

On staying at an Hotel with a Celebrated Actress

I

THIS was at Turin. I had strolled slowly back to the hotel about half-past eleven, and was glancing at some time-table or other hung up on the staircase, when a lady passed me very quietly going to her room. She was quite alone, without even a maid; and the servants of the hotel remained unmoved at her passage. Hardly had she gone by than the manager of the hotel, coming in an opposite direction, stopped to speak to me. Had I observed the lady? That was Mme X, who was giving a series of representations at the theatre. Had I not noticed her name on the board in the hall where the names of the travellers were written? Not even. That was curious; however, she was staying in the hotel, in fact, she had the very next room to mine. And the manager proceeded to talk enthusiastically about the great national actress. He knew Europe, he said; he knew the Paris theatres; well, there was no one to touch her in Paris or elsewhere. She had the strength and fire of Mme Bernhardt; the diction and subtlety of Mme Moreno. And with all that she was so quiet, so unpretentious, so charitable; she had no money, she gave it all away. Her own needs were very slight. He went on to lament that she chose so often such bad plays, and that the company of players who travelled with her was always inferior.

"Those players, have you them," said I, "staying here too?"

Ah, no, not them. Actors, as a rule, didn't come to his hotel. But Mme X was so simple and so quiet—yes, so quiet.

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

II

AFTER that, when I got up to my room, the room next to Mme X, I confess it, my mind was in what you may call a *tourbillon*. Notions which I had affected for years, which I had grown to accept without question, had just been crumbled to ashes. An obscure citizen, pursuing my daily round far from the contact of artists of any kind, whose names I was used to read with a certain awe in the newspapers, I had, like other plain citizens, formed

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

notions of a violent, brilliant, erratic life which artists and such enjoyed, and of which the plain citizen was deprived. The plain citizen sometimes amuses his stray hours by picturing the feverish delights of this life of the artist, with more or less success as his imagination is strong or weak. When his imagination is fatigued and can no more, he calls upon novels and romances to continue the vision. For myself, at any rate, I freely acknowledge that such notions as I had formed of all this kind of thing had been gleaned in the field of romance, from novels in which actresses and painters and musicians and poets figured in an endless and bewildering display of lights and flowers and supper-parties, in the homage of princes and the tributes of genius, laughter, rapture, love, a symphony of prodigality and adulation. Yes; but here was an actress, and of the most celebrated, returning even like myself, the plain citizen, by herself to her hotel a few minutes after the last act. And heaven knows it was not to a revel she was returning; I had the room next to hers, and I constated in great perplexity that there was no popping of champagne corks, no smell of flowers and cigarettes, no wit, no laughter, no little supper going on, no anything. Here was an accident to strike chill upon the most incurably romantic. Why was there no talk, no bustle, all the insolent noise in the wake of a *prima donna* who has taken the possession of an hotel? Why were not the princes and journalists crowding the stairs? Instead of all that, on the other side of the wall a tired woman was in the common-place situation of making up her mind to go to bed in the common-place room of an hotel, with the same disgust, the same common-place boredom as I was on mine. That was all. But, since this was the sad reality, unsealing painfully my long abused sight, how about the novelists with whom I had mewed my youth? How about Balzac and a hundred others? How, above all, about Ouida?

III

You will realize without difficulty that after this sudden crash among the opinions of a lifetime I had little disposition to sleep, and lying awake in the darkness I fell to thinking of the works of this romancer, so very good, so excellent even in some respects,

so shockingly bad in others—and I say shockingly, because I mean strictly that their badness is of the kind which does give you actually a shock. An hotel, to be sure, was no such inappropriate place to meditate upon the novels of Ouida, for her books have all the fever and restlessness of an hotel; that is, of one of those big hotels in big cities where princes and “prominent actresses” and tenors descend; ironically enough one of those developments of modern life which the authoress herself whenever she gets a chance spares no pains to belabour. One has heard that in the years between 1880 and 1890 Ouida was considered immoral, or rather what was then called in the jargon of the period “fast”: it is hardly conceivable: one finds on the contrary that her propensity is to preach, one finds even that she preaches too much. But since such an appreciation of Ouida undoubtedly at one time prevailed, the seed of it must be looked for in the constant suggestion her characters, male and female, manage to give of living imperturbably in the sight of the public. It is certain that the author wishes nothing less than to have her characters bring about this suggestion, but the suggestion is nevertheless conveyed in spite of her; even as a man or woman may go into a company with their minds made up to produce one kind of effect, and actually produce quite another. Of course, Ouida constantly gives us the interior, the domestic hearth, the private house; but the private house somehow or other takes the air, as it has the proportions, of some gigantic palace hotel in London, Paris, or New York. And this leads me to point out that Ouida was the first English novelist really to think in terms of nations. Before her the English novelists had dodged between town and country, with an occasional lapse into France (for a crime), or into Italy (for a consumption); but Ouida does not mind shifting the scenes in the same book from Buda-Pesth to Rome, from Rome to St Petersburg, from Petersburg to Paris, from Paris to Vienna, from Vienna to Hyde Park with an amazing dexterity, and what is more, manages to give a fair impression of each of these cities. And that is why I will permit myself to call her the novelist of the “Grands Express Européens.”

And to the foregoing let it be added, by way of making clear why the young ladies of the 'eighties used to shove her under the sofa when mamma came into the room, that she de-

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

liberately, and even defiantly, makes her characters exotic; and they must have seemed indecently exotic to a generation which read Anthony Trollope. Certainly I remember her characters presented as English, her guardsmen and the rest—who could forget them?—but they are the work of a fervent imagination working from exteriors; English people of that kind never grew in Devon or Yorkshire. On the other hand, she willingly makes her heroes and heroines Roumanian, Polish, Magyar—in a word, of those remoter nationalities the inhabitants of which the Parisians and English, when they find them out of their native land, are always ready to condemn, till they have blinding proof of the contrary, as *rastaquouères* and adventurers. From such nationalities Ouida often chooses her characters, and gives them, very properly, pedigrees as long and longer than the longest in the English House of Lords. But Ouida writes novels in English for the English, and this kind of thing, when she began it, was a slap in the face for English provinciality, which like all provincialities in all lands worships its own aristocracy, but can hardly be got to believe that there is any aristocracy at all anywhere else.

But here I must not omit to remark that, while we find the characters labelled Roumanian, or Hungarian, or Russian, or French, or English, yet if anybody should turn to the novels of Ouida to gain some knowledge of the peculiarities of any of these peoples he would find himself at a loss. The truth is, these characters are said to be this or that pretty much in the same way as a child playing with his lead soldiers calls the general with the blue coat French, and the general with the red coat English; but they have all a family likeness which denotes a common origin. And in fact their native country is nowhere else than Ouida's writing desk. Now and then, it is true, in her charming peasant stories, we get a sensation of reality, we feel that certain characters and scenes could have arisen just in Italy, as she says, and not in some other land quite as well; but in her peasant stories she is often the tale teller; in her novels of the aristocracy and the high life she is the romancer. Now, the abiding trait left by the characters which figure in these last is their unreality. I put aside the scented cigars and gigantic feats of strength which have been the jest of the facile times out of mind and which have prevented

this great writer from being considered as seriously as she deserves. This sense of unreality which I experience when her characters face me is not engendered by superficial absurdities; it arises from the perception that not one of her characters is sympathetic, that most of them are, on the contrary, positively antipathetic, people against whom we should be rather glad to see the worst wiles of the villain succeed. To say that we should be rather glad, and not indifferent, is of course a proof that these characters, if they fail to give conviction of genuineness, of being what they set up to be, have at least a very vigorous life. That they fail to rouse our sympathies, springs, I think, from the fact that we never find them in repose, never, so to speak, with the paint off. This seems a hard saying when one has almost a physical sense sometimes of the pains the author takes to throw about her characters an air of aristocratic repose, above all. But just as people in one of those immense Palace hotels I have spoken of can never feel quite easy, are always more or less in public, are always conscious of the corridor, are always guarding against undesirable approaches, so it is with these characters. These patricians who are always so afraid of not being patrician enough, these ladies always haughty and on their dignity, or condescending with so profound a sense of condescension, these men and women always thinking of their "caste," and talking about it, and supercilious and insolent to those who are not of the same—no, they are not convincing. All this, when you think of it, is not rationally in the habits of people of great and assured position; that generally induces longanimity and a certain indifference to the details of family breeding. Nervous aggressiveness and susceptibility come rather from the consciousness of inferiority and powerlessness, which induces a man, through a sort of instinct of self-preservation, to impose himself, and to intimidate, let us say, in advance men whom he suspects are inclined to be villainous, knavish, disobliging, violent, and against whom he knows he would have no advantage whatever if it really came to a tussle. I do not presume to rest on my own experience in so delicate a matter, but (to speak in a Thackerayan manner on a Thackerayan subject) little Jones, who married Lord Bailiffrest's younger daughter, and who is sometimes willing to impart to me his stores of authentic information when he has a spare hour and

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

no one better to talk to—well, little Jones tells me that the “haughty beauties” old Smith and I gaze on with such awe as they loll in their carriages on a June afternoon in Piccadilly, are not really thinking of their grandeur (as Smith and I from our readings suppose), and engaged in despising the likes of us; but simply of their row with their aunt, or of the dentist to-morrow, or even whether their lunch disagreed with them, or of something equally prosaic. And little Jones adds that when Smith and I stand in our muddy clothes on a rainy night waiting for a 'bus, and we are suddenly gratified by the sight of a young dandy driving to the court ball, the young dandy is not really wondering (as Smith and I in our humility imagine) if we miserable rascals of plebeians are admiring him sufficiently, and thinking that he would like to throw us a handful of pence to scramble for—no, says Jones, he is not thinking of anything at all like that; he is not even thinking of his own importance, and that it is a bore to go to the court ball; if he is thinking of anything, says Jones, besides the weather, it is about whom he will meet, and whether the rooms will be hot—which, when you come to think of it, is pretty much what goes through the head of old Smith and myself when the Parkinsons give a little dance in Victoria Terrace, and we are lucky enough to be invited. Now, it is not that Ouida has gone wrong about these great matters with the wrongness of the London Journal novelettist; Ouida's wrongness is the defect of a phantasmagoric brain. Here we have a case of the romantic temperament in extremes: a woman of genius with an extraordinary gift of expression, who nevertheless finds it impossible to express precisely what she sees; who confounds reality with her own visions, and who perhaps deliberately prefers her visions.

From the same defect of mind proceed many of the incongruities her works offer to the critical reader. For instance, that she loves and pities animals and all gentle and helpless things there is no doubt: she has exposed her convictions on this subject in a thousand places with amazing force and vivacity. And yet in her romances the horses seem to be always galloping. In one of her books, the heroine, who lives in Austria, has to go to Paris for ten or fifteen days in mid-winter; and she does not hesitate to drag her horses, with the rest of her packages, because, as she puts it, she loves her horses, and always likes to have some of

them with her. Ouida is so occupied with the loftiness of this notion, that she does not pause to consider the equivocal kindness of treating horses like lap-dogs, and that when one realizes the feelings of the wretched horses dragged over a railway in winter-time, hundreds of miles in this direction, and then hundreds of miles in that, with an interval of fifteen days on the asphalt, the heroine's generous impulse shades off into cruelty and brutal ostentation. In the same way, when it comes to those sublime actions of her heroes and heroines, in which so often the ridiculous has at least an equal part, she is either constitutionally unable to distinguish the ridiculous, or has trained herself to ignore it. So much is this the case, that I have often wondered, while reading some of her scenes, if, when she was writing them, she was really serious, and not after all trying to wake up the rector's daughters and other young women in provincial towns. But having deeply pondered, I have come to the conclusion that Ouida is never laughing at herself, or indeed at any one else. Like some other great romancers, like Victor Hugo for example, that part of the brain which enables some to perceive the incongruous is lacking in her organization. She does indeed provide characters intended to be humorous, but their humour does not arise out of any humorous situation; they are like the futile and dreary jesters introduced to lend relief to a sombre tragedy. But we may remind ourselves that in the equipment of the romancer (as distinct from the novelist) humour is but an awkward weapon, and even useless and dangerous. For humour sterilizes the *beau geste*, and the romance as a rule proceeds by the *beau geste* without reference to logic; it would defy the ingenuity of Edgar Allan Poe himself to foretell the conclusion from the premises. Let the situation be however ravelled, and the *beau geste*, absurd, improbable to impossibility, arrives in due season to straighten it out. Ouida is the helpless slave of the *beau geste*, as much so, let us say, as Barbey d'Aureville, of whom she reminds the reader in a thousand ways at every turn.

And have I not had myself (thought I, turning in bed) proof and to spare this very night of the bewildering fashion in which this romancer ignores or differs from reality? Was it not among her volumes that I found elaborate imaginations of triumph at the opera, of countesses who conquered Paris by their beauty, of

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

tensors who had all Paris at their feet? 'Tis true that in the sober reality I had seen once or twice before now what were considered triumphs at the opera, and they proved to be rather mixed: some enthusiasts contending to remain and applaud after the last act, against the majority struggling to go out and get their wraps. 'Tis true I had never seen Paris at anybody's feet, and didn't much expect to, least of all at an artist's feet; since the number of people in a position to enjoy the work of a singer, or a painter, or a dramatist is necessarily limited, and the thousands of men and women outside that zone know little about the artist and care less. 'Tis true I had perceived that if one is inside a group or coterie one is prone to fancy that a whole city is stirred by a gesture which really affects only one's immediate surroundings; whereas if one is outside of all the groups one is forced to take account of the relatively slight carrying power of all artistic fame, of all fame of any kind except that of the sworder and the demagogue. Yes, these things I had perceived, but I had perceived them through a haze: though they were real, they had neither the vividness nor concreteness of Ouida's visions, and by consequence it was in Ouida's conditions that I anticipated the next encounter of real life. It needed something as strong and coloured in an opposite sense as Ouida's visions to shake my faith in them; and so my faith remained unshaken till the night I had the room next to a celebrated actress.

But, after all, this very exaggeration of Ouida is what won for her at the beginning her popularity—nay, her notoriety with a certain class of readers. It is plain that most novel readers strongly object to read constantly of great wealth and fame and state, unless these are, now and then at all events, more or less brought down to the terms of our ordinary life; that is to say, unless the reader is offered a situation and conditions in which he can without too much outrage to his common sense imagine himself; unless the governess has at least a chance of marrying the lord, and the young doctor the countess. Certainly the average English reader likes to see on the stage and in the novel the aristocracy strut, but on condition that they strut within a boundary where he can keep in touch with them. If he hears of nothing but the Duke with his three houses, and his Park, and his haughty Duchess who despises the middle classes, he can indeed be illuded,

he can still imagine the situation, and just because he can imagine it he gets irritated in the long run.

But now, call the Duke a Hungarian Prince; make his Park run five hundred miles in every direction; make him have so many palaces that when he passes one on a journey he has to be reminded that he owns it; make him throw crown pieces in situations where the ordinary novelist's hero would throw pence, and where a man in real life would throw nothing; don't stick to say that a Marquess, an amateur painter, can paint like a Venetian master, and play the piano like a virtuoso, all of which he has picked up in the odds and ends of hours left on his hands by his social duties, his flirting, his equestrianism, his hunting and shooting; in a word, violate probability till you verge the impossible, and then the reader is swept beyond his wildest calculations and imaginations, and he has no more notion of equalling, far less of envying, such a hero than he has of equalling or envying an angel in heaven.

Well, but this is the Ouida man-character, hero or villain, at his deadliest; this is he who brought about the big sales and startled the reader of the 'eighties, and shed upon the name of Ouida a terrific glare of wickedness, for his morals were always lax. This is he, this face fastened to a moustache, who with his companions, the second-empire actress and the impavid countess, was fought for over the counters at Mudie's, and studied and loved and wept over in the country houses and country towns by thousands of readers who never caught a glimpse of the reflection, and dignity, and power, and a thousand other qualities which are to be found in each of Ouida's works—and certainly if such qualities were not to be found there I would not be giving myself the trouble to think of her now. This indiscriminate part of the public has at present, I think, fallen away from Ouida: it has taken to something cruder. For Ouida, sprung from Victor Hugo and Disraeli, cannot escape being the ancestor of Mr Hall Caine and Miss Marie Corelli. After all, it is hard to be held responsible for the fantasies of our descendants. Flaubert and Edgar Allan Poe and Dickens are responsible for more people than it is pleasant to think of. And it is well to remember that Ouida herself, however popular she may have been, never bent to any concessions or vulgarities to gain or maintain her popularity: it is against her principles that

*ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS*

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

the governess should marry the lord, and the governess in fact does not. From this it would appear that the main difference, the all-important difference between Ouida and many of her imitators is that Ouida has decidedly character, the others only caprice.

But whatever else her imitators have taken from her, they have never been able to catch her grand manner. Her teaching is always noble. In her essays, perverse and wrong-headed as some of her opinions may be, she is, as in her novels, always on the side of all the superiorities. With a vehemence and exaltation almost equal to Ruskin's, who is her master in ethics and much else, she throws into relief mercy, honour, loyalty, a noble pride and an equally noble obedience, a pity for the dumb things and for the outcast—all that on the one side; and on the other, her hatred of modern rush, advertisement, noise, scurrility. Again, like Ruskin, she is not ashamed to be indignant, eloquent, passionate; but she never descends to those miserable sneers whereof the object is to make honest, plain people uncomfortable about things which they have been doing for years, and which they have never suspected to be absurd or vulgar till they are told so by some he or she author who has not an inch less of folly and vanity, not an ounce more of competence and sense than the least of his readers, who has nothing at all in fact but pretention and effrontery enough to deal out little flicks of a sterilized irony with a superior snigger. Her heroes and heroines, as we have seen, are often unreal, sometimes even absurd, but they are never tricky, or mean, or ignoble. There is nothing paltry, nothing of the parish about them, as I am afraid there is about many of the heroes and heroines of authors who think themselves infinitely superior to Ouida, and indulge in a little discreet laugh at her expense.

Her style, though it is full of carelessnesses, though at times it even gives us the impression of a foreigner struggling with the language, of sentences beaten out with the dictionary, though it is often turgid and overloaded, often written for effect, often stained by what is called the "purple patch," nevertheless, like Ruskin's, it often rises into quite beautiful severity and strength when she is profoundly moved. For acuteness of sensation, and for a power to render that in words, she seems to me unequalled in our day. There is a description, to choose among a hundred, in one of her less good novels, in "Idalia," of a man bound and tortured under a burning

sun, which is so vivid, so poignant—in a word, so felt, that it becomes almost too painful to read. It is by such qualities that she takes her place among the great novelists, that she is, in fact, besides Mr Meredith and Mr Hardy, the only great novelist who has survived from the nineteenth century into this. Of course, if a man be disposed to fly into a rage at every wild or petulant assertion he finds in a book, he had better leave Ouida alone: she will too often give him cause. This is exactly one of the points in which she resembles Victor Hugo; like Victor Hugo, with a thousand faults that exasperate, that cry to heaven, she remains a great artist. Her books with all their faults live with us; we grow fond of them: a novel of Ouida's is not finished when the last page has been read. As Carlyle observed, with any work of real abiding excellence the first glance is the least favourable. Our wits and laughers have laughed their fill at Ouida; all of us have been at times impatient with her; but when all that has done its worst her work still remains great and imposing. Methinks I see in my mind a circus which gives a performance in the valley; the ring master cracks his whip, the acrobat wheels, the clown cuts his jokes; then evening falls, the tents are struck, the circus moves off, the laughers disperse, and the long shadows steal over the mountains majestic and unsullied as before.

And once again, she gives us, as no other, the sense of European movement. Whoever has stood at a railway station on a main line, and watching the great trains come for a few minutes to a halt with the sleeping-cars labelled Posen, Warsaw, Belgrade, has experienced the immense longing that comes on some of us at like moments for the far-off, the anywhere-but-here, the other end of Europe, must always be a devotee of the novelist of the Grands Express Européens. Like Balzac, she imposes her characters against our better judgement. Speaking for myself, I cannot see a lady of foreign appearance, wrapped in furs, driving through Paris on a sunny winter afternoon, but for me she becomes one of Ouida's exotic countesses or princesses, with a brute of a husband who squanders millions on a dancer, and loses thousands every night at cards, and by whom she is in danger of being immured in some remote castle amid the fastnesses of the Caucasus. Or has she just escaped, and moves terrified, pursued by her husband's myrmidons? Ah, if one could only be mingled in a stirring at-

ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS

*ON STAY-
ING AT AN
HOTEL
WITH A
CELE-
BRATED
ACTRESS*

tempt to set her free! Or again, a few hours later at the opera, that tenor who has just sung so beautifully, surely he will find a note from a duchess hid in a bouquet, and after reading it with languor will disdainfully go to supper with a lady of facile humour who has an impossible second-empire name, Casse-croûte, or Cochonette. And the celebrated actress—

IV

BUT at this point my meditations were interrupted by the opening of the door next to mine. At the same moment the clock of a neighbouring church struck one: I had thought that all the hotel was asleep and the lights out long ago. What (I said) if the revels have been proceeding all this time, silently but no less scarletly? What if Ouida and the romancers are in the right, after all? I was in no mood to be trifled with: this was a matter to be investigated at once: I got out of bed and opened the door. The lights were low in the passage, and half way down a figure in a white trailing kind of robe, a figure that looked somehow pathetic and lonely in the darkness, was moving with a book under her arm and a candle in her hand. At the sound of my door she turned, and I recognized the face. It was the celebrated actress going from her sitting-room to bed.

VINCENT O'SULLIVAN