

A Visit to Bath

It was the Helbourne family who, decorously plundering through life, set me on the right course of my own. I had been in their employ for some weeks before a trip to Bath was announced. I was a young girl of barely eighteen then, and though bright and generally good, I was romantic and prone to jealousy as young girls often are. And so, when one morning in May Mrs Helbourne shrilly rang forth: 'Girls, your father has seen sense! We are going to Bath for the season!' I was naturally excited. The delights of the City were all too discussed both upstairs and downstairs, and the new prospect of gowns, dancing and suitors was thrilling to me, the countrified daughter of a lady's maid, even if I would only experience them second-hand.

In the weeks before our departure, the women of the household fluttered and fretted like butterflies in jars. Ball dresses, riding habits and hats were bought, admired and promptly ruined by Mrs Helbourne, who rustled up and down the corridors bedecked in ribbon and lace and leaving behind a cloud of scent more appropriate for her daughters. The one aspect of the trip which passed unspoken and undisputed was its purpose — the procurement of a husband for any one of the Helbourne girls. It is only Cecilia about whom we need concern ourselves, however — charming, vapid Cecilia, on the verge of being ruined by her elder sisters Blanche and Emilia. As I enviously re-heeled her slippers and ironed her petticoats, she presented to me a warning of the danger of living only for luxury.

For, as the harried housekeeper conspiratorially informed me, Mr Helbourne (who remained in his study) could ill afford the footmen, let alone the pleasures of Bath society. This knowledge may have inspired more pity in me for the family's foolish attempts to uphold their façade of affluence and to pursue wealthier young men, had it not been for the toils I undertook and the waste I witnessed, each discarded piece of finery incurring resentment.

A few days in the apartments over a dressmaker's not five minutes from the Baths, were enough for the predatory Mrs Helbourne to set her sights on the prize. It came in the form of Nicholas Montmorency, a slightly brainless but courteous youth, well dressed and red haired, who had taken a liking to Cecilia at a tea dance. Needless to say, the next morning's visits brought forth a wealth of information concerning the young man. Though quiet, he had proven he could dance very satisfactorily so that, by the end of the day, it was common knowledge to everyone in the household that he was from a good family, that he had a titled cousin and that he was most partial to a cherry pie of a Sunday afternoon.

Thus began the chase. Cecilia and Mr Montmorency seemed to meet, of course as luck would have it, every other day. He and his mother were invited to partake of afternoon tea where he engaged Cecilia in unselfish conversation whilst each mother did her best to ascertain the extent of the other's fortune. A cherry pie was consumed.

Frequent visits were made to the Pump Room, the Park, and the Baths, and as the unfortunate boy fell prey to Cecilia's sloping shoulders and brown curls, my idyllic notion of courtship disappeared. Each night, dresses were taken in and restyled, shoes passed around the sisters and dishes slaved over in the kitchen, in order that the next might pass pleasantly and that the Helbournes might keep pace with the rest of their society acquaintances. Cecilia, though obviously taken by Montmorency's manners and attentions, seemed more infatuated with his money than with him. She was, I think, an essentially pleasant girl, but her sisters encouraged vacuous thought and cunning in her. She began to trot out such affected little turns of phrase as 'I care not a jot for London, Bath is by far more amusing,' or 'Such mischief, Mr Montmorency! I declare I shall not pay you a bit of the attention you crave for the rest of the evening!' (proceeding to chatter by his side until midnight)

The girls would dance into the early hours, and return home all the more discontented with their state of affairs, lamenting the vast superiority of Miss Fairley's gown or the Hardings' phaeton to their own. The euphoria would last long enough, however, to leave room in them for spite, which would frequently rear its sly face in my direction. And so, although the family's entire time in Bath had been focused towards the moment, I was surprised when a proposal came at the end of the season. After seeing the foolish exploits of my employers, even after helping them, I still thought, in my young heart, that in the end they would fail, that their efforts would be foiled.

I wonder now how my own life would have unfolded had my ideals remained so completely trampled. As it transpired, they were only to be restored a few months later. The family returned home in July, and I stayed with them until one day a letter came from Cecilia. The cook gleefully regaled its contents after finding it hurriedly crumpled on the breakfast table. It read '...Mama, things are not as you promised, Nicholas will insist that Brighton is out of the question this Easter. Since his father died we have not come into any money, as you so often said, but instead have acquired what Nicholas refers to as accumulating mortgages. He asked me yesterday if we couldn't borrow from father, and seemed astonished to learn that you are in much the same position. We haven't had a single ball...' and more of the same.

I am slightly ashamed to admit that the consequences of the Helbourne's conniving set me upon the right way, but they did. I ceased yearning for what I could not have, as I witnessed the outcome of selfishness and frivolity. My life has been simple, but quietly rewarding. I married my sweetheart, a poor but hard-working groom, at Martinmas, and will relish our uncomplicated, trusting life in his master's household, far from the empty pleasures I knew with the Helbournes.