

CHAPTER VI

EDINBURGH SOCIETY IN THE 'FIFTIES

SEVERAL years before this, we had moved to Edinburgh for the winter months. Portobello, as a place of residence, had become impossible, since the elder daughters of the house had now to be taken into society; and 11 Brighton Crescent had accordingly been sold on our going south after leaving Blackhall.

In what was then the furthest west part of the Scottish capital a new district had sprung up, and was looked upon with much favour. It has never, however, extended far, the tide of fashion having turned off at right angles, and Eton Terrace, where my father purchased a house in 1855, still remains pretty much as it was, though gardens have replaced what was then a somewhat bare grass slope, down to the "Water of Leith."

In some ways we children liked the change, but there was one drawback—the Dean Bridge.

The Dean Bridge, to some of us, was a nightmare. From its height it was—and we heard whispers of this in the household—a favourite resort of suicides; while we also had our secret terror of being either blown over ourselves, or seeing such a fate befall another, on every windy day.

This may sound absurd; but be it observed the reign of "King Crinoline" had begun, and with every gust that swept down the deep-cut valley below the bridge, the hoops flew about, and could with difficulty be prevented flying over the fair owners' heads.

What a thralldom that crinoline was ! Not a kitchen-maid cleaning the doorsteps, not a beggar in the street, but must have *something*, whatever it was, which bulged and swung, and was a source of supreme discomfort, but without which she would not have felt it decent to be abroad. Going to bathe within our grounds at Mull, with merely a *sortie-de-bain* over our bathing gowns, we nevertheless could not venture forth without the inevitable appendage. Once, being only twelve, I tried it, but felt so miserable and ashamed, that I had to run back to the house, and return inflated and happy.

My best frock stood out straight like a Japanese parasol. I used to wonder what the Fairchild family would have thought of it, when of poor Emily, dressed for the archery meeting by the ultra-fashionable Louisa, we learn that "her skirt was short, fully displaying her ankles," and the reader is expected to be as shocked as were her parents at such an apparition.

The strange thing was that, so far as my recollection serves me, neither old nor young resented the incubus which had been thrust upon us. We were wedged together in carriages, with hoops billowing up to the roof ; we scuttled crab-like through turnstiles ; we were unable to pass in gangways ; we endured every imaginable form of inconvenience, and heard ourselves derided for it by fathers, husbands, and brothers, and we boldly faced them, vowing that come what might, we would never, never give up our crinoline !

How we jeered at an old beau, a great admirer of our sex, who protested that all beauty of outline was now gone from a woman's figure. We thought him the silliest old fool imaginable. We devoutly trusted that *we* at least should never see "beauty of outline" thus exposed again—indeed I am sure that we fully believed it never would be so—and when it is remembered that for *twelve years* the infatuation lasted, it will be seen that there was something to be said for our conviction.

I have already alluded to the fruitless efforts of my grandmother, Mrs Fuller-Maitland, to oust the parasite from Park Place. Domestic autocrats of the old school who made similar attempts elsewhere were, I have heard, foiled in like manner ; while among gentlefolks who chose to make a stand on their own account, I can only recall two middle-aged sisters who had the hardihood to adhere to it.

These were the Misses Macdonnell of Glengarry, sisters of the last great chief of the name. They were not going to do what they did not choose for anybody. They disliked and despised the universal monstrosity ; and encumber themselves with it ? Not they !

As they had fine, tall figures, and carried themselves very erect, their appearance thereby might not have suffered—indeed they might have been looked upon as the only sane women among a crowd of lunatics, had their clothes been suitably cut and shaped ; but as they only went for these to a village seamstress, and as she was unaccustomed to making any sort of skirt to be worn minus crinoline, the effect was unfortunate.

The wide folds fell in about their heels ; they had some grand old tartan silks which were pleated like the philabeg of a kilt ; and entirely unaware of anything ludicrous or incongruous, they placidly wore them so that one in particular—the elder and taller of the two—had the effect of a fish walking on its tail.

And she danced, moreover, and danced beautifully—and a more coveted partner at certain houses was not in the room.

True, the round dances which now reign supreme were then in their infancy, and were very long in being acclimatised among the sober-minded. My sisters and I had to sit out whenever a waltz was next on the programme ; but as we always had a partner to sit with, and as we were borne up by a sense of virtue—or by a faculty for making the best of things—I expect we did not mind it very much.

Besides we knew we were only dancing at all by sufferance. My mother had inherited the old Puritan repugnance to this form of merrymaking, and had she had her way, never a ball, or even a "hop," as the phrase was, would any of her daughters have seen. But, luckily for us, my father, who had a great respect for tradition, scouted the idea. "The ladies of our family have *always* danced," quoth he; and put down his foot. When he put down his foot, which was not once in a blue moon, the foot remained down. We had no more to fear.

We went therefore to children's parties as other children did; and were beautifully attired, and had the hairdresser come in the afternoon to curl our hair. Little boys, as well as little girls, had their hair curled on occasion in those days, and I must own were greatly improved thereby. Many a plain little fellow would blossom out into quite a "mother's darling" under the magic tongs; and, beyond a doubt, it was not only *little* boys who took advantage of this whim on the part of Dame Fashion—certainly those who happened to have straight hair seemed to be few and far between. Hair was divided down the back above the nape of the neck, and brushed well out on each side. When I see an old Crimean veteran with his gray locks thus arranged, I think of how that venerable mode once became him, and am glad he clings to it still.

But if my parents were divided on the subject of dancing, they were at one as to operas and theatres. Scotch people, if they made any pretensions to piety, were dead against the stage fifty years ago.

One is at a loss to understand why this should have been so, seeing that they take first rank among the playgoers of to-day; but I suppose the very hold that music and acting have upon the Celtic mind now that it is open to receive it, was anticipated and dreaded by our forefathers. I recall that on one occasion when a season of opera was

being given in Edinburgh, and my parents were speaking with some severity of a desire on the part of some of us to hear for once *Semiramide* or *La Sonnambula*, that the same learned divine who had voted *The Bride of Lammermoor* first among Scott's novels, instead of joining in their animadversions, murmured gently, "They tell me that Salvini is worth hearing," and looked—yes, he did—as if he would fain have heard for himself.

Cards were also forbidden us. My mother had never touched one in her life ; my father had, and was very silent on the subject. Probably when in the army he had done as other young men did, and gambling stakes were high then as now.

One evening some of us younger ones had been out at a small party—not a large one, when dancing would have been *de rigueur*—and we had enjoyed hugely a game for which prizes were provided in the shape of satin boxes of bonbons. We showed our prizes and described the game—oh, it was such fun!—there were kings, and queens, and knaves, and aces ; and you sat at a round table, and the grown-ups took us in charge and watched our "hands," and showed us what to do. "Why, they've been playing cards!" exclaimed my father.

We were struck dumb. Did he then know this wonderful game ? At that time we had never heard of it ; but as he only looked amused, not angry, we pressed for an explanation. It was given kindly and wisely—and then we learnt the meaning of his whimsical air : "To think of the good T.'s playing cards," he said aside to my mother. "Well, well, different people have different ideas" ; and with this placid summary of the situation, it was dismissed.

It was not till "Bezique" came in many years afterwards that a revolution took place in the minds of austere people, who then began to discover that "The Devil's Book" might be a very innocent book in innocent hands ; and "Patience,"

which succeeded "Bezique," finally and for ever broke down the wall of prejudice.

Despite these restrictions and prohibitions, there was enough of gaiety and variety in Edinburgh life to make it very attractive to us all, old and young. There was a vast amount of entertaining; I remember thinking that our elders were never a night at home during the season, which lasted from the beginning of February to April. How the Church of England people managed during Lent, when most of the private balls and all the public ones took place, I leave it to others to say: we Presbyterians, having no such period in our calendars, had no scruples to contend with. In the daytime there were concerts, flower-shows, bazaars, and "The Exhibition." "The Exhibition" meant the Scottish Academy of Pictures, which was the regular accredited lounge every afternoon between four and six o'clock. Every regimental dandy from the Castle, or Piershill, or Leith Fort, every gay sailor from the man-of-war in the Forth, had his season ticket, and when tired of patrolling Princes Street, turned in to the "Exhibition," there to meet his dancing-partners of the past, and secure their promises for the future.

There were also good race-meetings within hail, of which, in our home, we only heard the echoes. Never being taken to one, however, we got along without; and I must add that whenever there were any amusements afoot of which my parents did approve, they neither grudged trouble nor expense in letting such of us as were of an age to do so take part in them. Thus, even when quite young, we heard Jenny Lind sing and Thalberg play, and attended many interesting and impressive functions—of which I recollect two in particular, because when Gladstone and Carlyle were severally installed Rectors of the University, I, though only a schoolgirl, was one of the privileged few who, having no

claim to being present, was so, and in a good seat, too. My mother vacated for me her own for the former ceremony, and I must relate how I was in luck's way for the latter.

It was a wet and stormy afternoon, and I was sitting by the drawing-room fire—for some reason or other permitted to be there—when in walked a figure familiar to every denizen of Auld Reekie. The snow-white locks and eagle eyes of Professor Blackie were before me.

Wrapped in his shepherd's plaid and supported by his stout stick, he had braved the weather for the purpose of bringing a coveted ticket for the installation, then the theme of every tongue. My mother, I told him, was unwell, and would be unable to profit by his kindness. He inquired about my sisters? There were only two at home, and they were already provided for.

He grunted dubiously; I eyed him hungrily. He said something; I answered—I forget what. Then all at once I found the ticket in my hand!

Perhaps I had shown, however innocently, something of the breathless hope which had sprung up within; perhaps the good professor thought that a young girl who could so hope and care was as worthy of the honour as an indifferent or callous dowager; or perhaps he was merely disinclined to tramp further afield when here was a recipient ready to his hand. At any rate, my rejoicing ears caught a gruff but kindly, "Well, well, child, have it for yourself then"—and never did heart leap higher.

There were but twenty ladies to be admitted to the Music Hall on the occasion. Twenty—and all the women of Edinburgh desirous of going!—some, no doubt, from real and intelligent interest in the proceedings, others because it was the event of the moment. Edinburgh being a very small place, there could never be more than one event paramount at a time, and Carlyle was at the height of his fame.

Well, we were early there, we three ; and whether disdainful glances were bestowed on such a poor little brat as myself or not, I did not care ; my whole soul was on the platform. But though I can still see the rugged face beneath its shock of grizzled hair, all I can remember now of an address of which at the time I lost not a word, is a single sentence. The speaker was surrounded by the first men in Scotland, and the judges in their robes formed an imposing portion of his platform audience. In his absent-minded manner, and homely accent of the broadest Scotch, Carlyle observed tranquilly, "In my young days, we thought a great deal about the law" (pronouncing it *la*) ; "but," with a gentle sigh, "nobody thinks anything about the *la noo*,"—whereat a great laugh responded from the hall below, and was heartily joined in by all the administrators of the *la* present.

About this time Dr Caird as a preacher and orator was also at his zenith. The power of his eloquence was such that crowds would assemble outside the churches wherever he was to preach—willing to wait any length of time for the doors to open ; and when one sees the queues of to-day at pit entrances of theatres, with their indomitable patience and sturdy resolution, one may take it that these same human beings would have exhibited like qualities outside a church door (at any rate in Scotland) fifty years ago.

On one occasion when Caird preached at St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, the galleries sank three inches, while many stood throughout the service on the backs of the pews, holding on by the lamp-posts. We had been at the morning service—this being in the afternoon ; and rather than lose our seats, we sat on, and ate buns by stealth, having brought them in our pockets. We younger ones were offered the chance of going home, but scorned the idea.

The crowds increased, and the police had to be called in to force a passage for the preacher himself. We could just see his small, black head moving slowly, very slowly, up the aisle—and then what a sermon!

It was on St Paul's announcement to the Athenians, "Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you"; and never perhaps has an audience listened to anything finer than the rush of thought gathered up into the noblest language, when a "point" was approached in any of this preacher's great oratorical outbursts.

And the fame of them spread to strange places. A railway porter, wheeling his truckload, was overheard, nudging one of his fellows with, "D'ye see yon wee man?"

"Ay," responded the other, staring, "Ay; A see him. Whae's he?"

"Caird; yon's Caird. Man, *he's a gran' wee deevil at the preachin'!*"

We did not know Caird personally; but his still more widely known contemporary, Norman Macleod, was often at our house, a welcome and honoured guest.

One trait I recall of him; brimful of humour, he could control it, of which the following is an instance.

It was then the custom in Scotland to ask a minister, if one were present, to say grace at dinner. One day my father, in his slow, emphatic, and most solemn tones, began his usual formula, not noticing the presence of his reverend guest—then was suddenly enlightened; and it is impossible to give an idea in writing of the ludicrousness of the scene. Try to imagine it. "For what we are about to receive—*Oh, Dr Macleod, I beg your pardon!*"

Amidst the stares and tittering of a tableful of giddy youngsters, Dr Macleod calmly lifted up his hand and "asked a blessing."

When he had finished he observed in a quiet aside,

“That was rather trying”—and changed the subject. We all felt impressed, and, I am sure, regarded the speaker with an increase of esteem ever after.

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Our relations, the Sinclairs, were naturally much to the front in our Edinburgh life. I have already mentioned their excellence as entertainers and organisers, and now that we had come to reside close by, as it were, we reaped a liberal benefit. Miss Catherine Sinclair, in particular, was never tired of making up parties for this thing and that, and we grew to recognise that the Sinclair carriage at the door meant something good, and probably some impromptu good. My parents, deaf to many another call of the world, could not refuse relations—and thus many a time even we young ones were sent flying to make ready to accompany our kind aunt, who had bethought herself of some gay scheme on the spur of the moment. You may be sure we went in double-quick time.

Aunt Catherine’s “Ulbster Hall Lectures” were also arranged about this time. They were by invitation, and were very smart affairs. No one would have thought of giving a party on the same evening, if they were in the set likely to be asked, and—strange as it may seem—young men and girls were as pleased as their elders to be present.

There were all sorts and conditions of lecturers, and when it is remembered what an intellectual centre Edinburgh was once, it will be readily understood that it was easy for a personage like my aunt to pick and choose, and provide the best of fare for her guests.

Though the Ulbster Hall—which she secured and named after her family designation—was small for a lecture-room, it was large for an evening party, and the lectures were brief, and the party stayed on, and there was supper

in an adjoining room (I also remember that trays of "negus" and "hot jelly" went round beforehand), so that altogether it was very pleasant; and when it came to my father's turn to give an account of Highland sport, and all his family had to be present, we young ones were in the seventh heaven. On that solitary evening did it fall to my lot to attend an Ulbster Hall lecture, for they only lasted a couple of winters (I think), and I was, of course, too young for anything of the kind, unless there were a special reason for making an exception to the rule.

Edinburgh society was not provincial in the 'fifties. There were family mansions, belonging to the best blood in Scotland, regularly opened for the season; while the surrounding country was so thickly peopled that at all the leading social gatherings there was an appreciable infusion of country-house parties.

These outside neighbours entertained in their turn, and kept the ball going; and as my mother occasionally permitted us younger ones to accompany her to make calls of ceremony where they were due, we grew to know and love such places as Hopetoun, Dalmeny, and Dreghorn, among many others. Nowhere are there more delightful and reposeful homes than those in the Lothians, with their large, well-cultivated gardens, shady avenues, and views of rich, fertile landscapes on every side.

Next door to ourselves in Eton Terrace was a family from the north, and, as we had made their acquaintance there, we saw a good deal of the young ones, who were our contemporaries. There was one little boy who did not care much for games and pastimes, but whose pencil or paintbrush was rarely out of his hand.

We used to get him to take portraits of our pets, and were such ardent admirers of his prowess that one day he produced and presented to me—(or rather, to be strictly

truthful, bargained it for a plate of toffee)—a picture of a kestrel hawk sitting on a bough, with which I flew to my father. He, after examining it carefully, and with corresponding appreciation, wound up his remarks with, "The thing is—it's *so true to Nature—so exactly true to Nature,*" and permitted the little picture to hang in his own collection of bird and beast portraiture. When I see a crowd assembled before the later productions of that distinguished A.R.A., Mr Joseph Farquharson, I fancy I hear a voice from the past again exclaiming, "So true to Nature!" The lonely heron rising from the sea would surely have drawn forth his old friend's note of praise.

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One more reminiscence of Edinburgh in bygone days. Two caustic Lords of Session—both of whom were well known to us—had had an argument and separated in heat, neither being able to prove his point.

The question, however, speedily solved itself, and Lords D. and Y. spied each other across the street soon after. The former halted, perhaps a shade more readily than the latter, and, shaking his stick in triumph, bellowed at the pitch of his voice, "Aha, Lord Y., ye see I was right. Lord Y., I say, ye see I was right."

"Humph," growled Lord Y., unable to deny it, then hurried on, firing this Parthian shot over his shoulder—"Well, Lord D., ye may be *sometimes* right, but ye're *always* disagreeable."

The retort—well deserved—soon passed into a household word among us; and I have often thought that if those people who pride themselves on being "right," at whatever cost to their opponents, could understand how the man who thus feels is "*always*" disagreeable, perhaps he would be less loth to proclaim every petty advantage.