

Cashel Byron's Profession

by

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Prologue

I

Moncrief House, Panley Common. Scholastic establishment for the sons of gentlemen, etc.

Panley Common, viewed from the back windows of Moncrief House, is a tract of grass, furze and rushes, stretching away to the western horizon.

One wet spring afternoon the sky was full of broken clouds, and the common was swept by their shadows, between which patches of green and yellow gorse were bright in the broken sunlight. The hills to the northward were obscured by a heavy shower, traces of which were drying off the slates of the school, a square white building, formerly a gentleman's country-house. In front of it was a well-kept lawn with a few clipped holly-trees. At the rear, a quarter of an acre of land was enclosed for the use of the boys. Strollers on the common could hear, at certain hours, a hubbub of voices and racing footsteps from within the boundary wall. Sometimes, when the strollers were boys themselves, they climbed to the coping, and saw on the other side a piece of common trampled bare and brown, with a few square yards of concrete, so worn into hollows as to be unfit for its original use as a ball-alley. Also a long shed, a pump, a door defaced by innumerable incised inscriptions, the back of the house in much worse repair than the front, and about fifty boys in tailless jackets and broad, turned-down collars. When the fifty boys perceived a stranger on the wall they rushed to the spot with a wild halloo, overwhelmed him with insult and defiance, and dislodged him by a volley of clods, stones, lumps of bread, and such other projectiles as were at hand.

On this rainy spring afternoon a brougham stood at the door of Moncrief House. The coachman, enveloped in a white india-rubber coat, was bestirring himself a little after the recent shower. Within-doors, in the drawing-room, Dr. Moncrief was conversing with a stately lady aged about thirty-five, elegantly dressed, of attractive manner, and only falling short of absolute beauty in her complexion, which was deficient in freshness.

"No progress whatever, I am sorry to say," the doctor was remarking.

"That is very disappointing," said the lady, contracting her brows.

"It is natural that you should feel disappointed," replied the doctor. "I would myself earnestly advise you to try the effect of placing him at some other--" The doctor stopped. The lady's face had lit up with a wonderful smile, and she had raised her hand with a bewitching gesture of protest.

"Oh, no, Dr. Moncrief," she said. "I am not disappointed with YOU; but I am all the more angry with Cashel, because I know that if he makes no progress with you it must be his

own fault. As to taking him away, that is out of the question. I should not have a moment's peace if he were out of your care. I will speak to him very seriously about his conduct before I leave to-day. You will give him another trial, will you not?"

"Certainly. With the greatest pleasure," exclaimed the doctor, confusing himself by an inept attempt at gallantry. "He shall stay as long as you please. But"--here the doctor became grave again--"you cannot too strongly urge upon him the importance of hard work at the present time, which may be said to be the turning-point of his career as a student. He is now nearly seventeen; and he has so little inclination for study that I doubt whether he could pass the examination necessary to entering one of the universities. You probably wish him to take a degree before he chooses a profession."

"Yes, of course," said the lady, vaguely, evidently assenting to the doctor's remark rather than expressing a conviction of her own. "What profession would you advise for him? You know so much better than I."

"Hum!" said Dr. Moncrief, puzzled. "That would doubtless depend to some extent on his own taste--"

"Not at all," said the lady, interrupting him with vivacity. "What does he know about the world, poor boy? His own taste is sure to be something ridiculous. Very likely he would want to go on the stage, like me."

"Oh! Then you would not encourage any tendency of that sort?"

"Most decidedly not. I hope he has no such idea."

"Not that I am aware of. He shows so little ambition to excel in any particular branch that I should say his choice of a profession may be best determined by his parents. I am, of course, ignorant whether his relatives possess influence likely to be of use to him. That is often the chief point to be considered, particularly in cases like your son's, where no special aptitude manifests itself."

"I am the only relative he ever had, poor fellow," said the lady, with a pensive smile. Then, seeing an expression of astonishment on the doctor's face, she added, quickly, "They are all dead."

"Dear me!"

"However," she continued, "I have no doubt I can make plenty of interest for him. But it is difficult to get anything nowadays without passing competitive examinations. He really must work. If he is lazy he ought to be punished."

The doctor looked perplexed. "The fact is," he said, "your son can hardly be dealt with as a child any longer. He is still quite a boy in his habits and ideas; but physically he is rapidly springing up into a young man. That reminds me of another point on which I will

ask you to speak earnestly to him. I must tell you that he has attained some distinction among his school-fellows here as an athlete. Within due bounds I do not discourage bodily exercises: they are a recognized part of our system. But I am sorry to say that Cashel has not escaped that tendency to violence which sometimes results from the possession of unusual strength and dexterity. He actually fought with one of the village youths in the main street of Panley some months ago. The matter did not come to my ears immediately; and, when it did, I allowed it to pass unnoticed, as he had interfered, it seems, to protect one of the smaller boys. Unfortunately he was guilty of a much more serious fault a little later. He and a companion of his had obtained leave from me to walk to Panley Abbey together. I afterwards found that their real object was to witness a prize-fight that took place--illegally, of course--on the common. Apart from the deception practised, I think the taste they betrayed a dangerous one; and I felt bound to punish them by a severe imposition, and restriction to the grounds for six weeks. I do not hold, however, that everything has been done in these cases when a boy has been punished. I set a high value on a mother's influence for softening the natural roughness of boys."

"I don't think he minds what I say to him in the least," said the lady, with a sympathetic air, as if she pitied the doctor in a matter that chiefly concerned him. "I will speak to him about it, of course. Fighting is an unbearable habit. His father's people were always fighting; and they never did any good in the world."

"If you will be so kind. There are just the three points: the necessity for greater--much greater--application to his studies; a word to him on the subject of rough habits; and to sound him as to his choice of a career. I agree with you in not attaching much importance to his ideas on that subject as yet. Still, even a boyish fancy may be turned to account in rousing the energies of a lad."

"Quite so," assented the lady. "I will certainly give him a lecture."

The doctor looked at her mistrustfully, thinking perhaps that she herself would be the better for a lecture on her duties as a mother. But he did not dare to tell her so; indeed, having a prejudice to the effect that actresses were deficient in natural feeling, he doubted the use of daring. He also feared that the subject of her son was beginning to bore her; and, though a doctor of divinity, he was as reluctant as other men to be found wanting in address by a pretty woman. So he rang the bell, and bade the servant send Master Cashel Byron. Presently a door was heard to open below, and a buzz of distant voices became audible. The doctor fidgeted and tried to think of something to say, but his invention failed him: he sat in silence while the inarticulate buzz rose into a shouting of "By-ron!" "Cash!" the latter cry imitated from the summons usually addressed to cashiers in haberdashers' shops. Finally there was a piercing yell of "Mam-ma-a-a-ah!" apparently in explanation of the demand for Byron's attendance in the drawing-room. The doctor reddened. Mrs. Byron smiled. Then the door below closed, shutting out the tumult, and footsteps were heard on the stairs.

"Come in," cried the doctor, encouragingly.

Master Cashel Byron entered blushing; made his way awkwardly to his mother, and kissed the critical expression which was on her upturned face as she examined his appearance. Being only seventeen, he had not yet acquired a taste for kissing. He inexpertly gave Mrs. Byron quite a shock by the collision of their teeth. Conscious of the failure, he drew himself upright, and tried to hide his hands, which were exceedingly dirty, in the scanty folds of his jacket. He was a well-grown youth, with neck and shoulders already strongly formed, and short auburn hair curling in little rings close to his scalp. He had blue eyes, and an expression of boyish good-humor, which, however, did not convey any assurance of good temper.

"How do you do, Cashel?" said Mrs. Byron, in a queenly manner, after a prolonged look at him.

"Very well, thanks," said he, grinning and avoiding her eye.

"Sit down, Byron," said the doctor. Byron suddenly forgot how to sit down, and looked irresolutely from one chair to another. The doctor made a brief excuse, and left the room; much to the relief of his pupil.

"You have grown greatly, Cashel. And I am afraid you are very awkward." Cashel colored and looked gloomy.

"I do not know what to do with you," continued Mrs. Byron. "Dr. Moncrief tells me that you are very idle and rough."

"I am not," said Cashel, sulkily. "It is bec--"

"There is no use in contradicting me in that fashion," said Mrs. Byron, interrupting him sharply. "I am sure that whatever Dr. Moncrief says is perfectly true."

"He is always talking like that," said Cashel, plaintively. "I can't learn Latin and Greek; and I don't see what good they are. I work as hard as any of the rest--except the regular stews, perhaps. As to my being rough, that is all because I was out one day with Gully Molesworth, and we saw a crowd on the common, and when we went to see what was up it was two men fighting. It wasn't our fault that they came there to fight."

"Yes; I have no doubt that you have fifty good excuses, Cashel. But I will not allow any fighting; and you really must work harder. Do you ever think of how hard I have to work to pay Dr. Moncrief one hundred and twenty pounds a year for you?"

"I work as hard as I can. Old Moncrief seems to think that a fellow ought to do nothing else from morning till night but write Latin verses. Tatham, that the doctor thinks such a genius, does all his constringing from cribs. If I had a crib I could constring as well--very likely better."

"You are very idle, Cashel; I am sure of that. It is too provoking to throw away so much money every year for nothing. Besides, you must soon be thinking of a profession."

"I shall go into the army," said Cashel. "It is the only profession for a gentleman."

Mrs. Byron looked at him for a moment as if amazed at his presumption. But she checked herself and only said, "I am afraid you will have to choose some less expensive profession than that. Besides, you would have to pass an examination to enable you to enter the army; and how can you do that unless you study?"

"Oh, I shall do that all right enough when the time comes."

"Dear, dear! You are beginning to speak so coarsely, Cashel. After all the pains I took with you at home!"

"I speak the same as other people," he replied, sullenly. "I don't see the use of being so jolly particular over every syllable. I used to have to stand no end of chaff about my way of speaking. The fellows here know all about you, of course."

"All about me?" repeated Mrs. Byron, looking at him curiously.

"All about your being on the stage, I mean," said Cashel. "You complain of my fighting; but I should have a precious bad time of it if I didn't lick the chaff out of some of them."

Mrs. Byron smiled doubtfully to herself, and remained silent and thoughtful for a moment. Then she rose and said, glancing at the weather, "I must go now, Cashel, before another shower begins. And do, pray, try to learn something, and to polish your manners a little. You will have to go to Cambridge soon, you know."

"Cambridge!" exclaimed Cashel, excited. "When, mamma? When?"

"Oh, I don't know. Not yet. As soon as Dr. Moncrief says you are fit to go."

"That will be long enough," said Cashel, much dejected by this reply. "He will not turn one hundred and twenty pounds a year out of doors in a hurry. He kept big Inglis here until he was past twenty. Look here, mamma; might I go at the end of this half? I feel sure I should do better at Cambridge than here."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Byron, decidedly. "I do not expect to have to take you away from Dr. Moncrief for the next eighteen months at least, and not then unless you work properly. Now don't grumble, Cashel; you annoy me exceedingly when you do. I am sorry I mentioned Cambridge to you."

"I would rather go to some other school, then," said Cashel, ruefully. "Old Moncrief is so awfully down on me."

"You only want to leave because you are expected to work here; and that is the very reason I wish you to stay."

Cashel made no reply; but his face darkened ominously.

"I have a word to say to the doctor before I go," she added, reseating herself. "You may return to your play now. Good-bye, Cashel." And she again raised her face to be kissed.

"Good-bye," said Cashel, huskily, as he turned toward the door, pretending that he had not noticed her action.

"Cashel!" she said, with emphatic surprise. "Are you sulky?"

"No," he retorted, angrily. "I haven't said anything. I suppose my manners are not good enough, I'm very sorry; but I can't help it."

"Very well," said Mrs. Byron, firmly. "You can go, Cashel. I am not pleased with you."

Cashel walked out of the room and slammed the door. At the foot of the staircase he was stopped by a boy about a year younger than himself, who accosted him eagerly.

"How much did she give you?" he whispered.

"Not a halfpenny," replied Cashel, grinding his teeth.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed the other, much disappointed. "That was beastly mean."

"She's as mean as she can be," said Cashel. "It's all old Monkey's fault. He has been cramming her with lies about me. But she's just as bad as he is. I tell you, Gully, I hate my mother."

"Oh, come!" said Gully, shocked. "That's a little too strong, old chap. But she certainly ought to have stood something."

"I don't know what you intend to do, Gully; but I mean to bolt. If she thinks I am going to stick here for the next two years she is jolly much mistaken."

"It would be an awful lark to bolt," said Gully, with a chuckle. "But," he added, seriously, "if you really mean it, by George, I'll go too! Wilson has just given me a thousand lines; and I'll be hanged if I do them."

"Gully," said Cashel, his eyes sparkling, "I should like to see one of those chaps we saw on the common pitch into the doctor--get him on the ropes, you know."

Gully's mouth watered. "Yes," he said, breathlessly; "particularly the fellow they called the Fibber. Just one round would be enough for the old beggar. Let's come out into the playground; I shall catch it if I am found here."

II

That night there was just sufficient light struggling through the clouds to make Panley Common visible as a black expanse, against the lightest tone of which a piece of ebony would have appeared pale. Not a human being was stirring within a mile of Moncrief House, the chimneys of which, ghostly white on the side next the moon, threw long shadows on the silver-gray slates. The stillness had just been broken by the stroke of a quarter past twelve from a distant church tower, when, from the obscurity of one of these chimney shadows, a head emerged. It belonged to a boy, whose body presently wriggled through an open skylight. When his shoulders were through he turned himself face upward, seized the miniature gable in which the skylight was set, drew himself completely out, and made his way stealthily down to the parapet. He was immediately followed by another boy.

The door of Moncrief House was at the left-hand corner of the front, and was surmounted by a tall porch, the top of which was flat and could be used as a balcony. A wall, of the same height as the porch, connected the house front with the boundary wall, and formed part of the enclosure of a fruit garden which lay at the side of the house between the lawn and the playground. When the two boys had crept along the parapet to a point directly above the porch they stopped, and each lowered a pair of boots to the balcony by means of fishing-lines. When the boots were safely landed, their owners let the lines drop and reentered the house by another skylight. A minute elapsed. Then they reappeared on the top of the porch, having come out through the window to which it served as a balcony. Here they put on their boots, and stepped on to the wall of the fruit garden. As they crawled along it, the hindmost boy whispered.

"I say, Cashy."

"Shut up, will you," replied the other under his breath. "What's wrong?"

"I should like to have one more go at old mother Moncrief's pear-tree; that's all."

"There are no pears on it this season, you fool."

"I know. This is the last time we shall go this road, Cashy. Usen't it to be a lark? Eh?"

"If you don't shut up, it won't be the last time; for you'll be caught. Now for it."

Cashel had reached the outer wall, and he finished his sentence by dropping from it to the common. Gully held his breath for some moments after the noise made by his companion's striking the ground. Then he demanded in a whisper whether all was right.

"Yes," returned Cashel, impatiently. "Drop as soft as you can."

Gully obeyed; and was so careful lest his descent should shake the earth and awake the doctor, that his feet shrank from the concussion. He alighted in a sitting posture, and remained there, looking up at Cashel with a stunned expression.

"Crikey!" he ejaculated, presently. "That was a buster."

"Get up, I tell you," said Cashel. "I never saw such a jolly ass as you are. Here, up with you! Have you got your wind back?"

"I should think so. Bet you twopence I'll be first at the cross roads. I say, let's pull the bell at the front gate and give an awful yell before we start. They'll never catch us."

"Yes," said Cashel, ironically; "I fancy I see myself doing it, or you either. Now then. One, two, three, and away."

They ran off together, and reached the cross roads about eight minutes later; Gully completely out of breath, and Cashel nearly so. Here, according to their plan, Gully was to take the north road and run to Scotland, where he felt sure that his uncle's gamekeeper would hide him. Cashel was to go to sea; where, he argued, he could, if his affairs became desperate, turn pirate, and achieve eminence in that profession by adding a chivalrous humanity to the ruder virtues for which it is already famous.

Cashel waited until Gully had recovered from his race. Then he said.

"Now, old fellow, we've got to separate."

Gully, thus confronted with the lonely realities of his scheme, did not like the prospect. After a moment's reflection he exclaimed:

"Damme, old chap, but I'll come with you. Scotland may go and be hanged."

But Cashel, being the stronger of the two, was as anxious to get rid of Gully as Gully was to cling to him. "No," he said; "I'm going to rough it; and you wouldn't be able for that. You're not strong enough for a sea life. Why, man, those sailor fellows are as hard as nails; and even they can hardly stand it."

"Well, then, do you come with me," urged Gully. "My uncle's gamekeeper won't mind. He's a jolly good sort; and we shall have no end of shooting."

"That's all very well for you, Gully; but I don't know your uncle; and I'm not going to put myself under a compliment to his gamekeeper. Besides, we should run too much risk of being caught if we went through the country together. Of course I should be only too glad if we could stick to one another, but it wouldn't do; I feel certain we should be nabbed. Good-bye."

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