THE COAST OF BOHEMIA

W. D. HOWELLS

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INTRODUCTORY SKETCH.

In one of the old-fashioned books for children there was a story of the adventures of a cent (or perhaps that coin of older lineage, a penny) told by itself, which came into my mind when the publishers suggested that the readers of a new edition of this book might like to know how it happened to be written. I promptly fancied the book speaking, and taking upon itself the burden of autobiography, which we none of us find very heavy; and no sooner had I done so than I began actually to hear from it in a narrative of much greater distinctness than I could have supplied for it.

"You must surely remember," it protested to my forgetfulness, "that you first thought of me in anything like definite shape as you stood looking on at the trotting-races of a county fair in Northern Ohio, and that I began to gather color and character while you loitered through the art-building, and dwelt with pitying interest upon the forlorn, unpromising exhibits there.

"But previous to this, my motive existed somewhere in that nebulous fore-life where both men and books have their impalpable beginning; for even you cannot have forgotten that when a certain passionately enterprising young editor asked you for a novel to be printed in his journal, you so far imagined me as to say that I would be about a girl. When you looked over those hapless works of art at the Pymantoning County Fair, you thought, 'What a good thing it would be to have a nice village girl, with a real but limited gift, go from here to study art in New York! And get in love there! And married!' Cornelia and her

mother at once stepped out of the inchoate; Ludlow advanced from another quarter of Chaos, and I began really to be.

"The getting me down on paper was a much later affair—nearly two years later. There were earlier engagements to be met; there was an exciting editorial episode to be got behind you; and there was material for a veridical representation of the ardent young life of the New York Synthesis of Art Studies to be gathered as nearly at first hands and as furtively as possible.

"I should be almost ashamed to remind you of the clandestine means you employed before you were forced to a frankness alien to your nature, and went and threw yourself on the mercy of a Member who, upon your avowing your purpose, took you through the schools of the Synthesis and instructed you in its operation. Not satisfied with this, you got an undergraduate of the Synthesis to coach you as to its social side, and while she was consenting to put it all down in writing for your convenience, you were shamelessly making notes of her boarding-house, as the very place to have Cornelia come to.

"Your methods were at first so secret and uncandid that I wonder I ever came to be the innocent book I am; and I feel that the credit is far less due to you than to the friends who helped you. But I am glad to remember how you got your come-uppings when, long after, a student of the Synthesis whom you asked, in your latent vanity, how she thought that social part of me was managed, answered, 'Well, any one could see that it was studied altogether from the outside, that it wasn't at all the *spirit* of the Synthesis.'

"It was enough almost to make me doubt myself, but I recovered my belief in my own truth when I reflected that it was merely a just punishment for you. I could expose you in other points, if I chose, and show what slight foundations you built my facts and characters upon; but perhaps that would be ungrateful. You were at least a doting parent, if

not a wise one, and in your fondness you did your best to spoil me. You gave me two heroines, and you know very well that before you were done you did not know but you preferred Charmian to Cornelia. And you had nothing whatever to build Charmian upon, not the slightest suggestion from life, where you afterwards encountered her Egyptian profile! I think I ought to say that you had never been asked to a Synthesis dance when you wrote that account of one in me; and though you have often been asked since, you have never had the courage to go for fear of finding out how little it was like your description.

"But if Charmian was created out of nothing, what should you say if I were frank about the other characters of my story? Could you deny that the drummer who was first engaged to Cornelia was anything more than a materialization from seeing a painter very long ago make his two fingers do a ballet-dance? Or that Ludlow was not at first a mere pointed beard and a complexion glimpsed in a slim young Cuban one night at Saratoga? Or that Cornelia's mother existed by any better right than your once happening to see a poor lady try to hide the gap in her teeth when she smiled?

"When I think what a thing of shreds and patches I am, I wonder that I have any sort of individual temperament or consciousness at all. But I know that I have, and that you wrote me with pleasure and like me still. You think I have form, and that, if I am not very serious, I am sincere, and that somehow I represent a phase of our droll American civilization truly enough. I know you were vexed when some people said I did not go far enough, and insisted that the coast of Bohemia ought to have been the whole kingdom. As if I should have cared to be that! There are shady places inland where I should not have liked my girls to be, and where I think my young men would not have liked to meet them; and I am glad you kept me within the sweet, pure breath of the sea. I think I am all the better

book for that, and, if you are fond of me, you have your reasons. I——"

"Upon my word," I interrupted at this point, "it seems to me that you are saying rather more for yourself than I could say for you, if you *are* one of my spoiled children. Don't you think we had both better give the reader a chance, now?"

"Oh, if there are to be any readers!" cried the book, and lapsed into the silence of print.

W .D. HOWELLS.

I.

The forty-sixth annual fair of the Pymantoning County Agricultural Society was in its second day. The trotting-matches had begun, and the vast majority of the visitors had abandoned the other features of the exhibition for this supreme attraction. They clustered four or five deep along the half-mile of railing that enclosed the track, and sat sweltering in the hot September sun, on the benching of the grandstand that flanked a stretch of the course. Boys selling lemonade and peanuts, and other boys with the score of the races, made their way up and down the seats with shrill cries; now and then there was a shriek of girls' laughter from a group of young people calling to some other group, or struggling for a programme caught back and forth; the young fellows shouted to each other jokes that were lost in mid-air; but, for the most part, the crowd was a very silent one, grimly intent upon the rival sulkies as they flashed by and lost themselves in the clouds that thickened over the distances of the long, dusty loop. Here and there some one gave a shout as a horse broke, or settled down to his work under the guttural snarl of his driver; at times the whole throng burst into impartial applause as a horse gained or lost a length; but the quick throb of the hoofs on the velvety earth and the whir of the flying wheels were the sounds that chiefly made themselves heard.

The spectacle had the importance which multitude givers, and Ludlow found in it the effects which he hoped to get again in his impression. He saw the deep purples which he looked to see with eyes trained by the French masters of

his school to find them, and the indigo blues, the intense greens, the rainbow oranges and scarlets; and he knew just how he should give them. In the light of that vast afternoon sky, cloudless, crystalline in its clearness, no brilliancy of rendering could be too bold.

If he had the courage of his convictions, this purely American event could be reported on his canvas with all its native character; and yet it could be made to appeal to the enlightened eye with the charm of a French subject, and impressionism could be fully justified of its follower in Pymantoning as well as in Paris. That golden dust along the track; the level tops of the buggies drawn up within its ellipse, and the groups scattered about in gypsy gayety on the grass there; the dark blur of men behind the barrier; the women, with their bright hats and parasols, massed flower-like,—all made him long to express them in lines and dots and breadths of pure color. He had caught the vital effect of the whole, and he meant to interpret it so that its truth should be felt by all who had received the light of the new faith in painting, who believed in the prismatic colors as in the ten commandments, and who hoped to be saved by tone-contrasts. For the others, Ludlow was at that day too fanatical an impressionist to care. He owed a duty to France no less than to America, and he wished to fulfil it in a picture which should at once testify to the excellence of the French method and the American material. At twenty-two, one is often much more secure and final in one's conclusions than one is afterwards.

He was vexed that a lingering doubt of the subject had kept him from bringing a canvas with him at once, and recording his precious first glimpses of it. But he meant to come to the trotting-match the next day again, and then he hoped to get back to his primal impression of the scene, now so vivid in his mind. He made his way down the benches, and out of the enclosure of the track. He drew a deep breath, full of the sweet smell of the bruised grass,

forsaken now by nearly all the feet that had trodden it. A few old farmers, who had failed to get places along the railing and had not cared to pay for seats on the stand, were loitering about, followed by their baffled and disappointed wives. The men occasionally stopped at the cattle-pens, but it was less to look at the bulls and boars and rams which had taken the premiums, and wore cards or ribbons certifying the fact, than to escape a consciousness of their partners, harassingly taciturn or voluble in their reproach. A number of these embittered women brokenly fringed the piazza of the fair-house, and Ludlow made his way toward them with due sympathy for their poor little tragedy, so intelligible to him through the memories of his own country-bred youth. He followed with his pity those who sulked away through the deserted aisles of the building, and nursed their grievance among the prize fruits and vegetables, and the fruits and vegetables that had not taken the prizes. They were more censorious than they would have been perhaps if they had not been defeated themselves; he heard them dispute the wisdom of most of the awards as the shoutings and clappings from the racetrack penetrated the lonely hall. They creaked wearily up and down in their new shoes or best shoes, and he knew how they wished themselves at home and in bed, and wondered why they had ever been such fools as to come, anyway. Occasionally, one of their husbands lagged in, as if in search of his wife, but kept at a safe distance, after seeing her, or hung about with a group of other husbands, who could not be put to shame or suffering as they might if they had appeared singly.

II.

Ludlow believed that if the right fellow ever came to the work, he could get as much pathos out of our farm folks as Millet got out of his Barbizon peasants. But the fact was that he was not the fellow; he wanted to paint beauty not pathos; and he thought, so far as he thought ethically about it, that, the Americans needed to be shown the festive and joyous aspects of their common life. To discover and to represent these was his pleasure as an artist, and his duty as a citizen. He suspected, though, that the trotting-match was the only fact of the Pymantoning County Fair that could be persuaded to lend itself to his purpose. Certainly, there was nothing in the fair-house, with those poor, dreary old people straggling through it, to gladden an artistic conception. Agricultural implements do not group effectively, or pose singly with much picturesqueness; tall stalks of corn, mammoth squashes, huge apples and potatoes want the beauty and quality that belong to them out of doors, when they are gathered into the sections of a county fair-house; piles of melons fail of their poetry on a wooden floor, and heaps of grapes cannot assert themselves in a very bacchanal profusion against the ignominy of being spread upon long tables and ticketed with the names of their varieties and exhibitors.

Ludlow glanced at them, to right and left, as he walked through the long, barn-like building, and took in with other glances the inadequate decorations of the graceless interior. His roving eye caught the lettering over the lateral archways, and with a sort of contemptuous compassion he turned into the Fine Arts Department.

The fine arts were mostly represented by photographs and crazy quilts; but there were also tambourines and round brass plaques painted with flowers, and little satin banners painted with birds or autumn leaves, and gilt rolling-pins with vines. There were medley-pictures contrived of photographs cut out and grouped together in novel and unexpected relations; and there were set about divers patterns and pretences in keramics, as the decoration of earthen pots and jars was called. Besides these were sketches in oil and charcoal, which Ludlow found worse than the more primitive things, with their second-hand *chic* picked up in a tenth-rate school. He began to ask himself whether people tasteless enough to produce these inanities and imagine them artistic, could form even the subjects of art; he began to have doubts of his impression of the trotting-match, its value, its possibility of importance. The senseless ugliness of the things really hurt him: his worship of beauty was a sort of religion, and their badness was a sort of blasphemy. He could not laugh at them; he wished he could; and his first impulse was to turn and escape from the Fine Arts Department, and keep what little faith in the artistic future of the country he had been able to get together during his long sojourn out of it. Since his return he had made sure of the feeling for color and form with which his country-women dressed themselves. There was no mistake about that; even here, in the rustic heart of the continent he had seen costumes which had touch and distinction; and it could not be that the instinct which they sprang from should go for nothing in the arts supposed higher than mantua-making and millinery. The village girls whom he saw so prettily gowned and picturesquely hatted on the benches out there by the race-course, could it have been they who committed these atrocities? Or did these come up from yet deeper depths of the country, where the vague, shallow talk about art going on for the past decade was

having its first crude effect? Ludlow was exasperated as well as pained, for he knew that the pretty frocks and hats expressed a love of dressing prettily, which was honest and genuine enough, while the unhappy effects about him could spring only from a hollow vanity far lower than a woman's wish to be charming. It was not an innate impulse which produced them, but a sham ambition, implanted from without, and artificially stimulated by the false and fleeting mood of the time. They must really hamper the growth of æsthetic knowledge among people who were not destitute of the instinct.

He exaggerated the importance of the fact with the sensitiveness of a man to whom æsthetic cultivation was all-important. It appeared to him a far greater evil than it was; it was odious to him, like a vice; it was almost a crime. He spent a very miserable time in the Fine Arts Department of the Pymantoning County Agricultural Fair; and in a kind of horrible fascination he began to review the collection in detail, to guess its causes in severalty and to philosophize its lamentable consequences.

III.

In this process Ludlow discovered that there was more of the Fine Arts Department than he had supposed at first. He was aware of some women who had come into the next aisle or section, and presently he overheard fragments of their talk.

A girl's voice said passionately: "I don't care! I shan't leave them here for folks to make remarks about! I knew they wouldn't take the premium, and I hope you're satisfied now, mother."

"Well, you're a very silly child," came in an older voice, suggestive of patience and amiability. "Don't tear them, anyway!"

"I shall! I don't care if I tear them all to pieces."

There was a sound of quick steps, and of the angry swirl of skirts, and the crackling and rending of paper.

"There, now!" said the older voice. "You've dropped one."

"I don't care! I hope they'll trample it under their great stupid hoofs."

The paper, whatever it was, came skating out under the draped tabling in the section where Ludlow stood, arrested in his sad employment by the unseen drama, and lay at his feet. He picked it up, and he had only time to glance at it before he found himself confronted by a fiercely tearful young girl who came round the corner of his section, and suddenly stopped at sight of him. With one hand she pressed some crumpled sheets of paper against, her breast; the other she stretched toward Ludlow.

"Oh! will you——" she began, and then she faltered; and as she turned her little head aside for a backward look over

her shoulder, she made him, somehow, think of a hollyhock, by the tilt of her tall, slim, young figure, and by the colors of her hat from which her face flowered; no doubt the deep-crimson silk waist she wore, with its petal-edged ruffle flying free down her breast, had something to do with his fantastic notion. She was a brunette, with the lightness and delicacy that commonly go with the beauty of a blonde. She could not have been more than fifteen; her skirts had not yet matured to the full womanly length; she was still a child.

A handsome, mild, middle-aged woman appeared beside the stormy young thing, and said in the voice which Ludlow had already heard, "Well, Cornelia!" She seemed to make more account than the girl made of the young fellow's looks. He was of the medium height for a man, but he was so slight that he seemed of lower stature, and he eked out an effect of distinction by brushing his little moustache up sharply at the corners in a fashion he had learned in France, and by wearing a little black dot of an imperial. His brow was habitually darkened by a careworn frown, which came from deep and anxious thinking about the principles and the practice of art. He was very well dressed, and he carried himself with a sort of worldly splendor which did not intimidate the lady before him. In the country women have no more apprehension of men who are young and stylish and good-looking than they have in the city; they rather like them to be so, and meet them with confidence in any casual encounter.

The lady said, "Oh, thank you," as Ludlow came up to the girl with the paper, and then she laughed with no particular intention, and said, "It's one of my daughter's drawings."

"Oh, indeed!" said Ludlow, with a quick perception of the mother's pride in it, and of all the potentialities of prompt intimacy. "It's very good."

"Well, *I* think so," said the lady, while the girl darkled and bridled in young helplessness. If she knew that her mother

ought not to be offering a stranger her confidence like that, she did not know what to do about it. "She was just going to take them home," said the mother vaguely.

"I'm sorry," said Ludlow. "I seem to be a day after the fair, as far as they're concerned."

"Well, I don't know," said the mother, with the same amiable vagueness. She had some teeth gone, and when she smiled she tried to hide their absence on the side next Ludlow; but as she was always smiling she did not succeed perfectly. She looked doubtfully at her daughter, in the manner of mothers whom no severity of snubbing can teach that their daughters when well-grown girls can no longer be treated as infants. "I don't know as you'd think you had lost much. We didn't expect they *would* take the premium, a *great* deal."

"I should hope not," said Ludlow. "The competition was bad enough."

The mother seemed to divine a compliment in this indefinite speech. She said: "Well, I don't see myself why they didn't take it."

"There was probably no one to feel how much better they were," said Ludlow.

"Well, that's what *I* think," said the mother, "and it's what I tell her." She stood looking from Ludlow to her daughter and back, and now she ventured, seeing him so intent on the sketch he still held, "You an artist?"

"A student of art," said Ludlow, with the effect of uncovering himself in a presence.

The mother did not know what to make of it apparently; she said blankly, "Oh!" and then added impressively, to her daughter: "Why don't you show them to him, Cornelia?"

"I should think it a great favor," said Ludlow, intending to be profoundly respectful. But he must have overdone it. The girl majestically gave her drawings to her mother, and marched out of the aisle.

Ludlow ignored her behavior, as if it had nothing to do with the question, and began to look at the drawings, one after another, with various inarticulate notes of comment imitated from a great French master, and with various foreign phrases, such as "*Bon! Bon! Pas mauvais! Joli! Chic!*" He seemed to waken from them to a consciousness of the mother, and returned to English. "They are very interesting. Has she had instruction?"

"Only in the High School, here. And she didn't seem to care any for that. She seems to want to work more by herself."

"That's wrong," said Ludlow, "though she's probably right about the High School."

The mother made bold to ask, "Where are *you* taking lessons?"

"I?" said Ludlow, dreamily. "Oh! everywhere."

"I thought, perhaps," the mother began, and she stopped, and then resumed, "How many lessons do you expect to take?"

IV.

Ludlow descended from the high horse which he saw it was really useless for him to ride in that simple presence. "I didn't mean that I was a student of art in that sense, exactly. I suppose I'm a painter of some sort. I studied in Paris, and I'm working in New York—if that's what you mean."

"Yes," said the lady, as if she did not know quite what she meant.

Ludlow still remained in possession of the sketches, and he now looked at them with a new knot between his eyebrows. He had known at the first glance, with the perception of one who has done things in any art, that here was the possibility of things in his art, and he had spoken from a generous and compassionate impulse, from his recognition of the possibility, and from his sympathy with the girl in her defeat. Now his conscience began to prick him. He asked himself whether he had any right to encourage her, whether he ought not rather to warn her. He asked her mother: "Has she been doing this sort of thing long?"

"Ever since she was a little bit of a thing," said the mother. "You *might* say she's been doing it ever since she could do anything; and she *ain't* but about fifteen, *now*. Well, she's going on sixteen," the mother added, scrupulously. "She was born the third of July, and now it's the beginning of September. So she's just fifteen years and a little over two months. I suppose she's too young to commence taking lessons regularly?"

"No one would be too young for that," said Ludlow, austerely, with his eyes on the sketch. He lifted them, and bent them frankly and kindly on the mother's face. "And were you thinking of her going on?" The mother questioned him for his exact meaning with the sweet unwisdom of her smile. "Did you think of her becoming an artist, a painter?"

"Well," she returned, "I presume she would have as good a chance as anybody, if she had the talent for it."

"She has the talent for it," said Ludlow, "and she would have a better chance than most—that's very little to say—but it's a terribly rough road."

"Yes," the mother faltered, smiling.

"Yes. It's a hard road for a man, and it's doubly hard for a woman. It means work that breaks the back and wrings the brain. It means for a woman, tears, and hysterics, and nervous prostration, and insanity—some of them go wild over it. The conditions are bad air, and long hours, and pitiless criticism; and the rewards are slight and uncertain. One out of a hundred comes to anything at all; one out of a thousand to anything worth while. New York is swarming with girl art-students. They mostly live in poor boarding-houses, and some of them actually suffer from hunger and cold. For men the profession is hazardous, arduous; for women it's a slow anguish of endeavor and disappointment. Most shop-girls earn more than most fairly successful art-students for years; most servant-girls fare better. If you are rich, and your daughter wishes to amuse herself by studying art, it's all very well; but even then I wouldn't recommend it as an amusement. If you're poor——"

"I presume," the mother interrupted, "that she would be self-supporting by the time she had taken six months' lessons, and I guess she could get along till then."

Ludlow stared at the amiably smiling creature. From her unruffled composure his warning had apparently fallen like water from the back of a goose. He saw that it would be

idle to go on, and he stopped short and waited for her to speak again.

"If she was to go to New York to take lessons, how do you think she'd better——" She seemed not to know enough of the situation to formulate her question farther. He had pity on her ignorance, though he doubted whether he ought to have.

"Oh, go into the Synthesis," he said briefly.

"The Synthesis?"

"Yes; the Synthesis of Art Studies; it's the only thing. The work is hard, but it's thorough; the training's excellent, if you live through it."

"Oh, I guess she'd live through it," said the mother with a laugh. She added, "I don't know as I know just what you mean by the Synthesis of Art Studies."

"It's a society that the art-students have formed. They have their own building, and casts, and models; the principal artists have classes among them. You submit a sketch, and if you get in you work away till you drop, if you're in earnest, or till you're bored, if you're amusing yourself."

"And should you think," said the mother gesturing toward him with the sketches in her hand, "that she could get in?"

"I think she could," said Ludlow, and he acted upon a sudden impulse. He took a card from his pocketbook, and gave it to the mother. "If you'll look me up when you come to New York, or let me know, I may be of use to you, and I shall be very glad to put you in the way of getting at the Synthesis."

"Thanks," the mother drawled with her eyes on the card. She probably had no clear sense of the favor done her. She lifted her eyes and smiled on Ludlow with another kind of intelligence. "You're visiting at Mrs. Burton's."

"Yes," said Ludlow, remembering after a moment of surprise how pervasive the fact of a stranger's presence in

a village is. "Mr. Burton can tell you who I am," he added in some impatience with her renewed scrutiny of his card.

"Oh, it's all right," she said, and she put it in her pocket, and then she began to drift away a little. "Well, I'm sure I'm much obliged to you." She hesitated a moment, and then she said, "Well, good afternoon."

"Good-by," said Ludlow, and he lifted his hat and stood bowing her out of the Fine Arts Department, while she kept her eyes on him to the last with admiration and approval.

"Well, I declare, Cornelia," she burst out to her daughter, whom she found glowering at the agricultural implements, "that *is* about the nicest fellow! Do you know what he's done?" She stopped and began a search for her pocket, which ended successfully. "He's given me his name, and told me just what you're to do. And when you get to New York, if you ever do, you can go right straight *to* him."

She handed Ludlow's card to the girl, who instantly tore it to pieces without looking at it. "I'll never go to him—horrid, mean, cross old thing! And you go and talk about me to a perfect stranger as if I were a baby. And now he'll go and laugh at you with the Burtons, and they'll say it's just like you to say everything that comes into your head, that way, and think everybody's as nice as they seem. But *he* isn't nice! He's *horrid*, and conceited, and—and—hateful. And I shall *never* study art anywhere. And I'd *die* before I asked *him* to help me. He was just making fun of you all the time, and anybody but you would see it, mother! Comparing me to a hired girl!"

"No, I don't think he did *that*, Cornelia," said the mother with some misgiving. "I presume he may have been a little touched up by your pictures, and wanted to put me down about them——"

"Oh, mother, mother, mother!" The girl broke into tears over the agricultural implements. "They were the dust under his feet."

"Why, Cornelia, how you talk!"