

## CHAPTER XI

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Alice was more at her ease during the remnant of the London season. Though she had been proud of her connection with Lydia, she had always felt eclipsed in her presence; and now that Lydia was gone, the pride remained and the sense of inferiority was forgotten. Her freedom emboldened and improved her. She even began to consider her own judgment a safer guide in the affairs of every day than the example of her patroness. Had she not been right in declaring Cashel Byron an ignorant and common man when Lydia, in spite of her warning, had actually invited him to visit them? And now all the newspapers were confirming the opinion she had been trying to impress on Lydia for months past. On the evening of the assault-at-arms, the newsmen had shouted through the streets, "Disgraceful scene between two pugilists at Islington in the presence of the African king." Next day the principal journals commented on the recent attempt to revive the brutal pastime of prize-fighting; accused the authorities of conniving at it, and called on them to put it down at once with a strong hand. "Unless," said a clerical organ, "this plague-spot be rooted out from our midst, it will no longer be possible for our missionaries to pretend that England is the fount of the Gospel of Peace." Alice collected these papers, and forwarded them to Wiltstoken.

On this subject one person at least shared her bias. Whenever she met Lucian Webber, they talked about Cashel, invariably coming to the conclusion that though the oddity of his behavior had gratified Lydia's unfortunate taste for eccentricity, she had never regarded him with serious interest, and would not now, under any circumstances, renew her intercourse with him. Lucian found little solace in these conversations, and generally suffered from a vague sense of meanness after them. Yet next time they met he would drift into discussing Cashel over again; and he always rewarded Alice for the admirable propriety of her views by dancing at least three times with her when dancing was the business of the evening. The dancing was still less congenial than the conversation. Lucian, who had at all times too much of the solemnity of manner for which Frenchmen reproach Englishmen, danced stiffly and unskilfully. Alice, whose muscular power and energy were superior to anything of the kind that Mr. Mellish could artificially produce, longed for swift motion and violent exercise, and, even with an expert partner, could hardly tame herself to the quietude of dancing as practised in London. When waltzing with Lucian she felt as though she were carrying a stick round the room in the awkward fashion in which Punch carries his baton. In spite of her impression that he was a man of unusually correct morals and great political importance, and greatly to be considered in private life because he was Miss Carew's cousin, it was hard to spend quarter-hours with him that some of the best dancers in London asked for.

She began to tire of the subject of Cashel and Lydia. She began to tire of Lucian's rigidity. She began to tire exceedingly of the vigilance she had to maintain constantly over her own manners and principles. Somehow, this vigilance defeated itself; for she one evening overheard a lady of rank speak of her as a stuck-up country girl. The remark gave her acute pain: for a week afterwards she did not utter a word or make a movement in society without first considering whether it could by any malicious observer be considered rustic or stuck-up. But the more she strove to attain perfect propriety of demeanor, the more odious did she seem to herself, and, she inferred, to others. She longed for Lydia's secret of always doing the right thing at the right moment, even when defying precedent. Sometimes she blamed the dulness of the people she met for her shortcomings. It was impossible not to be stiff with them. When she chatted with an entertaining man, who made her laugh and forget herself for a while, she was conscious afterwards of having been at her best with him. But she saw others who, in stupid society, were pleasantly at their ease. She began to fear at last that she was naturally disqualified by her comparatively humble birth from acquiring the well-bred air for which she envied those among whom she moved.

One day she conceived a doubt whether Lucian was so safe an authority and example in matters of personal deportment as she had hitherto unthinkingly believed. He could not dance; his conversation was priggish; it was impossible to feel at ease when speaking to him. Was it courageous to stand in awe of his opinion? Was it courageous to stand in awe of anybody? Alice closed her lips proudly and began to be defiant. Then a reminiscence, which had never before failed to rouse indignation in her, made her laugh. She recalled the

scandalous spectacle of Lucian's formal perpendicularity overbalanced and doubled up into Mrs. Hoskyn's gilded arm-chair in illustration of the prize-fighter's theory of effort defeating itself. After all, what was that caressing touch of Cashel's hand in comparison with the tremendous rataplan he had beaten on the ribs of Paradise? Could it be true that effort defeated itself--in personal behavior, for instance? A ray of the truth that underlay Cashel's grotesque experiment was flickering in her mind as she asked herself that question. She thought a good deal about it; and one afternoon, when she looked in at four at-homes in succession, she studied the behavior of the other guests from a new point of view, comparing the most mannered with the best mannered, and her recent self with both. The result half convinced her that she had been occupied during her first London season in displaying, at great pains, a very unripe self-consciousness--or, as she phrased it, in making an insufferable fool of herself.

Shortly afterwards, she met Lucian at a cinderella, or dancing-party concluding at midnight. He came at eleven, and, as usual, gravely asked whether he might have the pleasure of dancing with her. This form of address he never varied. To his surprise, she made some difficulty about granting the favor, and eventually offered him "the second extra." He bowed. Before he could resume a vertical position a young man came up, remarked that he thought this was his turn, and bore Alice away. Lucian smiled indulgently, thinking that though Alice's manners were wonderfully good, considering her antecedents, yet she occasionally betrayed a lower tone than that which he sought to exemplify in his own person.

"I wish you would learn to reverse," said Alice unexpectedly to him, when they had gone round the room twice to the strains of the second extra.

"I DO reverse," he said, taken aback, and a little indignant.

"Everybody does--that way."

This silenced him for a moment. Then he said, slowly, "Perhaps I am rather out of practice. I am not sure that reversing is quite desirable. Many people consider it bad form."

When they stopped--Alice was always willing to rest during a waltz with Lucian--he asked her whether she had heard from Lydia.

"You always ask me that," she replied. "Lydia never writes except when she has something particular to say, and then only a few lines."

"Precisely. But she might have had something particular to say since we last met."

"She hasn't had," said Alice, provoked by an almost arch smile from him.

"She will be glad to hear that I have at last succeeded in recovering possession of the Warren Lodge from its undesirable tenants."

"I thought they went long ago," said Alice, indifferently.

"The men have not been there for a month or more. The difficulty was to get them to remove their property. However, we are rid of them now. The only relic of their occupation is a Bible with half the pages torn out, and the rest scrawled with records of bets, recipes for sudorific and other medicines, and a mass of unintelligible memoranda. One inscription, in faded ink, runs, 'To Robert Mellish, from his affectionate mother, with her sincere hope that he may ever walk in the ways of this book.' I am afraid that hope was not fulfilled."

"How wicked of him to tear a Bible!" said Alice, seriously. Then she laughed, and added, "I know I shouldn't;

but I can't help it."

"The incident strikes me rather as being pathetic," said Lucian, who liked to show that he was not deficient in sensibility. "One can picture the innocent faith of the poor woman in her boy's future, and so forth."

"Inscriptions in books are like inscriptions on tombstones," said Alice, disparagingly. "They don't mean much."

"I am glad that these men have no further excuse for going to Wiltstoken. It was certainly most unfortunate that Lydia should have made the acquaintance of one of them."

"So you have said at least fifty times," replied Alice, deliberately. "I believe you are jealous of that poor boxer."

Lucian became quite red. Alice trembled at her own audacity, but kept a bold front.

"Really--it's too absurd," he said, betraying his confusion by assuming a carelessness quite foreign to his normal manner. "In what way could I possibly be jealous, Miss Goff?"

"That is best known to yourself."

Lucian now saw plainly that there was a change in Alice, and that he had lost ground with her. The smarting of his wounded vanity suddenly obliterated his impression that she was, in the main, a well-conducted and meritorious young woman. But in its place came another impression that she was a spoiled beauty. And, as he was by no means fondest of the women whose behavior accorded best with his notions of propriety, he found, without at once acknowledging to himself, that the change was not in all respects a change for the worse. Nevertheless, he could not forgive her last remark, though he took care not to let her see how it stung him.

"I am afraid I should cut a poor figure in an encounter with my rival," he said, smiling.

"Call him out and shoot him," said Alice, vivaciously. "Very likely he does not know how to use a pistol."

He smiled again; but had Alice known how seriously he entertained her suggestion for some moments before dismissing it as impracticable, she would not have offered it. Putting a bullet into Cashel struck him rather as a luxury which he could not afford than as a crime. Meanwhile, Alice, being now quite satisfied that this Mr. Webber, on whom she had wasted so much undeserved awe, might be treated as inconsiderately as she used to treat her beaux at Wiltstoken, proceeded to amuse herself by torturing him a little.

"It is odd," she said, reflectively, "that a common man like that should be able to make himself so very attractive to Lydia. It was not because he was such a fine man; for she does not care in the least about that. I don't think she would give a second look at the handsomest man in London, she is so purely intellectual. And yet she used to delight in talking to him."

"Oh, that is a mistake. Lydia has a certain manner which leads people to believe that she is deeply interested in the person she happens to be speaking to; But it is only manner--it means nothing."

"I know that manner of hers perfectly well. But this was something quite different."

Lucian shook his head reproachfully. "I cannot jest on so serious a matter," he said, resolving to make the attempt to re-establish his dignity with Alice. "I think, Miss Groff, that you perhaps hardly know how absurd your supposition is. There are not many men of distinction in Europe with whom my cousin is not personally acquainted. A very young girl, who had seen little of the world, might possibly be deceived by the exterior of

such a man as Byron. A woman accustomed to associate with writers, thinkers, artists, statesmen, and diplomatists could make no such mistake. No doubt the man's vulgarity and uncouth address amused her for a moment; but--"

"But why did she ask him to come to her Friday afternoons?"

"A mere civility which she extended to him because he assisted her in some difficulty she got into in the streets."

"She might as well have asked a policeman to come to see her. I don't believe that was it."

Lucian at that moment hated Alice. "I am sorry you think such a thing possible," he said. "Shall we resume our waltz?"

Alice was not yet able to bear an implication that she did not understand society sufficiently to appreciate the distance between Lydia and Cashel.

"Of course I know it is impossible," she said, in her old manner. "I did not mean it."

Lucian found some difficulty in gathering from this what she did mean; and they presently took refuge in waltzing. Subsequently, Alice, fearing that her new lights had led her too far, drew back a little; led the conversation to political matters, and expressed her amazement at the extent and variety of the work he performed in Downing Street. He accepted her compliments with perfect seriousness; and she felt satisfied that she had, on the whole, raised herself in his esteem by her proceedings during the evening. But she was mistaken. She knew nothing of politics or official work, and he knew the worthlessness of her pretended admiration of his share in them, although he felt that it was right that she should revere his powers from the depths of her ignorance. What stuck like a burr in his mind was that she thought him small enough to be jealous of the poor boxer, and found his dancing awkward.

After that dance Alice thought much about Lucian, and also about the way in which society regulated marriages. Before Miss Carew sent for her she had often sighed because all the nice men she knew of moved in circles into which an obscure governess had no chance of admission. She had received welcome attentions from them occasionally at subscription balls; but for sustained intimacy and proposals of marriage she had been dependent on the native youth of Wiltstoken, whom she looked upon as louts or prigs, and among whom Wallace Parker had shone pre-eminent as a university man, scholar, and gentleman. And now that she was a privileged beauty in society which would hardly tolerate Wallace Parker, she found that the nice men were younger sons, poor and extravagant, far superior to Lucian Webber as partners for a waltz, but not to be thought of as partners in domestic economy. Alice had experienced the troubles of poverty, and had never met with excellence in men except in poems, which she had long ago been taught to separate from the possibilities of actual life. She had, therefore, no conception of any degree of merit in a husband being sufficient to compensate for slender means of subsistence. She was not base-minded; nothing could have induced her to marry a man, however rich, whom she thought wicked. She wanted money; but she wanted more than money; and here it was that she found supply failing to answer the demand. For not only were all the handsome, gallant, well-bred men getting deeply into debt by living beyond smaller incomes than that with which Wallace Parker had tempted her, but many of those who had inherited both riches and rank were as inferior to him, both in appearance and address, as they were in scholarship. No man, possessing both wealth and amiability, had yet shown the least disposition to fall in love with her.

One bright forenoon in July, Alice, attended by a groom, went to the park on horseback. The Row looked its best. The freshness of morning was upon horses and riders; there were not yet any jaded people lolling supine in carriages, nor discontented spectators sitting in chairs to envy them. Alice, who was a better horsewoman than might have been expected from the little practice she had had, appeared to advantage in the saddle. She

had just indulged in a brisk canter from the Corner to the Serpentine, when she saw a large white horse approaching with Wallace Parker on its back.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, expertly wheeling his steed and taking off his hat at the same time with an intentional display of gallantry and horsemanship. "How are you, Alice?"

"Goodness!" cried Alice, forgetting her manners in her astonishment. "What brings you here; and where on earth did you get that horse?"

"I presume, Alice," said Parker, satisfied with the impression he had made, "that I am here for much the same reason as you are--to enjoy the morning in proper style. As for Rozinante, I borrowed him. Is that chestnut yours? Excuse the rudeness of the question."

"No," said Alice, coloring a little. "This seems such an unlikely place to meet you."

"Oh, no. I always take a turn in the season. But certainly it would have been a very unlikely place for us to meet a year ago."

So far, Alice felt, she was getting the worst of the conversation. She changed the subject. "Have you been to Wiltstoken since I last saw you?"

"Yes. I go there once every week at least."

"Every week! Janet never told me."

Parker implied by a cunning air that he thought he knew the reason of that; but he said nothing. Alice, piqued, would not condescend to make inquiries. So he said, presently,

"How is Miss Thingumbob?"

"I do not know any one of that name."

"You know very well whom I mean. Your aristocratic patron, Miss Carew."

Alice flushed. "You are very impertinent, Wallace," she said, grasping her riding-whip. "How dare you call Miss Carew my patron?"

Wallace suddenly became solemn. "I did not know that you objected to be reminded of all you owe her," he said. "Janet never speaks ungratefully of her, though she has done nothing for Janet."

"I have not spoken ungratefully," protested Alice, almost in tears. "I feel sure that you are never tired of speaking ill of me to them at home."

"That shows how little you understand my real character. I always make excuses for you."

"Excuses for what? What have I done? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't mean anything, if you don't. I thought from your beginning to defend yourself that you felt yourself to be in the wrong."

"I did not defend myself; and I won't have you say so, Wallace."

"Always your obedient, humble servant," he replied, with complacent irony.

She pretended not to hear him, and whipped up her horse to a smart trot. The white steed being no trotter, Parker followed at a lumbering canter. Alice, possessed by a shamefaced fear that he was making her ridiculous, soon checked her speed; and the white horse subsided to a walk, marking its paces by deliberate bobs of its unfashionably long mane and tail.

"I have something to tell you," said Parker at last.

Alice did not deign to reply.

"I think it better to let you know at once," he continued. "The fact is, I intend to marry Janet."

"Janet won't," said Alice, promptly, retorting first, and then reflecting on the intelligence, which surprised her more than it pleased her.

Parker smiled conceitedly, and said, "I don't think she will raise any difficulty if you give her to understand that it is all over between us."

"That what is all over?"

"Well, if you prefer it, that there never has been anything between us. Janet believes that we were engaged. So did a good many other people until you went into high life."

"I cannot help what people thought."

"And they all know that I, at least, was ready to perform my part of the engagement honorably."

"Wallace," she said, with a sudden change of tone; "I think we had better separate. It is not right for me to be riding about the park with you when I have nobody belonging to me here except a man-servant."

"Just as you please," he said, coolly, halting. "May I assure Janet that you wish her to marry me?"

"Most certainly not. I do not wish anyone to marry you, much less my own sister. I am far inferior to Janet; and she deserves a much better husband than I do."

"I quite agree with you, though I don't quite see what that has to do with it. As far as I understand you, you will neither marry me yourself--mind, I am quite willing to fulfil my engagement still--nor let any one else have me. Is that so?"

"You may tell Janet," said Alice, vigorously, her face glowing, "that if we--you and I--were condemned to live forever on a desert isle--No; I will write to her. That will be the best way. Good-morning."

Parker, hitherto imperturbable, now showed signs of alarm. "I beg, Alice," he said, "that you will say nothing unfair to her of me. You cannot with truth say anything bad of me."

"Do you really care for Janet?" said Alice, wavering.

"Of course," he replied, indignantly. "Janet is a very superior girl."

"I have always said so," said Alice, rather angry because some one else had forestalled her with the meritorious admission. "I will tell her the simple truth--that there has never been anything between us except

what is between all cousins; and that there never could have been anything more on my part. I must go now. I don't know what that man must think of me already."

"I should be sorry to lower you in his esteem," said Parker, maliciously. "Good-bye, Alice." Uttering the last words in a careless tone, he again pulled up the white horse's head, raised his hat, and sped away. It was not true that he was in the habit of riding in the park every season. He had learned from Janet that Alice was accustomed to ride there in the forenoon; and he had hired the white horse in order to meet her on equal terms, feeling that a gentleman on horseback in the road by the Serpentine could be at no social disadvantage with any lady, however exalted her associates.

As for Alice, she went home with his reminder that Miss Carew was her patron rankling in her. The necessity for securing an independent position seemed to press imminently upon her. And as the sole way of achieving this was by marriage, she felt for the time willing to marry any man, without regard to his person, age, or disposition, if only he could give her a place equal to that of Miss Carew in the world, of which she had lately acquired the manners and customs.