

## JUNE.—THE BOTANICAL GARDENS.



It was in the "leafy month of June," some summers ago, that I was invited by Mrs. Arundel Seymour, the most distinguished among the *déite* of my acquaintance, to form one of a little company that had resolved to combine for the better enjoyment of the Rose Fête in the Regent's Park. This distinction would have rendered me a proud man at any time, but at that particular juncture, circumstances enhanced its value a thousand fold. It had been my lot to encounter, during a similar expedition, undertaken only a few weeks previously, serious mortification, and, as I then esteemed it, social disgrace; and nothing could be better calculated to efface its memory than a second visit to the same scene, under circumstances so different and so eminently favourable.

Having no friend at hand to introduce me gracefully to the reader, and to mention, aside, any little facts concerning my character and antecedents, of which it is desirable he should be informed, I may here casually remark, that, at the period referred to, my two-and-twentieth birthday was not long past. I had recently been dismissed from parental supervision and a vicarage in the country to lodgings in London and the control of my own actions; but, in the very face of experiences now to be related, I can hardly boast of having then attained to moral independence by any means proportioned to my physical freedom. I shared largely in the error common to youth, that society judges us by what we do, rather than by what we are, and takes altogether far more note of our proceedings than is really the case. It was my constant care, therefore, to accommodate my doings to its standard of propriety, and more especially to avoid any situation which might chance to draw upon me a shadow of ridicule; for a true enjoyment of the ludicrous in others rendered me in no respect disposed to provide similar gratification for my friends.

Having pleaded guilty to these weaknesses, it may be easily imagined with what unenviable feelings I perused, one bright May morning, a letter from my mother, informing me of the advent to No. 16, Melina-street, Old Kent-road, of two elderly maiden ladies, who claimed kinship with our family, and, worse still, my services as *cicerone* during their presence in London. These estimable ladies, residing ordinarily in some village, with an unpronounceable name, in the furthest recesses of North Wales, whence they only emerged at rare intervals, it had never been my good fortune to make their personal acquaintance, but imagination found ample basis for conjecture in my mother's underlined postscript. The Misses Lawson were not, she remarked, exactly the kind of persons from whose society a young man would derive personal gratification; but she trusted I would not forget that their relationship and limited means gave them a double claim upon my good offices. After seven years' seclusion, they had accumulated a little fund for a fortnight's pleasure trip to town, and she made it a personal request that I would put myself as far as possible at their disposal, for the better economy of their time and money. This concluding sentence put an end to a vision which had previously floated through my mind of escaping with a call at Melina-place, and a long Monday in the Zoological Gardens; for I felt intuitively that I should scarcely be ambitious of introducing the worthy maidens into a more fashionable throng than is then and there to be met with. But alas! it was evident that filial duty required from me a more serious sacrifice. I lectured myself into a general resolution of heroic behaviour, and then dismissed all thought of the painful details until the proper period for my initiatory visit.

It was no small shock to me to discover that the sisters had a perfect acquaintance with the pleasure-giving resources of London, having made it their business to acquire such information for months previously. I had fully intended to ignore altogether any places of resort which it might seem desirable so to do; assuring myself, in order to stifle the pangs of conscience, that a day in the British Museum, or a steam-boat excursion to Greenwich Hospital, would be the kind of amusement best suited to their habits, tastes, and—to their appearance, I may unconsciously have added. But this plan was entirely neutralized; and I found, to my horror, that a visit to the theatre loomed awfully in the distance, and that nothing short of a convulsion of nature would subvert their resolution to be present, under my escort of course, at the next Botanical Fête—the last words of their Vicar's daughter having been a recommendation to that effect. In vain I remarked on the inconvenience of *al-fresco* entertainments in case of rain; they would take care to go prepared, they rejoined, and the assurance by no means comforted me. The flowers were a failure that season, I rather thought; but, unhappily, it mattered not; for they had always felt assured no rhododendrons in

England would equal those of their friend Squire Owen. Then the crowd would be annoying to them; but, no! human life, responded Miss Lawson, was the most delightful of studies. Thus silenced, I could but consent meekly to obtain tickets, and to call for them, according to order, at an early hour on the following Wednesday. I should undoubtedly have been satisfied to perambulate the world evermore beneath the shelter of an umbrella, if it would but have rained on that particular day. A clear atmosphere and a glorious sun, giving promise of a brilliant and well-attended fête, only rendered my feelings and anticipations more gloomy as I wended my way to the rendezvous. Having been instructed very early in life on the impropriety of personal remarks, I will only hint slightly at the appearance presented by my companions when they entered, in full array, the little sitting-room where I awaited them at the appointed hour. The tall form of the elder sister was clothed in a black satin dress of wholly inadequate length, which she triumphantly informed me had been shortened purposely that it might encounter with impunity the dirt of the London streets. She wore a bonnet, of which suffice it to say, that it was very unnecessarily enlarged by the addition of a green silk "ugly;" and some white drapery, fashioned and embroidered probably in her school days, shrouded her angular form, for which, however, more substantial covering was provided in the shape of a plaid woollen shawl, which lay neatly folded on her arm. Neither this nor a sturdy umbrella, could any persuasion of mine induce her to lay aside; for my unlucky suggestion of the possibility of rain had taken firm possession of her mind, and refused to be dislodged. Although the *tout-ensemble* was not by any means what I could have desired, it was impossible to remain untouched by the affectionate pride with which her sister regarded her, or insensible to the beaming felicity legibly imprinted on both their countenances. Under the influence of it, I charged myself with the large umbrella; and, having fairly started, we were in time deposited as near our place of destination as could be accomplished by the homely medium of an omnibus. We arrived at the entrance to the Gardens as countless carriages were there depositing their gay and elegant freights. Many and loud were the criticisms approving and other-wise, which issued from the lips of my companions, as I hurried them in, meditating the removal of some chairs to the most secluded position I could meet with, and our permanent establishment therein. But Miss Lawson had not reigned for thirty years undisputed monarch of her little domestic kingdom without acquiring a will of her own, and for an hour at least did we traverse the Grand Promenade, in the face of entering crowds, before the idea of repose was entertained for a moment. At length I was permitted to go in quest of seats. But this brought me no comfort, for after various experimental flittings, they were finally established, not in the secluded nook I had so agreeably pictured to myself, but in a position which the sisters joyfully agreed had a good view of everything, and of which I sorrowfully felt, everyone had a good view. There sat they, beating time with conspicuous enthusiasm to the inspiring strains of the music; and there stood I, as though mounting guard in the vicinity, looking, to the best of my ability, as if I did not belong to them, and confirming this assumed independence by occasional *sottises* a few yards in extent, which, however, commonly ended in more complete discomfort. I was generally recalled by the loud utterance of my Christian name, and followed by an equally ill-modulated, and, to our immediate neighbours, a highly entertaining inquiry whether some lady in gorgeous costume, holding her parasol over her face, might not be her Majesty in private life; or a peaceable old gentleman, endowed with a prominent nose, were not assuredly the Duke of Wellington.

Meantime the sun was shining brightly, gentle breezes rustled in the trees, and silk dresses rustled in unison. A ceaseless procession of elegant forms sauntered past us, leaving behind them the echo of many a merry laugh and tender saying. I could not sympathise in their joy, however, realising as I did nothing but my own position—which, although ever-varying, never seemed to take a turn for the better. As the day advanced the throng increased, and my uneasiness increased with it; constant watchfulness and presence of mind became absolutely necessary; and practice enabled me to "double" at length with all the ingenuity of a hunted hare. So many times did I resort to the expedient of dropping my handkerchief and stooping to recover it, whilst some familiar face was passing by, that my back ached with the exertion; and so often did I cut short my career midway on discovering that the party just before us included a dame, in whose eyes I had no wish to look ridiculous, that Miss Lawson became actively rebellious. And after all, my artifices availed me nothing, for I was challenged by my fair friend at the very moment I was resisting the importunities of Miss Lawson to accept one of three slices of "home-made cake," which, to my infinite horror, she produced from the recesses of the woollen shawl. Not until the very last visitor had departed from the Gardens did my companions feel that they had had their full money's-worth for their money. Nor did the mortifications of this expedition end with the day. For weeks afterwards my friends mentioned very unnecessarily that they had seen me at the last Botanical Fête—with my mother, gravely supposed the ladies—with my laundress, humorously suggested the gentlemen; and up to the present moment, home-made cake is always pressed upon me at a certain house where I occasionally visit, with a very significant smile.

It may be imagined that after these occurrences Mrs. Seymour's proposal was most welcome and carried consolation to my heart. The party she had formed was unexceptionable, and, in due time I found myself occupying a seat in an open carriage, opposite a fascinating "country cousin," of quite a different species from my own, and side by side with a man scarcely as well dressed as myself. Could any conjuncture of circumstances be more favourable to happiness? I thought not, as, having secured my pretty companion, and left her *chaperon* to follow with her *vis-à-vis*, I entered the scene of my former troubles. Now indeed was I fully sensible of the cheering influence of the sunshine, the joyous strains of the music, the gay murmur of voices, and the whole spirit of the scene. Now could I lift up my head boldly, challenging recognition, and note the details of what was passing around me—the various classes of society and the different phases of individual character which the occasion had assembled together. The company generally was, I observed, divided into two classes, those to whom a Botanical Fête was merely an object for their afternoon's drive, and with this division I complacently classed myself for the time being; and, secondly, those to whom it is a fête and festival indeed, of rare occurrence, and productive of no mean delight. Amongst the latter number were many forms quaint enough to assure me that I was not the only person who had ever exhibited themselves there in strange company; indeed I now derived considerable entertainment from the observation of one or two individuals whose sensations I could, from my own experience, tolerably well divine. In every respect fortune seemed well disposed to make amends for her former ill treatment of me; and not only were my personal feelings gratified, but my credit was considerably raised by this public appearance as a member of one of the most distinguished-looking groups in the Gardens. In addition, I have only to mention that the uncoremious *dé dansante* at Mrs. Seymour's residence, with which the day concluded, formed a striking contrast to the very tame delights of my visit to the Colosseum with the Misses Lawson; and that these two visits to the Botanical Gardens still live in my memory as standing epochs of misery and bliss.