

**Mary Elizabeth Braddon**

**Lady Audley's Secret**





## CHAPTER I

### LUCY

It lay down in a hollow, rich with fine old timber and luxuriant pastures; and you came upon it through an avenue of limes, bordered on either side by meadows, over the high hedges of which the cattle looked inquisitively at you as you passed, wondering, perhaps, what you wanted; for there was no thorough-fare, and unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all.

At the end of this avenue there was an old arch and a clock tower, with a stupid, bewildering clock, which had only one hand—and which jumped straight from one hour to the next—and was therefore always in extremes. Through this arch you walked straight into the gardens of Audley Court.

A smooth lawn lay before you, dotted with groups of rhododendrons, which grew in more perfection here than anywhere else in the county. To the right there were the kitchen gardens, the fish-pond, and an orchard bordered by a dry moat, and a broken ruin of a wall, in some places thicker than it was high, and everywhere overgrown with trailing ivy, yellow stonecrop, and dark moss. To the left there was a broad graveled walk, down which, years ago, when the place had been a convent, the quiet nuns had walked hand in hand; a wall bordered with espaliers, and shadowed on one side by goodly oaks, which shut out the flat landscape, and circled in the house and gardens with a darkening shelter.

The house faced the arch, and occupied three sides of a quadrangle. It was very old, and very irregular and rambling. The windows were uneven; some small, some large, some with heavy stone mullions and rich stained glass; others with frail

lattices that rattled in every breeze; others so modern that they might have been added only yesterday. Great piles of chimneys rose up here and there behind the pointed gables, and seemed as if they were so broken down by age and long service that they must have fallen but for the straggling ivy which, crawling up the walls and trailing even over the roof, wound itself about them and supported them. The principal door was squeezed into a corner of a turret at one angle of the building, as if it were in hiding from dangerous visitors, and wished to keep itself a secret—a noble door for all that—old oak, and studded with great square-headed iron nails, and so thick that the sharp iron knocker struck upon it with a muffled sound, and the visitor rung a clanging bell that dangled in a corner among the ivy, lest the noise of the knocking should never penetrate the stronghold.

A glorious old place. A place that visitors fell in raptures with; feeling a yearning wish to have done with life, and to stay there forever, staring into the cool fish-ponds and counting the bubbles as the roach and carp rose to the surface of the water. A spot in which peace seemed to have taken up her abode, setting her soothing hand on every tree and flower, on the still ponds and quiet alleys, the shady corners of the old-fashioned rooms, the deep window-seats behind the painted glass, the low meadows and the stately avenues—ay, even upon the stagnant well, which, cool and sheltered as all else in the old place, hid itself away in a shrubbery behind the gardens, with an idle handle that was never turned and a lazy rope so rotten that the pail had broken away from it, and had fallen into the water.

A noble place; inside as well as out, a noble place—a house in which you incontinently lost yourself if ever you were so rash as to attempt to penetrate its mysteries alone; a house in which no one room had any sympathy with another, every chamber running off at a tangent into an inner chamber, and through that down some narrow staircase leading to a door which, in its turn, led back into that very part of the house from which you thought yourself the furthest; a house that could never have been planned by any mortal architect, but must have been the handiwork of that good old builder,

Time, who, adding a room one year, and knocking down a room another year, toppling down a chimney coeval with the Plantagenets, and setting up one in the style of the Tudors; shaking down a bit of Saxon wall, allowing a Norman arch to stand here; throwing in a row of high narrow windows in the reign of Queen Anne, and joining on a dining-room after the fashion of the time of Hanoverian George I, to a refectory that had been standing since the Conquest, had contrived, in some eleven centuries, to run up such a mansion as was not elsewhere to be met with throughout the county of Essex. Of course, in such a house there were secret chambers; the little daughter of the present owner, Sir Michael Audley, had fallen by accident upon the discovery of one. A board had rattled under her feet in the great nursery where she played, and on attention being drawn to it, it was found to be loose, and so removed, revealed a ladder, leading to a hiding-place between the floor of the nursery and the ceiling of the room below—a hiding-place so small that he who had hid there must have crouched on his hands and knees or lain at full length, and yet large enough to contain a quaint old carved oak chest, half filled with priests' vestments, which had been hidden away, no doubt, in those cruel days when the life of a man was in danger if he was discovered to have harbored a Roman Catholic priest, or to have mass said in his house.

The broad outer moat was dry and grass-grown, and the laden trees of the orchard hung over it with gnarled, straggling branches that drew fantastical shadows upon the green slope. Within this moat there was, as I have said, the fish-pond—a sheet of water that extended the whole length of the garden and bordering which there was an avenue called the lime-tree walk; an avenue so shaded from the sun and sky, so screened from observation by the thick shelter of the over-arching trees that it seemed a chosen place for secret meetings or for stolen interviews; a place in which a conspiracy might have been planned, or a lover's vow registered with equal safety; and yet it was scarcely twenty paces from the house.

At the end of this dark arcade there was the shrubbery, where, half buried among the tangled branches and the neglected weeds, stood the rusty wheel of that old well of

which I have spoken. It had been of good service in its time, no doubt; and busy nuns have perhaps drawn the cool water with their own fair hands; but it had fallen into disuse now, and scarcely any one at Audley Court knew whether the spring had dried up or not. But sheltered as was the solitude of this lime-tree walk, I doubt very much if it was ever put to any romantic uses. Often in the cool of the evening Sir Michael Audley would stroll up and down smoking his cigar, with his dogs at his heels, and his pretty young wife dawdling by his side; but in about ten minutes the baronet and his companion would grow tired of the rustling limes and the still water, hidden under the spreading leaves of the water-lilies, and the long green vista with the broken well at the end, and would stroll back to the drawing-room, where my lady played dreamy melodies by Beethoven and Mendelssohn till her husband fell asleep in his easy-chair.

Sir Michael Audley was fifty-six years of age, and he had married a second wife three months after his fifty-fifth birthday. He was a big man, tall and stout, with a deep, sonorous voice, handsome black eyes, and a white beard—a white beard which made him look venerable against his will, for he was as active as a boy, and one of the hardest riders in the country. For seventeen years he had been a widower with an only child, a daughter, Alicia Audley, now eighteen, and by no means too well pleased at having a step-mother brought home to the Court; for Miss Alicia had reigned supreme in her father's house since her earliest childhood, and had carried the keys, and jingled them in the pockets of her silk aprons, and lost them in the shrubbery, and dropped them into the pond, and given all manner of trouble about them from the hour in which she entered her teens, and had, on that account, deluded herself into the sincere belief, that for the whole of that period, she had been keeping the house.

But Miss Alicia's day was over; and now, when she asked anything of the housekeeper, the housekeeper would tell her that she would speak to my lady, or she would consult my lady, and if my lady pleased it should be done. So the baronet's daughter, who was an excellent horsewoman and a very clever artist, spent most of her time out of doors, riding about the

green lanes, and sketching the cottage children, and the plow-boys, and the cattle, and all manner of animal life that came in her way. She set her face with a sulky determination against any intimacy between herself and the baronet's young wife; and amiable as that lady was, she found it quite impossible to overcome Miss Alicia's prejudices and dislike; or to convince the spoilt girl that she had not done her a cruel injury by marrying Sir Michael Audley. The truth was that Lady Audley had, in becoming the wife of Sir Michael, made one of those apparently advantageous matches which are apt to draw upon a woman the envy and hatred of her sex. She had come into the neighborhood as a governess in the family of a surgeon in the village near Audley Court. No one knew anything of her, except that she came in answer to an advertisement which Mr. Dawson, the surgeon, had inserted in *The Times*. She came from London; and the only reference she gave was to a lady at a school at Brompton, where she had once been a teacher. But this reference was so satisfactory that none other was needed, and Miss Lucy Graham was received by the surgeon as the instructress of his daughters. Her accomplishments were so brilliant and numerous, that it seemed strange that she should have answered an advertisement offering such very moderate terms of remuneration as those named by Mr. Dawson; but Miss Graham seemed perfectly well satisfied with her situation, and she taught the girls to play sonatas by Beethoven, and to paint from nature after Creswick, and walked through a dull, out-of-the-way village to the humble little church, three times every Sunday, as contentedly as if she had no higher aspiration in the world than to do so all the rest of her life.

People who observed this, accounted for it by saying that it was a part of her amiable and gentle nature always to be light-hearted, happy and contented under any circumstances.

Wherever she went she seemed to take joy and brightness with her. In the cottages of the poor her fair face shone like a sunbeam. She would sit for a quarter of an hour talking to some old woman, and apparently as pleased with the admiration of a toothless crone as if she had been listening to the compliments of a marquis; and when she tripped away,

leaving nothing behind her (for her poor salary gave no scope to her benevolence), the old woman would burst out into senile raptures with her grace, beauty, and her kindness, such as she never bestowed upon the vicar's wife, who half fed and clothed her. For you see, Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination, by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Every one loved, admired, and praised her. The boy who opened the five-barred gate that stood in her pathway, ran home to his mother to tell of her pretty looks, and the sweet voice in which she thanked him for the little service. The verger at the church, who ushered her into the surgeon's pew; the vicar, who saw the soft blue eyes uplifted to his face as he preached his simple sermon; the porter from the railway station, who brought her sometimes a letter or a parcel, and who never looked for reward from her; her employer; his visitors; her pupils; the servants; everybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived.

Perhaps it was the rumor of this which penetrated into the quiet chamber of Audley Court; or, perhaps, it was the sight of her pretty face, looking over the surgeon's high pew every Sunday morning; however it was, it was certain that Sir Michael Audley suddenly experienced a strong desire to be better acquainted with Mr. Dawson's governess.

He had only to hint his wish to the worthy doctor for a little party to be got up, to which the vicar and his wife, and the baronet and his daughter, were invited.

That one quiet evening sealed Sir Michael's fate. He could no more resist the tender fascination of those soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls; the low music of that gentle voice; the perfect harmony which pervaded every charm, and made all doubly charming in this woman; than he could resist his destiny! Destiny! Why, she was his destiny! He had never loved before. What had been his marriage with Alicia's mother but a dull, jog-trot bargain made to keep some estate in the family that would have been just as well out of it? What had been his love for his first wife but a poor, pitiful, smoldering spark, too dull to be extinguished, too

feeble to burn? But *this* was love—this fever, this longing, this restless, uncertain, miserable hesitation; these cruel fears that his age was an insurmountable barrier to his happiness; this sick hatred of his white beard; this frenzied wish to be young again, with glistening raven hair, and a slim waist, such as he had twenty years before; these, wakeful nights and melancholy days, so gloriously brightened if he chanced to catch a glimpse of her sweet face behind the window curtains, as he drove past the surgeon's house; all these signs gave token of the truth, and told only too plainly that, at the sober age of fifty-five, Sir Michael Audley had fallen ill of the terrible fever called love.

I do not think that, throughout his courtship, the baronet once calculated upon his wealth or his position as reasons for his success. If he ever remembered these things, he dismissed the thought of them with a shudder. It pained him too much to believe for a moment that any one so lovely and innocent could value herself against a splendid house or a good old title. No; his hope was that, as her life had been most likely one of toil and dependence, and as she was very young nobody exactly knew her age, but she looked little more than twenty, she might never have formed any attachment, and that he, being the first to woo her, might, by tender attentions, by generous watchfulness, by a love which should recall to her the father she had lost, and by a protecting care that should make him necessary to her, win her young heart, and obtain from her fresh and earliest love, the promise of her hand. It was a very romantic day-dream, no doubt; but, for all that, it seemed in a very fair way to be realized. Lucy Graham appeared by no means to dislike the baronet's attentions. There was nothing whatever in her manner that betrayed the shallow artifices employed by a woman who wishes to captivate a rich man. She was so accustomed to admiration from every one, high and low, that Sir Michael's conduct made very little impression upon her. Again, he had been so many years a widower that people had given up the idea of his ever marrying again. At last, however, Mrs. Dawson spoke to the governess on the subject. The surgeon's wife was sitting in the school-room busy at work, while Lucy was putting the finishing touches on some water-color sketches done by her pupils.

“Do you know, my dear Miss Graham,” said Mrs. Dawson, “I think you ought to consider yourself a remarkably lucky girl?”

The governess lifted her head from its stooping attitude, and stared wonderingly at her employer, shaking back a shower of curls. They were the most wonderful curls in the world—soft and feathery, always floating away from her face, and making a pale halo round her head when the sunlight shone through them.

“What do you mean, my dear Mrs. Dawson?” she asked, dipping her camel’s-hair brush into the wet aquamarine upon the palette, and poisoning it carefully before putting in the delicate streak of purple which was to brighten the horizon in her pupil’s sketch.

“Why, I mean, my dear, that it only rests with yourself to become Lady Audley, and the mistress of Audley Court.”

Lucy Graham dropped the brush upon the picture, and flushed scarlet to the roots of her fair hair; and then grew pale again, far paler than Mrs. Dawson had ever seen her before.

“My dear, don’t agitate yourself,” said the surgeon’s wife, soothingly; “you know that nobody asks you to marry Sir Michael unless you wish. Of course it would be a magnificent match; he has a splendid income, and is one of the most generous of men. Your position would be very high, and you would be enabled to do a great deal of good; but, as I said before, you must be entirely guided by your own feelings. Only one thing I must say, and that is that if Sir Michael’s attentions are not agreeable to you, it is really scarcely honorable to encourage him.”

“His attentions—encourage him!” muttered Lucy, as if the words bewildered her. “Pray, pray don’t talk to me, Mrs. Dawson. I had no idea of this. It is the last thing that would have occurred to me.” She leaned her elbows on the drawing-board before her, and clasping her hands over her face, seemed for some minutes to be thinking deeply. She wore a narrow black ribbon round her neck, with a locket, or a cross, or a miniature, perhaps, attached to it; but whatever the trinket was, she always kept it hidden under her dress. Once or twice, while she sat silently thinking, she removed

one of her hands from before her face, and fidgeted nervously with the ribbon, clutching at it with a half-angry gesture, and twisting it backward and forward between her fingers.

"I think some people are born to be unlucky, Mrs. Dawson," she said, by-and-by; "it would be a great deal too much good fortune for me to become Lady Audley."

She said this with so much bitterness in her tone, that the surgeon's wife looked up at her with surprise.

"You unlucky, my dear!" she exclaimed. "I think you are the last person who ought to talk like that—you, such a bright, happy creature, that it does every one good to see you. I'm sure I don't know what we shall do if Sir Michael robs us of you."

After this conversation they often spoke upon the subject, and Lucy never again showed any emotion whatever when the baronet's admiration for her was canvassed. It was a tacitly understood thing in the surgeon's family that whenever Sir Michael proposed, the governess would quietly accept him; and, indeed, the simple Dawsons would have thought it something more than madness in a penniless girl to reject such an offer.

So, one misty August evening, Sir Michael, sitting opposite to Lucy Graham, at a window in the surgeon's little drawing-room, took an opportunity while the family happened by some accident to be absent from the room, of speaking upon the subject nearest to his heart. He made the governess, in a few but solemn words, an offer of his hand. There was something almost touching in the manner and tone in which he spoke to her—half in deprecation, knowing that he could hardly expect to be the choice of a beautiful young girl, and praying rather that she would reject him, even though she broke his heart by doing so, than that she should accept his offer if she did not love him.

"I scarcely think there is a greater sin, Lucy," he said, solemnly, "than that of a woman who marries a man she does not love. You are so precious to me, my beloved, that deeply as my heart is set on this, and bitter as the mere thought of disappointment is to me, I would not have you commit such a sin for any happiness of mine. If my happiness could be

achieved by such an act, which it could not—which it never could,” he repeated, earnestly—”nothing but misery can result from a marriage dictated by any motive but truth and love.”

Lucy Graham was not looking at Sir Michael, but straight out into the misty twilight and dim landscape far away beyond the little garden. The baronet tried to see her face, but her profile was turned to him, and he could not discover the expression of her eyes. If he could have done so, he would have seen a yearning gaze which seemed as if it would have pierced the far obscurity and looked away—away into another world.

“Lucy, you heard me?”

“Yes,” she said, gravely; not coldly, or in any way as if she were offended at his words.

“And your answer?”

She did not remove her gaze from the darkening country side, but for some moments was quite silent; then turning to him, with a sudden passion in her manner, that lighted up her face with a new and wonderful beauty which the baronet perceived even in the growing twilight, she fell on her knees at his feet.

“No, Lucy; no, no!” he cried, vehemently, “not here, not here!”

“Yes, here, here,” she said, the strange passion which agitated her making her voice sound shrill and piercing—not loud, but preternaturally distinct; “here and nowhere else. How good you are—how noble and how generous! Love you! Why, there are women a hundred times my superiors in beauty and in goodness who might love you dearly; but you ask too much of me! Remember what my life has been; only remember that! From my very babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty. My father was a gentleman: clever, accomplished, handsome—but poor—and what a pitiful wretch poverty made of him! My mother—But do not let me speak of her. Poverty—poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations. You cannot tell; you, who are among those for whom life is so smooth and easy, you can never guess what is endured by such as we. Do not ask too much of me, then. I cannot be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot!”

Beyond her agitation and her passionate vehemence, there is an undefined something in her manner which fills the baronet with a vague alarm. She is still on the ground at his feet, crouching rather than kneeling, her thin white dress clinging about her, her pale hair streaming over her shoulders, her great blue eyes glittering in the dusk, and her hands clutching at the black ribbon about her throat, as if it had been strangling her. "Don't ask too much of me," she kept repeating; "I have been selfish from my babyhood."

"Lucy—Lucy, speak plainly. Do you dislike me?"

"Dislike you? No—no!"

"But is there any one else whom you love?"

She laughed aloud at his question. "I do not love any one in the world," she answered.

He was glad of her reply; and yet that and the strange laugh jarred upon his feelings. He was silent for some moments, and then said, with a kind of effort:

"Well, Lucy, I will not ask too much of you. I dare say I am a romantic old fool; but if you do not dislike me, and if you do not love any one else, I see no reason why we should not make a very happy couple. Is it a bargain, Lucy?"

"Yes."

The baronet lifted her in his arms and kissed her once upon the forehead, then quietly bidding her good-night, he walked straight out of the house.

He walked straight out of the house, this foolish old man, because there was some strong emotion at work in his breast—neither joy nor triumph, but something almost akin to disappointment—some stifled and unsatisfied longing which lay heavy and dull at his heart, as if he had carried a corpse in his bosom. He carried the corpse of that hope which had died at the sound of Lucy's words. All the doubts and fears and timid aspirations were ended now. He must be contented, like other men of his age, to be married for his fortune and his position.

Lucy Graham went slowly up the stairs to her little room at the top of the house. She placed her dim candle on the chest of drawers, and seated herself on the edge of the white bed, still and white as the draperies hanging around her.

“No more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations,” she said; “every trace of the old life melted away—every clew to identity buried and forgotten—except these, except these.”

She had never taken her left hand from the black ribbon at her throat. She drew it from her bosom, as she spoke, and looked at the object attached to it.

It was neither a locket, a miniature, nor a cross; it was a ring wrapped in an oblong piece of paper—the paper partly written, partly printed, yellow with age, and crumpled with much folding.

## CHAPTER II

### ON BOARD THE ARGUS

He threw the end of his cigar into the water, and leaning his elbows upon the bulwarks, stared meditatively at the waves.

“How wearisome they are,” he said; “blue and green, and opal; opal, and blue, and green; all very well in their way, of course, but three months of them are rather too much, especially—”

He did not attempt to finish his sentence; his thoughts seemed to wander in the very midst of it, and carry him a thousand miles or so away.

“Poor little girl, how pleased she’ll be!” he muttered, opening his cigar-case, lazily surveying its contents; “how pleased and how surprised? Poor little girl. After three years and a half, too; she *will* be surprised.”

He was a young man of about five-and-twenty, with dark face bronzed by exposure to the sun; he had handsome brown eyes, with a lazy smile in them that sparkled through the black lashes, and a bushy beard and mustache that covered the whole lower part of his face. He was tall and powerfully built; he wore a loose gray suit and a felt hat, thrown carelessly upon his black hair. His name was George Talboys, and he was aft-cabin passenger on board the good ship *Argus*, laden with Australian wool and sailing from Sydney to Liverpool.

There were very few passengers in the aft-cabin of the *Argus*. An elderly wool-stapler returning to his native country with his wife and daughters, after having made a fortune in the colonies; a governess of three-and-thirty years of age, going home to marry a man to whom she had been engaged fifteen years; the sentimental daughter of a wealthy