adjoining library. It was then about nine o'clock in the evening; the air of the room felt damp and chill, and the light but faintly struggled against the mournful gloom of the dark book-lined walls and sombre tapestry. He placed the candle on the table, and drawing aside the curtain that veiled the portrait, gazed with deep emotion, not unmixed with awe, upon the beautiful face whose eyes seemed fixed upon him with mournful sweetness. There is something mystical about those painted ghosts of ourselves, that survive our very dust! Who, gazing upon them long and wistfully, does not half fancy that they seem not insensible to his gaze, as if we looked our own life into them, and the eyes that followed us where we moved were animated by a stranger art than the mere trick of the limner's colours?

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