

CHAPTER XIII

Lydia resumed her work next day with shaken nerves and a longing for society. Many enthusiastic young ladies of her acquaintance would have brought her kisses and devotion by the next mail in response to a telegram; and many more practical people would have taken considerable pains to make themselves agreeable to her for the sake of spending the autumn at Wiltstoken Castle. But she knew that they would only cause her to regret her former solitude. She shrank from the people who attached themselves to her strength and riches even when they had not calculated her gain, and were conscious only of admiration and gratitude. Alice, as a companion, had proved a failure. She was too young, and too much occupied with the propriety of her own behavior, to be anything more to Lydia than an occasional tax upon her patience. Lydia, to her own surprise, thought several times of Miss Gisborne, and felt tempted to invite her, but was restrained by mistrust of the impulse to communicate with Cashel's mother, and reluctance to trace it to its source. Eventually she resolved to conquer her loneliness, and apply herself with increased diligence to the memoir of her father. To restore her nerves, she walked for an hour every day in the neighborhood, and drove out in a pony carriage, in the evening. Bashville's duties were now fulfilled by the butler and Phoebe, Lydia being determined to admit no more young footmen to her service.

One afternoon, returning from one of her daily walks, she found a stranger on the castle terrace, in conversation with the butler. As it was warm autumn weather, Lydia was surprised to see a woman wearing a black silk mantle trimmed with fur, and heavily decorated with spurious jet beads. However, as the female inhabitants of Wiltstoken always approached Miss Carew in their best raiment, without regard to hours or seasons, she concluded that she was about to be asked for a subscription to a school treat, a temperance festival, or perhaps a testimonial to one of the Wiltstoken curates.

When she came nearer she saw that the stranger was an elderly lady--or possibly not a lady--with crimped hair, and ringlets hanging at each ear in a fashion then long obsolete.

"Here is Miss Carew," said the butler, shortly, as if the old lady had tried his temper. "You had better talk to her yourself."

At this she seemed fluttered, and made a solemn courtesy. Lydia, noticing the courtesy and the curls, guessed that her visitor kept a dancing academy. Yet a certain contradictory hardihood in her frame and bearing suggested that perhaps she kept a tavern. However, as her face was, on the whole, an anxious and a good face, and as her attitude towards the lady of the castle was one of embarrassed humility, Lydia acknowledged her salutation kindly, and waited for her to speak.

"I hope you won't consider it a liberty," said the stranger, tremulously. "I'm Mrs. Skene."

Lydia became ominously grave; and Mrs. Skene reddened a little. Then she continued, as if repeating a carefully prepared and rehearsed speech, "It would be esteemed a favor if I might have the honor of a few words in private with your ladyship."

Lydia looked and felt somewhat stern; but it was not in her nature to rebuff any one without strong provocation. She invited her visitor to enter, and led the way to the circular drawing-room, the strange decorations of which exactly accorded with Mrs. Skene's ideas of aristocratic splendor. As a professor of deportment and etiquette, the ex-champion's wife was nervous under the observation of such an expert as Lydia; but she got safely seated without having made a mistake to reproach herself with. For, although entering a room seems a simple matter to many persons, it was to Mrs. Skene an operation governed by the strict laws of the art she professed, and one so elaborate that few of her pupils mastered it satisfactorily with less than a month's practice. Mrs. Skene soon dismissed it from her mind. She was too old to dwell upon such vanities when real anxieties were pressing upon her.

"Oh, miss," she began, appealingly, "the boy!"

Lydia knew at once who was meant. But she repeated, as if at a loss, "The boy?" And immediately accused herself of insincerity.

"Our boy, ma'am. Cashel."

"Mrs. Skene!" said Lydia, reproachfully.

Mrs. Skene understood all that Lydia's tone implied. "I know, ma'am," she pleaded. "I know well. But what could I do but come to you? Whatever you said to him, it has gone to his heart; and he's dying."

"Pardon me," said Lydia, promptly; "men do not die of such things; and Mr. Cashel Byron is not so deficient either in robustness of body or hardness of heart as to be an exception to THAT rule."

"Yes, miss," said Mrs. Skene, sadly. "You are thinking of the profession. You can't believe he has any feelings because he fights. Ah, miss, if you only knew them as I do! More tender-hearted men don't breathe. Cashel is like a young child, his feelings are that easily touched; and I have known stronger than he to die of broken hearts only because they were unlucky in their calling. Just think what a high-spirited young man must feel when a lady calls him a wild beast. That was a cruel word, miss; it was, indeed."

Lydia was so disconcerted by this attack that she had to pause awhile before replying. Then she said, "Are you aware, Mrs. Skene, that my knowledge of Mr. Byron is very slight--that I have not seen him ten times in my life? Perhaps you do not know the circumstances in which I last saw him. I was greatly shocked by the injuries he had inflicted on another man; and I believe I spoke of them as the work of a wild beast. For your sake, I am sorry I said so; for he has told me that he regards you as his mother; and--"

"Oh, no! Far from it, miss. I ask your pardon a thousand times for taking the word out of your mouth; but me and Ned is no more to him than your housekeeper or governess might be to you. That's what I'm afraid you don't understand, miss. He's no relation of ours. I do assure you that he's a gentleman born and bred; and when we go back to Melbourne next Christmas, it will be just the same as if he had never known us."

"I hope he will not be so ungrateful as to forget you. He has told me his history."

"That's more than he ever told me, miss; so you may judge how much he thinks of you."

A pause followed this. Mrs. Skene felt that the first exchange was over, and that she had got the better in it.

"Mrs. Skene," said Lydia then, penetratingly; "when you came to pay me this visit, what object did you propose to yourself? What do you expect me to do?"

"Well, ma'am," said Mrs. Skene, troubled, "the poor lad has had crosses lately. There was the disappointment about you--the first one, I mean--that had been preying on his mind for a long time. Then there was that exhibition spar at the Agricultural Hall, when Paradise acted so dishonorable. Cashel heard that you were looking on; and then he read the shameful way the newspapers wrote of him; and he thought you'd believe it all. I couldn't get that thought out of his head. I said to him, over and over again--"

"Excuse me," said Lydia, interrupting. "We had better be frank with one another. It is useless to assume that he mistook my feeling on that subject. I WAS shocked by the severity with which he treated his opponent."

"But bless you, that's his business," said Mrs. Skene, opening her eyes widely. "I put it to you, miss," she continued, as if mildly reprobating some want of principle on Lydia's part, "whether an honest man shouldn't

fulfil his engagements. I assure you that the pay a respectable professional usually gets for a spar like that is half a guinea; and that was all Paradise got. But Cashel stood on his reputation, and wouldn't take less than ten guineas; and he got it, too. Now many another in his position would have gone into the ring and fooled away the time pretending to box, and just swindling those that paid him. But Cashel is as honest and high-minded as a king. You saw for yourself the trouble he took. He couldn't have spared himself less if he had been fighting for a thousand a side and the belt, instead of for a paltry ten guineas. Surely you don't think the worse of him for his honesty, miss?"

"I confess," said Lydia, laughing in spite of herself, "that your view of the transaction did not occur to me."

"Of course not, ma'am; no more it wouldn't to any one, without they were accustomed to know the right and wrong of the profession. Well, as I was saying, miss, that was a fresh disappointment to him. It worried him more than you can imagine. Then came a deal of bother about the match with Paradise. First Paradise could only get five hundred pounds; and the boy wouldn't agree for less than a thousand. I think it's on your account that he's been so particular about the money of late; for he was never covetous before. Then Mellish was bent on its coming off down hereabouts; and the poor lad was so mortal afraid of its getting to your ears, that he wouldn't consent until they persuaded him you would be in foreign parts in August. Glad I was when the articles were signed at last, before he was worried into his grave. All the time he was training he was longing for a sight of you; but he went through with it as steady and faithful as a man could. And he trained beautiful. I saw him on the morning of the fight; and he was like a shining angel; it would have done a lady's heart good to look at him. Ned went about like a madman offering twenty to one on him: if he had lost, we should have been ruined at this moment. And then to think of the police coming just as he was finishing Paradise. I cried like a child when I heard of it: I don't think there was ever anything so cruel. And he could have finished him quarter of an hour sooner, only he held back to make the market for Ned." Here Mrs. Skene, overcome, blew her nose before proceeding. "Then, on the top of that, came what passed betwixt you and him, and made him give himself up to the police. Lord Worthington bailed him out; but what with the disgrace and the disappointment, and his time and money thrown away, and the sting of your words, all coming together, he was quite broken-hearted. And now he mopes and frets; and neither me nor Ned nor Fan can get any good of him. They tell me that he won't be sent to prison; but if he is"--here Mrs. Skene broke down and began to cry--"it will be the death of him, and God forgive those that have brought it about."

Sorrow always softened Lydia; but tears hardened her again; she had no patience with them.

"And the other man?" she said. "Have you heard anything of him? I suppose he is in some hospital."

"In hospital!" repeated Mrs. Skene, checking her tears in alarm. "Who?"

"Paradise," replied Lydia, pronouncing the name reluctantly.

"He in hospital! Why, bless your innocence, miss, I saw him yesterday, looking as well as such an ugly brute could look--not a mark on him, and he bragging what he would have done to Cashel if the police hadn't come up. He's a nasty, low fighting man, so he is; and I'm only sorry that our boy demeaned himself to strip with the like of him. I hear that Cashel made a perfect picture of him, and that you saw him. I suppose you were frightened, ma'am, and very naturally, too, not being used to such sights. I have had my Ned brought home to me in that state that I have poured brandy into his eye, thinking it was his mouth; and even Cashel, careful as he is, has been nearly blind for three days. It is not to be expected that they could have all the money for nothing. Don't let it prey on your mind, miss. If you married--I am only supposing it," said Mrs. Skene in soothing parenthesis as she saw Lydia shrink from the word--"if you were married to a great surgeon, as you might be without derogation to your high rank, you'd be ready to faint if you saw him cut off a leg or an arm, as he would have to do every day for his livelihood; but you'd be proud of his cleverness in being able to do it. That's how I feel with regard to Ned. I tell you the truth, ma'am, I shouldn't like to see him in the ring no more than the lady of an officer in the Guards would like to see her husband in the field of battle running his sword

into the poor blacks or into the French; but as it's his profession, and people think so highly of him for it, I make up my mind to it; and now I take quite an interest in it, particularly as it does nobody any harm. Not that I would have you think that Ned ever took the arm or leg off a man: Lord forbid--or Cashel either. Oh, ma'am, I thank you kindly, and I'm sorry you should have given yourself the trouble." This referred to the entry of a servant with tea.

"Still," said Lydia, when they were at leisure to resume the conversation, "I do not quite understand why you have come to me. Personally you are quite welcome; but in what way did you expect to relieve Mr. Byron's mind by visiting me? Did he ask you to come?"

"He'd have died first. I came down of my own accord, knowing what was the matter with him."

"And what then?"

Mrs. Skene looked around to satisfy herself that they were alone. Then she leaned towards Lydia, and said in an emphatic whisper,

"Why won't you marry him, miss?"

"Because I don't choose, Mrs. Skene," said Lydia, with perfect good-humor.

"But consider a little, miss. Where will you ever get such another chance? Only think what a man he is! champion of the world and a gentleman as well. The two things have never happened before, and never will again. I have known lots of champions, but they were not fit company for the like of you. Ned was champion when I married him; and my family thought that I lowered myself in doing it, although I was only a professional dancer on the stage. The men in the ring are common men mostly; and so, though they are the best men in the kingdom, ladies are cut off from their society. But it has been your good luck to take the fancy of one that's a gentleman. What more could a lady desire? Where will you find his equal in health, strength, good looks, or good manners? As to his character, I can tell you about that. In Melbourne, as you may suppose, all the girls and women were breaking their hearts for his sake. I declare to you that I used to have two or three of them in every evening merely to look at him, and he, poor innocent lad, taking no more notice of them than if they were cabbages. He used to be glad to get away from them by going into the saloon and boxing with the gentlemen; and then they used to peep at him through the door. They never got a wink from him. You were the first, Miss Carew; and, believe me, you will be the last. If there had ever been another he couldn't have kept it from me; because his disposition is as open as a child's. And his honesty is beyond everything you can imagine. I have known him to be offered eight hundred pounds to lose a fight that he could only get two hundred by winning, not to mention his chance of getting nothing at all if he lost honestly. You know--for I see you know the world, ma'am--how few men would be proof against such a temptation. There are men high up in their profession--so high that you'd as soon suspect the queen on her throne of selling her country's battles as them--that fight cross on the sly when it's made worth their while. My Ned is no low prize-fighter, as is well known; but when he let himself be beat by that little Killarney Primrose, and went out and bought a horse and trap next day, what could I think? There, ma'am, I tell you that of my own husband; and I tell you that Cashel never was beaten, although times out of mind it would have paid him better to lose than to win, along of those wicked betting men. Not an angry word have I ever had from him, nor the sign of liquor have I ever seen on him, except once on Ned's birthday; and then nothing but fun came out of him in his cups, when the truth comes out of all men. Oh, do just think how happy you ought to be, miss, if you would only bring yourself to look at it in the proper light. A gentleman born and bred, champion of the world, sober, honest, spotless as the unborn babe, able to take his own part and yours in any society, and mad in love with you! He thinks you an angel from heaven and so I am sure you are, miss, in your heart. I do assure you that my Fan gets quite put out because she thinks he draws comparisons to her disadvantage. I don't think you can be so hard to please as to refuse him, miss."

Lydia leaned back in her chair and looked at Mrs. Skene with a curious expression which soon brightened into an irrepressible smile. Mrs. Skene smiled very slightly in complaisance, but conveyed by her serious brow that what she had said was no laughing matter.

"I must take some time to consider all that you have so eloquently urged," said Lydia. "I am in earnest, Mrs. Skene; you have produced a great effect upon me. Now let us talk of something else for the present. Your daughter is quite well, I hope."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am, she enjoys her health."

"And you also?"

"I am as well as can be expected," said Mrs. Skene, too fond of commiseration to admit that she was perfectly well.

"You must have a rare sense of security," said Lydia, watching her, "being happily married to so celebrated a--a professor of boxing as Mr. Skene. Is it not pleasant to have a powerful protector?"

"Ah, miss, you little know," exclaimed Mrs. Skene, falling into the trap baited by her own grievances, and losing sight of Cashel's interests. "The fear of his getting into trouble is never off my mind. Ned is quietness itself until he has a drop of drink in him; and then he is like the rest--ready to fight the first that provokes him. And if the police get hold of him he has no chance. There's no justice for a fighting man. Just let it be said that he's a professional, and that's enough for the magistrate; away with him to prison, and good-by to his pupils and his respectability at once. That's what I live in terror of. And as to being protected, I'd let myself be robbed fifty times over sooner than say a word to him that might bring on a quarrel. Many a time when we were driving home of a night have I overpaid the cabman on the sly, afraid he would grumble and provoke Ned. It's the drink that does it all. Gentlemen are proud to be seen speaking with him in public; and they come up one after another asking what he'll have, until the next thing he knows is that he's in bed with his boots on, his wrist sprained, and maybe his eye black, trying to remember what he was doing the night before. What I suffered the first three years of our marriage none can tell. Then he took the pledge, and ever since that he's been very good--I haven't seen him what you could fairly call drunk, not more than three times a year. It was the blessing of God, and a beating he got from a milkman in Westminster, that made him ashamed of himself. I kept him to it and made him emigrate out of the way of his old friends. Since that, there has been a blessing on him; and we've prospered."

"Is Cashel quarrelsome?"

At the tone of this question Mrs. Skene suddenly realized the untimeliness of her complaints. "No, no," she protested. "He never drinks; and as to fighting, if you can believe such a thing, miss, I don't think he has had a casual turnout three times in his life--not oftener, at any rate. All he wants is to be married; and then he'll be steady to his grave. But if he's left adrift now, Lord knows what will become of him. He'll mope first--he's moping at present--then he'll drink; then he'll lose his pupils, get out of condition, be beaten, and--One word from you, miss, would save him. If I might just tell him--"

"Nothing," said Lydia. "Absolutely nothing. The only assurance I can give you is that you have softened the hard opinion that I had formed of some of his actions. But that I should marry Mr. Cashel Byron is simply the most improbable thing in the world. All questions of personal inclination apart, the mere improbability is enough in itself to appal an ordinary woman."

Mrs. Skene did not quite understand this; but she understood sufficiently for her purpose. She rose to go, shaking her head despondently, and saying, "I see how it is, ma'am. You think him beneath you. Your relations wouldn't like it."

"There is no doubt that my relatives would be greatly shocked; and I am bound to take that into account for--what it is worth."

"We should never trouble you," said Mrs. Skene, lingering. "England will see the last of us in a month of two."

"That will make no difference to me, except that I shall regret not being able to have a pleasant chat with you occasionally." This was not true; but Lydia fancied she was beginning to take a hardened delight in lying.

Mrs. Skene was not to be consoled by compliments. She again shook her head. "It is very kind of you to give me good words, miss," she said; "but if I might have one for the boy you could say what you liked to me."

Lydia considered far before she replied. At last she said, "I am sorry I spoke harshly to him, since, driven as he was by circumstances, I cannot see how he could have acted otherwise than he did. And I overlooked the economic conditions of his profession. In short, I am not used to fisticuffs; and what I saw shocked me so much that I was unreasonable. But," continued Lydia, checking Mrs. Skene's rising hope with a warning finger, "how, if you tell him this, will you make him understand that I say so as an act of justice, and not in the least as a proffer of affection?"

"A crumb of comfort will satisfy him, miss. I'll just tell him that I've seen you, and that you meant nothing by what you said the other day; and--"

"Mrs. Skene," said Lydia, interrupting her softly; "tell him nothing at all as yet. I have made up my mind at last. If he does not hear from me within a fortnight you may tell him what you please. Can you wait so long?"

"Of course. Whatever you wish, ma'am. But Mellish's benefit is to be to-morrow night; and--"

"What have I to do with Mellish or his benefit?"

Mrs. Skene, abashed, murmured apologetically that she was only wishful that the boy should do himself credit.

"If he is to benefit Mellish by beating somebody, he will not be behindhand. Remember you are not to mention me for a fortnight. Is that a bargain?"

"Whatever you wish, ma'am," repeated Mrs. Skene, hardly satisfied. But Lydia gave her no further comfort; so she begged to take her leave, expressing a hope that things would turn out to the advantage of all parties. Then Lydia insisted on her partaking of some solid refreshment, and afterwards drove her to the railway station in the pony-carriage. Just before they parted Lydia, suddenly recurring to their former subject, said,

"Does Mr. Byron ever THINK?"

"Think!" said Mrs. Skene emphatically. "Never. There isn't a more cheerful lad in existence, miss."

Then Mrs. Skene was carried away to London, wondering whether it could be quite right for a young lady to live in a gorgeous castle without any elder of her own sex, and to speak freely and civilly to her inferiors. When she got home she said nothing of her excursion to Mr. Skene, in whose disposition valor so entirely took the place of discretion that he had never been known to keep a secret except as to the whereabouts of a projected fight. But she sat up late with her daughter Fanny, tantalizing her by accounts of the splendor of the castle, and consoling her by describing Miss Carew as a slight creature with red hair and no figure (Fanny having jet black hair, fine arms, and being one of Cashel's most proficient pupils).

"All the same, Fan," added Mrs. Skene, as she took her candlestick at two in the morning, "if it comes off, Cashel will never be master in his own house."

"I can see that very plain," said Fanny; "but if respectable professional people are not good enough for him, he will have only himself to thank if he gets himself looked down upon by empty-headed swells."

Meanwhile, Lydia, on her return to the castle after a long drive round the country, had attempted to overcome an attack of restlessness by setting to work on the biography of her father. With a view to preparing a chapter on his taste in literature she had lately been examining his favorite books for marked passages. She now resumed this search, not setting methodically to work, but standing perched on the library ladder, taking down volume after volume, and occasionally dipping into the contents for a few pages or so. At this desultory work the time passed as imperceptibly as the shadows lengthened. The last book she examined was a volume of poems. There were no marks in it; but it opened at a page which had evidently lain open often before. The first words Lydia saw were these:

"What would I give for a heart of flesh to warm me through
Instead of this heart of stone ice-cold whatever I
do; Hard and cold and small, of all hearts the worst of all."

Lydia hastily stepped down from the ladder, and recoiled until she reached a chair, where she sat and read and reread these lines. The failing light roused her to action. She replaced the book on the shelf, and said, as she went to the writing-table, "If such a doubt as that haunted my father it will haunt me, unless I settle what is to be my heart's business now and forever. If it be possible for a child of mine to escape this curse of autovivisection, it must inherit its immunity from its father, and not from me--from the man of emotion who never thinks, and not from the woman of introspection, who cannot help thinking. Be it so."