CHAPTER XIV

Before many days had elapsed a letter came for Cashel as he sat taking tea with the Skene family. When he saw the handwriting, a deep red color mounted to his temples.

"Oh, Lor'!" said Miss Skene, who sat next him. "Let's read it."

"Go to the dickens," cried Cashel, hastily baffling her as she snatched at it.

"Don't worrit him, Fan," said Mrs. Skene, tenderly.

"Not for the world, poor dear," said Miss Skene, putting her hand affectionately on his shoulder. "Let me just peep at the name--to see who it's from. Do, Cashel, DEAR."

"It's from nobody," said Cashel. "Here, get out. If you don't let me alone I'll make it warm for you the next time you come to me for a lesson."

"Very likely," said Fanny, contemptuously. "Who had the best of it to-day, I should like to know?"

"Gev' him a hot un on the chin with her right as ever I see," observed Skene, with hoarse mirth.

Cashel went away from the table, out of Fanny's reach; and read the letter, which ran thus:

"Regent's Park. "Dear Mr. Cashel Byron,--I am desirous that you should meet a lady friend of mine. She will be here at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon. You would oblige me greatly by calling on me at that hour.

"Yours faithfully,

"Lydia Carew."

There was a long pause, during which there was no sound in the room except the ticking of the clock and the munching of shrimps by the ex-champion.

"Good news, I hope, Cashel," said Mrs. Skene, at last, tremulously.

"Blow me if I understand it," said Cashel. "Can you make it out?" And he handed the letter to his adopted mother. Skene ceased eating to see his wife read, a feat which was to him one of the wonders of science.

"I think the lady she mentions must be herself," said Mrs. Skene, after some consideration.

"No," said Cashel, shaking his head. "She always says what she means."

"Ah," said Skene, cunningly; "but she can't write it though. That's the worst of writing; no one can't never tell exactly what it means. I never signed articles yet that there weren't some misunderstanding about; and articles is the best writing that can be had anywhere."

"You'd better go and see what it means," said Mrs. Skene.

"Right," said Skene. "Go and have it out with her, my boy."

"It is short, and not particularly sweet," said Fanny. "She might have had the civility to put her crest at the top."

"What would you give to be her?" said Cashel, derisively, catching the letter as she tossed it disdainfully to him.

"If I was I'd respect myself more than to throw myself at YOUR head."

"Hush, Fanny," said Mrs. Skene; "you're too sharp. Ned, you oughtn't to encourage her by laughing."

Next day Cashel rose early, went for a walk, paid extra attention to his diet, took some exercise with the gloves, had a bath and a rub down, and presented himself at Regent's Park at three o'clock in excellent condition. Expecting to see Bashville, he was surprised when the door was opened by a female servant.

"Miss Carew at home?"

"Yes, sir," said the girl, falling in love with him at first sight. "Mr. Byron, sir?"

"That's me," said Cashel. "I say, is there any one with her?"

"Only a lady, sir."

"Oh, d--n! Well, it can't be helped. Never say die."

The girl led him then to a door, opened it, and when he entered shut it softly without announcing him. The room in which he found himself was a long one, lighted from the roof. The walls were hung with pictures. At the far end, with their backs towards him, were two ladies: Lydia, and a woman whose noble carriage and elegant form would, have raised hopes of beauty in a man less preoccupied than Cashel. But he, after advancing some distance with his eyes on Lydia, suddenly changed countenance, stopped, and was actually turning to fly, when the ladies, hearing his light step, faced about and rooted him to the spot. As Lydia offered him her hand, her companion, who had surveyed the visitor first with indifference, and then with incredulous surprise, exclaimed, with a burst of delighted recognition, like a child finding a long-lost plaything, "My darling boy!" And going to Cashel with the grace of a swan, she clasped him in her arms. In acknowledgment of which he thrust his red, discomfited face over her shoulder, winked at Lydia with his tongue in his cheek, and said,

"This is what you may call the voice of nature, and no mistake."

"What a splendid creature you are!" said Mrs. Byron, holding him a little way from her, the better to admire him. "Do you know how handsome you are, you wretch?"

"How d'ye do, Miss Carew," said Cashel, breaking loose, and turning to Lydia. "Never mind her; it's only my mother. At least," he added, as if correcting himself, "she's my mamma."

"And where have you come from? Where have you been? Do you know that I have not seen you for seven years, you unnatural boy? Think of his being my son, Miss Carew. Give me another kiss, my own," she continued, grasping his arm affectionately.

"What a muscular creature you are!"

"Kiss away as much as you like," said Cashel, struggling with the old school-boy sullenness as it returned oppressively upon him. "I suppose you're well. You look right enough."

"Yes," she said, mockingly, beginning to despise him for his inability to act up to her in this thrilling scene; "I AM right enough. Your language is as refined as ever. And why do you get your hair cropped close like that?

You must let it grow, and--"

"Now, look here," said Cashel, stopping her hand neatly as she raised it to rearrange his locks. "You just drop it, or I'll walk out at that door and you won't see me again for another seven years. You can either take me as you find me, or let me alone. Absalom and Dan Mendoza came to grief through wearing their hair long, and I am going to wear mine short."

Mrs. Byron became a shade colder. "Indeed!" she said. "Just the same still, Cashel?"

"Just the same, both one and other of us," he replied. "Before you spoke six words I felt as if we'd parted only yesterday."

"I am rather taken aback by the success of my experiment," interposed Lydia. "I invited you purposely to meet one another. The resemblance between you led me to suspect the truth, and my suspicion was confirmed by the account Mr. Byron gave me of his adventures."

Mrs. Byron's vanity was touched. "Is he like me?" she said, scanning his features. He, without heeding her, said to Lydia with undisguised mortification,

"And was THAT why you sent for me?"

"Are you disappointed?" said Lydia.

"He is not in the least glad to see me," said Mrs. Byron, plaintively. "He has no heart."

"Now she'll go on for the next hour," said Cashel, looking to Lydia, obviously because he found it much pleasanter than looking at his mother. "However, if you don't care, I don't. So, fire away, mamma."

"And you think we are really like one another?" said Mrs. Byron, not heeding him. "Yes; I think we are. There is a certain--Are you married, Cashel?" with sudden mistrust.

"Ha! ha! ha!" shouted Cashel. "No; but I hope to be, some day," he added, venturing to glance again at Lydia, who was, however, attentively observing Mrs. Byron.

"Well, tell me everything about yourself. What are you? Now, I do hope, Cashel, that you have not gone upon the stage."

"The stage!" said Cashel, contemptuously. "Do I look like it?"

"You certainly do not," said Mrs. Byron, whimsically--"although you have a certain odious professional air, too. What did you do when you ran away so scandalously from that stupid school in the north? How do you earn your living? Or DO you earn it?"

"I suppose I do, unless I am fed by ravens, as Elijah was. What do you think I was best fitted for by my education and bringing up? Sweep a crossing, perhaps! When I ran away from Panley, I went to sea."

"A sailor, of all things! You don't look like one. And pray, what rank have you attained in your profession?"

"The front rank. The top of the tree," said Cashel, shortly.

"Mr. Byron is not at present following the profession of a sailor; nor has he done so for many years," said Lydia.

Cashel looked at her, half in appeal, half in remonstrance.

"Something very different, indeed," pursued Lydia, with quiet obstinacy. "And something very startling."

"CAN'T you shut up?" exclaimed Cashel. "I should have expected more sense from you. What's the use of setting her on to make a fuss and put me in a rage? I'll go away if you don't stop."

"What is the matter?" said Mrs. Byron. "Have you been doing anything disgraceful, Cashel?"

"There she goes. I told you so. I keep a gymnasium, that's all. There's nothing disgraceful in that, I hope."

"A gymnasium?" repeated Mrs. Byron, with imperious disgust. "What nonsense! You must give up everything of that kind, Cashel. It is very silly, and very low. You were too ridiculously proud, of course, to come to me for the means of keeping yourself in a proper position. I suppose I shall have to provide you with--"

"If I ever take a penny from you, may I--" Cashel caught Lydia's anxious look, and checked himself. He paused and got away a step, a cunning smile flickering on his lips. "No," he said; "it's just playing into your hands to lose temper with you. You think you know me, and you want to force the fighting. Well, we'll see. Make me angry now if you can."

"There is not the slightest reason for anger," said Mrs. Byron, angry herself. "Your temper seems to have become ungovernable--or, rather, to have remained so; for it was never remarkable for sweetness."

"No," retorted Cashel, jeering good-humoredly. "Not the slightest occasion to lose my temper! Not when I am told that I am silly and low! Why, I think you must fancy that you're talking to your little Cashel, that blessed child you were so fond of. But you're not. You're talking--now for a screech, Miss Carew!--to the champion of Australia, the United States, and England, holder of three silver belts and one gold one (which you can have to wear in 'King John' if you think it'll become you); professor of boxing to the nobility and gentry of St. James's, and common prize-fighter to the whole globe, without reference to weight or color, for not less than five hundred pounds a side. That's Cashel Byron."

Mrs. Byron recoiled, astounded. After a pause she said, "Oh, Cashel, how COULD you?" Then, approaching him again, "Do you mean to say that you go out and fight those great rough savages?"

"Yes, I do."

"And that you BEAT them?"

"Yes. Ask Miss Carew how Billy Paradise looked after standing before me for an hour."

"You wonderful boy! What an occupation! And you have done all this in your own name?"

"Of course I have. I am not ashamed of it. I often wondered whether you had seen my name in the papers."

"I never read the papers. But you must have heard of my return to England. Why did you not come to see me?"

"I wasn't quite certain that you would like it," said Cashel, uneasily, avoiding her eye. "Hullo!" he exclaimed, as he attempted to refresh himself by another look at Lydia, "she's given us the slip."

"She is quite right to leave us alone together under the circumstances. And now tell me why my precious boy should doubt that his own mother wished to see him."

"I don't know why he should," said Cashel, with melancholy submission to her affection. "But he did."

"How insensible you are! Did you not know that you were always my cherished darling--my only son?"

Cashel, who was now sitting beside her on an ottoman, groaned and moved restlessly, but said nothing.

"Are you glad to see me?"

"Yes," said Cashel, dismally, "I suppose I am. I--By Jingo," he cried, with sudden animation, "perhaps you can give me a lift here. I never thought of that. I say, mamma; I am in great trouble at present, and I think you can help me if you will."

Mrs. Byron looked at him satirically. But she said, soothingly, "Of course I will help you--as far as I am able--my precious one. All I possess is yours."

Cashel ground his feet on the floor impatiently, and then sprang up. After an interval, during which he seemed to be swallowing some indignant protest, he said,

"You may put your mind at rest, once and for all, on the subject of money. I don't want anything of that sort."

"I am glad you are so independent, Cashel."

"So am I."

"Do, pray, be more amiable."

"I am amiable enough," he cried, desperately, "only you won't listen."

"My treasure," said Mrs. Byron, remorsefully. "What is the matter?"

"Well," said Cashel, somewhat mollified, "it is this. I want to marry Miss Carew; that's all."

"YOU marry Miss Carew!" Mrs. Byron's tenderness had vanished, and her tone was shrewd and contemptuous. "Do you know, you silly boy, that--"

"I know all about it," said Cashel, determinedly--"what she is, and what I am, and the rest of it. And I want to marry her; and, what's more, I will marry her, if I have to break the neck of every swell in London first. So you can either help me or not, as you please; but if you won't, never call me your precious boy any more. Now!"

Mrs. Byron abdicated her dominion there and then forever. She sat with quite a mild expression for some time in silence. Then she said,

"After all, I do not see why you should not. It would be a very good match for you."

"Yes; but a deuced bad one for her."

"Really, I do not see that, Cashel. When your uncle dies, I suppose you will succeed to the Dorsetshire property."

"I the heir to a property! Are you in earnest?"

"Of course. Don't you know who your people are?"

"How could I? You never told me. Do you mean to say that I have an uncle?"

"Old Bingley Byron? Certainly."

"Well, I AM blowed. But--but--I mean--Supposing he IS my uncle, am I his lawful heir?"

"Yes. Walford Byron, the only other brother of your father, died years ago, while you were at Moncrief's; and he had no sons. Bingley is a bachelor."

"But," said Cashel, cautiously, "won't there be some bother about my--at least--"

"My dearest child, what are you thinking or talking about? Nothing can be clearer than your title."

"Well," said Cashel, blushing, "a lot of people used to make out that you weren't married at all."

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Byron, indignantly. "Oh, they DARE not say so! Impossible. Why did you not tell me at once?"

"I didn't think about it," said Cashel, hastily excusing himself. "I was too young to care. It doesn't matter now. My father is dead, isn't he?"

"He died when you were a baby. You have often made me angry with you, poor little innocent, by reminding me of him. Do not talk of him to me."

"Not if you don't wish. Just one thing, though, mamma. Was he a gentleman?"

"Of course. What a question!"

"Then I am as good as any of the swells that think themselves her equals? She has a cousin in the government office; a fellow who gives out that he is the home secretary, and most likely sits in a big chair in a hall and cheeks the public. Am I as good as he is?"

"You are perfectly well connected by your mother's side, Cashel. The Byrons are only commoners; but even they are one of the oldest county families in England."

Cashel began to show signs of excitement. "How much a year are they worth?" he demanded.

"I do not know how much they are worth now. Your father was always in difficulties, and so was his father. But Bingley is a miser. Five thousand a year, perhaps."

"That's an independence. That's enough. She said she couldn't expect a man to be so thunderingly rich as she is."

"Indeed? Then you have discussed the question with her?"

Cashel was about to speak, when a servant entered to say that Miss Carew was in the library, and begged that they would come to her as soon as they were quite disengaged. When the maid withdrew he said, eagerly,

"I wish you'd go home, mamma, and let me catch her in the library by herself. Tell me where you live, and I'll come in the evening and tell you all about it. That is, if you have no objection."

"What objection could I possibly have, dearest one? Are you sure that you are not spoiling your chance by too much haste? She has no occasion to hurry, Cashel, and she knows it."

"I am dead certain that now is my time or never. I always know by instinct when to go in and finish. Here's your mantle."

"In such a hurry to get rid of your poor old mother, Cashel?"

"Oh, bother! you're not old. You won't mind my wanting you to go for this once, will you?"

She smiled affectionately, put on her mantle, and turned her cheek towards him to be kissed. The unaccustomed gesture alarmed him; he retreated a step, and involuntary assumed an attitude of self-defence, as if the problem before him were a pugilistic one. Recovering himself immediately, he kissed her, and impatiently accompanied her to the house door, which he closed softly behind her, leaving her to walk in search of her carriage alone. Then he stole up-stairs to the library, where he found Lydia reading.

"She's gone," he said.

Lydia put down her book, looked up at him, saw what was coming, looked down again to hide a spasm of terror, and said, with a steady severity that cost her a great effort, "I hope you have not quarrelled."

"Lord bless you, no! We kissed one another like turtle-doves. At odd moments she wheedles me into feeling fond of her in spite of myself. She went away because I asked her to."

"And why do you ask my guests to go away?"

"Because I wanted to be alone with you. Don't look as if you didn't understand. She's told me a whole heap of things about myself that alter our affairs completely. My birth is all right; I'm heir to a county family that came over with the Conqueror, and I shall have a decent income. I can afford to give away weight to old Webber now."

"Well," said Lydia, sternly.

"Well," said Cashel, unabashed, "the only use of all that to me is that I may marry if I like. No more fighting or teaching now."

"And when you are married, will you be as tender to your wife as you are to your mother?"

Cashel's elation vanished. "I knew you'd think that," he said. "I am always the same with her; I can't help it. She makes me look like a fool, or like a brute. Have I ever been so with you?"

"Yes," said Lydia. "Except," she added, "that you have never shown absolute dislike to me."

"Ah! EXCEPT! That's a very big except. But I don't dislike her. Blood is thicker than water, and I have a softness for her; only I won't put up with her nonsense. But it's different with you. I don't know how to say it; I'm not good at sentiment--not that there's any sentiment about it. At least, I don't mean that; but--You're fond of me in a sort of way, ain't you?"

"Yes; I'm fond of you in a sort of way."

"Well, then," he said, uneasily, "won't you marry me? I'm not such a fool as you think; and you'll like me better after a while."

Lydia became very pale. "Have you considered," she said, "that henceforth you will be an idle man, and that I shall always be a busy woman, preoccupied with the work that may seem very dull to you?"

"I won't be idle. There's lots of things I can do besides boxing. We'll get on together, never fear. People that are fond of one another never have any difficulty; and people that hate each other never have any comfort. I'll be on the lookout to make you happy. You needn't fear my interrupting your Latin and Greek: I won't expect you to give up your whole life to me. Why should I? There's reason in everything. So long as you are mine, and nobody else's, I'll be content. And I'll be yours and nobody else's. What's the use of supposing half a dozen accidents that may never happen? Let's sign reasonable articles, and then take our chance. You have too much good-nature ever to be nasty."

"It would be a hard bargain," she said, doubtfully; "for you would have to give up your occupation; and I should give up nothing but my unfruitful liberty."

"I will swear never to fight again; and you needn't swear anything. If that is not an easy bargain, I don't know what is."

"Easy for me, yes. But for you?"

"Never mind me. You do whatever you like; and I'll do whatever you like. You have a conscience; so I know that whatever you like will be the best thing. I have the most science; but you have the most sense. Come!"

Lydia looked around, as if for a means of escape. Cashel waited anxiously. There was a long pause.

"It can't be," he said, pathetically, "that you are afraid of me because I was a prize-fighter."

"Afraid of you! No: I am afraid of myself; afraid of the future; afraid FOR you. But my mind is already made up on this subject. When I brought about this meeting between you and your mother I determined to marry you if you asked me again."

She stood up, quietly, and waited. The rough hardihood of the ring fell from him like a garment: he blushed deeply, and did not know what to do. Nor did she; but without willing it she came a step closer to him, and turned up her face towards his. He, nearly blind with confusion, put his arms about her and kissed her. Suddenly she broke loose from his arms, seized the lapels of his coat tightly in her hands, and leaned back until she nearly hung from him with all her weight.

"Cashel," she said, "we are the silliest lovers in the world, I believe--we know nothing about it. Are you really fond of me?"

She recovered herself immediately, and made no further demonstration of the kind. He remained shy, and was so evidently anxious to go, that she presently asked him to leave her for a while, though she was surprised to feel a faint pang of disappointment when he consented.

On leaving the house he hurried to the address which his mother had given him: a prodigious building in Westminster, divided into residential flats, to the seventh floor of which he ascended in a lift. As he stepped from it he saw Lucian Webber walking away from him along a corridor. Obeying a sudden impulse, he followed, and overtook him just as he was entering a room. Lucian, finding that some one was resisting his attempt to close the door, looked out, recognized Cashel, turned white, and hastily retreated into the apartment, where, getting behind a writing-table, he snatched a revolver from a drawer. Cashel recoiled, amazed and frightened, with his right arm up as if to ward off a blow.

"Hullo!" he cried. "Drop that d--d thing, will you? If you don't, I'll shout for help."

"If you approach me I will fire," said Lucian, excitedly. "I will teach you that your obsolete brutality is powerless against the weapons science has put into the hands of civilized men. Leave my apartments. I am not afraid of you; but I do not choose to be disturbed by your presence."

"Confound your cheek," said Cashel, indignantly; "is that the way you receive a man who comes to make a friendly call on you?"

"Friendly NOW, doubtless, when you see that I am well protected."

Cashel gave a long whistle. "Oh," he said, "you thought I came to pitch into you. Ha! ha! And you call that science--to draw a pistol on a man. But you daren't fire it, and well you know it. You'd better put it up, or you may let it off without intending to: I never feel comfortable when I see a fool meddling with firearms. I came to tell you that I'm going to be married to your cousin. Ain't you glad?"

Lucian's face changed. He believed; but he said, obstinately, "I don't credit that statement. It is a lie."

This outraged Cashel. "I tell you again," he said, in a menacing tone, "that your cousin is engaged to me. Now call me a liar, and hit me in the face, if you dare. Look here," he added, taking a leather case from his pocket, and extracting from it a bank note, "I'll give you that twenty-pound note if you will hit me one blow."

Lucian, sick with fury, and half paralyzed by a sensation which he would not acknowledge as fear, forced himself to come forward. Cashel thrust out his jaw invitingly, and said, with a sinister grin, "Put it in straight, governor. Twenty pounds, remember."

At that moment Lucian would have given all his political and social chances for the courage and skill of a prize-fighter. He could see only one way to escape the torment of Cashel's jeering and the self- reproach of a coward. He desperately clenched his fist and struck out. The blow wasted itself on space; and he stumbled forward against his adversary, who laughed uproariously, grasped his hand, clapped him on the back, and exclaimed,

"Well done, my boy. I thought you were going to be mean; but you've been game, and you're welcome to the stakes. I'll tell Lydia that you have fought me for twenty pounds and won on your merits. Ain't you proud of yourself for having had a go at the champion?"

"Sir--" began Lucian. But nothing coherent followed.

"You just sit down for a quarter of an hour, and don't drink anything, and you'll be all right. When you recover you'll be glad you showed pluck. So, good-night, for the present--I know how you feel, and I'll be off. Be sure not to try to settle yourself with wine; it'll only make you worse. Ta-ta!"

As Cashel withdrew, Lucian collapsed into a chair, shaken by the revival of passions and jealousies which he had thought as completely outgrown as the school-boy jackets in which he had formerly experienced them. He tried to think of some justification of his anger--some better reason for it than the vulgar taunt of a bully. He told himself presently that the idea of Lydia marrying such a man had maddened him to strike. As Cashel had predicted, he was beginning to plume himself on his pluck. This vein of reflection, warring with his inner knowledge that he had been driven by fear and hatred into a paroxysm of wrath against a man to whom he should have set an example of dignified self-control, produced an exhausting whirl in his thoughts, which were at once quickened and confused by the nervous shock of bodily violence, to which he was quite unused. Unable to sit still, he rose, put on his hat, went out, and drove to the house in Regent's Park.

Lydia was in her boudoir, occupied with a book, when he entered. He was not an acute observer; he could see no change in her. She was as calm as ever; her eyes were not even fully open, and the touch of her hand subdued him as it had always done. Though he had never entertained any hope of possessing her since the day when she had refused him in Bedford Square, a sense of intolerable loss came upon him as he saw her for the first time pledged to another--and such another!

"Lydia," he said, trying to speak vehemently, but failing to shake off the conventional address of which he had made a second nature, "I have heard something that has filled me with inexpressible dismay. Is it true?"

"The news has travelled fast," she said. "Yes; it is true." She spoke composedly, and so kindly that he choked in trying to reply.

"Then, Lydia, you are the chief actor in a greater tragedy than I have ever witnessed on the stage."

"It is strange, is it not?" she said, smiling at his effort to be impressive.

"Strange! It is calamitous. I trust I may be allowed to say so. And you sit there reading as calmly as though nothing had happened."

She handed him the book without a word.

"'Ivanhoe'!" he said. "A novel!"

"Yes. Do you remember once, before you knew me very well, telling me that Scott's novels were the only ones that you liked to see in the hands of ladies?"

"No doubt I did. But I cannot talk of literature just--"

"I am not leading you away from what you want to talk about. I was about to tell you that I came upon 'Ivanhoe' by chance half an hour ago, when I was searching--I confess it--for something very romantic to read. Ivanhoe was a prize-fighter--the first half of the book is a description of a prize-fight. I was wondering whether some romancer of the twenty-fourth century will hunt out the exploits of my husband, and present him to the world as a sort of English nineteenth-century Cyd, with all the glory of antiquity upon his deeds."

Lucian made a gesture of impatience. "I have never been able to understand," he said, "how it is that a woman of your ability can habitually dwell on perverse and absurd ideas. Oh, Lydia, is this to be the end of all your great gifts and attainments? Forgive me if I touch a painful chord; but this marriage seems to me so unnatural that I must speak out. Your father made you one of the richest and best-educated women in the world. Would he approve of what you are about to do?"

"It almost seems to me that he educated me expressly to some such end. Whom would you have me marry?"

"Doubtless few men are worthy of you, Lydia. But this man least of all. Could you not marry a gentleman? If he were even an artist, a poet, or a man of genius of any kind, I could bear to think of it; for indeed I am not influenced by class prejudice in the matter. But a--I will try to say nothing that you must not in justice admit to be too obvious to be ignored--a man of the lower orders, pursuing a calling which even the lower orders despise; illiterate, rough, awaiting at this moment a disgraceful sentence at the hands of the law! Is it possible that you have considered all these things?"

"Not very deeply; they are not of a kind to concern me much. I can console you as to one of them. I have always recognized him as a gentleman, in your sense of the word. He proves to be so--one of considerable position, in fact. As to his approaching trial, I have spoken with Lord Worthington about it, and also with the lawyers who have charge of the case; and they say positively that, owing to certain proofs not being in the hands of the police, a defence can be set up that will save him from imprisonment."

"There is no such defence possible," said Lucian, angrily.

"Perhaps not. As far as I understand it, it is rather an aggravation of the offence than an excuse for it. But if they imprison him it will make no difference. He can console himself by the certainty that I will marry him at once when he is released."

Lucian's face lengthened. He abandoned the argument, and said, blankly, "I cannot suppose that you would allow yourself to be deceived. If he is a gentleman of position, that of course alters the case completely."

"Very little indeed from my point of view. Hardly at all. And now, worldly cousin Lucian, I have satisfied you that I am not going to connect you by marriage with a butcher, bricklayer, or other member of the trades from which Cashel's profession, as you warned me, is usually recruited. Stop a moment. I am going to do justice to you. You want to say that my unworldly friend Lucian is far more deeply concerned at seeing the phoenix of modern culture throw herself away on a man unworthy of her."

"That IS what I mean to say, except that you put it too modestly. It is a case of the phoenix, not only of modern culture, but of natural endowment and of every happy accident of the highest civilization, throwing herself away on a man specially incapacitated by his tastes and pursuits from comprehending her or entering the circle in which she moves."

"Listen to me patiently, Lucian, and I will try to explain the mystery to you, leaving the rest of the world to misunderstand me as it pleases. First, you will grant me that even a phoenix must marry some one in order that she may hand on her torch to her children. Her best course would be to marry another phoenix; but as she--poor girl!--cannot appreciate even her own phoenixity, much less that of another, she must perforce be content with a mere mortal. Who is the mortal to be? Not her cousin Lucian; for rising young politicians must have helpful wives, with feminine politics and powers of visiting and entertaining; a description inapplicable to the phoenix. Not, as you just now suggested, a man of letters. The phoenix has had her share of playing helpmeet to a man of letters, and does not care to repeat that experience. She is sick to death of the morbid introspection and womanish self-consciousness of poets, novelists, and their like. As to artists, all the good ones are married; and ever since the rest have been able to read in hundreds of books that they are the most gifted and godlike of men, they are become almost as intolerable as their literary flatterers. No, Lucian, the phoenix has paid her debt to literature and art by the toil of her childhood. She will use and enjoy both of them in future as best she can; but she will never again drudge in their laboratories. You say that she might at least have married a gentleman. But the gentlemen she knows are either amateurs of the arts, having the egotism of professional artists without their ability, or they are men of pleasure, which means that they are dancers, tennis-players, butchers, and gamblers. I leave the nonentities out of the question. Now, in the eyes of a phoenix, a prize-fighter is a hero in comparison with a wretch who sets a leash of greyhounds upon a hare. Imagine, now, this poor phoenix meeting with a man who had never been guilty of self-analysis in his life--who complained when he was annoyed, and exulted when he was glad, like a child (and unlike a modern man)--who was honest and brave, strong and beautiful. You open your eyes, Lucian: you do not do justice to Cashel's good looks. He is twenty-five, and yet there is not a line in his face. It is neither thoughtful, nor poetic, nor wearied, nor doubting, nor old, nor self-conscious, as so many of his contemporaries' faces are--as mine perhaps is. The face of a pagan god, assured of eternal youth, and absolutely disqualified from comprehending 'Faust.' Do you understand a word of what I am saying, Lucian?"

"I must confess that I do not. Either you have lost your reason, or I have. I wish you had never taking to reading 'Faust.'"

"It is my fault. I began an explanation, and rambled off, womanlike, into praise of my lover. However, I will not attempt to complete my argument; for if you do not understand me from what I have already said, the further you follow the wider you will wander. The truth, in short, is this: I practically believe in the doctrine of heredity; and as my body is frail and my brain morbidly active, I think my impulse towards a man strong in body and untroubled in mind a trustworthy one. You can understand that; it is a plain proposition in eugenics. But if I tell you that I have chosen this common pugilist because, after seeing half the culture of Europe, I despaired of finding a better man, you will only tell me again that I have lost my reason."

"I know that you will do whatever you have made up your mind to do," said Lucian, desolately.

"And you will make the best of it, will you not?"

"The best or the worst of it does not rest with me. I can only accept it as inevitable."

"Not at all. You can make the worst of it by behaving distantly to Cashel; or the best of it by being friendly with him."

Lucian reddened and hesitated. She looked at him, mutely encouraging him to be generous.

"I had better tell you," he said. "I have seen him since--since--" Lydia nodded. "I mistook his object in coming into my room as he did, unannounced. In fact, he almost forced his way in. Some words arose between us. At last he taunted me beyond endurance, and offered me--characteristically--twenty pounds to strike him. And I am sorry to say that I did so."

"You did so! And what followed?"

"I should say rather that I meant to strike him; for he avoided me, or else I missed my aim. He only gave the money and went away, evidently with a high opinion of me. He left me with a very low one of myself."

"What! He did not retaliate!" exclaimed Lydia, recovering her color, which had fled. "And you STRUCK him!" she added.

"He did not," replied Lucian, passing by the reproach. "Probably he despised me too much."

"That is not fair, Lucian. He behaved very well--for a prize-fighter! Surely you do not grudge him his superiority in the very art you condemn him for professing."

"I was wrong, Lydia; but I grudged him you. I know I have acted hastily; and I will apologize to him. I wish matters had fallen out otherwise."

"They could not have done so; and I believe you will yet acknowledge that they have arranged themselves very well. And now that the phoenix is disposed of, I want to read you a letter I have received from Alice Goff, which throws quite a new light on her character. I have not seen her since June, and she seems to have gained three years' mental growth in the interim. Listen to this, for example."

And so the conversation turned upon Alice.

When Lucian returned to his chambers, he wrote the following note, which he posted to Cashel Byron before going to bed:

"Dear Sir,--I beg to enclose you a bank-note which you left here this evening. I feel bound to express my regret for what passed on that occasion, and to assure you that it proceeded from a misapprehension of your purpose in calling on me. The nervous disorder into which the severe mental application and late hours of the past session have thrown me must be my excuse. I hope to have the pleasure of meeting you again soon, and offering you personally my congratulations on your approaching marriage. "I am, dear sir, yours truly, "Lucian Webber."