

CHAPTER V

Miss Carew remorselessly carried out her intention of going to London, where she took a house in Regent's Park, to the disappointment of Alice, who had hoped to live in Mayfair, or at least in South Kensington. But Lydia set great store by the high northerly ground and open air of the park; and Alice found almost perfect happiness in driving through London in a fine carriage and fine clothes. She liked that better than concerts of classical music, which she did not particularly relish, or even than the opera, to which they went often. The theatres pleased her more, though the amusements there were tamer than she had expected. Society was delightful to her because it was real London society. She acquired a mania for dancing; went out every night, and seemed to herself far more distinguished and attractive than she had ever been in Wiltstoken, where she had nevertheless held a sufficiently favorable opinion of her own manners and person.

Lydia did not share all these dissipations. She easily procured invitations and chaperones for Alice, who wondered why so intelligent a woman would take the trouble to sit out a stupid concert, and then go home, just as the real pleasure of the evening was beginning.

One Saturday morning, at breakfast, Lydia said,

"Your late hours begin to interfere with the freshness of your complexion, Alice. I am getting a little fatigued, myself, with literary work. I will go to the Crystal Palace to-day, and wander about the gardens for a while; there is to be a concert in the afternoon for the benefit of Madame Szczymplika, whose playing you do not admire. Will you come with me?"

"Of course," said Alice, resolutely dutiful.

"Of choice; not of course," said Lydia. "Are you engaged for to-morrow evening?"

"Sunday? Oh, no. Besides, I consider all my engagements subject to your convenience."

There was a pause, long enough for this assurance to fall perfectly flat. Alice bit her lip. Then Lydia said, "Do you know Mrs. Hoskyn?"

"Mrs. Hoskyn who gives Sunday evenings? Shall we go there?" said Alice, eagerly. "People often ask me whether I have been at one of them. But I don't know her--though I have seen her. Is she nice?"

"She is a young woman who has read a great deal of art criticism, and been deeply impressed by it. She has made her house famous by bringing there all the clever people she meets, and making them so comfortable that they take care to come again. But she has not, fortunately for her, allowed her craze for art to get the better of her common-sense. She married a prosperous man of business, who probably never read anything but a newspaper since he left school; and there is probably not a happier pair in England."

"I presume she had sense enough to know that she could not afford to choose," said Alice, complacently. "She is very ugly."

"Do you think so? She has many admirers, and was, I am told, engaged to Mr. Herbert, the artist, before she met Mr. Hoskyn. We shall meet Mr. Herbert there to-morrow, and a number of celebrated persons besides--his wife, Madame Szczymplika the pianiste, Owen Jack the composer, Hawkshaw the poet, Conolly the inventor, and others. The occasion will be a special one, as Herr Abendgasse, a remarkable German socialist and art critic, is to deliver a lecture on 'The True in Art.' Be careful, in speaking of him in society, to refer to him as a sociologist, and not as a socialist. Are you particularly anxious to hear him lecture?"

"No doubt it will be very interesting," said Alice. "I should not like to miss the opportunity of going to Mrs. Hoskyn's. People so often ask me whether I have been there, and whether I know this, that, and the other celebrated person, that I feel quite embarrassed by my rustic ignorance."

"Because," pursued Lydia, "I had intended not to go until after the lecture. Herr Abendgasse is enthusiastic and eloquent, but not original; and as I have imbibed all his ideas direct from their inventors, I do not feel called upon to listen to his exposition of them. So that, unless you are specially interested--"

"Not at all. If he is a socialist I should much rather not listen to him, particularly on Sunday evening."

So it was arranged that they should go to Mrs. Hoskyn's after the lecture. Meanwhile they went to Sydenham, where Alice went through the Crystal Palace with provincial curiosity, and Lydia answered her questions encyclopedically. In the afternoon there was a concert, at which a band played several long pieces of music, which Lydia seemed to enjoy, though she found fault with the performers. Alice, able to detect neither the faults in the execution nor the beauty of the music, did as she saw the others do--pretended to be pleased and applauded decorously. Madame Szczymplica, whom she expected to meet at Mrs. Hoskyn's, appeared, and played a fantasia for pianoforte and orchestra by the famous Jack, another of Mrs. Hoskyn's circle. There was in the programme an analysis of this composition from which Alice learned that by attentively listening to the adagio she could hear the angels singing therein. She listened as attentively as she could, but heard no angels, and was astonished when, at the conclusion of the fantasia, the audience applauded Madame Szczymplica as if she had made them hear the music of the spheres. Even Lydia seemed moved, and said,

"Strange, that she is only a woman like the rest of us, with just the same narrow bounds to her existence, and just the same prosaic cares--that she will go by train to Victoria, and from thence home in a common vehicle instead of embarking in a great shell and being drawn by swans to some enchanted island. Her playing reminds me of myself as I was when I believed in fairyland, and indeed knew little about any other land."

"They say," said Alice, "that her husband is very jealous, and that she leads him a terrible life."

"THEY SAY anything that brings gifted people to the level of their own experience. Doubtless they are right. I have not met Mr. Herbert, but I have seen his pictures, which suggest that he reads everything and sees nothing; for they all represent scenes described in some poem. If one could only find an educated man who had never read a book, what a delightful companion he would be!"

When the concert was over they did not return directly to town, as Lydia wished to walk awhile in the gardens. In consequence, when they left Sydenham, they got into a Waterloo train, and so had to change at Clapham Junction. It was a fine summer evening, and Alice, though she thought that it became ladies to hide themselves from the public in waiting-rooms at railway stations, did not attempt to dissuade Lydia from walking to and fro at an unfrequented end of the platform, which terminated in a bank covered with flowers.

"To my mind," said Lydia, "Clapham Junction is one of the prettiest places about London."

"Indeed!" said Alice, a little maliciously. "I thought that all artistic people looked on junctions and railway lines as blots on the landscape."

"Some of them do," said Lydia; "but they are not the artists of our generation; and those who take up their cry are no better than parrots. If every holiday recollection of my youth, every escape from town to country, be associated with the railway, I must feel towards it otherwise than did my father, upon whose middle age it came as a monstrous iron innovation. The locomotive is one of the wonders of modern childhood. Children crowd upon a bridge to see the train pass beneath. Little boys strut along the streets puffing and whistling in imitation of the engine. All that romance, silly as it looks, becomes sacred in afterlife. Besides, when it is not underground in a foul London tunnel, a train is a beautiful thing. Its pure, white fleece of steam harmonizes

with every variety of landscape. And its sound! Have you ever stood on a sea-coast skirted by a railway, and listened as the train came into hearing in the far distance? At first it can hardly be distinguished from the noise of the sea; then you recognize it by its vibration; one moment smothered in a deep cutting, and the next sent echoing from some hillside. Sometimes it runs smoothly for many minutes, and then breaks suddenly into a rhythmic clatter, always changing in distance and intensity. When it comes near, you should get into a tunnel, and stand there while it passes. I did that once, and it was like the last page of an overture by Beethoven--thunderingly impetuous. I cannot conceive how any person can hope to disparage a train by comparing it with a stage-coach; and I know something of stage-coaches--or, at least, of diligences. Their effect on the men employed about them ought to decide the superiority of steam without further argument. I have never observed an engine-driver who did not seem an exceptionally intelligent mechanic, while the very writers and artists who have preserved the memory of the coaching days for us do not appear to have taken coachmen seriously, or to have regarded them as responsible and civilized men. Abuse of the railway from a pastoral point of view is obsolete. There are millions of grown persons in England to whom the far sound of the train is as pleasantly suggestive as the piping of a blackbird. Again--is not that Lord Worthington getting out of the train? Yes, that one, at the third platform from this. He--"She stopped.

Alice looked, but could see neither Lord Worthington nor the cause of a subtle but perceptible change in Lydia, who said, quickly,

"He is probably coming to our train. Come to the waiting-room." She walked swiftly along the platform as she spoke. Alice hurried after her; and they had but just got into the room, the door of which was close to the staircase which gave access to the platform, when a coarse din of men's voices showed that a noisy party were ascending the steps. Presently a man emerged reeling, and at once began to execute a drunken dance, and to sing as well as his condition and musical faculty allowed. Lydia stood near the window of the room and watched in silence. Alice, following her example, recognized the drunken dancer as Mellish. He was followed by three men gayly attired and highly elated, but comparatively sober. After them came Cashel Byron, showily dressed in a velveteen coat, and tightly-fitting fawn-colored pantaloons that displayed the muscles of his legs. He also seemed quite sober; but he was dishevelled, and his left eye blinked frequently, the adjacent brow and cheek being much yellower than his natural complexion, which appeared to advantage on the right side of his face. Walking steadily to Mellish, who was now asking each of the bystanders in turn to come and drink at his expense, he seized him by the collar and sternly bade him cease making a fool of himself. Mellish tried to embrace him.

"My own boy," he exclaimed, affectionately. "He's my little nonpareil. Cashel Byron again' the world at catch weight. Bob Mellish's money--"

"You sot," said Cashel, rolling him about until he was giddy as well as drunk, and then forcing him to sit down on a bench; "one would think you never saw a mill or won a bet in your life before."

"Steady, Byron," said one of the others. "Here's his lordship." Lord Worthington was coming up the stairs, apparently the most excited of the party.

"Fine man!" he cried, patting Cashel on the shoulder. "Splendid man! You have won a monkey for me to-day; and you shall have your share of it, old boy."

"I trained him," said Mellish, staggering forward again. "I trained him. You know me, my lord. You know Bob Mellish. A word with your lordship in c-confidence. You ask who knows how to make the beef go and the muscle come. You ask--I ask your lordship's pard'n. What'll your lordship take?"

"Take care, for Heaven's sake!" exclaimed Lord Worthington, clutching at him as he reeled backward towards the line. "Don't you see the train?"

"I know," said Mellish, gravely. "I am all right; no man more so. I am Bob Mellish. You ask--"

"Here. Come out of this," said one of the party, a powerful man with a scarred face and crushed nose, grasping Mellish and thrusting him into the train. "Y'll 'ave to clap a beefsteak on that ogle of yours, where you napped the Dutchman's auctioneer, Byron. It's got more yellow paint on it than y'll like to show in church to-morrow."

At this they all gave a roar of laughter, and entered a third-class carriage. Lydia and Alice had but just time to take their places in the train before it started.

"Eeally, I must say," said Alice, "that if those were Mr. Cashel Byron's and Lord Worthington's associates, their tastes are very peculiar."

"Yes," said Lydia, almost grimly. "I am a fair linguist; but I did not understand a single sentence of their conversation, though I heard it all distinctly."

"They were not gentlemen," said Alice. "You say that no one can tell by a person's appearance whether he is a gentleman or not; but surely you cannot think that those men are Lord Worthington's equals."

"I do not," said Lydia. "They are ruffians; and Cashel Byron is the most unmistakable ruffian of them all."

Alice, awestruck, did not venture to speak again until they left the train at Victoria. There was a crowd outside the carriage in which Cashel had travelled. They hastened past; but Lydia asked a guard whether anything was the matter. He replied that a drunken man, alighting from the train, had fallen down upon the rails, and that, had the carriage been in motion, he would have been killed. Lydia thanked her informant, and, as she turned from him, found Bashville standing before her, touching his hat. She had given him no instructions to attend. However, she accepted his presence as a matter of course, and inquired whether the carriage was there.

"No, madam," replied Bashville. "The coachman had no orders."

"Quite right. A hansom, if you please." When he was gone she said to Alice, "Did you tell Bashville to meet us?"

"Oh, DEAR, no," said Alice. "I should not think of doing such a thing."

"Strange! However, he knows his duties better than I do; so I have no doubt that he has acted properly. He has been waiting all the afternoon, I suppose, poor fellow."

"He has nothing else to do," said Alice, carelessly. "Here he is. He has picked out a capital horse for us, too."

Meanwhile, Mellish had been dragged from beneath the train and seated on the knee of one of his companions. He was in a stupor, and had a large lump on his brow. His eye was almost closed. The man with the crushed nose now showed himself an expert surgeon. While Cashel supported the patient on the knee of another man, and the rest of the party kept off the crowd by mingled persuasion and violence, he produced a lancet and summarily reduced the swelling by lancing it. He then dressed the puncture neatly with appliances for that purpose which he carried about him, and shouted in Mellish's ear to rouse him. But the trainer only groaned, and let his head drop inert on his breast. More shouting was resorted to, but in vain. Cashel impatiently expressed an opinion that Mellish was shamming, and declared that he would not stand there to be fooled with all the evening.

"If he was my pal 'stead o' yours," said the man with the broken nose, "I'd wake him up fast enough."

"I'll save you the trouble," said Cashel, coolly stooping and seizing between his teeth the cartilage of the

trainer's ear.

"That's the way to do it," said the other, approvingly, as Mellish screamed and started to his feet. "Now, then. Up with you."

He took Mellish's right arm, Cashel took the left, and they brought him away between them without paying the least heed to his tears, his protestations that he was hurt, his plea that he was an old man, or his bitter demand as to where Cashel would have been at that moment without his care.

Lord Worthington had taken advantage of this accident to slip away from his travelling companions and drive alone to his lodgings in Jermyn Street. He was still greatly excited; and when his valet, an old retainer with whom he was on familiar terms, brought him a letter that had arrived during his absence, he asked him four times whether any one had called, and four times interrupted him by scraps of information about the splendid day he had had and the luck he was in.

"I bet five hundred even that it would be over in a quarter of an hour; and then I bet Byron two hundred and fifty to one that it wouldn't. That's the way to do it; eh, Bedford? Catch Cashel letting two hundred and fifty slip through his fingers! By George, though, he's an artful card. At the end of fourteen minutes I thought my five hundred was corpsed. The Dutchman was full of fight; and Cashel suddenly turned weak and tried to back out of the rally. You should have seen the gleam in the Dutchman's eye when he rushed in after him. He made cock-sure of finishing him straight off."

"Indeed, my lord. Dear me!"

"I should think so: I was taken in by it myself. It was only done to draw the poor devil. By George, Bedford, you should have seen the way Cashel put in his right. But you couldn't have seen it; it was too quick. The Dutchman was asleep on the grass before he knew he'd been hit. Byron had collected fifteen pounds for him before he came to. His jaw must feel devilish queer after it. By Jove, Bedford, Cashel is a perfect wonder. I'd back him for every cent I possess against any man alive. He makes you feel proud of being an Englishman."

Bedford looked on with submissive wonder as his master, transfigured with enthusiasm, went hastily to and fro through the room, occasionally clenching his fist and smiting an imaginary Dutchman. The valet at last ventured to remind him that he had forgotten the letter.

"Oh, hang the letter!" said Lord Worthington. "It's Mrs. Hoskyn's writing--an invitation, or some such rot. Here; let's see it."

"Campden Hill Road, Saturday.

"My dear Lord Worthington,--I have not forgotten my promise to obtain for you a near view of the famous Mrs. Herbert--'Madame Simplicita,' as you call her. She will be with us to-morrow evening; and we shall be very happy to see you then, if you care to come. At nine o'clock, Herr Abendgasse, a celebrated German art critic and a great friend of mine, will read us a paper on 'The True in Art'; but I will not pay you the compliment of pretending to believe that that interests you, so you may come at ten or half-past, by which hour all the serious business of the evening will be over."

"Well, there is nothing like cheek," said Lord Worthington, breaking off in his perusal. "These women think that because I enjoy life in a rational way I don't know the back of a picture from the front, or the inside of a book from the cover. I shall go at nine sharp."

"If any of your acquaintances take an interest in art, I will gladly make them welcome. Could you not bring me a celebrity or two? I am very anxious to have as good an audience as possible for Herr Abendgasse."

However, as it is, he shall have no reason to complain, as I flatter myself that I have already secured a very distinguished assembly. Still, if you can add a second illustrious name to my list, by all means do so."

"Very good, Mrs. Hoskyn," said Lord Worthington, looking cunningly at the bewildered Bedford. "You shall have a celebrity--a real one--none of your mouldy old Germans--if I can only get him to come. If any of her people don't like him they can tell him so. Eh, Bedford?"