

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**THE SAXTONS: A
FAMILY PICTURE —
VOLUME 03**

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The Saxtons: A Family
Picture — Volume 03

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Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton

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PART III

CHAPTER I

It was a beautiful summer afternoon when the coach set me down at my father's gate. Mrs. Primmins herself ran out to welcome me; and I had scarcely escaped from the warm clasp of her friendly hand before I was in the arms of my mother.

As soon as that tenderest of parents was convinced that I was not famished, seeing that I had dined two hours ago at Dr. Herman's, she led me gently across the garden towards the arbor. "You will find your father so cheerful," said she, wiping away a tear. "His brother is with him."

I stopped. His brother! Will the reader believe it? I had never heard that he had a brother, so little were family affairs ever discussed in my hearing.

"His brother!" said I. "Have I then an Uncle Caxton as well as an Uncle Jack?"

"Yes, my love," said my mother. And then she added, "Your father and he were not such good friends as they ought to have been, and the Captain has been abroad. However, thank Heaven! they are now quite reconciled."

We had time for no more,—we were in the arbor. There, a table was spread with wine and fruit,—the gentlemen were at their dessert; and those gentlemen were my father, Uncle Jack, Mr. Squills, and—tall, lean, buttoned-to-the-chin—an erect, martial, majestic, and imposing personage, who seemed worthy of a place in my great ancestor's "Boke of Chivalrie."

All rose as I entered; but my poor father, who was always slow in his movements, had the last of me. Uncle Jack had left the very powerful impression of his great seal-ring on my fingers; Mr. Squills had patted me on the shoulder and pronounced me "wonderfully grown;" my new-found relative had with great dignity said, "Nephew, your hand, sir,—I am Captain de Caxton;" and even the tame duck had taken her beak from her wing and rubbed it gently between my legs, which was her usual mode of salutation, before my father placed his pale hand on my forehead, and looking at me for a moment with unutterable sweetness, said, "More and more like your mother,—God bless you!"

A chair had been kept vacant for me between my father and his brother. I sat down in haste, and with a tingling color on my cheeks and a rising at my throat, so much had the unusual kindness of my father's greeting affected me; and then there

came over me a sense of my new position. I was no longer a schoolboy at home for his brief holiday: I had returned to the shelter of the roof-tree to become myself one of its supports. I was at last a man, privileged to aid or solace those dear ones who had ministered, as yet without return, to me. That is a very strange crisis in our life when we come home for good. Home seems a different thing; before, one has been but a sort of guest after all, only welcomed and indulged, and little festivities held in honor of the released and happy child. But to come home for good,—to have done with school and boyhood,—is to be a guest, a child no more. It is to share the everyday life of cares and duties; it is to enter into the confidences of home. Is it not so? I could have buried my face in my hands and wept!

My father, with all his abstraction and all his simplicity, had a knack now and then of penetrating at once to the heart. I verily believe he read all that was passing in mine as easily as if it had been Greek. He stole his arm gently round my waist and whispered, "Hush!" Then, lifting his voice, he cried aloud, "Brother Roland, you must not let Jack have the best of the argument."

"Brother Austin," replied the Captain, very formally, "Mr. Jack, if I may take the liberty so to call him—"

"You may indeed," cried Uncle Jack.

"Sir," said the Captain, bowing, "it is a familiarity that does me honor. I was about to say that Mr. Jack has retired from the field."

"Far from it," said Squills, dropping an effervescing powder into a chemical mixture which he had been preparing with great attention, composed of sherry and lemon-juice—"far from it. Mr. Tibbets—whose organ of combativeness is finely developed, by the by—was saying—"

"That it is a rank sin and shame in the nineteenth century," quoth Uncle Jack, "that a man like my friend Captain Caxton—"

"De Caxton, sir—Mr. Jack."

"De Caxton,—of the highest military talents, of the most illustrious descent,—a hero sprung from heroes,—should have served so many years, and with such distinction, in his Majesty's service, and should now be only a captain on half-pay. This, I say, comes of the infamous system of purchase, which sets up the highest honors for sale, as they did in the Roman empire—"

My father pricked up his ears; but Uncle Jack pushed on before my father could get ready the forces of his meditated interruption.

"A system which a little effort, a little union, can so easily terminate. Yes, sir," and Uncle Jack thumped the table, and two cherries bobbed up and smote Captain de Caxton on the nose, "yes, sir, I will undertake to say that I could put the army upon a very different footing. If the poorer and more meritorious gentlemen, like Captain de Caxton, would, as I was just observing, but unite in a grand anti- aristocratic association, each paying a small sum quarterly, we could realize a capital sufficient to out-purchase all these undeserving individuals, and

every man of merit should have his fair chance of promotion."

"Egad! sir," said Squills, "there is something grand in that, eh, Captain?"

"No, sir," replied the Captain, quite seriously; "there is in monarchies but one fountain of honor. It would be an interference with a soldier's first duty,—his respect for his sovereign."

"On the contrary," said Mr. Squills, "it would still be to the sovereigns that one would owe the promotion."

"Honor," pursued the Captain, coloring up, and unheeding this witty interruption, "is the reward of a soldier. What do I care that a young jackanapes buys his colonelcy over my head? Sir, he does not buy from me my wounds and my services. Sir, he does not buy from me the medal I won at Waterloo. He is a rich man, and I am a poor man; he is called— colonel, because he paid money for the name. That pleases him; well and good. It would not please me; I had rather remain a captain, and feel my dignity, not in my title, but in the services by which it has been won. A beggarly, rascally association of stock-brokers, for aught I know, buy me a company! I don't want to be uncivil, or I would say damn 'em—Mr.—sir—Jack!"

A sort of thrill ran through the Captain's audience; even Uncle Jack seemed touched, for he stared very hard at the grim veteran, and said nothing. The pause was awkward; Mr. Squills broke it. "I should like," quoth he, "to see your Waterloo medal,—you have it not about you?"

"Mr. Squills," answered the Captain, "it lies next to my heart while I live. It shall be buried in my coffin, and I shall rise with it, at the word of command, on the day of the Grand Review!" So saying, the Captain leisurely unbuttoned his coat, and detaching from a piece of striped ribbon as ugly a specimen of the art of the silversmith (begging its pardon) as ever rewarded merit at the expense of taste, placed the medal on the table.

The medal passed round, without a word, from hand to hand.

"It is strange," at last said my father, "how such trifles can be made of such value,—how in one age a man sells his life for what in the next age he would not give a button! A Greek esteemed beyond price a few leaves of olive twisted into a circular shape and set upon his head,—a very ridiculous head-gear we should now call it. An American Indian prefers a decoration of human scalps, which, I apprehend, we should all agree (save and except Mr. Squills, who is accustomed to such things) to be a very disgusting addition to one's personal attractions; and my brother values this piece of silver, which may be worth about five shillings, more than Jack does a gold mine, or I do the library of the London Museum. A time will come when people will think that as idle a decoration as leaves and scalps."

"Brother," said the Captain, "there is nothing strange in the matter. It is as plain as a pike-staff to a man who understands the principles of honor."

"Possibly," said my father, mildly. "I should like to hear what you have to say upon honor. I am sure it would very much edify

us all."

CHAPTER II

"Gentlemen," began the Captain, at the distinct appeal thus made to him,— "Gentlemen, God made the earth, but man made the garden. God made man, but man re-creates himself."

"True, by knowledge," said my father.

"By industry," said Uncle Jack.

"By the physical conditions of his body," said Mr. Squills. He could not have made himself other than he was at first in the woods and wilds if he had fins like a fish, or could only chatter gibberish like a monkey. Hands and a tongue, sir,—these are the instruments of progress."

"Mr. Squills," said my father, nodding, "Anaxagoras said very much the same thing before you, touching the hands."

"I cannot help that," answered Mr. Squills; "one could not open one's lips, if one were bound to say what nobody else had said. But after all, our superiority is less in our hands than the greatness, of our thumbs."

"Albinus, 'De Sceleto,' and our own learned William Lawrence, have made a similar remark," again put in my father. "Hang it, sir!" exclaimed Squills, "what business have you to know everything?"

"Everything! No; but thumbs furnish subjects of investigation to the simplest understanding," said my father, modestly.

"Gentlemen," re-commenced my Uncle Roland, "thumbs and

hands are given to an Esquimaux, as well as to scholars and surgeons,—and what the deuce are they the wiser for them? Sirs, you cannot reduce us thus into mechanism. Look within. Man, I say, re-creates himself. How? By The Principle Of Honor. His first desire is to excel some one else; his first impulse is distinction above his fellows. Heaven places in his soul, as if it were a compass, a needle that always points to one end; namely, to honor in that which those around him consider honorable. Therefore, as man at first is exposed to all dangers from wild beasts, and from men as savage as himself, Courage becomes the first quality mankind must honor: therefore the savage is courageous; therefore he covets the praise for courage; therefore he decorates himself with the skins of the beasts he has subdued, or the the scalps of the foes he has slain. Sirs, don't tell me that the skins and the scalps are only hide and leather: they are trophies of honor. Don't tell me that they are ridiculous and disgusting: they become glorious as proofs that the savage has emerged out of the first brute-like egotism, and attached price to the praise which men never give except for works that secure or advance their welfare. By and by, sirs, our savages discover that they cannot live in safety amongst themselves unless they agree to speak the truth to each other: therefore Truth becomes valued, and grows into a principle of honor; so brother Austin will tell us that in the primitive times truth was always the attribute of a hero."

"Right," said my father; "Homer emphatically assigns it to Achilles."

"Out of truth comes the necessity for some kind of rude justice and law. Therefore men, after courage in the warrior, and truth in all, begin to attach honor to the elder, whom they intrust with preserving justice amongst them. So, sirs, Law is born—"

"But the first lawgivers were priests," quoth my father.

"Sirs, I am coming to that. Whence arises the desire of honor, but from man's necessity of excelling,—in other words, of improving his faculties for the benefit of others; though, unconscious of that consequence, man only strives for their praise? But that desire for honor is unextinguishable, and man is naturally anxious to carry its rewards beyond the grave. Therefore he who has slain most lions or enemies, is naturally prone to believe that he shall have the best hunting fields in the country beyond, and take the best place at the banquet. Nature, in all its operations, impresses man with the idea of an invisible Power; and the principle of honor that is, the desire of praise and reward—snakes him anxious for the approval which that Power can bestow. Thence comes the first rude idea of Religion; and in the death-hymn at the stake, the savage chants songs prophetic of the distinctions he is about to receive. Society goes on; hamlets are built; property is established. He who has more than another has more power than another. Power is honored. Alan covets the honor attached to the power which is attached to possession. Thus the soil is cultivated; thus the rafts are constructed; thus tribe trades with tribe; thus Commerce is founded, and Civilization commenced. Sirs, all that seems

least connected with honor, as we approach the vulgar days of the present, has its origin in honor, and is but an abuse of its principles. If men nowadays are hucksters and traders, if even military honors are purchased, and a rogue buys his way to a peerage, still all arises from the desire for honor, which society, as it grows old, gives to the outward signs of titles and gold, instead of, as once, to its inward essentials,—courage, truth, justice, enterprise. Therefore I say, sirs, that honor is the foundation of all improvement in mankind."

"You have argued like a schoolman, brother," said Mr. Caxton, admiringly; "but still, as to this round piece of silver, don't we go back to the most barbarous ages in estimating so highly such things as have no real value in themselves,—as could not give us one opportunity for instructing our minds?"

"Could not pay for a pair of boots," added Uncle Jack.

"Or," said Mr. Squills, "save you one twinge of the cursed rheumatism you have got for life from that night's bivouac in the Portuguese marshes,—to say nothing of the bullet in your cranium, and that cork-leg, which must much diminish the salutary effects of your constitutional walk."

"Gentlemen," resumed the Captain, nothing abashed, "in going back to those barbarous ages, I go back to the true principles of honor. It is precisely because this round piece of silver has no value in the market that it is priceless, for thus it is only a proof of desert. Where would be the sense of service in this medal, if it could buy back my leg, or if I could bargain

it away for forty thousand a year? No, sirs, its value is this,—that when I wear it on my breast, men shall say, 'That formal old fellow is not so useless as he seems. He was one of those who saved England and freed Europe.' And even when I conceal it here," and, devoutly kissing the medal, Uncle Roland restored it to its ribbon and its resting-place, "and no eye sees it, its value is yet greater in the thought that my country has not degraded the old and true principles of honor, by paying the soldier who fought for her in the same coin as that in which you, Mr. Jack, sir, pay your bootmaker's bill. No, no, gentlemen. As courage was the first virtue that honor called forth, the first virtue from which all safety and civilization proceed, so we do right to keep that one virtue at least clear and unsullied from all the money-making, mercenary, pay-me-in-cash abominations which are the vices, not the virtues, of the civilization it has produced."

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