

CHAPTER V. AT THE OPERA

A friend had given Josephine Ford a box at the opera for one evening; our story continues by night. The box was large and important, near the stage. Josephine and Julia were there, with Robert and Jim--also two more men. The women sat in the front of the box, conspicuously. They were both poor, they were rather excited. But they belonged to a set which looked on social triumphs as a downfall that one allows oneself. The two men, Lilly and Struthers, were artists, the former literary, the latter a painter. Lilly sat by Josephine in the front of the box: he was her little lion of the evening.

Few women can sit in the front of a big box, on a crowded and full-swing opera night, without thrilling and dilating. There is an intoxication in being thus thrust forward, conspicuous and enhanced, right in the eye of the vast crowd that lines the hollow shell of the auditorium. Thus even Josephine and Julia leaned their elbows and poised their heads regally, looking condescendingly down upon the watchful world. They were two poor women, having nothing to do with society. Half bohemians.

Josephine was an artist. In Paris she was a friend of a very fashionable dressmaker and decorator, master of modern elegance. Sometimes she designed dresses for him, and sometimes she accepted from him a commission to decorate a room. Usually at her last sou, it gave her pleasure to dispose of costly and exquisite things for other people, and

then be rid of them.

This evening her dress was a simple, but a marvellously poised thing of black and silver: in the words of the correct journal. With her tight, black, bright hair, her arched brows, her dusky-ruddy face and her bare shoulders; her strange equanimity, her long, slow, slanting looks; she looked foreign and frightening, clear as a cameo, but dark, far off.

Julia was the English beauty, in a lovely blue dress. Her hair was becomingly untidy on her low brow, her dark blue eyes wandered and got excited, her nervous mouth twitched. Her high-pitched, sing-song voice and her hurried laugh could be heard in the theatre. She twisted a beautiful little fan that a dead artist had given her.

Not being fashionable, they were in the box when the overture began. The opera was Verdi--Aida. If it is impossible to be in an important box at the opera without experiencing the strange intoxication of social pre-eminence, it is just as impossible to be there without some feeling of horror at the sight the stage presents.

Josephine leaned her elbow and looked down: she knew how arresting that proud, rather stiff bend of her head was. She had some aboriginal American in her blood. But as she looked, she pursed her mouth. The artist in her forgot everything, she was filled with disgust. The sham Egypt of Aida hid from her nothing of its shame. The singers were all colour-washed, deliberately colour-washed to a bright orange tint. The men had oblong dabs of black wool under their lower lip; the beard of

the mighty Pharaohs. This oblong dab shook and wagged to the singing.

The vulgar bodies of the fleshy women were unendurable. They all looked such good meat. Why were their haunches so prominent? It was a question Josephine could not solve. She scanned their really expensive, brilliant clothing. It was nearly right--nearly splendid. It only lacked that last subtlety which the world always lacks, the last final clinching which puts calm into a sea of fabric, and yet is the opposite pole to machine fixity.

But the leading tenor was the chief pain. He was large, stout, swathed in a cummerbund, and looked like a eunuch. This fattish, emasculated look seems common in stage heroes--even the extremely popular. The tenor sang bravely, his mouth made a large, coffin-shaped, yawning gap in his orange face, his little beard fluttered oddly, like a tail. He turned up his eyes to Josephine's box as he sang--that being the regulation direction. Meanwhile his abdomen shook as he caught his breath, the flesh of his fat, naked arms swayed.

Josephine looked down with the fixed gravity of a Red Indian, immovable, inscrutable. It was not till the scene was ended that she lifted her head as if breaking a spell, sent the point of her tongue rapidly over her dried lips, and looked round into the box. Her brown eyes expressed shame, fear, and disgust. A curious grimace went over her face--a grimace only to be expressed by the exclamation Merde! But she was mortally afraid of society, and its fixed institutions. Rapidly she

scanned the eyes of her friends in the box. She rested on the eyes of Lilly, a dark, ugly man.

"Isn't it nasty?" she said.

"You shouldn't look so closely," he said. But he took it calmly, easily, whilst she felt floods of burning disgust, a longing to destroy it all.

"Oh-ho-ho!" laughed Julia. "It's so fu-nny--so funny!"

"Of course we are too near," said Robert.

"Say you admire that pink fondant over there," said Struthers, indicating with his eyebrows a blond large woman in white satin with pink edging, who sat in a box opposite, on the upper tier.

"Oh, the fondant--exactly--the fondant! Yes, I admire her immensely! Isn't she exactly IT!" sang Julia.

Josephine was scanning the auditorium. So many myriads of faces--like beads on a bead-work pattern--all bead-work, in different layers. She bowed to various acquaintances--mostly Americans in uniform, whom she had known in Paris. She smiled to Lady Cochrane, two boxes off--Lady Cochrane had given her the box. But she felt rather coldly towards her.

The curtain rose, the opera wound its slow length along. The audience

loved it. They cheered with mad enthusiasm. Josephine looked down on the choppy sea of applause, white gloves clapping, heads shaking. The noise was strange and rattling. What a curious multiple object a theatre-audience was! It seemed to have a million heads, a million hands, and one monstrous, unnatural consciousness. The singers appeared before the curtain--the applause rose up like clouds of dust.

"Oh, isn't it too wonderful!" cried Julia. "I am wild with excitement. Are you all of you?"

"Absolutely wild," said Lilly laconically.

"Where is Scott to-night?" asked Struthers.

Julia turned to him and gave him a long, queer look from her dark blue eyes.

"He's in the country," she said, rather enigmatic.

"Don't you know, he's got a house down in Dorset," said Robert, verbally rushing in. "He wants Julia to go down and stay."

"Is she going?" said Lilly.

"She hasn't decided," replied Robert.

"Oh! What's the objection?" asked Struthers.

"Well, none whatsoever, as far as can be seen, except that she can't make up her mind," replied Robert.

"Julia's got no mind," said Jim rudely.

"Oh! Hear the brotherly verdict!" laughed Julia hurriedly.

"You mean to go down to Dorset alone!" said Struthers.

"Why not?" replied Robert, answering for her.

"And stay how long?"

"Oh--as long as it lasts," said Robert again.

"Starting with eternity," said Lilly, "and working back to a fortnight."

"And what's the matter?--looks bad in the eyes of the world?"

"Yes--about that. Afraid of compromising herself--"

Lilly looked at them.

"Depends what you take the world to mean. Do you mean us in this box, or

the crew outside there?" he jerked his head towards the auditorium.

"Do you think, Lilly, that we're the world?" said Robert ironically.

"Oh, yes, I guess we're shipwrecked in this box, like Robinson Crusoes. And what we do on our own little island matters to us alone. As for the infinite crowds of howling savages outside there in the unspeakable, all you've got to do is mind they don't scrap you."

"But WON'T they?" said Struthers.

"Not unless you put your head in their hands," said Lilly.

"I don't know--" said Jim.

But the curtain had risen, they hushed him into silence.

All through the next scene, Julia puzzled herself, as to whether she should go down to the country and live with Scott. She had carried on a nervous kind of amour with him, based on soul sympathy and emotional excitement. But whether to go and live with him? She didn't know if she wanted to or not: and she couldn't for her life find out. She was in that nervous state when desire seems to evaporate the moment fulfilment is offered.

When the curtain dropped she turned.

"You see," she said, screwing up her eyes, "I have to think of Robert." She cut the word in two, with an odd little hitch in her voice--"ROB-ert."

"My dear Julia, can't you believe that I'm tired of being thought of," cried Robert, flushing.

Julia screwed up her eyes in a slow smile, oddly cogitating.

"Well, who AM I to think of?" she asked.

"Yourself," said Lilly.

"Oh, yes! Why, yes! I never thought of that!" She gave a hurried little laugh. "But then it's no FUN to think about oneself," she cried flatly.

"I think about ROB-ert, and SCOTT." She screwed up her eyes and peered oddly at the company.

"Which of them will find you the greatest treat," said Lilly sarcastically.

"Anyhow," interjected Robert nervously, "it will be something new for Scott."

"Stale buns for you, old boy," said Jim drily.

"I don't say so. But--" exclaimed the flushed, full-blooded Robert, who was nothing if not courteous to women.

"How long ha' you been married? Eh?" asked Jim.

"Six years!" sang Julia sweetly.

"Good God!"

"You see," said Robert, "Julia can't decide anything for herself. She waits for someone else to decide, then she puts her spoke in."

"Put it plainly--" began Struthers.

"But don't you know, it's no USE putting it plainly," cried Julia.

"But DO you want to be with Scott, out and out, or DON'T you?" said Lilly.

"Exactly!" chimed Robert. "That's the question for you to answer Julia."

"I WON'T answer it," she cried. "Why should I?" And she looked away into the restless hive of the theatre. She spoke so wildly that she attracted attention. But it half pleased her. She stared abstractedly down at the pit.

The men looked at one another in some comic consternation.

"Oh, damn it all!" said the long Jim, rising and stretching himself.

"She's dead nuts on Scott. She's all over him. She'd have eloped with him weeks ago if it hadn't been so easy. She can't stand it that Robert offers to hand her into the taxi."

He gave his malevolent grin round the company, then went out. He did not reappear for the next scene.

"Of course, if she loves Scott--" began Struthers.

Julia suddenly turned with wild desperation, and cried:

"I like him tremendously--tre-men-dous-ly! He DOES understand."

"Which we don't," said Robert.

Julia smiled her long, odd smile in their faces: one might almost say she smiled in their teeth.

"What do YOU think, Josephine?" asked Lilly.

Josephine was leaning forward. She started. Her tongue went rapidly over her lips. "Who--? I--?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"I think Julia should go with Scott," said Josephine. "She'll bother with the idea till she's done it. She loves him, really."

"Of course she does," cried Robert.

Julia, with her chin resting on her arms, in a position which irritated the neighbouring Lady Cochrane sincerely, was gazing with unseeing eyes down upon the stalls.

"Well then--" began Struthers. But the music struck up softly. They were all rather bored. Struthers kept on making small, half audible remarks--which was bad form, and displeased Josephine, the hostess of the evening.

When the curtain came down for the end of the act, the men got up. Lilly's wife, Tanny, suddenly appeared. She had come on after a dinner engagement.

"Would you like tea or anything?" Lilly asked.

The women refused. The men filtered out on to the crimson and white, curving corridor. Julia, Josephine and Tanny remained in the box. Tanny was soon hitched on to the conversation in hand.

"Of course," she replied, "one can't decide such a thing like drinking a cup of tea."

"Of course, one can't, dear Tanny," said Julia.

"After all, one doesn't leave one's husband every day, to go and live with another man. Even if one looks on it as an experiment--."

"It's difficult!" cried Julia. "It's difficult! I feel they all want to FORCE me to decide. It's cruel."

"Oh, men with their beastly logic, their either-this-or-that stunt, they are an awful bore.--But of course, Robert can't love you REALLY, or he'd want to keep you. I can see Lilly discussing such a thing for ME. But then you don't love Robert either," said Tanny.

"I do! Oh, I do, Tanny! I DO love him, I love him dearly. I think he's beautiful. Robert's beautiful. And he NEEDS me. And I need him too. I need his support. Yes, I do love him."

"But you like Scott better," said Tanny.

"Only because he--he's different," sang Julia, in long tones. "You see Scott has his art. His art matters. And ROB-ert--Robert is a dilettante, don't you think--he's dilettante--" She screwed up her eyes at Tanny.

Tanny cogitated.

"Of course I don't think that matters," she replied.

"But it does, it matters tremendously, dear Tanny, tremendously."

"Of course," Tanny sheered off. "I can see Scott has great attractions--a great warmth somewhere--"

"Exactly!" cried Julia. "He UNDERSTANDS!"

"And I believe he's a real artist. You might even work together. You might write his librettos."

"Yes!--Yes!--" Julia spoke with a long, pondering hiss.

"It might be AWFULLY nice," said Tanny rapturously.

"Yes!--It might!--It might!--!" pondered Julia. Suddenly she gave herself a shake. Then she laughed hurriedly, as if breaking from her line of thought.

"And wouldn't Robert be an AWFULLY nice lover for Josephine! Oh, wouldn't that be splendid!" she cried, with her high laugh.

Josephine, who had been gazing down into the orchestra, turned now,

flushing darkly.

"But I don't want a lover, Julia," she said, hurt.

"Josephine dear! Dear old Josephine! Don't you really! Oh, yes, you do.--I want one so BADLY," cried Julia, with her shaking laugh.

"Robert's awfully good to me. But we've been married six years. And it does make a difference, doesn't it, Tanny dear?"

"A great difference," said Tanny.

"Yes, it makes a difference, it makes a difference," mused Julia. "Dear old Rob-ert--I wouldn't hurt him for worlds. I wouldn't. Do you think it would hurt Robert?"

She screwed up her eyes, looking at Tanny.

"Perhaps it would do Robert good to be hurt a little," said Tanny. "He's so well-nourished."

"Yes!--Yes!--I see what you mean, Tanny!--Poor old ROB-ert! Oh, poor old Rob-ert, he's so young!"

"He DOES seem young," said Tanny. "One doesn't forgive it."

"He is young," said Julia. "I'm five years older than he. He's only

twenty-seven. Poor Old Robert."

"Robert is young, and inexperienced," said Josephine, suddenly turning with anger. "But I don't know why you talk about him."

"Is he inexperienced, Josephine dear? IS he?" sang Julia. Josephine flushed darkly, and turned away.

"Ah, he's not so innocent as all that," said Tanny roughly. "Those young young men, who seem so fresh, they're deep enough, really. They're far less innocent really than men who are experienced."

"They are, aren't they, Tanny," repeated Julia softly. "They're old--older than the Old Man of the Seas, sometimes, aren't they? Incredibly old, like little boys who know too much--aren't they? Yes!" She spoke quietly, seriously, as if it had struck her.

Below, the orchestra was coming in. Josephine was watching closely. Julia became aware of this.

"Do you see anybody we know, Josephine?" she asked.

Josephine started.

"No," she said, looking at her friends quickly and furtively.

"Dear old Josephine, she knows all sorts of people," sang Julia.

At that moment the men returned.

"Have you actually come back!" exclaimed Tanny to them. They sat down without answering. Jim spread himself as far as he could, in the narrow space. He stared upwards, wrinkling his ugly, queer face. It was evident he was in one of his moods.

"If only somebody loved me!" he complained. "If only somebody loved me I should be all right. I'm going to pieces." He sat up and peered into the faces of the women.

"But we ALL love you," said Josephine, laughing uneasily. "Why aren't you satisfied?"

"I'm not satisfied. I'm not satisfied," murmured Jim.

"Would you like to be wrapped in swaddling bands and laid at the breast?" asked Lilly, disagreeably.

Jim opened his mouth in a grin, and gazed long and malevolently at his questioner.

"Yes," he said. Then he sprawled his long six foot of limb and body across the box again.

"You should try loving somebody, for a change," said Tanny. "You've been loved too often. Why not try and love somebody?"

Jim eyed her narrowly.

"I couldn't love YOU," he said, in vicious tones.

"A la bonne heure!" said Tanny.

But Jim sank his chin on his chest, and repeated obstinately:

"I want to be loved."

"How many times have you been loved?" Robert asked him. "It would be rather interesting to know."

Jim looked at Robert long and slow, but did not answer.

"Did you ever keep count?" Tanny persisted.

Jim looked up at her, malevolent.

"I believe I did," he replied.

"Forty is the age when a man should begin to reckon up," said Lilly.

Jim suddenly sprang to his feet, and brandished his fists.

"I'll pitch the lot of you over the bloody rail," he said.

He glared at them, from under his bald, wrinkled forehead. Josephine glanced round. She had become a dusky white colour. She was afraid of him, and she disliked him intensely nowadays.

"Do you recognise anyone in the orchestra?" she asked.

The party in the box had become dead silent. They looked down. The conductor was at his stand. The music began. They all remained silent and motionless during the next scene, each thinking his own thoughts. Jim was uncomfortable. He wanted to make good. He sat with his elbows on his knees, grinning slightly, looking down. At the next interval he stood up suddenly.

"It IS the chap--What?" he exclaimed excitedly, looking round at his friends.

"Who?" said Tanny.

"It IS he?" said Josephine quietly, meeting Jim's eye.

"Sure!" he barked.

He was leaning forward over the ledge, rattling a programme in his hand, as if trying to attract attention. Then he made signals.

"There you are!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "That's the chap."

"Who? Who?" they cried.

But neither Jim nor Josephine would vouchsafe an answer.

The next was the long interval. Jim and Josephine gazed down at the orchestra. The musicians were laying aside their instruments and rising. The ugly fire-curtain began slowly to descend. Jim suddenly bolted out.

"Is it that man Aaron Sisson?" asked Robert.

"Where? Where?" cried Julia. "It can't be."

But Josephine's face was closed and silent. She did not answer.

The whole party moved out on to the crimson-carpeted gangway. Groups of people stood about chatting, men and women were passing along, to pay visits or to find drinks. Josephine's party stared around, talking desultorily. And at length they perceived Jim stalking along, leading Aaron Sisson by the arm. Jim was grinning, the flautist looked unwilling. He had a comely appearance, in his white shirt--a certain

comely blondness and repose. And as much a gentleman as anybody.

"Well!" cried Josephine to him. "How do you come here?"

"I play the flute," he answered, as he shook hands.

The little crowd stood in the gangway and talked.

"How wonderful of you to be here!" cried Julia.

He laughed.

"Do you think so?" he answered.

"Yes, I do.--It seems so FAR from Shottle House and Christmas Eve.--Oh, wasn't it exciting!" cried Julia.

Aaron looked at her, but did not answer.

"We've heard all about you," said Tanny playfully.

"Oh, yes," he replied.

"Come!" said Josephine, rather irritated. "We crowd up the gangway." And she led the way inside the box.

Aaron stood and looked down at the dishevelled theatre.

"You get all the view," he said.

"We do, don't we!" cried Julia.

"More than's good for us," said Lilly.

"Tell us what you are doing. You've got a permanent job?" asked Josephine.

"Yes--at present."

"Ah! It's more interesting for you than at Beldover."

She had taken her seat. He looked down at her dusky young face. Her voice was always clear and measured.

"It's a change," he said, smiling.

"Oh, it must be more than that," she said. "Why, you must feel a whole difference. It's a whole new life."

He smiled, as if he were laughing at her silently. She flushed.

"But isn't it?" she persisted.

"Yes. It can be," he replied.

He looked as if he were quietly amused, but dissociated. None of the people in the box were quite real to him. He was not really amused. Julia found him dull, stupid. Tanny also was offended that he could not perceive her. The men remained practically silent.

"You're a chap I always hoped would turn up again," said Jim.

"Oh, yes!" replied Aaron, smiling as if amused.

"But perhaps he doesn't like us! Perhaps he's not glad that we turned up," said Julia, leaving her sting.

The flautist turned and looked at her.

"You can't REMEMBER us, can you?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I can remember you."

"Oh," she laughed. "You are unflattering."

He was annoyed. He did not know what she was getting at.

"How are your wife and children?" she asked spitefully.

"All right, I think."

"But you've been back to them?" cried Josephine in dismay.

He looked at her, a slow, half smiling look, but did not speak.

"Come and have a drink. Damn the women," said Jim uncouthly, seizing Aaron by the arm and dragging him off.