

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**THE LAST OF THE
BARONS – VOLUME
08**

Эдвард Бульвер-Литтон

The Last of the Barons — Volume 08

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

The Last of the Barons — Volume 08

BOOK VIII.

IN WHICH THE LAST LINK BETWEEN KING-MAKER AND KING SNAPS ASUNDER

CHAPTER I.

THE LADY ANNE VISITS THE COURT

It was some weeks after the date of the events last recorded. The storm that hung over the destinies of King Edward was dispersed for the hour, though the scattered clouds still darkened the horizon: the Earl of Warwick had defeated the Lancastrians on the frontier, [Croyl. 552] and their leader had perished on the scaffold; but Edward's mighty sword had not shone in the battle. Chained by an attraction yet more powerful than slaughter, he had lingered at Middleham, while Warwick led his army to York; and when the earl arrived at the capital of Edward's ancestral duchy, he found that the able and active Hastings—having heard, even before he reached the Duke of Gloucester's camp, of Edward's apparent seizure by the earl and the march to Middleham—had deemed it best to halt at York, and to summon in all haste a council of such of the knights and barons as either love to the king or envy to Warwick could collect. The report was general that Edward was retained against his will at Middleham; and this rumour Hastings gravely demanded Warwick, on the arrival of the latter at York, to disprove. The earl, to clear himself from a suspicion that impeded all his military movements, despatched Lord Montagu to Middleham, who returned not only with the king, but the countess and her daughters, whom Edward, under pretence of proving the complete amity that existed between Warwick and himself, carried in his train. The king's appearance at York reconciled all differences; but he suffered Warwick to march alone against the enemy, and not till after the decisive victory, which left his reign for a while without an open foe, did he return to London.

Thither the earl, by the advice of his friends, also repaired, and in a council of peers, summoned for the purpose, deigned to refute the rumours still commonly circulated by his foes, and not disbelieved by the vulgar, whether of his connivance at the popular rising or his forcible detention of the king at Middleham. To this, agreeably to the counsel of the archbishop, succeeded a solemn interview of the heads of the Houses of York and Warwick, in which the once fair Rose of Raby (the king's mother) acted as mediator and arbiter. The earl's word to the commons at Olney was ratified. Edward consented to the temporary retirement of the Woodvilles, though the gallant Anthony yet delayed his pilgrimage to Compostella. The vanity of Clarence was contented by the government of Ireland, but, under various pretences, Edward deferred his brother's departure to that important post. A general amnesty was proclaimed, a parliament summoned for the redress of popular grievances, and the betrothal of the king's daughter to Montagu's heir was proclaimed: the latter received the title of Duke of Bedford; and the whole land rejoiced in the recovered peace of the realm, the retirement of the Woodvilles, and the reconciliation of the young king with his all-beloved subject. Never had the power of the Neviles seemed so secure; never did the throne of Edward appear so stable.

It was at this time that the king prevailed upon the earl and his countess to permit the Lady Anne to accompany the Duchess of Clarence in a visit to the palace of the Tower. The queen had submitted so graciously to the humiliation of her family, that even the haughty Warwick was touched

and softened; and the visit of his daughter at such a time became a homage to Elizabeth which it suited his chivalry to render.

The public saw in this visit, which was made with great state and ceremony, the probability of a new and popular alliance. The archbishop had suffered the rumour of Gloucester's attachment to the Lady Anne to get abroad, and the young prince's return from the North was anxiously expected by the gossips of the day.

It was on this occasion that Warwick showed his gratitude for Marmaduke Nevile's devotion. "My dear and gallant kinsman," he said, "I forget not that when thou didst leave the king and the court for the discredited minister and his gloomy hall,—I forget not that thou didst tell me of love to some fair maiden, which had not prospered according to thy merits. At least it shall not be from lack of lands, or of the gold spur, which allows the wearer to ride by the side of king or kaiser, that thou canst not choose thy bride as the heart bids thee. I pray thee, sweet cousin, to attend my child Anne to the court, where the king will show thee no ungracious countenance; but it is just to recompense thee for the loss of thy post in his highness's chamber. I hold the king's commission to make knights of such as can pay the fee, and thy lands shall suffice for the dignity. Kneel down and rise up, Sir Marmaduke Nevile, lord of the Manor of Borrodaile, with its woodlands and its farms, and may God and our Lady render thee puissant in battle and prosperous in love!"

Accordingly, in his new rank, and entitled to ruffle it with the bravest, Sir Marmaduke Nevile accompanied the earl and the Lady Anne to the palace of the Tower.

As Warwick, leaving his daughter amidst the brilliant circle that surrounded Elizabeth, turned to address the king, he said, with simple and unaffected nobleness,—

"Ah, my liege, if you needed a hostage of my faith, think that my heart is here, for verily its best blood were less dear to me than that slight girl,—the likeness of her mother, when her lips first felt the touch of mine!"

Edward's bold brow fell, and he blushed as he answered, "My Elizabeth will hold her as a sister. But, cousin, part you not now for the North?"

"By your leave I go first to Warwick."

"Ah, you do not wish to approve of my seeming preparations against France?"

"Nay, your Highness is not in earnest. I promised the commons that you would need no supplies for so thriftless a war."

"Thou knowest I mean to fulfil all thy pledges. But the country so swarms with disbanded soldiers, that it is politic to hold out to them a hope of service, and so let the clouds gradually pass away."

"Alack, my liege," said Warwick, gravely, "I suppose that a crown teaches the brow to scheme; but hearty peace or open war seems ever the best to me."

Edward smiled, and turned aside. Warwick glanced at his daughter, whom Elizabeth flatteringly caressed, stifled a sigh, and the air seemed lighter to the insects of the court as his proud crest bowed beneath the doorway, and, with the pomp of his long retinue, he vanished from the scene.

"And choose, fair Anne," said the queen, "choose from my ladies whom you will have for your special train. We would not that your attendance should be less than royal."

The gentle Anne in vain sought to excuse herself from an honour at once arrogant and invidious, though too innocent to perceive the cunning so characteristic of the queen; for, under the guise of a special compliment, Anne had received the royal request to have her female attendants chosen from the court, and Elizabeth now desired to force upon her a selection which could not fail to mortify those not preferred. But glancing timidly round the circle, the noble damsel's eye rested on one fair face, and in that face there was so much that awoke her own interest, and stirred up a fond and sad remembrance, that she passed involuntarily to the stranger's side, and artlessly took her hand. The high-born maidens, grouped around, glanced at each other with a sneer, and slunk back. Even the queen looked surprised; but recovering herself, inclined her head graciously, and said, "Do we read

your meaning aright, Lady Anne, and would you this gentlewoman, Mistress Sibyll Warner, as one of your chamber?"

"Sibyll, ah, I knew that my memory failed me not," murmured Anne; and, after bowing assent to the queen, she said, "Do you not also recall, fair demoiselle, our meeting, when children long years ago?"

"Well, noble dame," [The title of dame was at that time applied indiscriminately to ladies whether married or single, if of high birth.] answered Sibyll. And as Anne turned, with her air of modest gentleness, yet of lofty birth and breeding, to explain to the queen that she had met Sibyll in earlier years, the king approached to monopolize his guest's voice and ear. It seemed natural to all present that Edward should devote peculiar attention to the daughter of Warwick and the sister of the Duchess of Clarence; and even Elizabeth suspected no guiltier gallantry in the subdued voice, the caressing manner, which her handsome lord adopted throughout that day, even to the close of the nightly revel, towards a demoiselle too high (it might well appear) for licentious homage.

But Anne herself, though too guileless to suspect the nature of Edward's courtesy, yet shrank from it in vague terror. All his beauty, all his fascination, could not root from her mind the remembrance of the exiled prince; nay, the brilliancy of his qualities made her the more averse to him. It darkened the prospects of Edward of Lancaster that Edward of York should wear so gracious and so popular a form. She hailed with delight the hour when she was conducted to her chamber, and dismissing gently the pompous retinue allotted to her, found herself alone with the young maiden whom she had elected to her special service.

"And you remember me, too, fair Sibyll?" said Anne, with her dulcet and endearing voice.

"Truly, who would not? for as you, then, noble lady, glided apart from the other children, hand in hand with the young prince, in whom all dreamed to see their future king, I heard the universal murmur of—a false prophecy!"

"Ah! and of what?" asked Anne.

"That in the hand the prince clasped with his small rosy fingers—the hand of great Warwick's daughter—lay the best defence of his father's throne."

Anne's breast heaved, and her small foot began to mark strange characters on the floor.

"So," she said musingly, "so even here, amidst a new court, you forget not Prince Edward of Lancaster. Oh, we shall find hours to talk of the past days. But how, if your childhood was spent in Margaret's court, does your youth find a welcome in Elizabeth's?"

"Avarice and power had need of my father's science. He is a scholar of good birth, but fallen fortunes, even now, and ever while night lasts, he is at work. I belonged to the train of her grace of Bedford; but when the duchess quitted the court, and the king retained my father in his own royal service, her highness the queen was pleased to receive me among her maidens. Happy that my father's home is mine!—who else could tend him?"

"Thou art his only child?—he must—love thee dearly?"

"Yet not as I love him; he lives in a life apart from all else that live. But after all, peradventure it is sweeter to love than to be loved."

Anne, whose nature was singularly tender and woman-like, was greatly affected by this answer. She drew nearer to Sibyll; she twined her arm round her slight form, and kissed her forehead.

"Shall I love thee, Sibyll?" she said, with a girl's candid simplicity, "and wilt thou love me?"

"Ah, lady! there are so many to love thee,—father, mother, sister,—all the world; the very sun shines more kindly upon the great!"

"Nay!" said Anne, with that jealousy of a claim to suffering to which the gentler natures are prone, "I may have sorrows from which thou art free. I confess to thee, Sibyll, that something I know not how to explain draws me strangely towards thy sweet face. Marriage has lost me my only sister, for since Isabel is wed she is changed to me—would that her place were supplied by thee! Shall I

steal thee from the queen when I depart? Ah, my mother—at least thou wilt love her! for verily, to love my mother you have but to breathe the same air. Kiss me, Sibyll."

Kindness, of late, had been strange to Sibyll, especially from her own sex, one of her own age; it came like morning upon the folded blossom. She threw her arms round the new friend that seemed sent to her from heaven; she kissed Anne's face and hands with grateful tears.

"Ah!" she said at last, when she could command a voice still broken with emotion—"if I could ever serve—ever repay thee—though those gracious words were the last thy lips should ever deign to address to me!"

Anne was delighted; she had never yet found one to protect; she had never yet found one in whom thoroughly to confide. Gentle as her mother was, the distinction between child and parent was, even in the fond family she belonged to, so great in that day, that she could never have betrayed to the countess the wild weakness of her young heart.

The wish to communicate, to reveal, is so natural to extreme youth, and in Anne that disposition was so increased by a nature at once open and inclined to lean on others, that she had, as we have seen, sought a confidante in Isabel; but with her, even at the first, she found but the half-contemptuous pity of a strong and hard mind; and lately, since Edward's visit to Middleham, the Duchess of Clarence had been so rapt in her own imperious egotism and discontented ambition, that the timid Anne had not even dared to touch, with her, upon those secrets which it flushed her own bashful cheek to recall. And this visit to the court, this new, unfamiliar scene, this estrangement from all the old accustomed affections, had produced in her that sense of loneliness which is so irksome, till grave experience of real life accustoms us to the common lot. So with the exaggerated and somewhat morbid sensibility that belonged to her, she turned at once, and by impulse, to this sudden, yet graceful friendship. Here was one of her own age, one who had known sorrow, one whose voice and eyes charmed her, one who would not chide even folly, one, above all, who had seen her beloved prince, one associated with her fondest memories, one who might have a thousand tales to tell of the day when the outlaw boy was a monarch's heir. In the childishness of her soft years, she almost wept at another channel for so much natural tenderness. It was half the woman gaining a woman-friend, half the child clinging to a new playmate.

"Ah, Sibyll," she whispered, "do not leave me to-night; this strange place daunts me, and the figures on the arras seem so tall and spectre-like, and they say the old tower is haunted. Stay, dear Sibyll!"

And Sibyll stayed.

CHAPTER II. THE SLEEPING INNOCENCE—THE WAKEFUL CRIME

While these charming girls thus innocently conferred; while, Anne's sweet voice running on in her artless fancies, they helped each other to undress; while hand in hand they knelt in prayer by the crucifix in the dim recess; while timidly they extinguished the light, and stole to rest; while, conversing in whispers, growing gradually more faint and low, they sank into guileless sleep,—the unholy king paced his solitary chamber, parched with the fever of the sudden and frantic passion that swept away from a heart in which every impulse was a giant all the memories of honour, gratitude, and law.

The mechanism of this strong man's nature was that almost unknown to the modern time; it belonged to those earlier days which furnish to Greece the terrible legends Ovid has clothed in gloomy fire, which a similar civilization produced no less in the Middle Ages, whether of Italy or the North,—that period when crime took a grandeur from its excess; when power was so great and absolute that its girth burst the ligaments of conscience; when a despot was but the incarnation of WILL; when honour was indeed a religion, but its faith was valour, and it wrote its decalogue with the point of a fearless sword.

The youth of Edward IV. was as the youth of an ancient Titan, of an Italian Borgia; through its veins the hasty blood rolled as a devouring flame. This impetuous and fiery temperament was rendered yet more fearful by the indulgence of every intemperance; it fed on wine and lust; its very virtues strengthened its vices,—its courage stifled every whisper of prudence; its intellect, uninured to all discipline, taught it to disdain every obstacle to its desires. Edward could, indeed, as we have seen, be false and crafty, a temporizer, a dissimulator; but it was only as the tiger creeps,—the better to spring, undetected, on its prey. If detected, the cunning ceased, the daring rose, and the mighty savage had fronted ten thousand foes, secure in its fangs and talons, its bold heart and its deadly spring. Hence, with all Edward's abilities, the astonishing levities and indiscretions of his younger years. It almost seemed, as we have seen him play fast and loose with the might of Warwick, and with that power, whether of barons or of people, which any other prince of half his talents would have trembled to arouse against an unrooted throne,—it almost seemed as if he loved to provoke a danger for the pleasure it gave the brain to baffle or the hand to crush it. His whole nature coveting excitement, nothing was left to the beautiful, the luxurious Edward, already wearied with pomp and pleasure, but what was unholy and forbidden. In his court were a hundred ladies, perhaps not less fair than Anne, at least of a beauty more commanding the common homage, but these he had only to smile on with ease to win. No awful danger, no inexpiable guilt, attended those vulgar frailties, and therefore they ceased to tempt. But here the virgin guest, the daughter of his mightiest subject, the beloved treasure of the man whose hand had built a throne, whose word had dispersed an army—here, the more the reason warned, the conscience started, the more the hell-born passion was aroused.

Like men of his peculiar constitution, Edward was wholly incapable of pure and steady love. His affection for his queen the most resembled that diviner affection; but when analyzed, it was composed of feelings widely distinct. From a sudden passion, not otherwise to be gratified, he had made the rashest sacrifices for an unequal marriage. His vanity, and something of original magnanimity, despite his vices, urged him to protect what he himself had raised,—to secure the honour of the subject who was honoured by the king. In common with most rude and powerful natures, he was strongly alive to the affections of a father, and the faces of his children helped to maintain the influence of the mother. But in all this, we need scarcely say that that true love, which is at once a passion and a devotion, existed not. Love with him cared not for the person loved, but solely for its own gratification; it was desire for possession,—nothing more. But that desire was the will of a king who never knew fear or scruple; and, pampered by eternal indulgence, it was to the feeble lusts of common men what the storm is to the west wind. Yet still, as in the solitude of night he paced his chamber, the shadow of the

great crime advancing upon his soul appalled even that dauntless conscience. He gasped for breath; his cheeks flushed crimson, and the next moment grew deadly pale. He heard the loud beating of his heart. He stopped still. He flung himself on a seat, and hid his face with his hands; then starting up, he exclaimed, "No, no! I cannot shut out that sweet face, those blue eyes from my gaze. They haunt me to my destruction and her own. Yet why say destruction? If she love me, who shall know the deed? If she love me not, will she dare to reveal her shame? Shame!—nay, a king's embrace never dishonours. A king's bastard is a House's pride. All is still,—the very moon vanishes from heaven. The noiseless rushes in the gallery give no echo to the footstep. Fie on me! Can a Plantagenet know fear?" He allowed himself no further time to pause; he opened the door gently and stole along the gallery. He knew well the chamber, for it was appointed by his command, and, besides the usual door from the corridor, a small closet conducted to a secret panel behind the arras. It was the apartment occupied, in her visits to the court, by the queen's rival, the Lady Elizabeth Lucy. He passed into the closet; he lifted the arras; he stood in that chamber, which gratitude and chivalry and hospitable faith should have made sacred as a shrine. And suddenly, as he entered, the moon, before hid beneath a melancholy cloud, broke forth in awful splendour, and her light rushed through the casement opposite his eye, and bathed the room with the beams of a ghostlier day.

The abruptness of the solemn and mournful glory scared him as the rebuking face of a living thing; a presence as if not of earth seemed to interpose between the victim and the guilt. It was, however, but for a moment that his step halted. He advanced: he drew aside the folds of the curtain heavy with tissue of gold, and the sleeping face of Anne lay hushed before him. It looked pale in the moonlight, but ineffably serene, and the smile on its lips seemed still sweeter than that which it wore awake. So fixed was his gaze, so ardently did his whole heart and being feed through his eyes upon that exquisite picture of innocence and youth, that he did not see for some moments that the sleeper was not alone. Suddenly an exclamation rose to his lips. He clenched his hand in jealous agony; he approached; he bent over; he heard the regular breathing which the dreams of guilt never know; and then, when he saw that pure and interlaced embrace,—the serene yet somewhat melancholy face of Sibyll, which seemed hueless as marble in the moonlight, bending partially over that of Anne, as if even in sleep watchful; both charming forms so linked and woven that the two seemed as one life, the very breath in each rising and ebbing with the other; the dark ringlets of Sibyll mingling with the auburn gold of Anne's luxuriant hair, and the darkness and the gold, tress within tress, falling impartially over either neck, that gleamed like ivory beneath that common veil,—when he saw this twofold loveliness, the sentiment, the conviction of that mysterious defence which exists in purity, thrilled like ice through his burning veins. In all his might of monarch and of man, he felt the awe of that unlooked-for protection,—maidenhood sheltering maidenhood, innocence guarding innocence. The double virtue appalled and baffled him; and that slight arm which encircled the neck he would have perilled his realm to clasp, shielded his victim more effectually than the bucklers of all the warriors that ever gathered round the banner of the lofty Warwick. Night and the occasion befriended him; but in vain. While Sibyll was there, Anne was saved. He ground his teeth, and muttered to himself. At that moment Anne turned restlessly. This movement disturbed the light sleep of her companion. She spoke half inaudibly, but the sound was as the hoot of shame in the ear of the guilty king. He let fall the curtain, and was gone. And if one who lived afterwards to hear and to credit the murderous doom which, unless history lies, closed the male line of Edward, had beheld the king stealing, felon-like, from the chamber,—his step reeling to and fro the gallery floors, his face distorted by stormy passion, his lips white and murmuring, his beauty and his glory dimmed and humbled,—the spectator might have half believed that while Edward gazed upon those harmless sleepers, A VISION OF THE TRAGEDY TO COME had stricken down his thought of guilt, and filled up its place with horror,—a vision of a sleep as pure, of two forms wrapped in an embrace as fond, of intruders meditating a crime scarce fouler than his own; and the sins of the father starting into grim corporeal shapes, to become the deathsmen of the sons!

CHAPTER III.

NEW DANGERS TO THE HOUSE OF YORK— AND THE KING'S HEART ALLIES ITSELF WITH REBELLION AGAINST THE KING'S THRONE

Oh, beautiful is the love of youth to youth, and touching the tenderness of womanhood to woman; and fair in the eyes of the happy sun is the waking of holy sleep, and the virgin kiss upon virgin lips smiling and murmuring the sweet "Good-morrow!"

Anne was the first to wake; and as the bright winter morn, robust with frosty sunbeams shone cheerily upon Sibyll's face, she was struck with a beauty she had not sufficiently observed the day before; for in the sleep of the young the traces of thought and care vanish, the aching heart is lulled in the body's rest, the hard lines relax into flexile ease, a softer, warmer bloom steals over the cheek, and, relieved from the stiff restraints of dress, the rounded limbs repose in a more alluring grace! Youth seems younger in its slumber, and beauty more beautiful, and purity more pure. Long and dark, the fringe of the eyelash rested upon the white lids, and the freshness of the parting pouted lips invited the sister kiss that wakened up the sleeper.

"Ah, lady," said Sibyll, parting her tresses from her dark blue eyes, "you are here, you are safe! —blessed be the saints and our Lady! for I had a dream in the night that startled and appalled me."

"And my dreams were all blithe and golden," said Anne. "What was thine?"

"Methought you were asleep and in this chamber, and I not by your side, but watching you at a little distance; and lo! a horrible serpent glided from yon recess, and, crawling to your pillow, I heard its hiss, and strove to come to your aid, but in vain; a spell seemed to chain my limbs. At last I found voice, I cried aloud, I woke; and mock me not, but I surely heard a parting footstep, and the low grating of some sliding door."

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