ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

THE CAXTONS: A FAMILY PICTURE — VOLUME 07

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The Caxtons: A Family Picture – Volume 07

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The Caxtons: A Family Picture – Volume 07:

Содержание

Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton
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PART VII

CHAPTER I

Saith Dr. Luther, "When I saw Dr. Gode begin to tell his puddings hanging in the chimney, I told him he would not live long!"

I wish I had copied that passage from "The Table Talk" in large round hand, and set it before my father at breakfast, the morn preceding that fatal eve in which Uncle Jack persuaded him to tell his puddings.

Yet, now I think of it, Uncle Jack hung the puddings in the chimney, but he did not persuade my father to tell them.

Beyond a vague surmise that half the suspended "tomacula" would furnish a breakfast to Uncle Jack, and that the youthful appetite of Pisistratus would despatch the rest, my father did not give a thought to the nutritious properties of the puddings,—in other words, to the two thousand pounds which, thanks to Mr.

Tibbets, dangled down the chimney. So far as the Great Work was concerned, my father only cared for its publication, not its profits. I will not say that he might not hunger for praise, but I am quite sure that he did not care a button for pudding. Nevertheless, it was an infaust and sinister augury for Austin Caxton, the very appearance, the very suspension and danglement of any puddings whatsoever, right over his ingle-nook, when those puddings were made by the sleek hands of Uncle Jack! None of the puddings which he, poor man, had all his life been stringing, whether from his own chimneys or the chimneys of other people, had turned out to be real puddings,– they had always been the eidola, the erscheinungen, the phantoms and semblances of puddings.

I question if Uncle Jack knew much about Democritus of Abdera. But he was certainly tainted with the philosophy of that fanciful sage. He peopled the air with images of colossal stature which impressed all his dreams and divinations, and from whose influences came his very sensations and thoughts. His whole being, asleep or waking, was thus but the reflection of great phantom puddings!

As soon as Mr. Tibbets had possessed himself of the two volumes of the "History of Human Error," he had necessarily established that hold upon my father which hitherto those lubricate hands of his had failed to effect. He had found what he had so long sighed for in vain,—his point d'appui, wherein to fix the Archimedean screw. He fixed it tight in the "History of Human Error," and moved the Caxtonian world.

A day or two after the conversation recorded in my last chapter, I saw Uncle Jack coming out of the mahogany doors of my father's banker; and from that time there seemed no reason why Mr. Tibbets should not visit his relations on weekdays as well as Sundays. Not a day, indeed, passed but what he held long conversations with my father. He had much to report of his interviews with the publishers. In these conversations he naturally recurred to that grand idea of the "Literary Times," which had so dazzled my poor father's imagination; and, having heated the iron, Uncle Jack was too knowing a man not to strike while it was hot.

When I think of the simplicity my wise father exhibited in this crisis of his life, I must own that I am less moved by pity than admiration for that poor great-hearted student. We have seen that out of the learned indolence of twenty years, the ambition which is the instinct of a man of genius had emerged; the serious preparation of the Great Book for the perusal of the world had insensibly restored the claims of that noisy world on the silent individual. And therewith came a noble remorse that he had hitherto done so little for his species. Was it enough to write quartos upon the past history of Human Error? Was it not his duty, when the occasion was fairly presented, to enter upon that present, daily, hourly war with Error, which is the sworn chivalry of Knowledge? Saint George did not dissect dead dragons, he fought the live one. And London, with that magnetic atmosphere which in great capitals fills the breath of life with stimulating

particles, had its share in quickening the slow pulse of the student. In the country he read but his old authors, and lived with them through the gone ages. In the city, my father, during the intervals of repose from the Great Book, and still more now that the Great Book had come to a pause, inspected the literature of his own time. It had a prodigious effect upon him. He was unlike the ordinary run of scholars, and, indeed, of readers, for that matter, who, in their superstitious homage to the dead, are always willing enough to sacrifice the living. He did justice to the marvellous fertility of intellect which characterizes the authorship of the present age. By the present age, I do not only mean the present day, I commence with the century. "What," said my father one day in dispute with Trevanion, "what characterizes the literature of our time is its human interest. It is true that we do not see scholars addressing scholars, but men addressing men,—not that scholars are fewer, but that the reading public is more large. Authors in all ages address themselves to what interests their readers; the same things do not interest a vast community which interested half a score of monks or book-worms. The literary polls was once an oligarchy, it is now a republic. It is the general brilliancy of the atmosphere which prevents your noticing the size of any particular star. Do you not see that with the cultivation of the masses has awakened the Literature of the affections? Every sentiment finds an expositor, every feeling an oracle. Like Epimenides, I have been sleeping in a cave; and, waking, I see those whom I left children are bearded men, and towns have

sprung up in the landscapes which I left as solitary wastes."

Thence the reader may perceive the causes of the change which had come over my father. As Robert Hall says, I think of Dr. Kippis. "He had laid so many books at the top of his head that the brains could not move." But the electricity had now penetrated the heart, and the quickened vigor of that noble organ enabled the brain to stir. Meanwhile, I leave my father to these influences, and to the continuous conversations of Uncle Jack, and proceed with the thread of my own egotism.

Thanks to Mr. Trevanion, my habits were not those which favor friendships with the idle, but I formed some acquaintances amongst young men a few years older than myself, who held subordinate situations in the public offices, or were keeping their terms for the Bar. There was no want of ability amongst these gentlemen, but they had not yet settled into the stern prose of life. Their busy hours only made them more disposed to enjoy the hours of relaxation. And when we got together, a very gay, light-hearted set we were! We had neither money enough to be very extravagant, nor leisure enough to be very dissipated; but we amused ourselves notwithstanding. My new friends were wonderfully erudite in all matters connected with the theatres. From an opera to a ballet, from "Hamlet" to the last farce from the French, they had the literature of the stage at the finger-ends of their straw-colored gloves. They had a pretty large acquaintance with actors and actresses, and were perfect Walpoladi in the minor scandals of the day. To do

them justice, however, they were not indifferent to the more masculine knowledge necessary in "this wrong world." They talked as familiarly of the real actors of life as of the sham ones. They could adjust to a hair the rival pretensions of contending statesmen. They did not profess to be deep in the mysteries of foreign cabinets (with the exception of one young gentleman connected with the Foreign Office, who prided himself on knowing exactly what the Russians meant to do with India—when they got it); but, to make amends, the majority of them had penetrated the closest secrets of our own. It is true that, according to a proper subdivision of labor, each took some particular member of the government for his special observation; just as the most skilful surgeons, however profoundly versed in the general structure of our frame, rest their anatomical fame on the light they throw on particular parts of it,—one man taking the brain, another the duodenum, a third the spinal cord, while a fourth, perhaps, is a master of all the symptoms indicated by a pensile finger. Accordingly, one of my friends appropriated to himself the Home Department; another the Colonies; and a third, whom we all regarded as a future Talleyrand (or a De Retz at least), had devoted himself to the special study of Sir Robert Peel, and knew, by the way in which that profound and inscrutable statesman threw open his coat, every thought that was passing in his breast! Whether lawyers or officials, they all had a great idea of themselves,—high notions of what they were to be, rather than what they were to do, some day. As the king of

modern fine gentlemen said to himself, in paraphrase of Voltaire, "They had letters in their pockets addressed to Posterity,—which the chances were, however, that they might forget to deliver." Somewhat "priggish" most of them might be; but, on the whole, they were far more interesting than mere idle men of pleasure. There was about them, as features of a general family likeness, a redundant activity of life, a gay exuberance of ambition, a light-hearted earnestness when at work, a schoolboy's enjoyment of the hours of play.

A great contrast to these young men was Sir Sedley Beaudesert, who was pointedly kind to me, and whose bachelor's house was always open to me after noon: Sir Sedley was visible to no one but his valet before that hour. A perfect bachelor's house it was, too, with its windows opening on the Park, and sofas nicked into the windows, on which you might loll at your ease, like the philosopher in Lucretius,—

"Despicere unde queas alios, passimque videre Errare,"—

and see the gay crowds ride to and fro Rotten Row, without the fatigue of joining them, especially if the wind was in the east.

There was no affectation of costliness about the rooms, but a wonderful accumulation of comfort. Every patent chair that proffered a variety in the art of lounging found its place there; and near every chair a little table, on which you might deposit your book or your coffee-cup, without the trouble of moving more than your hand. In winter, nothing warmer than the quilted curtains and Axminster carpets can be conceived; in summer,

nothing airier and cooler than the muslin draperies and the Indian mattings. And I defy a man to know to what perfection dinner may be brought, unless he had dined with Sir Sedley Beaudesert. Certainly, if that distinguished personage had but been an egotist, he had been the happiest of men. But, unfortunately for him, he was singularly amiable and kind-hearted. He had the bonne digestion, but not the other requisite for worldly felicity,—the mauvais cceur. He felt a sincere pity for every one else who lived in rooms without patent chairs and little coffee-tables, whose windows did not look on the Park, with sofas niched into their recesses. As Henry IV. wished every man to have his pot au feu, so Sir Sedley Beaudesert, if he could have had his way, would have every man served with an early cucumber for his fish, and a caraffe of iced water by the side of his bread and cheese. He thus evinced on politics a naive simplicity which delightfully contrasted his acuteness on matters of taste. I remember his saying, in a discussion on the Beer Bill, "The poor ought not to be allowed to drink beer, it is so particularly rheumatic! The best drink in hard work is dry champagne,—not vtousseux; I found that out when I used to shoot on the moors."

Indolent as Sir Sedley was, he had contrived to open an extraordinary number of drains on his wealth.

First, as a landed proprietor there was no end to applications from distressed farmers, aged poor, benefit societies, and poachers he had thrown out of employment by giving up his preserves to please his tenants.

Next, as a man of pleasure the whole race of womankind had legitimate demands on him. From a distressed duchess whose picture lay perdu under a secret spring of his snuff-box, to a decayed laundress to whom he might have paid a compliment on the perfect involutions of a frill, it was quite sufficient to be a daughter of Eve to establish a just claim on Sir Sedley's inheritance from Adam.

Again, as an amateur of art and a respectful servant of every muse, all whom the public had failed to patronize,—painter, actor, poet, musician,—turned, like dying sunflowers to the sun, towards the pitying smile of Sir Sedley Beaudesert. Add to these the general miscellaneous multitude who "had heard of Sir Sedley's high character for benevolence," and one may well suppose what a very costly reputation he had set up. In fact, though Sir Sedley could not spend on what might fairly be called "himself" a fifth part of his very handsome income, I have no doubt that he found it difficult to make both ends meet at the close of the year. That he did so, he owed perhaps to two rules which his philosophy had peremptorily adopted. He never made debts, and he never gambled. For both these admirable aberrations from the ordinary routine of fine gentlemen I believe he was indebted to the softness of his disposition. He had a great compassion for a wretch who was dunned. "Poor fellow!" he would say, "it must be so painful to him to pass his life in saying 'No.'" So little did he know about that class of promisers,—as if a man dunned ever said 'No'! As Beau Brummell, when asked

if he was fond of vegetables, owned that he had once eat a pea, so Sir Sedley Beaudesert owned that he had once played high at piquet. "I was so unlucky as to win," said he, referring to that indiscretion, "and I shall never forget the anguish on the face of the man who paid me. Unless I could always lose, it would be a perfect purgatory to play."

Now nothing could be more different in their kinds of benevolence than Sir Sedley and Mr. Trevanion. Mr. Trevanion had a great contempt for individual charity. He rarely put his hand into his purse,—he drew a great check on his bankers. Was a congregation without a church, or a village without a school, or a river without a bridge, Mr. Trevanion set to work on calculations, found out the exact sum required by an algebraic x—y, and paid it as he would have paid his butcher. It must be owned that the distress of a man whom he allowed to be deserving, did not appeal to him in vain. But it is astonishing how little he spent in that way; for it was hard indeed to convince Mr. Trevanion that a deserving man ever was in such distress as to want charity.

That Trevanion, nevertheless, did infinitely more real good than Sir Sedley, I believe; but he did it as a mental operation, —by no means as an impulse from the heart. I am sorry to say that the main difference was this,—distress always seemed to accumulate round Sir Sedley, and vanish from the presence of Trevanion. Where the last came, with his busy, active, searching mind, energy woke, improvement sprang up. Where the first

came, with his warm, kind heart, a kind of torpor spread under its rays; people lay down and basked in the liberal sunshine. Nature in one broke forth like a brisk, sturdy winter; in the other like a lazy Italian summer. Winter is an excellent invigorator, no doubt, but we all love summer better.

Now, it is a proof how lovable Sir Sedley was, that I loved him, and yet was jealous of him. Of all the satellites round my fair Cynthia, Fanny Trevanion, I dreaded most this amiable luminary. It was in vain for me to say, with the insolence of youth, that Sir Sedley Beaudesert was of the same age as Fanny's father; to see them together, he might have passed for Trevanion's son. No one amongst the younger generation was half so handsome as Sedley Beaudesert. He might be eclipsed at first sight by the showy effect of more redundant locks and more brilliant bloom; but he had but to speak, to smile, in order to throw a whole cohort of dandies into the shade. It was the expression of his countenance that was so bewitching; there was something so kindly in its easy candor, its benign good-nature. And he understood women so well! He flattered their foibles so insensibly; he commanded their affection with so gracious a dignity. Above all, what with his accomplishments, his peculiar reputation, his long celibacy, and the soft melancholy of his sentiments, he always contrived to interest them. There was not a charming woman by whom this charming man did not seem just on the point of being caught! It was like the sight of a splendid trout in a transparent stream, sailing pensively to and fro your fly, in a willand- a-won't sort of

a way. Such a trout! it would be a thousand pities to leave him, when evidently so well disposed! That trout, fair maid or gentle widow, would have kept youwhipping the stream and dragging the fly—from morning to dewy eve. Certainly I don't wish worse to my bitterest foe of five and twenty than such a rival as Sedley Beaudesert at seven and forty.

Fanny, indeed, perplexed me horribly. Sometimes I fancied she liked me; but the fancy scarce thrilled me with delight before it vanished in the frost of a careless look or the cold beam of a sarcastic laugh. Spoiled darling of the world as she was, she seemed so innocent in her exuberant happiness that one forgot all her faults in that atmosphere of joy which she diffused around her. And despite her pretty insolence, she had so kind a woman's heart below the surface! When she once saw that she had pained you, she was so soft, so winning, so humble, till she had healed the wound. But then, if she saw she had pleased you too much, the little witch was never easy till she had plagued you again. As heiress to so rich a father, or rather perhaps mother (for the fortune came from Lady Ellinor), she was naturally surrounded with admirers not wholly disinterested. She did right to plague them; but Me! Poor boy that I was, why should I seem more disinterested than others; how should she perceive all that lay hid in my young deep heart? Was I not in all— worldly pretensions the least worthy of her admirers, and might I not seem, therefore, the most mercenary,—I, who never thought of her fortune, or if that thought did come across me, it was to make me start and

turn pale? And then it vanished at her first glance, as a ghost from the dawn. How hard it is to convince youth, that sees all the world of the future before it, and covers that future with golden palaces, of the inequalities of life! In my fantastic and sublime romance I looked out into that Great Beyond, saw myself orator, statesman, minister, ambassador,—Heaven knows what, —laying laurels, which I mistook for rent-rolls, at Fanny's feet.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.