

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**THE DISOWNED —
VOLUME 07**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон
The Disowned — Volume 07

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Содержание

CHAPTER LXVIII	5
CHAPTER LXIX	7
CHAPTER LXX	10
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	13

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

The Disowned — Volume 07

CHAPTER LXVIII

*We will examine if those accidents,
Which common fame calls injuries, happen to him
Deservedly or no.*

—The New Inn.

FROM LORD ULSWATER TO LADY WESTBOROUGH

Forgive me, dearest Lady Westborough, for my violence: you know and will allow for the infirmities of my temper. I have to make you and Lady Flora one request, which I trust you will not refuse me.

Do not see or receive any communication from Mr. Linden till Wednesday; and on that day at the hour of twelve suffer me to meet him at your house. I will then either prove him to be the basest of impostors, or, if I fail in this and Lady Flora honours my rival with one sentiment of preference, I will without a murmur submit to her decree and my rejection. Dare I trust that this petition will be accorded to one who is, with great regard and esteem, etc.

"This is fortunate," said Lady Westborough gently to her daughter, who, leaning her head on her mother's bosom, suffered hopes, the sweeter for their long sleep, to divide, if not wholly to possess, her heart. "We shall have now time well and carefully to reflect over what will be best for your future happiness. We owe this delay to one to whom you have been affianced. Let us, therefore, now merely write to Mr. Linden, to inform him of Lord Ulswater's request; and to say that if he will meet his lordship at the time appointed, we, that is I, shall be happy to see him."

Lady Flora sighed, but she saw the reasonableness of her mother's proposal, and pressing Lady Westborough's hand murmured her assent.

"At all events," thought Lady Westborough, as she wrote to Clarence, "the affair can but terminate to advantage. If Lord Ulswater proves Mr. Linden's unworthiness, the suit of the latter is of course at rest forever: if not, and Mr. Linden be indeed all that he asserts, my daughter's choice cannot be an election of reproach; Lord Ulswater promises peaceably to withdraw his pretensions; and though Mr. Linden may not possess his rank or fortune, he is certainly one with whom, if of ancient blood, any family would be proud of an alliance."

Blending with these reflections a considerable share of curiosity and interest in a secret which partook so strongly of romance, Lady Westborough despatched her note to Clarence. The answer returned was brief, respectful, and not only acquiescent in but grateful for the proposal.

With this arrangement both Lady Westborough and Lady Flora were compelled, though with very different feelings, to be satisfied; and an agreement was established between them, to the effect that if Linden's name passed unblemished through the appointed ordeal Lady Flora was to be left to, and favoured in, her own election; while, on the contrary, if Lord Ulswater succeeded in the proof he had spoken of, his former footing in the family was to be fully re-established and our unfortunate adventurer forever discarded.

To this Lady Flora readily consented; for with a sanguine and certain trust in her lover's truth and honour, which was tenfold more strong for her late suspicions, she would not allow herself a doubt as to the result; and with an impatience, mingled with a rapturous exhilaration of spirit, which brought back to her the freshness and radiancy of her youngest years, she counted the hours and moments to the destined day.

While such was the state of affairs at Westborough Park, Clarence was again on horseback and on another excursion. By the noon of the day following that which had seen his eventful meeting with Lady Flora, he found himself approaching the extreme boundaries of the county in which Mordaunt Court and the memorable town of W—— were situated. The characteristics of the country were now materially changed from those which gave to the vicinity of Algernon's domains its wild and uncultivated aspect.

As Clarence slowly descended a hill of considerable steepness and length, a prospect of singular and luxurious beauty opened to his view. The noblest of England's rivers was seen, through "turfs and shades and flowers," pursuing "its silver-winding way." On the opposite banks lay, embosomed in the golden glades of autumn, the busy and populous town that from the height seemed still and lifeless as an enchanted city, over which the mid-day sun hung like a guardian spirit. Behind, in sweeping diversity, stretched wood and dale, and fields despoiled of their rich harvest, yet still presenting a yellow surface to the eye; and ever and anon some bright patch of green, demanding the gaze as if by a lingering spell from the past spring; while, here and there, spire and hamlet studded the landscape, or some lowly cot lay, backed by the rising ground or the silent woods, white and solitary, and sending up its faint tribute of smoke in spires to the altars of Heaven. The river was more pregnant of life than its banks: barge and boat were gliding gayly down the wave, and the glad oar of the frequent and slender vessels consecrated to pleasure was seen dimpling the water, made by distance smoother than glass.

On the right side of Clarence's road, as he descended the hill, lay wide plantations of fir and oak, divided from the road by a park paling, the uneven sides of which were covered with brown moss, and which, at rare openings in the young wood, gave glimpses of a park, seemingly extending over great space, the theatre of many a stately copse and oaken grove, which might have served the Druids with fane and temple meet for the savage sublimity of their worship.

Upon these unfrequent views, Clarence checked his horse, and gazed, with emotions sweet yet bitter, over the pales, along the green expanse which they contained. And once, when through the trees he caught a slight glimpse of the white walls of the mansion they adorned, all the years of his childhood seemed to rise on his heart, thrilling to its farthest depths with a mighty and sorrowful yet sweet melody, and—

"Singing of boyhood back, the voices of his home."

Home! yes, amidst those groves had the April of his life lavished its mingled smiles and tears! There was the spot hallowed by his earliest joys! and the scene of sorrows still more sacred than joys! and now, after many years, the exiled boy came back, a prosperous and thoughtful man, to take but one brief glance of that home which to him had been less hospitable than a stranger's dwelling, and to find a witness among those who remembered him of his very birth and identity!

He wound the ascent at last, and entering a small town at the foot of the hill, which was exactly facing the larger one on the opposite shore of the river, put up his horse at one of the inns, and then, with a beating heart, remounted the hill, and entering the park by one of its lodges found himself once more in the haunts of his childhood.

CHAPTER LXIX

*Oh, the steward, the steward: I might have guessed as much.
Tales of the Crusaders.*

The evening was already beginning to close, and Clarence was yet wandering in the park, and retracing, with his heart's eye, each knoll and tree and tuft once so familiar to his wanderings.

At the time we shall again bring him personally before the reader, he was leaning against an iron fence that, running along the left wing of the house, separated the pleasure-grounds from the park, and gazing with folded arms and wistful eyes upon the scene on which the dusk of twilight was gradually gathering.

The house was built originally in the reign of Charles II.; it had since received alteration and additions, and now presented to the eye a vast pile of Grecian or rather Italian architecture, heterogeneously blended with the massive window, the stiff coping, and the heavy roof which the age immediately following the Revolution introduced. The extent of the building and the grandeur of the circling demesnes were sufficient to render the mansion imposing in effect; while, perhaps, the style of the architecture was calculated to conjoin a stately comfort with magnificence, and to atone in solidity for any deficiency in grace.

At a little distance from the house, and placed on a much more commanding site, were some ancient and ivy-grown ruins, now scanty indeed and fast mouldering into decay, but sufficient to show the antiquarian the remains of what once had been a hold of no ordinary size and power. These were the wrecks of the old mansion, which was recorded by tradition to have been reduced to this state by accidental fire, during the banishment of its loyal owner in the time of the Protectorate. Upon his return the present house was erected.

As Clarence was thus stationed he perceived an elderly man approach towards him. "This is fortunate," said he to himself,— "the very person I have been watching for. Well, years have passed lightly over old Wardour: still the same precise garb, the same sturdy and slow step, the same upright form."

The person thus designated now drew near enough for parlance; and, in a tone a little authoritative, though very respectful, inquired if Clarence had any business to transact with him.

"I beg pardon," said Clarence, slouching his hat over his face, "for lingering so near the house at this hour: but I have seen it many years ago, and indeed been a guest within its walls; and it is rather my interest for an old friend, than my curiosity to examine a new one, which you are to blame for my trespass."

"Oh, sir," answered Mr. Wardour, a short and rather stout man, of about sixty-four, attired in a chocolate coat, gray breeches, and silk stockings of the same dye, which, by the waning light, took a sombrer and sadder hue, "oh, sir, pray make no apology. I am only sorry the hour is so late that I cannot offer to show you the interior of the house: perhaps, if you are staying in the neighbourhood, you would like to see it to-morrow. You were here, I take it, sir, in my old lord's time?"

"I was!—upon a visit to his second son: we had been boys together."

"What! Master Clinton?" cried the old man, with extreme, animation; and then, suddenly changing his voice, added, in a subdued and saddened tone, "Ah, poor young gentleman, I wonder where he is now?"

"Why, is he not in this country?" asked Clarence.

"Yes—no—that is, I can't exactly say where he is; I wish I could: poor Master Clinton! I loved him as my own son."

"You surprise me," said Clarence. "Is there anything in the fate of Clinton L'Estrange that calls forth your pity? If so, you would gratify a much better feeling than curiosity if you would inform me

of it. The fact is that I came here to seek him; for I have been absent from the country many years, and on my return my first inquiry was for my old friend and schoolfellow. None knew anything of him in London, and I imagined therefore that he might have settled down into a country gentleman. I was fully prepared to find him marshalling the fox-hounds or beating the preserves; and you may consequently imagine my mortification on learning at my inn that he had not been residing here for many years; further I know not!"

"Ay, ay, sir," said the old steward, who had listened very attentively to Clarence's detail, "had you pressed one of the village gossips a little closer, you would doubtless have learned more. But 't is a story I don't much love telling, although formerly I could have talked of Master Clinton by the hour together to any one who would have had the patience to listen to me."

"You have really created in me a very painful desire to learn more," said Clarence; "and, if I am not intruding on any family secrets, you would oblige me greatly by whatever information you may think proper to afford to an early and attached friend of the person in question."

"Well, sir, well," replied Mr. Wardour, who, without imputation on his discretion, loved talking as well as any other old gentleman of sixty- four, "if you will condescend to step up to my house, I shall feel happy and proud to converse with a friend of my dear young master; and you are heartily welcome to the information I can give you."

"I thank you sincerely," said Clarence; "but suffer me to propose, as an amendment to your offer, that you accompany me for an hour or two to my inn."

"Nay, sir," answered the old gentleman, in a piqued tone, "I trust you will not disdain to honour me with your company. Thank Heaven, I can afford to be hospitable now and then."

Clarence, who seemed to have his own reasons for the amendment he had proposed, still struggled against this offer, but was at last, from fear of offending the honest steward, obliged to accede.

Striking across a path, which led through a corner of the plantation to a space of ground containing a small garden, quaintly trimmed in the Dutch taste, and a brick house of moderate dimensions, half overgrown with ivy and jessamine, Clarence and his inviter paused at the door of the said mansion, and the latter welcomed his guest to his abode.

"Pardon me," said Clarence, as a damsel in waiting opened the door, "but a very severe attack of rheumatism obliges me to keep on my hat: you will, I hope, indulge me in my rudeness."

"To be sure, to be sure, sir. I myself suffer terribly from rheumatism in the winter; though you look young, sir, very young, to have an old man's complaint. Ah, the people of my day were more careful of themselves, and that is the reason we are such stout fellows in our age."

And the worthy steward looked complacently down at legs which very substantially filled their comely investments. "True, sir," said Clarence, laying his hand upon that of the steward, who was just about to open the door of an apartment; "but suffer me at least to request you not to introduce me to any of the ladies of your family. I could not, were my very life at stake, think of affronting them by not doffing my hat. I have the keenest sense of what is due to the sex, and I must seriously entreat you, for the sake of my health during the whole of the coming winter, to suffer our conversation not to take place in their presence."

"Sir, I honour your politeness," said the prim little steward: "I, myself, like every true Briton, reverence the ladies; we will therefore retire to my study. Mary, girl," turning to the attendant, "see that we have a nice chop for supper in half an hour; and tell your mistress that I have a gentleman of quality with me upon particular business, and must not be disturbed."

With these injunctions, the steward led the way to the farther end of the house, and, having ushered his guest into a small parlour, adorned with sundry law-books, a great map of the estate, a print of the late owner of it, a rusty gun slung over the fireplace, two stuffed pheasants, and a little mahogany buffet,—having, we say, led Clarence to this sanctuary of retiring stewardship, he placed a seat for him and said,—"Between you and me, sir, be it respectfully said, I am not sorry that our

little confabulation should pass alone. Ladies are very delightful, very delightful, certainly: but they won't let one tell a story one's own way; they are fidgety, you know, sir,—fidgety, nothing more; 't is a trifle, but it is unpleasant. Besides, my wife was Master Clinton's foster-mother, and she can't hear a word about him, without running on into a long rigmarole of what he did as a baby, and so forth. I like people to be chatty, sir, but not garrulous; I can't bear garrulity, at least in a female. But, suppose, sir, we defer our story till after supper? A glass of wine or warm punch makes talk glide more easily; besides, sir, I want something to comfort me when I talk about Master Clinton. Poor gentleman, he was so comely, so handsome!"

"Did you think so?" said Clarence, turning towards the fire.

"Think so!" ejaculated the steward, almost angrily; and forthwith he launched out into an encomium on the perfections, personal, moral, and mental, of Master Clinton which lasted till the gentle Mary entered to lay the cloth. This reminded the old steward of the glass of wine which was so efficacious in making talk glide easily; and, going to the buffet before mentioned, he drew forth two bottles, both of port. Having carefully and warily decanted both, he changed the subject of his praise; and, assuring Clarence that the wine he was about to taste was at least as old as Master Clinton, having been purchased in joyous celebration of the young gentleman's birthday, he whiled away the minutes with a glowing eulogy on its generous qualities, till Mary entered with the supper.

Clarence, with an appetite sharpened, despite his romance, by a long fast, did ample justice to the fare; and the old steward, warming into familiarity with the virtues of the far-famed port, chatted and laughed in a strain half simple and half shrewd.

The fire being stirred up to a free blaze, the hearth swept, and all the tokens of supper, save and except the kingly bottle and its subject glasses, being removed, the steward and his guest drew closer to each other, and the former began his story.

CHAPTER LXX

*The actors are at hand, and by their show
You shall know all that you are like to know.*

Midsommer-Night's Dream.

"You know, probably, sir, that my late lord was twice married; by his first wife he had three children, only one of whom, the youngest, though now the present earl, survived the first period of infancy. When Master Francis, as we always called him, in spite of his accession to the title of viscount, was about six years old, my lady died, and a year afterwards my lord married again. His second wife was uncommonly handsome: she was a Miss Talbot (a Catholic), daughter of Colonel Talbot, and niece to the celebrated beau, Squire Talbot of Scarsdale Park. Poor lady! they say that she married my lord through a momentary pique against a former lover. However that may be, she was a fine, high-spirited creature: very violent in temper, to be sure, but generous and kind when her passion was over; and however haughty to her equals charitable and compassionate to the poor."

"She had but one son, Master Clinton. Never, sir, shall I forget the rejoicings that were made at his birth: for my lord doted on his second wife, and had disliked his first, whom he had married for her fortune; and it was therefore natural that he should prefer the child of the present wife to Master Francis. Ah, it is sad to think how love can change! Well, sir, my lord seemed literally to be wrapped up in the infant: he nursed it and fondled it, and hung over it, as if he had been its mother rather than its father. My lady desired that it might be christened by one of her family names; and my lord consenting, it was called Clinton. (The wine is with you, sir! Do observe that it has not changed colour in the least, notwithstanding its age.)"

"My lord was fond of a quiet, retired life; indeed, he was a great scholar, and spent the chief part of his time among his books. Dr. Latinas, the young gentleman's tutor, said his lordship made Greek verses better than Dr. Latinas could make English ones, so you may judge of his learning. But my lady went constantly to town, and was among the gayest of the gay; nor did she often come down here without bringing a whole troop of guests. Lord help us, what goings on there used to be at the great house!—such dancing and music, and dining and supping, and shooting-parties, fishing-parties, gypsy-parties: you would have thought all England was merrymaking there."

"But my lord, though he indulged my lady in all her whims and extravagance, seldom took much share in them himself. He was constantly occupied with his library and children, nor did he ever suffer either Master Francis or Master Clinton to mix with the guests. He kept them very close at their studies, and when the latter was six years old, I do assure you, sir, he could say his *Propria quae maribus* better than I can. (You don't drink, sir.) When Master Francis was sixteen, and Master Clinton eight, the former was sent abroad on his travels with a German tutor, and did not return to England for many years afterwards; meanwhile Master Clinton grew up to the age of fourteen, increasing in comeliness and goodness. He was very fond of his studies, much more so than Master Francis had been, and was astonishingly forward for his years. So my lord loved him better and better, and would scarcely ever suffer him to be out of his sight."

"When Master Clinton was about the age I mentioned, namely, fourteen, a gentleman of the name of Sir Clinton Manners became a constant visitor at the house. Report said that he was always about my lady in London at Ranelagh, and the ball-rooms and routs, and all the fine places; and certainly he was scarcely ever from her side in the pleasure parties at the Park. But my lady said that he was a cousin of hers, and an old playmate in childhood, and so he was; and unhappily for her, something more too. My lord, however, shut up in his library, did not pay any attention to my lady's

intimacy with Sir Clinton; on the contrary, as he was a cousin and friend of hers, his lordship seemed always happy to see him, and was the only person in the neighbourhood who had no suspicion of what was going on."

"Oh, sir, it is a melancholy story, and I can scarcely persuade myself to tell it. (It is really delicious wine this-six-and-twenty years old last birthday—to say nothing of its age before I bought it.) Ah! well, sir, the blow came at last like a thunderclap: my lady, finding disguise was in vain, went off with Sir Clinton. Letters were discovered which showed that they had corresponded for years; that he was her lover before marriage; that she, in a momentary passion with him, had accepted my lord's offer; that she had always repented her precipitation; and that she had called her son after his name: all this, and much more, sir, did my lord learn, as it were, at a single blow."

"He obtained a divorce, and Sir Clinton and my lady went abroad. But from that time my lord was never the same man. Always proud and gloomy, he now became intolerably violent and morose. He shut himself up, saw no company of any description, rarely left the house, and never the park; and, from being one of the gayest places in the country, sir, the mansion became as dreary and deserted as if it had been haunted. (It is for you to begin the second bottle, sir.)"

"But the most extraordinary change in my lord was in his conduct to Master Clinton: from doting upon him, to a degree that would have spoilt any temper less sweet than my poor young master's, he took the most violent aversion to him. From the circumstance of his name, and the long intimacy existing between my lady and her lover, his lordship would not believe that Master Clinton was his own child; and indeed I must confess there seemed good ground for his suspicions. Besides this, Master Clinton took very much after his mother. He had her eyes, hair, and beautiful features, so that my lord could never see him without being reminded of his disgrace; therefore whenever the poor young gentleman came into his presence, he would drive him out with oaths and threats which rang through the whole house. He could not even bear that he should have any attendance or respect from the servants, for he considered him quite as an alien like, and worse than a stranger; and his lordship's only delight seemed to consist in putting upon him every possible indignity and affront. But Master Clinton was a high-spirited young gentleman; and, after having in vain endeavoured to soothe my lord by compliance and respect, he at last utterly avoided his lordship's presence."

"He gave up his studies in a great measure, and wandered about the park and woods all day and sometimes even half the night; his mother's conduct and his father's unkindness seemed to prey upon his health and mind, and at last he grew almost as much altered as my lord. From being one of the merriest boys possible, full of life and spirits, he became thoughtful and downcast, his step lost its lightness, and his eye all the fire which used once quite to warm one's heart when one looked at it; in short, sir, the sins of the mother were visited as much upon the child as the husband. (Not the least tawny, sir, you see, though it is so old!)"

"My lord at first seemed to be glad that he now never saw his son, but, by degrees, I think he missed the pleasure of venting his spleen upon him; and so he ordered my young master not to stir out without his leave, and confined him closer than ever to his studies. (Well, sir, if it were not for this port I could not get out another sentence.) There used then to be sad scenes between them: my lord was a terribly passionate man, and said things sharper than a two-edged sword, as the psalms express it; and though Master Clinton was one of the mildest and best-tempered boys imaginable, yet he could not at all times curb his spirit; and, to my mind, when a man is perpetually declaring he is not your father, one may now and then be forgiven in forgetting that you are to behave as his son."

"Things went on in this way sadly enough for about three years and a half, when Master Clinton was nearly eighteen. One evening, after my lord had been unusually stormy, Master Clinton's spirit warmed, I suppose, and, from word to word, the dispute increased, till my lord, in a furious rage, ordered in the servants, and told them to horsewhip his son. Imagine, sir, what a disgrace to that noble house! But there was not one of them who would not rather have cut off his right hand than laid a finger upon Master Clinton, so greatly was he beloved; and, at last, my lord summoned his own

gentleman, a German, six feet high, entirely devoted to his lordship, and commanded him, upon pain of instant dismissal, to make use in his presence of a horsewhip which he put into his hand."

"The German did not dare refuse, so he approached Master Clinton. The servants were still in the room, and perhaps they would have been bold enough to rescue Master Clinton, had there been any need of their assistance; but he was a tall youth, as bold as a hero, and, when the German approached, he caught him by the throat, threw him down, and very nearly strangled him; he then, while my lord was speechless with rage, left the room, and did not return all night. (What a body it has, sir—ah!)"

"The next morning I was in a little room adjoining my lord's study, looking over some papers and maps. His lordship did not know of my presence, but was sitting alone at breakfast, when Master Clinton suddenly entered the study; the door leading to my room was ajar, and I heard all the conversation that ensued."

"My lord asked him very angrily how he had dared absent himself all night; but Master Clinton, making no reply to this question, said, in a very calm, loud voice, which I think I hear now, 'My lord, after the insult you have offered to me, it is perhaps unnecessary to observe that nothing could induce me to remain under your roof. I come, therefore, to take my last leave of you.'"

"He paused, and my lord (probably like me, being taken by surprise) making no reply, he continued, 'You have often told me, my lord, that I am not your son; if this be possible, so much the more must you rejoice at the idea of ridding your presence of an intruder.' 'And how, sir, do you expect to live, except upon my bounty?' exclaimed my lord. 'You remember,' answered my young master, 'that a humble dependant of my mother's family, who had been our governess in childhood, left me at her death the earnings of her life. I believe they amount to nearly a thousand pounds; I look to your lordship's honour either for the principal or the yearly interest, as may please you best: further I ask not from you.' 'And do you think, sir,' cried my lord, almost screaming with passion, 'that upon that beggarly pittance you shall go forth to dishonour more than it is yet dishonoured the name of my ancient house? Do you think, sir, that that name to which you have no pretension, though the law iniquitously grants it you, shall be sullied either with trade or robbery? for to one or the other you must necessarily be driven.' 'I foresaw your speech, my lord, and am prepared with an answer. Far be it from me to thrust myself into any family, the head of which thinks proper to reject me; far be it from me to honour my humble fortunes with a name which I am as willing as yourself to disown: I purpose, therefore, to adopt a new one; and, whatever may be my future fate, that name will screen me both from your remembrance and the world's knowledge. Are you satisfied now, my lord?'"

"His lordship did not answer for some minutes: at last, he said sneeringly, 'Go, boy, go! I am delighted to hear you have decided so well. Leave word with my steward where you wish your clothes to be sent to you: Heaven forbid I should rob you either of your wardrobe or your princely fortune. Wardour will transmit to you the latter, even to the last penny, by the same conveyance as that which is honoured by the former. And now good-morning, sir; yet stay, and mark my words: never dare to re-enter my house, or to expect an iota more of fortune or favour from me. And, hark you, sir: if you dare violate your word; if you dare, during my life, at least, assume a name which you were born to sully,—my curse, my deepest, heartiest, eternal curse, be upon your head in this world and the next!' 'Fear not, my lord: my word is pledged,' said the young gentleman; and the next moment I heard his parting step in the hall."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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