

THE HUMAN INTEREST OF BUXTON

BY W. D. HOWELLS

THE customs inspector at Liverpool, vaguely but politely pawing over the contents of our trunks, could not find words warm enough in praise of our purpose of going to Buxton for a brace. Dropping an aspirate here and there among the clothes and picking it out to put it on in the wrong place, he said that there was nothing like Buxton for recovering from the languor of a sea voyage, and it was so near to Liverpool that we were in a manner already there. In a manner we were, after two or three hours' run or climb, with quite as many changes and waits at invigorating way-stations, rising one above another into the highest air in England. But the genius of English railroad travel is, after comfort, change, and you will do well not to repine at this, for you will not be able to help it, and it is so much eased by the porters at the smallest stations, with their promptness in seizing your hand-baggage and their instinctive recognition of your trunks among the contents of the luggage-van, that you had better resign yourself uncomplainingly to the charm of the scenery till the train, which is to carry you half an hour farther, arrives to fulfil its mission. If you add birds singing wildly at one of the stops, and dusty-white men drawing the lime-kilns at another, you have inducements to resignation which the most rebellious spirit can scarcely resist.

I

It was, perhaps, the mildest, the most amiable day of a singularly sullen English summer, and after we had left all imaginable junctions behind we arrived at Buxton in the glowing expectation of a long term of settled weather. We were in such sympathy with the sunshine that we asked to have it in our rooms at the agreeable hotel which we found "standing in its own grounds," as hotels like to do in Eng-

land, with wide gardens and groves about it; and the manageress yielded us such rooms as we desired with a readiness in which I now realize that we might have suspected something ironical. But we did not; we pinned our faith to every ray of that sunshine, and as it waned with the waning afternoon we bade it farewell in the confident belief of seeing it the next morning.

Meanwhile we had happened upon the most psychological moment of the whole Buxton year. It was the time of dressing the wells, which in an older dispensation would so probably have been blessing them, but which now consisted of garlanding the different health-giving founts with flowers, and matting the gables of the more enthusiastic shops, and adorning the fronts of the public buildings with natural or artificial blossoms. Just what sort of health the founts gave I will not make sure, but I will say it was relief from rheumatism or uric acid in some form, for uric acid is a thing which so pervades the English system that specifics for it are found wherever medicinal springs burst from English ground. Springs, however, you must not say: wells is the word, and somehow a much more engaging word with an old-time flavor and a resonance from early piety that echoes in many a holy well and well of this saint or that, of one sex or the other, insomuch that the surly Puritans of the Commonwealth forbade the sick to resort to them at Buxton, holding it a superstitious yielding to popish idolatry.

But the dressing of the wells has survived the past rigor, and we proposed to pass the next day visiting them, and the day after in going to Haddon Hall, which is as hard by as any place in England is to any other, and is sacred to the simple exploit of Dorothy Vernon in eloping with the young lord of Rutland five hundred years ago. That first silvern afternoon we would spend as the small change of golden guineas of days of sunshine to come; we would lavish it in loitering up and down the glowing streets; we would waste it in sitting on the benches in the own-grounds of the hotel and wishing, like Mrs. Allen at Bath, in "Northanger Abbey," that we "had a general acquaintance" among the outwardly repellent but no doubt inwardly hospitable English folk whom we saw coming and going on the neat paths or bowed over their novels in the portico. The warmth, the excessive splendor of the day, was so generally confessed that we found one clerical father and clerical daughter with-

drawn from the fervor in a covert of the garden so dense and dark that we shuddered in passing it; but they had saved themselves from sunstroke and were rapt in their respective romances.

II

The amiable afternoon waned quite to our minds in the fulfilment of such desultory impulses as followed one another and resulted in a pretty fair exploration of the town. Buxton must, of course, have some historical interest of its own, but our local guide-book did not vaunt its memories, and people who came to Buxton seeking the past always go to Haddon Hall for it. We should have done well to go our first afternoon when the sun shone into our carefully selected southern windows, but we gave it to the pleasant up-and-down-hill streets, the tasteful exteriors of the wells and baths, and especially that charming Crescent of Georgian architecture, softly saffron in the mellow light, which so agreeably expresses an elderly ideal of lodgings, and of delay for the cure of complaints not to be vulgarly hurried in convalescence. A yet older ideal is expressed in the neighboring hostelry to which modern sympathy may resort in compassion of that hapless Mary Stuart who sojourned there, in one of those many wanderings of hers which were always the ways to dusty death. Hard by this sojourn and in front of the more modern Crescent an upland park or open ground rises, and there is another public park on the river which carries off the waste argon, helium and radium of the wells. Besides these attractions, there are numbers of nice shops where ladies can buy almost anything they do not need between the paroxysms of their neuralgia, and there are several pretty tea-shops where on a Saturday people can drink tea enough to last them over Sunday; or had better do so, for in compliance with the universal English custom the places are fast locked on the Sabbath—you may inebriate, but not cheer yourself then. But, above all, there are in Buxton The Gardens with Open Spaces, with a Sylvan Park, with Sylvan Walks, with Recreation Grounds, with a Grotto, with Artificial Lakes and a Pavilion, where you may happen upon music when it is playing. It is a very pleasant pavilion when silent and is in the immediate neighborhood of a circular tea-kiosk of the most amiable temperament, with blooming young English maids serving the largest strawberries grown in England, which is really saying everything.

In those places and the like we vainly expected the morrow when we should motor through the sparkling air of Buxton to Haddon Hall and surprise Dorothy Vernon before she could send word she was not at the moment eloping. The air of Buxton, by the way, is "specifically lighter by reason of its altitude, and dryer and of more tonic property than elsewhere in the same latitude" (so I read in my local guide-book) and the rainfall, though heavy, "is one of the most important and beneficial factors of the climate, the air being washed, purified and freed from bacterial and other impurities." Through this thoroughly laundered atmosphere we were not surprised to find the sun trying to look in at our windows when we woke the next morning for that nine-o'clock breakfast which is the earliest that love or money can buy anywhere in England. But the weather was holding effects in reserve against us which we learned to know later of the weather-wiser. When the maid or the valet opens your curtains and you exult in the sunshine she or he says, "Yes, but too bright." "How can a morning be too bright?" you scoff to yourself, and you do not acquire modesty till experience confirms the precept that if a day in England opens cheerfully it will go on to gloom and close in tears. Far better it should dawn sadly amidst clouds and downpours, for then it cannot be worse, and there are chances that it may be better.

III

But the sun went down as radiantly on our first day as it rose on our second, and we confidently foregathered with our fellow guests after dinner in the lounge of the hotel for that entertainment which the summer hotel seldom fails of in England. This lounge was a sort of wide open space next the entrance, with the porter's booth and the manageress's office at one side and a very inadequate grate at the other, which people tried not to keep each other away from. Beyond stretched writing-rooms, yawned drawing-rooms frostily; a very noble stairway mounted from the lounge, but there was a lurking lift at one corner, kept secret by a uniformed boy who carried a key and locked and unlocked it on demand. Every night there was an entertainment in the lounge by strolling professionals; even Sunday night there was a concert. The concert was good, being mainly Welsh in the singing, but the entertainment was

truly deplorable; and the starting tear was the more compelled by the pity of having the head entertainer come round with a plate and gratefully receive whatever was dropped into it.

For shame and sorrow we paid what we thought would have been just gate money, and I dare say others did the same, but our hearts ached for the poor soul's humiliation, though he carried it off with a chipper ease and the queer gentlemanliness which seems the effect of the general civilization in England; his evening dress grieved one the more for him. But it was pleasant to have him speak to us in gratitude, for no one else spoke to us until the last night but one, when a kind lady had compassion on our isolation and took us into her friendly protection, so that we felt ourselves a part of society from that on. I cannot honestly say that it would have been different in America with the like hotel company or that I would myself have made up to two strangers under the circumstances. Perhaps the others were there for some ailment and were silent in question of the effect the free gases of the wells were having on their respective gout, rheumatism and neuralgia, and just how much argon, helium and radium were present in the waters. They might also have their doubts of the characteristic dryness of the Buxton air and the advantage of its great elevation above the sea. Even at a thousand feet the weather must have seemed very wet; and though the healing properties of the wells were known to the Romans, those Romans were without exception dead and could not be considered successful cases.

IV

In the morning the wisdom of the head porter decided us to abandon to the elements a day that had dawned so brightly and to take our chances in the town instead of venturing to Haddon Hall. The weather really had moments of relenting, and in one interval of the rain we saw the files of school children, who shared our courage, streaming down the street and making their way to the theater where they were to give the dances for the prizes offered. This was after the crowd, assembled on the hillside fronting the chief well and the Crescent, had scattered in despair of the promised dancing in the open there; but it is to be said of the theater that it was no damper or darker than the plain day, and that if the dances

(such as they are now reviving all over England from the times when England was merrier than now, in ignorance of the Lloyd-Georgian oppression of the poor dear lords, and nobody questioned their right to go untaxed in their respective thousands of acres) were given on a stage, instead of the grounds before the wells, they had some advantages there. I am sorry I cannot report the theater as thronged, but there was gate money classified in amount according to your rank in life or your depth of pocket, and that made the difference, perhaps. The place smelled of wet woollens, but the enthusiasm of some small dogs could not be quite repressed. One of them chewed upon the gloves of an American spectator; it was explained by its mistress that she had tried to leave it at home, but it would not be left. The audience was mostly children in charge of those self-sacrificing elders who take children to shows the world over; and when the dances were done (not too early done) we all, children and elders, trooped out and witnessed the distribution of large baskets of buns among the dancers. Every child was entitled to a bun; a bun of the sort that seems native to the island and not known elsewhere; slightly sweetened, thick, far round and speckled with not infrequent currants. Personally, I never ventured upon such a bun, but a middle-aged American who once did so told me that he was not hungry again for three weeks. I am not saying that buns are worse than pop-corn balls.

We ourselves were not really entitled to buns, and as we were rather faint from our pleasure, we hurried to a very cozy little tea-shop which we had noted in a neighboring street and had cups of that delicious tea which they know how to make only in England. But here we observed, as often before and afterwards, that a tea-shop is either overcrowded or empty and that the service superabounds or insuffices. The mistress of the place was very happy in her inability to meet the wants of her guests and smilingly left them standing till tables should be vacated, and then thirsting till earlier orders should be filled. It was all very kindly and simple, and the muffins, when they came, were as good as the tea and no one could complain. The next day was Sunday, and the tea-shop was fast shut against the public, which slaked its tea thirst we could not imagine where. I notice the same rule in the New York tea-shops, and it remains a universal mystery how people who raven for tea and

muffins on week-days are carried over the Sabbath with neither. It is, perhaps, a miracle.

V

That night we denied ourselves the entertainment in the lounge and went to the Fair which was to do its part, in the upper town, toward the festival of dressing the wells. It was an English Fair of those that follow holidays and anniversaries round the English year and purvey a simple joy to such as have pence or shillings to spend. There were streets of booths and tents lit, when the late twilight passed, with torches of smoky gasoline, and offering games and toys to the wanton desires of pleasure, or bargains in hardware, china, jewelry and haberdashery to adventurous thrift, with shrill cries of invitation from the showmen and showwomen. Every other booth or tent was for the joy of throwing things at Aunt Sallies and the masks of negroes, with prizes (preferably cocoanuts) for the successful marksmen; behind, the wagons were drawn up, and you heard between those clamors the soft deep breathing of horses and the muffled sound of their comfortable stamping. There were shows of several vaudeville types, some with a great outward splendor of gilded carving and some with the evanescent allure of clowns on the point of disappearing into the interior. There was, if my senses do not retroactively deceive me, a hiss and a smell of frying things, which were eaten from the fingers, and there were paper cones of American ice-cream, so called, which found acceptance with that amiable British public, though the mere sight of them sent the cold chills over the Americans who beheld them. There was no exhibition of fruits, or flowers, or live stock, or agricultural implements, such as take away the blame of the trotting-matches and balloon ascensions at our country fairs. But there were some serious attractions like character-reading by a sober-faced young man in a frock coat, from whom you learned to know yourself for a penny (or was it a tuppence?) and bore away a certificated detail of your qualities and the defects of them. Otherwise there was nothing but merry-making, with some palliation in the fact that nobody seemed to be made very merry, even by the merry-go-round. The fair folk seemed of another race from the town folk, and perhaps the free air and the open life breeds, under the

swarthy skins, a gipsy soul wanting to their patrons. Quite alien to both sorts was the aging Italian sibyl always to be found at public joys the world over with her fortune-telling love-birds. After having my character read I could not help having my fortune told, and when I pleaded in Italian for a favorable destiny the sibyl was so glad of the sound of her home speech in the well-washed air of Buxton, that she instructed her bird to fit me out with a fate that a far younger man might have envied.

Put into words, it does not sound a boisterous festivity, but it sufficed to amuse the crowd that traipsed and clumped round and round and to and fro, and remained there under the flare of the smoky lamps long after their kindly noise had followed us down into the lower town past the pavilion in the park where the musicians, despairing in the rain, were putting up their string and wind instruments and leaving their wide-spreading fan of empty chairs to welter through the wet night. Not that the night was altogether wet. It had rained so aimlessly, so absent-mindedly, at the Fair that nobody seemed to notice it; but it was an earnest of showers to come, which read the riddle of the manageress's almost eager willingness to give us sunny rooms at the hotel. If we paid more for that sunny exposure (I do not know that we did) we were the more deceived, as poor Desdemona says. Or is it Ophelia?

That was the only fault of the hotel, and the hotel was not to blame for it. Otherwise it was so good that I am sure it would have had sun for us if it could. It was, like other provincial hotels, kept on the American plan, the European plan being unknown in Europe except for very transient stays; that is, there was an inclusive rate coming to about three dollars a day. The meals were served in courses and were very good, and the servitors were those Germans who resort to England in order to learn the language and (as the more jingoistic natives believe) to spy out the strategic nakedness of the land and prepare the way for a German invasion. They are invariably willing and prompt, and we were sorry to have a middle-aged lady of military bearing rather scold the poor fellow whose ministrations we shared with her; she was the only English person whom I ever heard harsh with a domestic; ordinarily the thank-yous and the pleases superabound from the served to the serving and back.

VI

The next day being not only a Sunday, but a Sunday when we decided that it would be useless to go to Haddon Hall, which would be as fast shut as any tea-shop, we advised further with the head porter as to what we had better do. I do not know why a head porter should so often wear a red coat and a striped waistcoat with lustrous buttons or why these garments should lend him authority and compel faith in him, but they seem to do so. I myself would now think twice before trusting them, for I have sometimes found head porters of inferior judgment regarding routes and trains. Once a head porter in Liverpool sent us to Oxford by the London and Northwestern instead of the Great Western, with the result that we changed cars four times on the way, and at Oxford our conductor, with a little variation of uniform, degenerated into a porter and handled our baggage both large and small. I cannot make a like complaint of the head porter at Buxton; he remained of a pristine splendor to the last, and he advised us as well as we would let him concerning the drive we chose. We chose the drive to the Cat-and-Fiddle tavern mainly because the charge for it was lower than any other we could make out, and the air higher by some hundreds of feet than the air of Buxton, which is the highest in England. The charge was so much for the carriage and so much more for the driver, as at Great Malvern; and again I had to renounce my preference for a fixed rate in tips: the fee to the driver was about twice what I should have given if it had been left to my caprice. Still, I own that the principle is right, and the sum was not really bankrupting; if we could have had a little warmth of weather thrown in I should not now be murmuring. Even as it was, by muffling to the chin on a day which had not begun too bright for intervals between the rains, we contrived to enjoy the noble savagery of the moors to which we mounted.

Nothing surprises the New-Worldling more than this wildness which is so frequent in the Old World, where the hand of man might seem to have passed over every inch of the earth's surface. Here in the north of Derbyshire as in the south of Devonshire we traversed vast lonely wastes of moorland. The road trailed itself up and on and long before us as we climbed to the Cat-and-Fiddle, which at last grew a stony nubbin on the topmost reach, and lured us with a

mystic promise of interest which the reader must seek the fulfilment of for himself. Now and then we passed a huge *char-à-banc*, or omnibus, lumbering upward with its twelve or twenty passengers devoutly trusting in this promise. Now and then it was a pedestrian we passed and oftenest a woman, young and of gentle rank apparently, who kept the solitary road without fear and evidently without danger; now and then a bicyclist labored by or fell behind, walking his or her machine in the steep places. On every hand the great moorland drooped to the low horizon in one unchanging gloom of low scrub, mostly heather, I suppose, seamed by deep gulleys and scarred by the ineffectual fires that had been kindled to destroy it. The dull heavens clung close about it in clouds that meditated rain, and cold winds swept it in mid-June as if it had been in mid-November.

At last we stopped before the Cat-and-Fiddle, a plain two-story hostelry which bore a tablet on its front representing both these musical instruments, the hair of the one roughed backward by the blast and the strings of the other shrieking in the flaw. I say this for the dramatic effect; and perhaps I exaggerate, but one must do something to support the supposition that the Duke of Devonshire used to bring a cat and fiddle with him to help him make merry in his visits to an otherwise disconsolate inn. Besides the inn, there is an oblong tea-house of corrugated iron (much prized for temporary structures throughout England) on the summit, where the tourist may refresh himself under the shuddering roof. We would not enter either place, but straightway began our descent on the other side into the valley of what the guide-book calls "the infant Wye." It is a pretty valley when you climb down to it, but the way is by infrequent farms and past the furrowed flanks and humps of hopeless moorlands, where the heather, brown and blossomless at that season, gave the notion of the dense hides of monstrous pachyderms. There were gushes of foamy waters in some of the furrows, and where the heather gave way to hillside pasturage rough-coated cattle grazed. There were few figures of our own species to lend human interest to the scene, but when we got to the river's level it was cheerful enough with cottages and the gateways of statelier dwellings withdrawn into their favorite seclusion. One of these dwellings, indeed, stood close upon the highway, the owner clutching fast his narrow space of freehold

and refusing to yield it for any money to the great noble whose estate presses him close upon every side.

It was a tenant of this noble who sold us the hospitality of his cottage near by, in the form of tea and bread and butter and the society of some friendly hens which gathered the crumbs at our feet in the porch where we ate and drank. The cottager and his wife were friendly, too, and when their other guests were gone they let us look through the clean, homelike place. It was built for solid shelter with walls three feet thick in the older part, but more windows in the newer. The kitchen was fitted with a good range and dresser, and the whole house looked comfortable if not cheerful; the kind young pair managed to live, and at the rent they paid for their moderate acreage they will help the duke to live, too, now that the great nobles have been reduced to penury by having to pay their just share of the land tax. Near the cottage is a quaint stone bridge which looks conscious of being resorted to every summer by painters for purposes of landscape. One had come in a van, such as the English like to return to nature in, and had lived close to the bridge, as the van, which he left behind him, still attests. In the heart of the peaceful scene is a range of powder-mills, which we paid sixpence to pass on a private road; driving very gingerly, we got by them in safety and back to Buxton alive.

VII

That was the night we had in the lounge a concert, and one's heart was not wrung with pity of such humorous acting as we had the next night. What consoled even then was the admirable decorum of the English audience under the infliction of the head joker's jokes; when he came round, a smilingly and bowingly self-respectful figure, nobody withheld his dole. But it was awful to think, if some day the poor man should realize how dull he was, what would become of him. It would be possibly as if a writer of detective stories should come to a sense of where he was in the scale of being. The kind English tolerance spares all such; or is it an insular insensibility to all differences in the good or bad which is not a moral good or bad? So the English suffer the bread of the cottage loaf unrepiningly when they could have French bread, and endure a climate of every vicissitude except dry and warm, when in their empire they have every beautiful weather under the sun to choose from.

I continue to carp at the weather in Buxton, but if the truth must be told it was far better weather than we left at Boston the day we sailed ten days before, when we choked in the heat pushed seaward off the sweltering continent: a day following suddenly upon a June week of April cold. At least in Buxton you can get in out of the weather, but there was no escape from it in Boston. Yes, the English summer, as it is parceled out in days glum or gay from hour to hour, but always green and full of the perfume and color of flowers and sweet with the song of birds, is not so bad as I paint it, and I dare say the winter is even better; it cannot be worse.

As the next day woke raining, without even the delusory prelusive brightness, we decided finally to leave Dorothy Vernon to the chances of an elopement which we could not go to Haddon Hall all that way in the wet to countenance. Our baggage was hand-carted down a few rods from the hotel to the station by one of those German emissaries, a gentle youth who was very glad of my little German, but not too glad, because it helped retard the English he was trying to learn. He complained that the hotel service was so largely composed of his compatriots that he had no chance at the language of the country. We were sorry for him, but it showed how Providence watches over British interests under the very infestation of their enemies, whom it baffles not by the confusion of tongues, but by the hopeless unity of their speech.

The young porter seemed to understand an English shilling well enough and gratefully put our baggage into the van, where it instantly became luggage. The stations of the Midland Railway and the London and Northwestern lie side by side in Buxton and our train lay between them. It seemed as if it would go up to the metropolis either way we said, but as we had booked by the London and Northwestern the guard who looked at our tickets decided it had better go by that line.

W. D. HOWELLS.

“THE SONG-MAKERS”

BY MARY AUSTIN

THE talk had been going on for nearly an hour without affording me an occasion for saying anything, which was exceedingly tiresome.

“The fact is,” said the Professor, and the rest of the company agreed with him, “that the only place you can hear Wagner as he should be, is at Beyreuth.” The pines outside quivered at this announcement, and a bleary old sea fog came and peered through the panes at us. Suddenly the fire-log snapped asunder.

The red glow leaped into a three-inch point of flame. Instantly the fog caught it by reflection a rod outside and made of it a desert camp-fire spiring upward from the crossed ends of the back log. Dark against it by some superior sort of refraction from my mind I could see the dreaming face of my friend Tinnemaha, the Medicine-man.

What I thought the Professor had said was that the only place nowadays where you could see any genuine song-dancing is in Shoshone Land, and, out of the velvet desert dark beyond, Kern River Jim answered him.

“But in the old days,” said he, “right here in Sagharanite there was a Chisera who could sing the wind up out of the west with the rains behind it; and she could sing the rain away, too, when she had done with it; and you could no more be still when you heard her than the wind could, but you must get upon your feet and dance what she sang.”

“In Shoshone Land,” said Tinnemaha, “I remember a man who could dance the heart out of your bosom. He made a rattle of ram’s horn stopped with a round of mescal stem, and would keep time with it. He taught me to dance some of his songs for a bag of taboose, but I could never match with him, for the best of his singing was that he made it new for every occasion.”