

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**THE LAST OF THE
BARONS – VOLUME
02**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

The Last of the Barons — Volume 02

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

The Last of the Barons — Volume 02

BOOK II. THE KING'S COURT

CHAPTER I. EARL WARWICK THE KING-MAKER

The young men entered the Strand, which, thanks to the profits of a toll-bar, was a passable road for equestrians, studded towards the river, as we have before observed, with stately and half-fortified mansions; while on the opposite side, here and there, were straggling houses of a humbler kind,—the mediaeval villas of merchant and trader (for, from the earliest period since the Conquest, the Londoners had delight in such retreats), surrounded with blossoming orchards, [On all sides, without the suburbs, are the citizens' gardens and orchards, etc.—FITZSTEPHEN.] and adorned in front with the fleur-de-lis, emblem of the vain victories of renowned Agincourt. But by far the greater portion of the road northward stretched, unbuilt upon, towards a fair chain of fields and meadows, refreshed by many brooks, "turning water-mills with a pleasant noise." High rose, on the thoroughfare, the famous Cross, at which "the Judges Itinerant whilome sate, without London." [Stowe.] There, hallowed and solitary, stood the inn for the penitent pilgrims, who sought "the murmuring runnels" of St. Clement's healing well; for in this neighbourhood, even from the age of the Roman, springs of crystal wave and salubrious virtue received the homage of credulous disease. Through the gloomy arches of the Temple Gate and Lud, our horsemen wound their way, and finally arrived in safety at Marmaduke's hostelry in the East Chepe. Here Marmaduke found the decorators of his comely person already assembled. The simpler yet more manly fashions he had taken from the provinces were now exchanged for an attire worthy the kinsman of the great minister of a court unparalleled, since the reign of William the Red King, for extravagant gorgeousness of dress. His corset was of the finest cloth, sown with seed pearls; above it the lawn shirt, worn without collar, partially appeared, fringed with gold; over this was loosely hung a super-tunic of crimson sarcenet, slashed and pounced with a profusion of fringes. His velvet cap, turned up at the sides, extended in a point far over the forehead. His hose—under which appellation is to be understood what serves us of the modern day both for stockings and pantaloons—were of white cloth; and his shoes, very narrow, were curiously carved into chequer work at the instep, and tied with bobbins of gold thread, turning up like skates at the extremity, three inches in length. His dagger was suspended by a slight silver-gilt chain, and his girdle contained a large gipsire, or pouch, of embossed leather, richly gilt.

And this dress, marvellous as it seemed to the Nevile, the tailor gravely assured him was far under the mark of the highest fashion, and that an' the noble youth had been a knight, the shoes would have stretched at least three inches farther over the natural length of the feet, the placard have shone with jewels, and the tunic luxuriated in flowers of damascene. Even as it was, however, Marmaduke felt a natural diffidence of his habiliments, which cost him a round third of his whole capital; and no bride ever unveiled herself with more shamefaced bashfulness than did Marmaduke Nevile experience when he remounted his horse, and, taking leave of his foster-brother, bent his way to Warwick Lane, where the earl lodged.

The narrow streets were, however, crowded with equestrians whose dress eclipsed his own, some bending their way to the Tower, some to the palaces of the Flete. Carriages there were none,

and only twice he encountered the huge litters, in which some aged prelate or some high-born dame veiled greatness from the day. But the frequent vistas to the river gave glimpses of the gay boats and barges that crowded the Thames, which was then the principal thoroughfare for every class, but more especially the noble. The ways were fortunately dry and clean for London, though occasionally deep holes and furrows in the road menaced perils to the unwary horseman. The streets themselves might well disappoint in splendour the stranger's eye; for although, viewed at a distance, ancient London was incalculably more picturesque and stately than the modern, yet when fairly in its tortuous labyrinths, it seemed to those who had improved the taste by travel the meanest and the mirkiest capital of Christendom. The streets were marvellously narrow, the upper stories, chiefly of wood, projecting far over the lower, which were formed of mud and plaster. The shops were pitiful booths, and the 'prentices standing at the entrance bare-headed and cap in hand, and lining the passages, as the old French writer avers, *comme idoles*, [Perlin] kept up an eternal din with their clamorous invitations, often varied by pert witticisms on some churlish passenger, or loud vituperations of each other. The whole ancient family of the London criers were in full bay. Scarcely had Marmaduke's ears recovered the shock of "Hot peascods,—all hot!" than they were saluted with "Mackerel!" "Sheep's feet! hot sheep's feet!" At the smaller taverns stood the inviting vociferators of "Cock-pie," "Ribs of beef,—hot beef!" while, blended with these multi-toned discords, whined the *vielle*, or primitive hurdy-gurdy, screamed the pipe, twanged the harp, from every quarter where the thirsty paused to drink, or the idler stood to gape. [See Lydgate: London Lyckpenny.]

Through this Babel Marmaduke at last slowly wound his way, and arrived before the mighty mansion in which the chief baron of England held his state.

As he dismounted and resigned his steed to the servitor hired for him by Alwyn, Marmaduke paused a moment, struck by the disparity, common as it was to eyes more accustomed to the metropolis, between the stately edifice and the sordid neighbourhood. He had not noticed this so much when he had repaired to the earl's house on his first arrival in London, for his thoughts then had been too much bewildered by the general bustle and novelty of the scene; but now it seemed to him that he better comprehended the homage accorded to a great noble in surveying, at a glance, the immeasurable eminence to which he was elevated above his fellow-men by wealth and rank.

Far on either side of the wings of the earl's abode stretched, in numerous deformity, sheds rather than houses, of broken plaster and crazy timbers. But here and there were open places of public reception, crowded with the lower followers of the puissant chief; and the eye rested on many idle groups of sturdy swash-bucklers, some half-clad in armour, some in rude jerkins of leather, before the doors of these resorts,—as others, like bees about a hive, swarmed in and out with a perpetual hum.

The exterior of Warwick House was of a gray but dingy stone, and presented a half-fortified and formidable appearance. The windows, or rather loop-holes, towards the street were few, and strongly barred. The black and massive arch of the gateway yawned between two huge square towers; and from a yet higher but slender tower on the inner side, the flag gave the "White Bear and Ragged Staff" to the smoky air. Still, under the portal as he entered, hung the grate of the portcullis, and the square court which he saw before him swarmed with the more immediate retainers of the earl, in scarlet jackets, wrought with their chieftain's cognizance. A man of gigantic girth and stature, who officiated as porter, leaning against the wall under the arch, now emerged from the shadow, and with sufficient civility demanded the young visitor's name and business. On hearing the former, he bowed low as he doffed his hat, and conducted Marmaduke through the first quadrangle. The two sides to the right and left were devoted to the offices and rooms of retainers, of whom no less than six hundred, not to speak of the domestic and more orderly retinue, attested the state of the Last of the English Barons on his visits to the capital. Far from being then, as now, the object of the great to thrust all that belongs to the service of the house out of sight, it was their pride to strike awe into the visitor by the extent of accommodation afforded to their followers: some seated on benches of stone ranged along the walls; some grouped in the centre of the court; some lying at length upon the two oblong

patches of what had been turf, till worn away by frequent feet,—this domestic army filled the young Nevile with an admiration far greater than the gay satins of the knights and nobles who had gathered round the lord of Montagu and Northumberland at the pastime-ground.

This assemblage, however, were evidently under a rude discipline of their own. They were neither noisy nor drunk. They made way with surly obeisance as the cavalier passed, and closing on his track like some horde of wild cattle, gazed after him with earnest silence, and then turned once more to their indolent whispers with each other.

And now Nevile entered the last side of the quadrangle. The huge hall, divided from the passage by a screen of stone fretwork, so fine as to attest the hand of some architect in the reign of Henry III., stretched to his right; and so vast, in truth, it was, that though more than fifty persons were variously engaged therein, their number was lost in the immense space. Of these, at one end of the longer and lower table beneath the dais, some squires of good dress and mien were engaged at chess or dice; others were conferring in the gloomy embrasures of the casements; some walking to and fro, others gathered round the shovel-board. At the entrance of this hall the porter left Marmaduke, after exchanging a whisper with a gentleman whose dress eclipsed the Nevile's in splendour; and this latter personage, who, though of high birth, did not disdain to perform the office of chamberlain, or usher, to the king-like earl, advanced to Marmaduke with a smile, and said,—

"My lord expects you, sir, and has appointed this time to receive you, that you may not be held back from his presence by the crowds that crave audience in the forenoon. Please to follow me!" This said, the gentleman slowly preceded the visitor, now and then stopping to exchange a friendly word with the various parties he passed in his progress; for the urbanity which Warwick possessed himself, his policy inculcated as a duty on all who served him. A small door at the other extremity of the hall admitted into an anteroom, in which some half score pages, the sons of knights and barons, were gathered round an old warrior, placed at their head as a sort of tutor, to instruct them in all knightly accomplishments; and beckoning forth one of these youths from the ring, the earl's chamberlain said, with a profound reverence, "Will you be pleased, my young lord, to conduct your cousin, Master Marmaduke Nevile, to the earl's presence?" The young gentleman eyed Marmaduke with a supercilious glance.

"Marry!" said he, pertly, "if a man born in the North were to feed all his cousins, he would soon have a tail as long as my uncle, the stout earl's. Come, sir cousin, this way." And without tarrying even to give Nevile information of the name and quality of his new-found relation,—who was no less than Lord Montagu's son, the sole male heir to the honours of that mighty family, though now learning the apprenticeship of chivalry amongst his uncle's pages,—the boy passed before Marmaduke with a saunter, that, had they been in plain Westmoreland, might have cost him a cuff from the stout hand of the indignant elder cousin. He raised the tapestry at one end of the room, and ascending a short flight of broad stairs, knocked gently on the panels of an arched door sunk deep in the walls.

"Enter!" said a clear, loud voice, and the next moment Marmaduke was in the presence of the King-maker.

He heard his guide pronounce his name, and saw him smile maliciously at the momentary embarrassment the young man displayed, as the boy passed by Marmaduke, and vanished. The Earl of Warwick was seated near a door that opened upon an inner court, or rather garden, which gave communication to the river. The chamber was painted in the style of Henry III., with huge figures representing the battle of Hastings, or rather, for there were many separate pieces, the conquest of Saxon England. Over each head, to enlighten the ignorant, the artist had taken the precaution to insert a label, which told the name and the subject. The ceiling was groined, vaulted, and emblazoned with the richest gilding and colours. The chimney-piece (a modern ornament) rose to the roof, and represented in bold reliefs, gilt and decorated, the signing of Magna Charta. The floor was strewn thick with dried rushes and odorous herbs; the furniture was scanty, but rich. The low-backed chairs, of which there were but four, carved in ebony, had cushions of velvet with fringes of massive gold;

a small cupboard, or beaufet, covered with carpetz de cuir (carpets of gilt and painted leather), of great price, held various quaint and curious ornaments of plate inwrought with precious stones; and beside this—a singular contrast—on a plain Gothic table lay the helmet, the gauntlets, and the battle-axe of the master. Warwick himself, seated before a large, cumbrous desk, was writing,—but slowly and with pain,—and he lifted his finger as the Nevile approached, in token of his wish to conclude a task probably little congenial to his tastes. But Marmaduke was grateful for the moments afforded him to recover his self-possession, and to examine his kinsman.

The earl was in the lusty vigour of his age. His hair, of the deepest black, was worn short, as if in disdain of the effeminate fashions of the day; and fretted bare from the temples by the constant and early friction of his helmet, gave to a forehead naturally lofty yet more majestic appearance of expanse and height. His complexion, though dark and sunburned, glowed with rich health. The beard was closely shaven, and left in all its remarkable beauty the contour of the oval face and strong jaw,—strong as if clasped in iron. The features were marked and aquiline, as was common to those of Norman blood. The form spare, but of prodigious width and depth of chest, the more apparent from the fashion of the short surcoat, which was thrown back, and left in broad expanse a placard, not of holiday velvet and satins, but of steel polished as a mirror, and inlaid with gold. And now as, concluding his task, the earl rose and motioned Marmaduke to a stool by his side, his great stature, which, from the length of his limbs, was not so observable when he sat, actually startled his guest. Tall as Marmaduke was himself, the earl towered [The faded portrait of Richard Nevile, Earl of Warwick, in the Rous Roll, preserved at the Herald's College, does justice, at least, to the height and majesty of his stature. The portrait of Edward IV. is the only one in that long series which at all rivals the stately proportions of the King-maker.] above him,—with his high, majestic, smooth, unwrinkled forehead,—like some Paladin of the rhyme of poet or romancer; and, perhaps, not only in this masculine advantage, but in the rare and harmonious combination of colossal strength with graceful lightness, a more splendid union of all the outward qualities we are inclined to give to the heroes of old never dazzled the eye or impressed the fancy. But even this effect of mere person was subordinate to that which this eminent nobleman created—upon his inferiors, at least—by a manner so void of all arrogance, yet of all condescension, so simple, open, cordial, and hero-like, that Marmaduke Nevile, peculiarly alive to external impressions, and subdued and fascinated by the earl's first word, and that word was "Welcome!" dropped on his knee, and kissing the hand extended to him, said, "Noble kinsman, in thy service and for thy sake let me live and die!" Had the young man been prepared by the subtlest master of courtcraft for this interview, so important to his fortunes, he could not have advanced a hundredth part so far with the great earl as he did by that sudden, frank burst of genuine emotion; for Warwick was extremely sensitive to the admiration he excited,—vain or proud of it, it matters not which; grateful as a child for love, and inexorable as a woman for slight or insult: in rude ages, one sex has often the qualities of the other.

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