

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**THE SAXTONS: A
FAMILY PICTURE —
VOLUME 14**

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The Saxtons: A Family
Picture — Volume 14

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Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton

The Caxtons: A Family Picture — Volume 14

PART XIV

CHAPTER I

There is a beautiful and singular passage in Dante (which has not perhaps attracted the attention it deserves), wherein the stern Florentine defends Fortune from the popular accusations against her. According to him she is an angelic power appointed by the Supreme Being to direct and order the course of human splendors; she obeys the will of God; she is blessed; and hearing not those who blaspheme her, calm and aloft amongst the other angelic powers, revolves her spheral course and rejoices in her beatitude.¹

This is a conception very different from the popular notion

¹ Dante here evidently associates Fortune with the planetary influences of judicial astrology. It is doubtful whether Schiller ever read Dante; but in one of his most thoughtful poems he undertakes the same defence of Fortune, making the Fortunate a part of the Beautiful.

which Aristophanes, in his true instinct of things popular, expresses by the sullen lips of his Plutus. That deity accounts for his blindness by saying that "when a boy he had indiscreetly promised to visit only the good;" and Jupiter was so envious of the good that he blinded the poor money-god. Whereon Chremylus asks him whether, "if he recovered his sight, he would frequent the company of the good." "Certainly," quoth Plutus; "for I have not seen them ever so long." "Nor I either," rejoins Chremylus, pithily, "for all I can see out of both eyes."

But that misanthropical answer of Chremylus is neither here nor there, and only diverts us from the real question, and that is, "Whether Fortune be a heavenly, Christian angel, or a blind, blundering, old heathen deity?" For my part, I hold with Dante; for which, if I were so pleased, or if at this period of my memoirs I had half a dozen pages to spare, I could give many good reasons. One thing, however, is quite clear, that whether Fortune be more like Plutus or an angel, it is no use abusing her,—one may as well throw stones at a star. And I think, if one looked narrowly at her operations, one might perceive that she gives every man a chance at least once in his life if he take and make the best of it, she will renew her visits; if not, *itur ad astra!* And therewith I am reminded of an incident quaintly narrated by Mariana in his "History of Spain," how the army of the Spanish kings got out of a sad hobble among the mountains at the Pass of Losa by the help of a shepherd who showed them the way. "But," saith Mariana, parenthetically, "some do say the shepherd was an angel; for after

he had shown the way, he was never seen more." That is, the angelic nature of the guide was proved by being only once seen, and after having got the army out of the hobble, leaving it to fight or run away, as it had most mind to. Now, I look upon that shepherd, or angel, as a very good type of my fortune at least. The apparition showed me my way in the rocks to the great "Battle of Life;" after that—hold fast and strike hard!

Behold me in London with Uncle Roland. My poor parents naturally wished to accompany me, and take the last glimpse of the adventurer on board ship; but I, knowing that the parting would seem less dreadful to them by the hearthstone, and while they could say, "He is with Roland; he is not yet gone from the land," insisted on their staying behind; and thus the farewell was spoken. But Roland, the old soldier, had so many practical instructions to give, could so help me in the choice of the outfit and the preparations for the voyage, that I could not refuse his companionship to the last. Guy Bolding, who had gone to take leave of his father, was to join me in town, as well as my humbler Cumberland colleagues.

As my uncle and I were both of one mind upon the question of economy, we took up our quarters at a lodging-house in the City; and there it was that I first made acquaintance with a part of London of which few of my politer readers even pretend to be cognizant. I do not mean any sneer at the City itself, my dear alderman,—that jest is worn out. I am not alluding to streets, courts, and lanes; what I mean may be seen at the West-end—

not so well as at the East, but still seen very fairly,—I mean The House-Tops!

CHAPTER II

The House-Tops! What a soberizing effect that prospect produces on the mind. But a great many requisites go towards the selection of the right point of survey. It is not enough to secure a lodging in the attic; you must not be fobbed off with a front attic that faces the street. First, your attic must be unequivocally a back attic; secondly, the house in which it is located must be slightly elevated above its neighbors; thirdly, the window must not lie slant on the roof, as is common with attics,—in which case you can only catch a peep of that leaden canopy which infatuated Londoners call the sky,—but must be a window perpendicular, and not half blocked up by the parapets of that fosse called the gutter; and, lastly, the sight must be so humored that you cannot catch a glimpse of the pavements: if you once see the world beneath, the whole charm of that world above is destroyed. Taking it for granted that you have secured these requisites, open your window, lean your chin on both hands, the elbows propped commodiously on the sill, and contemplate the extraordinary scene which spreads before you. You find it difficult to believe life can be so tranquil on high, while it is so noisy and turbulent below. What astonishing stillness! Eliot Warburton (seductive enchanter!) recommends you to sail down the Nile if you want to lull the vexed spirit. It is easier and cheaper to hire an attic in Holborn! You don't have the crocodiles, but you have animals

no less hallowed in Egypt,—the cats! And how harmoniously the tranquil creatures blend with the prospect; how noiselessly they glide along at the distance, pause, peer about, and disappear! It is only from the attic that you can appreciate the picturesque which belongs to our domesticated tiger-kin! The goat should be seen on the Alps, and the cat on the house-top.

By degrees the curious eye takes the scenery in detail; and first, what fantastic variety in the heights and shapes of the chimney-pots! Some all level in a row, uniform and respectable, but quite uninteresting; others, again, rising out of all proportion, and imperatively tasking the reason to conjecture why they are so aspiring. Reason answers that it is but a homely expedient to give freer vent to the smoke; wherewith Imagination steps in, and represents to you all the fretting and fuming and worry and care which the owners of that chimney, now the tallest of all, endured before, by building it higher, they got rid of the vapors. You see the distress of the cook when the sooty invader rushed down, "like a wolf on the fold," full spring on the Sunday joint. You hear the exclamations of the mistress (perhaps a bride,—house newly furnished) when, with white apron and cap, she ventured into the drawing-room, and was straightway saluted by a joyous dance of those monads called vulgarly "smuts." You feel manly indignation at the brute of a bridegroom who rushes out from the door, with the smuts dancing after him, and swears, "Smoked out again! By the Arch-smoker himself, I'll go and dine at the club!" All this might well have been, till the chimney-pot was raised

a few feet nearer heaven; and now perhaps that long-suffering family owns the happiest home in the Row. Such contrivances to get rid of the smoke! It is not every one who merely heightens his chimney; others clap on the hollow tormentor all sorts of odd head-gear and cowls. Here, patent contrivances act the purpose of weather-cocks, swaying to and fro with the wind; there, others stand as fixed as if, by a sic jubeo, they had settled the business.

But of all those houses that in the street one passes by, unsuspecting of what's the matter within, there is not one in a hundred but what there has been the devil to do to cure the chimneys of smoking! At that reflection Philosophy dismisses the subject, and decides that, whether one lives in a but or a palace, the first thing to do is to look to the hearth and get rid of the vapors.

New beauties demand us. What endless undulations in the various declivities and ascents,—here a slant, there a zigzag! With what majestic disdain yon roof rises up to the left! Doubtless a palace of Genii, or Gin (which last is the proper Arabic word for those builders of halls out of nothing, employed by Aladdin). Seeing only the roof of that palace boldly breaking the sky-line, how serene your contemplations! Perhaps a star twinkles over it, and you muse on soft eyes far away; while below at the threshold—No, phantoms! we see you not from our attic. Note, yonder, that precipitous fall,—how ragged and jagged the roof-scene descends in a gorge! He who would travel on foot through the pass of that defile, of which we see but

the picturesque summits, stops his nose, averts his eyes, guards his pockets, and hurries along through the squalor of the grim London lazzaroni. But seen above, what a noble break in the sky-line! It would be sacrilege to exchange that fine gorge for a dead flat of dull rooftops. Look here, how delightful! that desolate house with no roof at all,—gutted and skinned by the last London fire! You can see the poor green-and-white paper still clinging to the walls, and the chasm that once was a cupboard, and the shadows gathering black on the aperture that once was a hearth! Seen below, how quickly you would cross over the way! That great crack forebodes an avalanche; you hold your breath, not to bring it down on your head. But seen above, what a compassionate, inquisitive charm in the skeleton ruin! How your fancy runs riot,—re-peopling the chambers, hearing the last cheerful good-night of that destined Pompeii, creeping on tiptoe with the mother when she gives her farewell look to the baby. Now all is midnight and silence; then the red, crawling serpent comes out. Lo! his breath; hark! his hiss. Now, spire after spire he winds and he coils; now he soars up erect,—crest superb, and forked tongue,—the beautiful horror! Then the start from the sleep, and the doubtful awaking, and the run here and there, and the mother's rush to the cradle; the cry from the window, and the knock at the door, and the spring of those on high towards the stair that leads to safety below, and the smoke rushing up like the surge of a hell! And they run back stifled and blinded, and the floor heaves beneath them like a bark on the sea. Hark!

the grating wheels thundering low; near and nearer comes the engine. Fix the ladders,—there! there! at the window, where the mother stands with the babe! Splash and hiss comes the water; pales, then flares out, the fire! Foe defies foe; element, element. How sublime is the war! But the ladder, the ladder,—there, at the window! All else are saved,—the clerk and his books; the lawyer with that tin box of title-deeds; the landlord, with his policy of insurance; the miser, with his bank-notes and gold: all are saved,—all but the babe and the mother. What a crowd in the streets; how the light crimsons over the gazers, hundreds on hundreds! All those faces seem as one face, with fear. Not a man mounts the ladder. Yes, there,—gallant fellow! God inspires, God shall speed thee! How plainly I see him! his eyes are closed, his teeth set. The serpent leaps up, the forked tongue darts upon him, and the reek of the breath wraps him round. The crowd has ebbed back like a sea, and the smoke rushes over them all. Ha! what dim forms are those on the ladder? Near and nearer,—crash come the roof-tiles! Alas and alas! no! a cry of joy,—a "Thank Heaven!" and the women force their way through the men to come round the child and the mother. All is gone save that skeleton ruin. But the ruin is seen from above. O Art! study life from the roof-tops!

CHAPTER III

I was again foiled in seeing Trevanion. It was the Easter recess, and he was at the house of one of his brother ministers somewhere in the North of England. But Lady Ellinor was in London, and I was ushered into her presence. Nothing could be more cordial than her manner, though she was evidently much depressed in spirits, and looked wan and careworn.

After the kindest inquiries relative to my parents and the Captain, she entered with much sympathy into my schemes and plans, which she said Trevanion had confided to her. The sterling kindness that belonged to my old patron (despite his affected anger at my not accepting his proffered loan) had not only saved me and my fellow-adventurer all trouble as to allotment orders, but procured advice as to choice of site and soil, from the best practical experience, which we found after wards exceedingly useful. And as Lady Ellinor gave me the little packet of papers, with Trevanion's shrewd notes on the margin, she said, with a half sigh, "Albert bids me say that he wishes he were as sanguine of his success in the Cabinet as of yours in the Bush." She then turned to her husband's rise and prospects, and her face began to change; her eyes sparkled, the color came to her cheeks. "But you are one of the few who know him," she said, interrupting herself suddenly; "you know how he sacrifices all things,—joy, leisure, health,—to his country. There is not one selfish thought in his

nature. And yet such envy,—such obstacles still! And [her eyes dropped on her dress, and I perceived that she was in mourning, though the mourning was not deep], and," she added, "it has pleased Heaven to withdraw from his side one who would have been worthy his alliance."

I felt for the proud woman, though her emotion seemed more that of pride than sorrow. And perhaps Lord Castleton's highest merit in her eyes had been that of ministering to her husband's power and her own ambition. I bowed my head in silence, and thought of Fanny. Did she, too, pine for the lost rank, or rather mourn the lost lover?

After a time I said, hesitatingly, "I scarcely presume to condole with you, Lady Ellinor, yet, believe me, few things ever shocked me like the death you allude to. I trust Miss Trevanion's health has not much suffered. Shall I not see her before I leave England?"

Lady Ellinor fixed her keen bright eyes searchingly on my countenance, and perhaps the gaze satisfied her; for she held out her hand to me with a frankness almost tender, and said "Had I had a son, the dearest wish of my heart had been to see you wedded to my daughter."

I started up; the blood rushed to my cheeks, and then left me pale as death. I looked reproachfully at Lady Ellinor, and the word "cruel!" faltered on my lips.

"Yes," continued Lady Ellinor, mournfully, "that was my real thought, my impulse of regret, when I first saw you. But as it

is, do not think me too hard and worldly if I quote the lofty old French proverb, *Noblesse oblige*. Listen to me, my young friend: we may never meet again, and I would not have your father's son think unkindly of me, with all my faults. From my first childhood I was ambitious,—not, as women usually are, of mere wealth and rank, but ambitious as noble men are, of power and fame. A woman can only indulge such ambition by investing it in another. It was not wealth, it was not rank, that attracted me to Albert Trevanion: it was the nature that dispenses with the wealth and commands the rank. Nay," continued Lady Ellinor, in a voice that slightly trembled, "I may have seen in my youth, before I knew Trevanion, one [she paused a moment, and went on hurriedly]—one who wanted but ambition to have realized my ideal. Perhaps even when I married—and it was said for love—I loved less with my whole heart than with my whole mind. I may say this now, for now every beat of this pulse is wholly and only true to him with whom I have schemed and toiled and aspired; with whom I have grown as one; with whom I have shared the struggle, and now partake the triumph, realizing the visions of my youth."

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