

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**THE SAXTONS: A
FAMILY PICTURE —
VOLUME 09**

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
The Caxtons: A Family
Picture — Volume 09

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Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton

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PART IX

CHAPTER I

And my father pushed aside his books.

O young reader, whoever thou art,—or reader at least who hast been young,—canst thou not remember some time when, with thy wild troubles and sorrows as yet borne in secret, thou hast come back from that hard, stern world which opens on thee when thou puttest thy foot out of the threshold of home,—come back to the four quiet walls wherein thine elders sit in peace,—and seen, with a sort of sad amaze, how calm and undisturbed all is there? That generation which has gone before thee in the path of the passions,—the generation of thy parents (not so many years, perchance, remote from thine own),—how immovably far off, in its still repose, it seems from thy turbulent youth! It has in it a stillness as of a classic age, antique as the statues of the Greeks. That tranquil monotony of routine into which those lives that

preceded thee have merged; the occupations that they have found sufficing for their happiness, by the fireside, in the arm-chair and corner appropriated to each,—how strangely they contrast thine own feverish excitement! And they make room for thee, and bid thee welcome, and then resettle to their hushed pursuits as if nothing had happened! Nothing had happened! while in thy heart, perhaps, the whole world seems to have shot from its axis, all the elements to be at war! And you sit down, crushed by that quiet happiness which you can share no more, and smile mechanically, and look into the fire; and, ten to one, you say nothing till the time comes for bed, and you take up your candle and creep miserably to your lonely room.

Now, it in a stage-coach in the depth of winter, when three passengers are warm and snug, a fourth, all besnowed and frozen, descends from the outside and takes place amongst them, straightway all the three passengers shift their places, uneasily pull up their cloak collars, re-arrange their "comforters," feel indignantly a sensible loss of caloric: the intruder has at least made a sensation. But if you had all the snows of the Grampians in your heart, you might enter unnoticed; take care not to tread on the toes of your opposite neighbor, and not a soul is disturbed, not a "comforter" stirs an inch. I had not slept a wink, I had not even lain down all that night,—the night in which I had said farewell to Fanny Trevanion; and the next morning, when the sun rose, I wandered out,—where I know not: I have a dim recollection of long, gray, solitary streets; of the river, that seemed flowing in

dull, sullen silence, away, far away, into some invisible eternity; trees and turf, and the gay voices of children. I must have gone from one end of the great Babel to the other; for my memory only became clear and distinct when I knocked, somewhere before noon, at the door of my father's house, and, passing heavily up the stairs, came into the drawing-room, which was the rendezvous of the little family; for since we had been in London, my father had ceased to have his study apart, and contented himself with what he called "a corner,"—a corner wide enough to contain two tables and a dumb-waiter, with chairs a discretion all littered with books. On the opposite side of this capacious corner sat my uncle, now nearly convalescent, and he was jotting down, in his stiff, military hand, certain figures in a little red account-book; for you know already that my Uncle Roland was, in his expenses, the most methodical of men.

My father's face was more benign than usual, for before him lay a proof,—the first proof of his first work—his one work—the Great Book! Yes! it had positively found a press. And the first proof of your first work—ask any author what that is! My mother was out, with the faithful Mrs. Primmins, shopping or marketing, no doubt; so, while the brothers were thus engaged, it was natural that my entrance should not make as much noise as if it had been a bomb, or a singer, or a clap of thunder, or the last "great novel of the season," or anything else that made a noise in those days. For what makes a noise now,—now, when the most astonishing thing of all is our easy familiarity with things astounding; when

we say, listlessly, "Another revolution at Paris," or, "By the by, there is the deuce to do at Vienna!" when De Joinville is catching fish in the ponds at Claremont, and you hardly turn back to look at Metternich on the pier at Brighton!

My uncle nodded and growled indistinctly; my father put aside his books,— "you have told us that already."

Sir, you are very much mistaken; it was not then that he put aside his books, for he was not then engaged in them,—he was reading his proof. And he smiled, and pointed to it (the proof I mean) pathetically, and with a kind of humor, as much as to say: "What can you expect, Pisistratus? My new baby in short clothes—or long primer, which is all the same thing!"

I took a chair between the two, and looked first at one, then at the other. Heaven forgive me!—I felt a rebellious, ungrateful spite against both. The bitterness of my soul must have been deep indeed to have overflowed in that direction, but it did. The grief of youth is an abominable egotist, and that is the truth. I got up from my chair and walked towards the window; it was open, and outside the window was Mrs. Primmins's canary, in its cage. London air had agreed with it, and it was singing lustily. Now, when the canary saw me standing opposite to its cage, and regarding it seriously, and, I have no doubt, with a very sombre aspect, the creature stopped short, and hung its head on one side, looking at me obliquely and suspiciously. Finding that I did it no harm, it began to hazard a few broken notes, timidly and interrogatively, as it were, pausing between each; and at length,

as I made no reply, it evidently thought it had solved the doubt, and ascertained that I was more to be pitied than feared,—for it stole gradually into so soft and silvery a strain that, I verily believe, it did it on purpose to comfort me!—me, its old friend, whom it had unjustly suspected. Never did any music touch me so home as did that long, plaintive cadence. And when the bird ceased, it perched itself close to the bars of the cage, and looked at me steadily with its bright, intelligent eyes. I felt mine water, and I turned back and stood in the centre of the room, irresolute what to do, where to go. My father had done with the proof, and was deep in his folios. Roland had clasped his red account-book, restored it to his pocket, wiped his pen carefully, and now watched me from under his great beetle-brows. Suddenly he rose, and stamping on the hearth with his cork leg, exclaimed, "Look up from those cursed books, brother Austin! What is there in your son's face? Construe that, if you can!"

CHAPTER II

And my father pushed aside his books and rose hastily. He took off his spectacles and rubbed them mechanically, but he said nothing, and my uncle, staring at him for a moment, in surprise at his silence, burst out,—

"Oh! I see; he has been getting into some scrape, and you are angry. Fie! young blood will have its way, Austin, it will. I don't blame that; it is only when—Come here, Sisty. Zounds! man, come here."

My father gently brushed off the Captain's hand, and advancing towards me, opened his arms. The next moment I was sobbing on his breast.

"But what is the matter?" cried Captain Roland. "Will nobody say what is the matter? Money, I suppose, money, you confounded extravagant young dog. Luckily you have got an uncle who has more than he knows what to do with. How much? Fifty?—a hundred?—two hundred? How can I write the check if you'll not speak?"

"Hush, brother! it is no money you can give that will set this right. My poor boy! Have I guessed truly? Did I guess truly the other evening when—"

"Yes, sir, yes! I have been so wretched. But I am better now, —I can tell you all."

My uncle moved slowly towards the door; his fine sense of

delicacy made him think that even he was out of place in the confidence between son and father.

"No, uncle," I said, holding out my hand to him, "stay. You too can advise me,—strengthen me. I have kept my honor yet; help me to keep it still."

At the sound of the word "honor," Captain Roland stood mute, and raised his head quickly.

So I told all,—incoherently enough at first, but clearly and manfully as I went on. Now I know that it is not the custom of lovers to confide in fathers and uncles. Judging by those mirrors of life, plays and novels, they choose better,—valets and chambermaids, and friends whom they have picked up in the street, as I had picked up poor Francis Vivian: to these they make clean breasts of their troubles. But fathers and uncles,—to them they are close, impregnable, "buttoned to the chin." The Caxtons were an eccentric family, and never did anything like other people. When I had ended, I lifted up my eyes and said pleadingly, "Now tell me, is there no hope—none?"

"Why should there be none?" cried Captain Roland, hastily—"the De Caxtons are as good a family as the Trevanions; and as for yourself, all I will say is, that the young lady might choose worse for her own happiness."

I wrung my uncle's hand, and turned to my father in anxious fear, for I knew that, in spite of his secluded habits, few men ever formed a sounder judgment on worldly matters, when he was fairly drawn to look at them. A thing wonderful is that plain

wisdom which scholars and poets often have for others, though they rarely deign to use it for themselves. And how on earth do they get at it? I looked at my father, and the vague hope Roland had excited fell as I looked.

"Brother," said he, slowly, and shaking his head, "the world, which gives codes and laws to those who live in it, does not care much for a pedigree, unless it goes with a title-deed to estates."

"Trevanion was not richer than Pisistratus when he married Lady Ellinor," said my uncle.

"True, but Lady Ellinor was not then an heiress; and her father viewed these matters as no other peer in England perhaps would. As for Trevanion himself, I dare say he has no prejudices about station, but he is strong in common-sense. He values himself on being a practical man. It would be folly to talk to him of love, and the affections of youth. He would see in the son of Austin Caxton, living on the interest of some fifteen or sixteen thousand pounds, such a match for his daughter as no prudent man in his position could approve. And as for Lady Ellinor—"

"She owes us much, Austin!" exclaimed Roland, his face darkening.

"Lady Ellinor is now what, if we had known her better, she promised always to be,—the ambitious, brilliant, scheming woman of the world. Is it not so, Pisistratus?"

I said nothing,—I felt too much.

"And does the girl like you? But I think it is clear she does!" exclaimed Roland. "Fate, fate; it has been a fatal family to us!"

Zounds! Austin, it was your fault. Why did you let him go there?"

"My son is now a man,—at least in heart, if not in years can man be shut from danger and trial? They found me in the old parsonage, brother!" said my father, mildly.

My uncle walked, or rather stumped, three times up and down the room; and he then stopped short, folded his arms, and came to a decision,—

"If the girl likes you, your duty is doubly clear: you can't take advantage of it. You have done right to leave the house, for the temptation might be too strong."

"But what excuse shall I make to Mr. Trevanion?" said I, feebly; "what story can I invent? So careless as he is while he trusts, so penetrating if he once suspects, he will see through all my subterfuges, and—and—"

"It is as plain as a pikestaff," said my uncle, abruptly, "and there need be no subterfuge in the matter. 'I must leave you, Mr. Trevanion.' 'Why?' says he. 'Don't ask me.' He insists. 'Well then, sir, if you must know, I love your daughter. I have nothing, she is a great heiress. You will not approve of that love, and therefore I leave you!' That is the course that becomes an English gentleman. Eh, Austin?"

"You are never wrong when your instincts speak, Roland," said my father.

"Can you say this, Pisistratus, or shall I say it for you?"

"Let him say it himself," said Roland, "and let him judge himself of the answer. He is young, he is clever, he may make a

figure in the world. Trevanion may answer, 'Win the lady after you have won the laurel, like the knights of old.' At all events you will hear the worst."

"I will go," said I, firmly; and I took my hat and left the room. As I was passing the landing-place, a light step stole down the upper flight of stairs, and a little hand seized my own. I turned quickly, and met the full, dark, seriously sweet eyes of my cousin Blanche.

"Don't go away yet, Sisty," said she, coaxingly. "I have been waiting for you, for I heard your voice, and did not like to come in and disturb you."

"And why did you wait for me, my little Blanche?"

"Why! only to see you. But your eyes are red. Oh, cousin!" and before I was aware of her childish impulse, she had sprung to my neck and kissed me. Now Blanche was not like most children, and was very sparing of her caresses. So it was out of the depths of a kind heart that that kiss came. I returned it without a word; and putting her down gently, descended the stairs, and was in the streets. But I had not got far before I heard my father's voice; and he came up, and hooking his arm into mine, said, "Are there not two of us that suffer? Let us be together!" I pressed his arm, and we walked on in silence. But when we were near Trevanion's house, I said hesitatingly, "Would it not be better, sir, that I went in alone? If there is to be an explanation between Mr. Trevanion and myself, would it not seem as if your presence implied either a request to him that would lower us both, or a doubt of me that—"

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