ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

THE CAXTONS: A FAMILY PICTURE — VOLUME 08

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

The Caxtons: A Family Picture — Volume 08

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Содержание

Baron Edward Bulwer Lytton
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PART VIII

CHAPTER I

There entered, in the front drawing-room of my father's house in Russell Street, an Elf! clad in white,—small, delicate, with curls of jet over her shoulders; with eyes so large and so lustrous that they shone through the room as no eyes merely human could possibly shine. The Elf approached, and stood facing us. The sight was so unexpected and the apparition so strange that we remained for some moments in startled silence. At length my father, as the bolder and wiser man of the two, and the more fitted to deal with the eerie things of another world, had the audacity to step close up to the little creature, and, bending down to examine its face, said, "What do you want, my pretty child?"

Pretty child! Was it only a pretty child after all? Alas! it would be well if all we mistake for fairies at the first glance could resolve themselves only into pretty children.

"Come," answered the child, with a foreign accent, and taking my father by the lappet of his coat, "come, poor papa is so ill! I am frightened! come, and save him."

"Certainly," exclaimed my father, quickly. "Where's my hat, Sisty?

Certainly, my child; we will go and save papa."

"But who is papa?" asked Pisistratus,—a question that would never have occurred to my father. He never asked who or what the sick papas of poor children were when the children pulled him by the lappet of his coat. "Who is papa?"

The child looked hard at me, and the big tears rolled from those large, luminous eyes, but quite silently. At this moment a full-grown figure filled up the threshold, and emerging from the shadow, presented to us the aspect of a stout, well-favored young woman. She dropped a courtesy, and then said, mincingly,—

"Oh, miss, you ought to have waited for me, and not alarmed the gentlefolks by running upstairs in that way! If you please, sir, I was settling with the cabman, and he was so imperent,—them low fellows always are, when they have only us poor women to deal with, sir, and—"

"But what is the matter?" cried I, for my father had taken the child in his arms soothingly, and she was now weeping on his breast.

"Why, you see, sir [another courtesy], the gent only arrived last night at our hotel, sir,—the Lamb, close by Lunnun Bridge,—and he was taken ill, and he's not quite in his right mind like; so we sent for the doctor, and the doctor looked at the brass plate on the gent's carpet- bag, sir, and then he looked into the 'Court Guide,' and he said, 'There is a Mr. Caxton in Great Russell Street,—is he any relation?' and this young lady said, 'That's my papa's brother, and we were going there.' And so, sir, as the Boots was out, I got into a cab, and miss would come with me, and—"

"Roland—Roland ill! Quick, quick, quick!" cried my father, and with the child still in his arms he ran down the stairs. I followed with his hat, which of course he had forgotten. A cab, by good luck, was passing our very door; but the chambermaid would not let us enter it till she had satisfied herself that it was not the same she had dismissed. This preliminary investigation completed, we entered and drove to the Lamb.

The chambermaid, who sat opposite, passed the time in ineffectual overtures to relieve my father of the little girl,—who still clung nestling to his breast,—in a long epic, much broken into episodes, of the causes which had led to her dismissal of the late cabman, who, to swell his fare, had

thought proper to take a "circumbendibus!"—and with occasional tugs at her cap, and smoothings down of her gown, and apologies for being such a figure, especially when her eyes rested on my satin cravat, or drooped on my shining boots.

Arrived at the Lamb, the chambermaid, with conscious dignity, led us up a large staircase, which seemed interminable. As she mounted the region above the third story, she paused to take breath and inform us, apologetically, that the house was full, but that if the "gent" stayed over Friday, he would be moved into No. 54, "with a look-out and a chimbly." My little cousin now slipped from my father's arms, and, running up the stairs, beckoned to us to follow. We did so, and were led to a door, at which the child stopped and listened; then, taking off her shoes, she stole in on tiptoe. We entered after her.

By the light of a single candle we saw my poor uncle's face; it was flushed with fever, and the eyes had that bright, vacant stare which it is so terrible to meet. Less terrible is it to find the body wasted, the features sharp with the great life-struggle, than to look on the face from which the mind is gone,—the eyes in which there is no recognition. Such a sight is a startling shock to that unconscious habitual materialism with which we are apt familiarly to regard those we love; for in thus missing the mind, the heart, the affection that sprang to ours, we are suddenly made aware that it was the something within the form, and not the form itself, that was so dear to us. The form itself is still, perhaps, little altered; but that lip which smiles no welcome, that eye which wanders over us as strangers, that ear which distinguishes no more our voices,—the friend we sought is not there! Even our own love is chilled back; grows a kind of vague, superstitious terror. Yes, it was not the matter, still present to us, which had conciliated all those subtle, nameless sentiments which are classed and fused in the word "affection;" it was the airy, intangible, electric something, the absence of which now appals us.

I stood speechless; my father crept on, and took the hand that returned no pressure. The child only did not seem to share our emotions, but, clambering on the bed, laid her cheek on the breast, and was still.

"Pisistratus," whispered my father at last, and I stole near, hushing my breath,—"Pisistratus, if your mother were here!"

I nodded; the same thought had struck us both. His deep wisdom, my active youth, both felt their nothingness then and there. In the sick chamber both turned helplessly to miss the woman.

So I stole out, descended the stairs, and stood in the open air in a sort of stunned amaze. Then the tramp of feet, and the roll of wheels, and the great London roar, revived me. That contagion of practical life which lulls the heart and stimulates the brain,—what an intellectual mystery there is in its common atmosphere! In another moment I had singled out, like an inspiration, from a long file of those ministrants of our Trivia, the cab of the lightest shape and with the strongest horse, and was on my way, not to my mother's, but to Dr. M— H—, Manchester Square, whom I knew as the medical adviser to the Trevanions. Fortunately, that kind and able physician was at home, and he promised to be with the sufferer before I myself could join him. I then drove to Russell Street, and broke to my mother, as cautiously as I could, the intelligence with which I was charged.

When we arrived at the Lamb, we found the doctor already writing his prescription and injunctions: the activity of the treatment announced the clanger. I flew for the surgeon who had been before called in. Happy those who are strange to that indescribable silent bustle which the sick-room at times presents,—that conflict which seems almost hand to hand between life and death,—when all the poor, unresisting, unconscious frame is given up to the war against its terrible enemy the dark blood flowing, flowing; the hand on the pulse, the hushed suspense, every look on the physician's bended brow; then the sinapisms to the feet, and the ice to the head; and now and then, through the lull of the low whispers, the incoherent voice of the sufferer,—babbling, perhaps, of green fields and fairyland, while your hearts are breaking! Then, at length, the sleep,—in that sleep, perhaps, the

crisis,—the breathless watch, the slow waking, the first sane words, the old smile again, only fainter, your gushing tears, your low "Thank God thank God!"

Picture all this! It is past; Roland has spoken, his sense has returned; my mother is leaning over him; his child's small hands are clasped round his neck; the surgeon, who has been there six hours, has taken up his hat, and smiles gayly as he nods farewell; and my father is leaning against the wall, his face covered with his hands.

CHAPTER II

All this had been so sudden that, to use the trite phrase,—for no other is so expressive,—it was like a dream. I felt an absolute, an imperious want of solitude, of the open air. The swell of gratitude almost stifled me; the room did not seem large enough for my big heart. In early youth, if we find it difficult to control our feelings, so we find it difficult to vent them in the presence of others. On the spring side of twenty, if anything affects us, we rush to lock ourselves up in our room, or get away into the streets or the fields; in our earlier years we are still the savages of Nature, and we do as the poor brute does: the wounded stag leaves the herd, and if there is anything on a dog's faithful heart, he slinks away into a corner.

Accordingly, I stole out of the hotel and wandered through the streets, which were quite deserted. It was about the first hour of dawn,—the most comfortless hour there is, especially in London! But I only felt freshness in the raw air, and soothing in the desolate stillness. The love my uncle inspired was very remarkable in its nature; it was not like that quiet affection with which those advanced in life must usually content themselves, but connected with the more vivid interest that youth awakens. There was in him still so much of viva, city and fire, in his errors and crotchets so much of the self-delusion of youth, that one could scarce fancy him other than young. Those Quixotic, exaggerated notions of honor, that romance of sentiment which no hardship, care, grief, disappointment, could wear away (singular in a period when, at two and twenty, young men declare themselves blases!), seemed to leave him all the charm of boyhood. A season in London had made me more a man of the world, older in heart than he was. Then, the sorrow that gnawed him with such silent sternness. No, Captain Roland was one of those men who seize hold of your thoughts, who mix themselves up with your lives. The idea that Roland should die,—die with the load at his heart unlightened,—was one that seemed to take a spring out of the wheels of nature, all object out of the aims of life,—of my life at least. For I had made it one of the ends of my existence to bring back the son to the father, and restore the smile, that must have been gay once, to the downward curve of that iron lip. But Roland was now out of danger; and yet, like one who has escaped shipwreck, I trembled to look back on the danger past: the voice of the devouring deep still boomed in my ears. While rapt in my reveries, I stopped mechanically to hear a clock strike—four; and, looking round, I perceived that I had wandered from the heart of the City, and was in one of the streets that lead out of the Strand. Immediately before me, on the doorsteps of a large shop whose closed shutters were as obstinate a stillness as if they had guarded the secrets of seventeen centuries in a street in Pompeii, reclined a form fast asleep, the arm propped on the hard stone supporting the head, and the limbs uneasily strewn over the stairs. The dress of the slumberer was travel-stained, tattered, yet with the remains of a certain pretence; an air of faded, shabby, penniless gentility made poverty more painful, because it seemed to indicate unfitness to grapple with it. The face of this person was hollow and pale, but its expression, even in sleep, was fierce and hard. I drew near and nearer; I recognized the countenance, the regular features, the raven hair, even a peculiar gracefulness of posture: the young man whom I had met at the inn by the way-side, and who had left me alone with the Savoyard and his mice in the churchyard, was before me. I remained behind the shadow of one of the columns of the porch, leaning against the area rails, and irresolute whether or not so slight an acquaintance justified me in waking the sleeper, when a policeman, suddenly emerging from an angle in the street, terminated my deliberations with the decision of his practical profession; for he laid hold of the young man's arm and shook it roughly: "You must not lie here; get up and go home!" The sleeper woke with a quick start, rubbed his eyes, looked round, and fixed them upon the policeman so haughtily that that discriminating functionary probably thought that it was not from sheer necessity that so improper a couch had been selected, and with an air of greater respect he said, "You have been drinking, young man,—can you find your way home?"

"Yes," said the youth, resettling himself, "you see I have found it!"

"By the Lord Harry!" muttered the policeman, "if he ben't going to sleep again. Come, come, walk on; or I must walk you off."

My old acquaintance turned round. "Policeman," said he, with a strange sort of smile, "what do you think this lodging is worth,—I don't say for the night, for you see that is over, but for the next two hours? The lodging is primitive, but it suits me; I should think a shilling would be a fair price for it, eh?"

"You love your joke, sir," said the policeman, with a brow much relaxed, and opening his hand mechanically.

"Say a shilling, then; it is a bargain! I hire it of you upon credit.

Good night, and call me at six o'clock."

With that the young man settled himself so resolutely, and the policeman's face exhibited such bewilderment, that I burst out laughing, and came from my hiding-place.

The policeman looked at me. "Do you know this—this—"

"This gentleman?" said I, gravely. "Yes, you may leave him to me;" and I slipped the price of the lodging into the policeman's hand. He looked at the shilling, he looked at me, he looked up the street and down the street, shook his head, and walked off. I then approached the youth, touched him, and said: "Can you remember me, sir; and what have you done with Mr. Peacock?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.