

CHAPTER VIII

One morning a handsome young man, elegantly dressed, presented himself at Downing Street, and asked to see Mr. Lucian Webber. He declined to send in a card, and desired to be announced simply as "Bashville." Lucian ordered him to be admitted at once, and, when he entered, nodded amiably to him and invited him to sit down.

"I thank you, sir," said Bashville, seating himself. It struck Lucian then, from a certain strung-up resolution in his visitor's manner, that he had come on some business of his own, and not, as he had taken for granted, with a message from his mistress.

"I have come, sir, on my own responsibility this morning. I hope you will excuse the liberty."

"Certainly. If I can do anything for you, Bashville, don't be afraid to ask. But be as brief as you can. I am so busy that every second I give you will probably be subtracted from my night's rest. Will ten minutes be enough?"

"More than enough, sir, thank you. I only wish to ask one question. I own that I am stepping out of my place to ask it; but I'll risk all that. Does Miss Carew know what the Mr. Cashel Byron is that she receives every Friday with her other friends?"

"No doubt she does," said Lucian, at once becoming cold in his manner, and looking severely at Bashville. "What business is that of yours?"

"Do YOU know what he is, sir?" said Bashville, returning Lucian's gaze steadily.

Lucian changed countenance, and replaced a pen that had slipped from a rack on his desk. "He is not an acquaintance of mine," he said. "I only know him as a friend of Lord Worthington's."

"Sir," said Bashville, with sudden vehemence, "he is no more to Lord Worthington than the racehorse his lordship bets on. *I* might as well set up to be a friend of his lordship because I, after a manner of speaking, know him. Byron is in the ring, sir. A common prize-fighter!"

Lucian, recalling what had passed at Mrs. Hoskyn's, and Lord Worthington's sporting habits, believed the assertion at once. But he made a faint effort to resist conviction. "Are you sure of this, Bashville?" he said. "Do you know that your statement is a very serious one?"

"There is no doubt at all about it, sir. Go to any sporting public-house in London and ask who is the best-known fighting man of the day, and they'll tell you, Cashel Byron. I know all about him, sir. Perhaps you have heard tell of Ned Skene, who was champion, belike, when you were at school."

"I believe I have heard the name."

"Just so, sir. Ned Skene picked up this Cashel Byron in the streets of Melbourne, where he was a common sailor-boy, and trained him for the ring. You may have seen his name in the papers, sir. The sporting ones are full of him; and he was mentioned in the Times a month ago."

"I never read articles on such subjects. I have hardly time to glance through the ones that concern me."

"That's the way it is with everybody, sir. Miss Carew never thinks of reading the sporting intelligence in the papers; and so he passes himself off on her for her equal. He's well known for his wish to be thought a gentleman, sir, I assure you."

"I have noticed his manner as being odd, certainly."

"Odd, sir! Why, a child might see through him; for he has not the sense to keep his own secret. Last Friday he was in the library, and he got looking at the new biographical dictionary that Miss Carew contributed the article on Spinoza to. And what do you think he said, sir? 'This is a blessed book,' he says. 'Here's ten pages about Napoleon Bonaparte, and not one about Jack Randall; as if one fighting man wasn't as good as another!' I knew by the way the mistress took up that saying, and drew him out, so to speak, on the subject, that she didn't know who she had in her house; and then I determined to tell you, sir. I hope you won't think that I come here behind his back out of malice against him. All I want is fair play. If I passed myself off on Miss Carew as a gentleman, I should deserve to be exposed as a cheat; and when he tries to take advantages that don't belong to him, I think I have a right to expose him."

"Quite right, quite right," said Lucian, who cared nothing for Bashville's motives. "I suppose this Byron is a dangerous man to have any personal unpleasantness with."

"He knows his business, sir. I am a better judge of wrestling than half of these London professionals; but I never saw the man that could put a hug on him. Simple as he is, sir, he has a genius for fighting, and has beaten men of all sizes, weights, and colors. There's a new man from the black country, named Paradise, who says he'll beat him; but I won't believe it till I see it."

"Well," said Lucian, rising, "I am much indebted to you, Bashville, for your information; and I will take care to let Miss Carew know how you have--"

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Bashville; "but, if you please, no. I did not come to recommend myself at the cost of another man; and perhaps Miss Carew might not think it any great recommendation neither." Lucian looked quickly at him, and seemed about to speak, but checked himself. Bashville continued, "If he denies it, you may call me as a witness, and I will tell him to his face that he lies--and so I would if he were twice as dangerous; but, except in that way, I would ask you, sir, as a favor, not to mention my name to Miss Carew."

"As you please," said Lucian, taking out his purse. "Perhaps you are right. However, you shall not have your trouble for nothing."

"I couldn't, really, sir," said Bashville, retreating a step. "You will agree with me, I'm sure, that this is not a thing that a man should take payment for. It is a personal matter between me and Byron, sir."

Lucian, displeased that a servant should have any personal feelings on any subject, much more one that concerned his mistress, put back his purse without comment and said, "Will Miss Carew be at home this afternoon between three and four?"

"I have not heard of any arrangement to the contrary, sir. I will telegraph to you if she goes out--if you wish."

"It does not matter. Thank you. Good-morning."

"Good-morning, sir," said Bashville, respectfully, as he withdrew. Outside the door his manner changed. He put on a pair of primrose gloves, took up a silver-mounted walking-stick that he had left in the corridor, and walked from Downing Street into Whitehall. A party of visitors from the country, who were standing there examining the buildings, guessed that he was a junior lord of the Treasury.

He waited in vain that afternoon for Lucian to appear at the house in Regent's Park. There were no callers, and he wore away the time by endeavoring, with the aid of a library that Miss Carew had placed at the disposal of her domestics, to unravel the philosophy of Spinoza. At the end of an hour, feeling satisfied that he had mastered that author's views, he proceeded to vary the monotony of the long summer's day by polishing

Lydia's plate.

Meanwhile, Lucian was considering how he could best make Lydia not only repudiate Cashel's acquaintance, but feel thoroughly ashamed of herself for having encouraged him, and wholesomely mistrustful of her own judgment for the future. His parliamentary experience had taught him to provide himself with a few well-arranged, relevant facts before attempting to influence the opinions of others on any subject. He knew no more of prize-fighting than that it was a brutal and illegal practice, akin to cock-fighting, and, like it, generally supposed to be obsolete. Knowing how prone Lydia was to suspect any received opinion of being a prejudice, he felt that he must inform himself more particularly. To Lord Worthington's astonishment, he not only asked him to dinner next evening, but listened with interest while he descanted to his heart's content on his favorite topic of the ring.

As the days passed, Bashville became nervous, and sometimes wondered whether Lydia had met her cousin and heard from him of the interview at Downing Street. He fancied that her manner towards him was changed; and he was once or twice on the point of asking the most sympathetic of the housemaids whether she had noticed it. On Wednesday his suspense ended. Lucian came, and had a long conversation with Lydia in the library. Bashville was too honorable to listen at the door; but he felt a strong temptation to do so, and almost hoped that the sympathetic housemaid might prove less scrupulous. But Miss Carew's influence extended farther than her bodily presence; and Lucian's revelation was made in complete privacy.

When he entered the library he looked so serious that she asked him whether he had neuralgia, from which he occasionally suffered. He replied with some indignation that he had not, and that he had a communication of importance to make to her.

"What! Another!"

"Yes, another," he said, with a sour smile; "but this time it does not concern myself. May I warn you as to the character of one of your guests without overstepping my privilege?"

"Certainly. But perhaps you mean Vernet. If so, I am perfectly aware that he is an exiled Communiard."

"I do not mean Monsieur Vernet. You understand, I hope, that I do not approve of him, nor of your strange fancy for Nihilists, Fenians, and other doubtful persons; but I think that even you might draw the line at a prize-fighter."

Lydia lost color, and said, almost inaudibly, "Cashel Byron!"

"Then you KNEW!" exclaimed Lucian, scandalized.

Lydia waited a moment to recover, settled herself quietly in her chair, and replied, calmly, "I know what you tell me--nothing more. And now, will you explain to me exactly what a prize-fighter is?"

"He is simply what his name indicates. He is a man who fights for prizes."

"So does the captain of a man-of-war. And yet society does not place them in the same class--at least, I do not think so."

"As if there could be any doubt that society does not! There is no analogy whatever between the two cases. Let me endeavor to open your eyes a little, if that be possible, which I am sometimes tempted to doubt. A prize-fighter is usually a man of naturally ferocious disposition, who has acquired some reputation among his associates as a bully; and who, by constantly quarrelling, has acquired some practice in fighting. On the strength of this reputation he can generally find some gambler willing to stake a sum of money that he will

vanquish a pugilist of established fame in single combat. Bets are made between the admirers of the two men; a prize is subscribed for, each party contributing a share; the combatants are trained as racehorses, gamecocks, or their like are trained; they meet, and beat each other as savagely as they can until one or the other is too much injured to continue the combat. This takes place in the midst of a mob of such persons as enjoy spectacles of the kind; that is to say, the vilest blackguards whom a large city can afford to leave at large, and many whom it cannot. As the prize-money contributed by each side often amounts to upwards of a thousand pounds, and as a successful pugilist commands far higher terms for giving tuition in boxing than a tutor at one of the universities does for coaching, you will see that such a man, while his youth and luck last, may have plenty of money, and may even, by aping the manners of the gentlemen whom he teaches, deceive careless people--especially those who admire eccentricity--as to his character and position."

"What is his true position? I mean before he becomes a prize-fighter."

"Well, he may be a handicraftsman of some kind: a journeyman butcher, skinner, tailor, or baker. Possibly a soldier, sailor, policeman, gentleman's servant, or what not? But he is generally a common laborer. The waterside is prolific of such heroes."

"Do they never come from a higher rank?"

"Never even from the better classes in their own. Broken-down gentlemen are not likely to succeed at work that needs the strength and endurance of a bull and the cruelty of a butcher."

"And the end of a prize-fighter. What is that like?"

"He soon has to give up his trade. For, if he be repeatedly beaten, no one will either bet on him or subscribe to provide him with a stake. If he is invariably successful, those, if any, who dare fight him find themselves in a like predicament. In either case his occupation is gone. If he has saved money he opens a sporting public-house, where he sells spirits of the worst description to his old rivals and their associates, and eventually drinks himself to death or bankruptcy. If, however, he has been improvident or unfortunate, he begs from his former patrons and gives lessons. Finally, when the patrons are tired of him and the pupils fail, he relapses into the laboring class with a ruined constitution, a disfigured face, a brutalized nature, and a tarnished reputation."

Lydia remained silent so long after this that Lucian's expression of magisterial severity first deepened, then wavered, and finally gave way to a sense of injury; for she seemed to have forgotten him. He was about to protest against this treatment, when she looked at him again, and said,

"Why did Lord Worthington introduce a man of this class to me?"

"Because you asked him to do so. Probably he thought that if you chose to make such a request without previous inquiry, you should not blame him if you found yourself saddled with an undesirable acquaintance. Recollect that you asked for the introduction on the platform at Wiltstoken, in the presence of the man himself. Such a ruffian would be capable of making a disturbance for much less offence than an explanation and refusal would have given him."

"Lucian," said Lydia, in a tone of gentle admonition, "I asked to be introduced to my tenant, for whose respectability you had vouched by letting the Warren Lodge to him." Lucian reddened. "How does Lord Worthington explain Mr. Byron's appearance at Mrs. Hoskyn's?"

"It was a stupid joke. Mrs. Hoskyn had worried Worthington to bring some celebrity to her house; and, in revenge, he took his pugilistic protege."

"Hm!"

"I do not defend Worthington. But discretion is hardly to be expected from him."

"He has discretion enough to understand a case of this kind thoroughly. But let that pass. I have been thinking upon what you tell me about these singular people, whose existence I hardly knew of before. Now, Lucian, in the course of my reading I have come upon denunciations of every race and pursuit under the sun. Very respectable and well-informed men have held that Jews, Irishmen, Christians, atheists, lawyers, doctors, politicians, actors, artists, flesh-eaters, and spirit-drinkers are all of necessity degraded beings. Such statements can be easily proved by taking a black sheep from each flock, and holding him up as the type. It is more reasonable to argue a man's character from the nature of his profession; and yet even that is very unsafe. War is a cruel business; but soldiers are not necessarily bloodthirsty and inhuman men. I am not quite satisfied that a prize-fighter is a violent and dangerous man because he follows a violent and dangerous profession--I suppose they call it a profession."

Lucian was about to speak; but she interrupted him by continuing,

"And yet that is not what concerns me at present. Have you found out anything about Mr. Byron personally? Is he an ordinary representative of his class?"

"No; I should rather think--and hope--that he is a very extraordinary representative of it. I have traced his history back to his boyhood, when he was a cabin-boy. Having apparently failed to recommend himself to his employers in that capacity, he became errand-boy to a sort of maitre d'armes at Melbourne. Here he discovered where his genius lay; and he presently appeared in the ring with an unfortunate young man named Duckett, whose jaw he fractured. This laid the foundation of his fame. He fought several battles with unvarying success; but at last he allowed his valor to get the better of his discretion so far as to kill an Englishman who contended with him with desperate obstinacy for two hours. I am informed that the particular blow by which he felled the poor wretch for the last time is known in pugilistic circles as 'Cashel's killer,' and that he has attempted to repeat it in all his subsequent encounters, without, however, achieving the same fatal result. The failure has doubtless been a severe disappointment to him. He fled from Australia and reappeared in America, where he resumed his victorious career, distinguishing himself specially by throwing a gigantic opponent in some dreadful fashion that these men have, and laming him for life. He then--"

"Thank you, Lucian," said Lydia rather faintly. "That is quite enough. Are you sure that it is all true?"

"My authority is Lord Worthington, and a number of newspaper reports which he showed me. Byron himself will probably be proud to give you the fullest confirmation of the record. I should add, in justice to him, that he is looked upon as a model--to pugilists--of temperance and general good conduct."

"Do you remember my remarking a few days ago, on another subject, how meaningless our observations are until we are given the right thread to string them on?"

"Yes," said Webber, disconcerted by the allusion.

"My acquaintance with this man is a case in point. He has obtruded his horrible profession upon me every time we have met. I have actually seen him publicly cheered as a pugilist-hero; and yet, being off the track, and ignorant of the very existence of such a calling, I have looked on and seen nothing."

Lydia then narrated her adventure in Soho, and listened with the perfect patience of indifference to his censure of her imprudence in going there alone.

"And now, Lydia," he added, "may I ask what you intend to do in this matter?"

"What would you have me do?"

"Drop his acquaintance at once. Forbid him your house in the most explicit terms."

"A pleasant task!" said Lydia, ironically. "But I will do it--not so much, perhaps, because he is a prize-fighter, as because he is an impostor. Now go to the writing-table and draft me a proper letter to send him."

Lucian's face elongated. "I think," he said, "you can do that better for yourself. It is a delicate sort of thing."

"Yes. It is not so easy as you implied a moment ago. Otherwise I should not require your assistance. As it is--" She pointed again to the table.

Lucian was not ready with an excuse. He sat down reluctantly, and, after some consideration, indited the following:

"Miss Carew presents her compliments to Mr. Cashel Byron, and begs to inform him that she will not be at home during the remainder of the season as heretofore. She therefore regrets that she cannot have the pleasure of receiving him on Friday afternoon."

"I think you will find that sufficient," said Lucian.

"Probably," said Lydia, smiling as she read it. "But what shall I do if he takes offence; calls here, breaks the windows, and beats Bashville? Were I in his place, that is what such a letter would provoke me to do."

"He dare not give any trouble. But I will warn the police if you feel anxious."

"By no means. We must not show ourselves inferior to him in courage, which is, I suppose, his cardinal virtue."

"If you write the note now, I will post it for you."

"No, thank you. I will send it with my other letters."

Lucian would rather have waited; but she would not write while he was there. So he left, satisfied on the whole with the success of his mission. When he was gone, she took a pen, endorsed his draft neatly, placed it in a drawer, and wrote to Cashel thus:

"Dear Mr. Cashel Byron,--I have just discovered your secret. I am sorry; but you must not come again. Farewell. Yours faithfully,

"Lydia Carew."

Lydia kept this note by her until next morning, when she read it through carefully. She then sent Bashville to the post with it.