ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

THE CAXTONS: A FAMILY PICTURE — VOLUME 15

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

The Caxtons: A Family Picture — Volume 15

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Содержание

Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton
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PART XV

CHAPTER I

There would have been nothing in what had chanced to justify the suspicions that tortured me, but for my impressions as to the character of Vivian.

Reader, hast thou not, in the easy, careless sociability of youth, formed acquaintance with some one in whose more engaging or brilliant qualities thou hast,—not lost that dislike to defects or vices which is natural to an age when, even while we err, we adore what is good, and glow with enthusiasts for the ennobling sentiment and the virtuous deed,—no, happily, not lost dislike to what is bad, nor thy quick sense of it,—but conceived a keen interest in the struggle between the bad that revolted, and the good that attracted thee, in thy companion? Then, perhaps, thou hast lost sight of him for a time; suddenly thou hearest that he has done something out of the way of ordinary good or commonplace evil; and in either—the good or the evil—thy mind runs rapidly back over its old reminiscences, and of either thou sayest, "How natural! Only, So-and-so could have done this thing!"

Thus I felt respecting Vivian. The most remarkable qualities in his character were his keen power of calculation and his unhesitating audacity,—qualities that lead to fame or to infamy, according to the cultivation of the moral sense and the direction of the passions. Had I recognized those qualities in some agency apparently of good,—and it seemed yet doubtful if Vivian were the agent,—I should have cried, "It is he; and the better angel has triumphed!" With the same (alas! with a yet more impulsive) quickness, when the agency was of evil, and the agent equally dubious, I felt that the qualities revealed the man, and that the demon had prevailed.

Mile after mile, stage after stage, were passed on the dreary, interminable, high north road. I narrated to my companion, more intelligibly than I had yet done, my causes for apprehension. The Captain at first listened eagerly, then checked me on the sudden. "There may be nothing in all this," he cried. "Sir, we must be men here,—have our heads cool, our reason clear; stop!" And leaning back in the chaise, Roland refused further conversation, and as the night advanced, seemed to sleep. I took pity on his fatigue, and devoured my heart in silence. At each stage we heard of the party of which we were in pursuit. At the first stage or two we were less than an hour behind; gradually, as we advanced, we lost ground, despite the most lavish liberality to the post-boys. I supposed, at length, that the mere circumstance of changing, at each relay, the chaise as well as the horses, was the cause of our comparative slowness; and on saying this to Roland as we were changing horses, somewhere about midnight, he at once called up the master of the inn and gave him his own price for permission to retain the chaise till the journey's end. This was so unlike Roland's ordinary thrift, whether dealing with my money or his own,—so unjustified by the fortune of either,—that I could not help muttering something in apology.

"Can you guess why I was a miser?" said Roland, calmly.

"A miser? Anything but that! Only prudent,—military men often are so."

"I was a miser," repeated the Captain, with emphasis. "I began the habit first when my son was but a child. I thought him high-spirited, and with a taste for extravagance. 'Well,' said I to myself, 'I will save for him; boys will be boys.' Then, afterwards, when he was no more a child (at least he began to have the vices of a man), I said to myself, 'Patience! he may reform still; if not, I will save money, that I may have power over his self-interest, since I have none over his heart. I will bribe him

into honor!' And then—and then—God saw that I was very proud, and I was punished. Tell them to drive faster,— faster; why, this is a snail's pace!"

All that night, all the next day, till towards the evening, we pursued our journey, without pause or other food than a crust of bread and a glass of wine. But we now picked up the ground we had lost, and gained upon the carriage. The night had closed in when we arrived at the stage at which the route to Lord N—'s branched from the direct north road. And here, making our usual inquiry, my worst suspicions were confirmed. The carriage we pursued had changed horses an hour before, but had not taken the way to Lord N—'s, continuing the direct road into Scotland. The people of the inn had not seen the lady in the carriage, for it was already dark; but the man-servant (whose livery they described) had ordered the horses.

The last hope that, in spite of appearances, no treachery had been designed, here vanished. The Captain at first seemed more dismayed than myself, but he recovered more quickly. "We will continue the journey on horseback," he said; and hurried to the stables. All objections vanished at the sight of his gold. In five minutes we were in the saddle, with a postilion, also mounted, to accompany us. We did the next stage in little more than two thirds of the time which we should have occupied in our former mode of travel,—indeed I found it hard to keep pace with Roland. We remounted; we were only twenty-five minutes behind the carriage,—we felt confident that we should overtake it before it could reach the next town. The moon was up: we could see far before us; we rode at full speed. Milestone after milestone glided by; the carriage was not visible. We arrived at the post-town or rather village; it contained but one posting-house. We were long in knocking up the hostlers: no carriage had arrived just before us; no carriage had passed the place since noon.

What mystery was this?

"Back, back, boy!" said Roland, with a soldier's quick wit, and spurring his jaded horse from the yard. "They will have taken a cross-road or by-lane. We shall track them by the hoofs of the horses or the print of the wheels."

Our postilion grumbled, and pointed to the panting sides of our horses. For answer, Roland opened his hand—full of gold. Away we went back through the dull, sleeping village, back into the broad moonlit thoroughfare. We came to a cross-road to the right, but the track we pursued still led us straight on. We had measured back nearly half the way to the post-town at which we had last changed, when lo! there emerged from a by-lane two postilions and their horses!

At that sight our companion, shouting loud, pushed on before us and hailed his fellows. A few words gave us the information we sought. A wheel had come off the carriage just by the turn of the road, and the young lady and her servants had taken refuge in a small inn not many yards down the lane. The man-servant had dismissed the post-boys after they had baited their horses, saying they were to come again in the morning and bring a blacksmith to repair the wheel.

"How came the wheel off?" asked Roland, sternly.

"Why, sir, the linch-pin was all rotted away, I suppose, and came out."

"Did the servant get off the dickey after you set out, and before the accident happened?"

"Why, yes. He said the wheels were catching fire, that they had not the patent axles, and he had forgot to have them oiled."

"And he looked at the wheels, and shortly afterwards the linch-pin came out? Eh?"

"Anan, sir!" said the post-boy, staring; "why, and indeed so it was!"

"Come on, Pisistratus, we are in time; but pray God, pray God that—" The Captain dashed his spurs into the horse's sides, and the rest of his words were lost to me.

A few yards back from the causeway, a broad patch of green before it, stood the inn,—a sullen, old-fashioned building of cold gray stone, looking livid in the moonlight, with black firs at one side throwing over half of it a dismal shadow. So solitary,—not a house, not a but near it! If they who kept the inn were such that villany might reckon on their connivance, and innocence despair of their aid, there was no neighborhood to alarm, no refuge at hand. The spot was well chosen.

The doors of the inn were closed; there was a light in the room below: but the outside shutters were drawn over the windows on the first floor. My uncle paused a moment, and said to the postilion, —

"Do you know the back way to the premises?"

"No, sir; I does n't often come by this way, and they be new folks that have taken the house, —and I hear it don't prosper over much."

"Knock at the door; we will stand a little aside while you do so. If any one ask what you want, merely say you would speak to the servant,— that you have found a purse. Here, hold up mine."

Roland and I had dismounted, and my uncle drew me close to the wall by the door, observing that my impatience ill submitted to what seemed to me idle preliminaries.

"Hist!" whispered he. "If there be anything to conceal within, they will not answer the door till some one has reconnoitred; were they to see us, they would refuse to open. But seeing only the post-boy, whom they will suppose at first to be one of those who brought the carriage, they will have no suspicion. Be ready to rush in the moment the door is unbarred."

My uncle's veteran experience did not deceive him. There was a long silence before any reply was made to the post-boy's summons; the light passed to and fro rapidly across the window, as if persons were moving within. Roland made sign to the post-boy to knock again. He did so twice, thrice; and at last, from an attic window in the roof, a head obtruded and a voice cried, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm the post-boy at the Red Lion; I want to see the servant with the brown carriage: I have found this purse!"

"Oh! that's all; wait a bit."

The head disappeared. We crept along under the projecting eaves of the house; we heard the bar lifted from the door, the door itself cautiously opened: one spring, and I stood within, and set my back to the door to admit Roland.

"Ho, help! thieves! help!" cried a loud voice, and I felt a hand grip at my throat. I struck at random in the dark, and with effect, for my blow was followed by a groan and a curse.

Roland, meanwhile, had detected a ray through the chinks of a door in the hall, and, guided by it, found his way into the room at the window of which we had seen the light pass and go, while without. As he threw the door open, I bounded after him and saw, in a kind of parlor, two females,—the one a stranger, no doubt the hostess; the other the treacherous abigail. Their faces evinced their terror.

"Woman," I said, seizing the last, "where is Miss Trevanion?" Instead of replying, the woman set up a loud shriek. Another light now gleamed from the staircase which immediately faced the door, and I heard a voice, that I recognized as Peacock's, cry out, "Who's there?—What's the matter?"

I made a rush at the stairs. A burly form (that of the landlord, who had recovered from my blow) obstructed my way for a moment, to measure its length on the floor at the next. I was at the top of the stairs; Peacock recognized me, recoiled, and extinguished the light. Oaths, cries, and shrieks now resounded through the dark. Amidst them all I suddenly heard a voice exclaim, "Here, here! help!" It was the voice of Fanny. I made my way to the right, whence the voice came, and received a violent blow. Fortunately it fell on the arm which I extended, as men do who feel their way through the dark. It was not the right arm, and I seized and closed on my assailant. Roland now came up, a candle in his hand; and at that sight my antagonist, who was no other than Peacock, slipped from me and made a rush at the stairs. But the Captain caught him with his grasp of iron. Fearing nothing for Roland in a contest with any single foe, and all my thoughts bent on the rescue of her whose voice again broke on my ear, I had already (before the light of the candle which Roland held went out in the struggle between himself and Peacock) caught sight of a door at the end of the passage, and thrown myself against it: it was locked, but it shook and groaned to my pressure.

"Hold back, whoever you are," cried a voice from the room within, far different from that wail of distress which had guided my steps. "Hold back at the peril of your life!"

The voice, the threat, redoubled my strength: the door flew from its fastenings. I stood in the room. I saw Fanny at my feet, clasping my hands; then raising herself, she hung on my shoulder and murmured "Saved!" Opposite to me, his face deformed by passion, his eyes literally blazing with savage fire, his nostrils distended, his lips apart, stood the man I have called Francis Vivian.

"Fanny—Miss Trevanion—what outrage, what villany is this? You have not met this man at your free choice,—oh, speak!" Vivian sprang forward.

"Question no one but me. Unhand that lady,—she is my betrothed; shall be my wife."

"No, no, no,—don't believe him," cried Fanny; "I have been betrayed by my own servants,—brought here, I know not how! I heard my father was ill; I was on my way to him that man met me here and dared to—"

"Miss Trevanion—yes, I dared to say I loved you!"

"Protect me from him! You will protect me from him?"

"No, madam!" said a voice behind me, in a deep tone; "it is I who claim the right to protect you from that man; it is I who now draw around you the arm of one sacred, even to him; it is I who, from this spot, launch upon his head—a father's curse. Violator of the hearth, baffled ravisher, go thy way to the doom which thou hast chosen for thyself! God will be merciful to me yet, and give me a grave before thy course find its close in the hulks or at the gallows!"

A sickness came over me, a terror froze my veins; I reeled back, and leaned for support against the wall. Roland had passed his arm round Fanny, and she, frail and trembling, clung to his broad breast, looking fearfully up to his face. And never in that face, ploughed by deep emotions and dark with unutterable sorrows, had I seen an expression so grand in its wrath, so sublime in its despair. Following the direction of his eye, stern and fixed as the look of one who prophesies a destiny and denounces a doom, I shivered as I gazed upon the son. His whole frame seemed collapsed and shrinking, as if already withered by the curse; a ghastly whiteness overspread the cheek, usually glowing with the dark bloom of Oriental youth; the knees knocked together; and at last, with a faint exclamation of pain, like the cry of one who receives a death-blow, he bowed his face over his clasped hands, and so remained —still, but cowering.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.