

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**THE SAXTONS: A
FAMILY PICTURE —
VOLUME 06**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

**The Saxtons: A Family
Picture — Volume 06**

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Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton

The Caxtons: A Family Picture — Volume 06

PART VI

CHAPTER I

"I don't know that," said my father.

What is it my father does not know? My father does not know that "happiness is our being's end and aim."

And pertinent to what does my father reply, by words so sceptical, to an assertion so seldom disputed?

Reader, Mr. Trevanion has been half an hour seated in our little drawing-room. He has received two cups of tea from my mother's fair hand; he has made himself at home. With Mr. Trevanion has come another friend of my father's, whom he has not seen since he left college,—Sir Sedley Beadesert.

Now, you must understand that it is a warm night, a little after nine o'clock,—a night between departing summer and approaching autumn. The windows are open; we have a balcony, which my mother has taken care to fill with flowers; the air, though we are in London, is sweet and fresh; the street quiet, except that an occasional carriage or hackney cabriolet rolls rapidly by; a few stealthy passengers pass to and fro noiselessly on their way homeward. We are on classic ground,—near that old and venerable Museum, the dark monastic pile which the taste of the age had spared then,—and the quiet of the temple seems to hallow the precincts. Captain Roland is seated by the fire-place, and though there is no fire, he is shading his face with a hand-screen; my father and Mr. Trevanion have drawn their chairs close to each other in the middle of the room; Sir Sedley Beadesert leans against the wall near the window, and behind my mother, who looks prettier and more pleased than usual since her Austin has his old friends about him; and I, leaning my elbow on the table and my chin upon my hand, am gazing with great admiration on Sir Sedley Beadesert.

Oh, rare specimen of a race fast decaying,—specimen of the true fine gentleman, ere the word "dandy" was known, and before "exquisite" became a noun substantive,—let me here pause to describe thee! Sir Sedley Beadesert was the contemporary of Trevanion and my father; but without affecting to be young, he still seemed so. Dress, tone, look, manner,—all were young; yet all had a certain dignity which does not belong to youth. At the age of five and twenty he had won what would have been fame to a French marquis of the old regime; namely, the reputation of being "the most charming man of his day,"—the most popular of our sex, the most favored, my dear lady-reader, by yours. It is a mistake, I believe, to suppose that it does not require talent to become the fashion,—at all events, Sir Sedley was the fashion, and he had talent.

He had travelled much, he had read much,—especially in memoirs, history, and belles-lettres,—he made verses with grace and a certain originality of easy wit and courtly sentiment, he conversed delightfully, he was polished and urbane in manner, he was brave and honorable in conduct; in words he could flatter, in deeds he was sincere.

Sir Sedley Beadesert had never married. Whatever his years, he was still young enough in looks to be married for love. He was high-born, he was rich, he was, as I have said, popular; yet on his fair features there was an expression of melancholy, and on that forehead—pure from the lines of ambition, and free from the weight of study—there was the shadow of unmistakable regret.

"I don't know that," said my father; "I have never yet found in life one man who made happiness his end and aim. One wants to gain a fortune, another to spend it; one to get a place, another to build a name: but they all know very well that it is not happiness they search for. No Utilitarian was ever actuated by self-interest, poor man, when he sat down to scribble his unpopular crotchets to prove self-interest universal. And as to that notable distinction between self-interest vulgar and self-interest enlightened, the more the self-interest is enlightened, the less we are influenced by it. If you tell the young man who has just written a fine book or made a fine speech that he will not be any happier if he attain to the fame of Milton or the power of Pitt, and that, for the sake of his own happiness, he had much better cultivate a farm, live in the country, and postpone to the last the days of dyspepsia and gout, he will answer you fairly, 'I am quite as sensible of that as you are. But I am not thinking whether or not I shall be happy. I have made up my mind to be, if I can, a great author or a prime minister.' So it is with all the active sons of the world. To push on is the law of Nature. And you can no more say to men and to nations than to children: 'Sit still, and don't wear out your shoes!'"

"Then," said Trevanion, "if I tell you I am not happy, your only answer is that I obey an inevitable law."

"No, I don't say that it is an inevitable law that man should not be happy; but it is an inevitable law that a man, in spite of himself, should live for something higher than his own happiness. He cannot live in himself or for himself, however egotistical he may try to be. Every desire he has links him with others. Man is not a machine,—he is a part of one."

"True, brother, he is a soldier, not an army," said Captain Roland.

"Life is a drama, not a monologue," pursued my father. "'Drama' is derived from a Greek verb signifying 'to do.' Every actor in the drama has something to do, which helps on the progress of the whole: that is the object for which the author created him. Do your part, and let the Great Play get on."

"Ah!" said Trevanion, briskly, "but to do the part is the difficulty. Every actor helps to the catastrophe, and yet must do his part without knowing how all is to end. Shall he help the curtain to fall on a tragedy or a comedy? Come, I will tell you the one secret of my public life, that which explains all its failure (for, in spite of my position, I have failed) and its regrets,—I want Conviction!"

"Exactly," said my father; "because to every question there are two sides, and you look at them both."

"You have said it," answered Trevanion, smiling also. "For public life a man should be one-sided: he must act with a party; and a party insists that the shield is silver, when, if it will take the trouble to turn the corner, it will see that the reverse of the shield is gold. Woe to the man who makes that discovery alone, while his party are still swearing the shield is silver, and that not once in his life, but every night!"

"You have said quite enough to convince me that you ought not to belong to a party, but not enough to convince me why you should not be happy," said my father.

"Do you remember," said Sir Sedley Beaudesert, "an anecdote of the first Duke of Portland? He had a gallery in the great stable of his villa in Holland, where a concert was given once a week, to cheer and amuse his horses! I have no doubt the horses thrived all the better for it. What Trevanion wants is a concert once a week. With him it is always saddle and spur. Yet, after all, who would not envy him? If life be a drama, his name stands high in the play-bill, and is printed in capitals on the walls."

"Envy me!" said Trevanion,— "Me! No, you are the enviable man,—you, who have only one grief in the world, and that so absurd a one that I will make you blush by disclosing it. Hear, O sage Austin! O sturdy Roland! Olivares was haunted by a spectre, and Sedley Beaudesert by the dread of old age!"

"Well," said my mother, seriously, "I do think it requires a great sense of religion, or at all events children' of one's own, in whom one is young again, to reconcile oneself to becoming old."

"My dear ma'am," said Sir Sedley, who had slightly colored at Trevanion's charge, but had now recovered his easy self-possession, "you have spoken so admirably that you give me courage to confess my weakness. I do dread to be old. All the joys of my life have been the joys of youth. I have had so exquisite a pleasure in the mere sense of living that old age, as it comes near, terrifies me by its dull eyes and gray hairs. I have lived the life of a butterfly. Summer is over, and I see my flowers withering; and my wings are chilled by the first airs of winter. Yes, I envy Trevanion; for in public life no man is ever young, and while he can work he is never old."

"My dear Beaudesert," said my father, "when Saint Amable, patron saint of Riom, in Auvergne, went to Rome, the sun waited upon him as a servant, carried his cloak and gloves for him in the heat, and kept off the rain, if the weather changed, like an umbrella. You want to put the sun to the same use you are quite right; but then, you see, you must first be a saint before you can be sure of the sun as a servant."

Sir Sedley smiled charmingly; but the smile changed to a sigh as he added, "I don't think I should much mind being a saint, if the sun would be my sentinel instead of my courier. I want nothing of him but to stand still. You see he moved even for Saint Amable. My dear madam, you and I understand each other; and it is a very hard thing to grow old, do what one will to keep young."

"What say you, Roland, of these two malcontents?" asked my father. The Captain turned uneasily in his chair, for the rheumatism was gnawing his shoulder, and sharp pains were shooting through his mutilated limb.

"I say," answered Roland, "that these men are wearied with marching from Brentford to Windsor,—that they have never known the bivouac and the battle."

Both the grumblers turned their eyes to the veteran: the eyes rested first on the furrowed, care-worn lines in his eagle face; then they fell on the stiff outstretched cork limb; and then they turned away.

Meanwhile my mother had softly risen, and under pretence of looking for her work on the table near him, bent over the old soldier and pressed his hand.

"Gentlemen," said my father, "I don't think my brother ever heard of Nichocorus, the Greek comic writer; yet he has illustrated him very ably. Saith Nichocorus, 'The best cure for drunkenness is a sudden calamity.' For chronic drunkenness, a continued course of real misfortune must be very salutary!"

No answer came from the two complainants; and my father took up a great book.

CHAPTER II

"Mr friends," said my father, looking up from his book, and addressing himself to his two visitors, know of one thing, milder than calamity, that would do you both a great deal of good."

"What is that?" asked Sir Sedley.

"A saffron bag, worn at the pit of the stomach!"

"Austin, my dear," said my mother, reprovingly.

My father did not heed the interruption, but continued gravely: "Nothing is better for the spirits! Roland is in no want of saffron, because he is a warrior; and the desire of fighting and the hope of victory infuse such a heat into the spirits as is profitable for long life, and keeps up the system."

"Tut!" said Trevanion.

"But gentlemen in your predicament must have recourse to artificial means. Nitre in broth, for instance,—about three grains to ten (cattle fed upon nitre grow fat); or earthy odors,—such as exist in cucumbers and cabbage. A certain great lord had a clod of fresh earth, laid in a napkin, put under his nose every morning after sleep. Light anointing of the head with oil, mixed with roses and salt, is not bade but, upon the whole, I prescribe the saffron bag at the—"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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