

At the Zoological Gardens

by Jenny Mitchell

*To the memory of my English great grandparents, who married in
Birmingham in 1886.*

In the court behind the ‘back-to-backs’, Ellen had been easy prey, though she wasn’t a young woman. It was hardly entrapment. Sidney would lurch unexpectedly from one of the alleyways running between the houses and engage her in conversation, telling her about his latest exploits and how indispensable he was. Mostly she met his overabundance of enthusiasm with silence. How did you turn the direction of a conversation towards things that you yourself were interested in? With young men, though Sidney wasn’t exactly young, Ellen was little practiced. Nature, ducks on a pond, her Sunday afternoons at the Free Art Gallery. She didn’t think any of this would interest Sidney very much. It was maybe mistaking her silence for something else that had led him to lean forward suddenly, and as she turned her head, their lips touched. Then shuffling footsteps were heard approaching, and just as quickly as Sidney had arrived by one alleyway, he disappeared by another. It left her feeling slightly flustered though her elderly neighbour, Mister Cornelius, did not appear to notice anything amiss.

She’d been there when Clara was born. “That’ll be it then,” from the midwife. “D’you hear?” Her mother, though young at heart, was already forty-seven. Clara had been the last. A healthy baby and then a quick and excitable child, she’d brought joy to them all. Ellen had always assumed that she would be the one to stay at home, but when Clara started her schooling, her mother said, “You could marry.” She knew that she had a patience in her and she had discovered a love that came easily for children. Watching over her much younger sister as she set out to

explore the world around her, Ellen had readily grasped how it was personality that underlay the course a life might take. But as to the course of her own? She began to look at Sidney with new eyes. A stolen kiss was one thing, and he'd not asked for more. Was he something of the dandy? One thing was for certain, he was convinced of his own worth and the importance of all that he pursued, and she had come to find this rather trying if she was honest. The returns did not seem to be so great, and the prospects, possibly nil.

Trains had been with Ellen all her life. The noise and grime she supposed, soot lacing the fogs that hugged the River Rea. The Curzon Street sidings were not far from her home on Jennens Row. Mostly she'd had no cause to make a rail journey, though she'd been to Liverpool once with a few of her co-workers from the Press. A wag who'd not been invited had labelled it the 'Bookfolder's Day Out'. Arriving at Lime Street Station, they'd used the dome of the Customs House to guide them to the Albert Dock, as they'd been instructed. Everything had been on an immense scale. At the deep-water basin the sea of masts drew their eyes upwards into a limitless blue sky and the unceasing cacophony of men's and gull's cries was quite unlike anything Ellen had experienced before.

It was then she'd recalled 'The last of England,' by Ford Maddox Brown. She'd stood in front of it a few times, its poignancy stopping her dead. The woman seated on deck, gripping the hand of a child; shielding her daughter - Ellen felt sure of it - within the depths of her cloak. Her face thrawn and red. From the biting cold or the drama of the moment? A wind blasted broolly and tossing waves hinted at what was to come. Tears lit the woman's eyes, as if she could not help herself prefiguring an insurmountable separation. Beside her the man resolute, his gaze fixed on the distance as he firmly clasped the frozen fingers within his wife's dark glove. At the Albert Dock that day there were no departing emigrant ships and when they turned to retrace their steps to the station, the walls of the warehouses lining the dock showed a deep burnish in the mid-afternoon sun.

Will had seemed to come out of nowhere. She heard his voice before she saw his face, when the parish choir from All Saints came across for the re-dedication of the St Bart's pipe organ. They'd exchanged a few polite words at the afternoon tea and after that Will had taken to attending St Bart's evensong on a regular basis. Now she thought ahead to the coming rail trip to London and the early start. Her father was usually up before dawn, lighting the furnace at the beginning of his working day. He would wake her. In the morning, they moved without speaking. Will was at the door when her father drew back the bolt. The men exchanged nods, her father looking Will full in the eye. And then the two of them were off. She'd read the look - bring back my daughter safe. Ducking her head, she smiled into her chin as they fell into step.

This was her first visit to London and Regent's Park was by far the largest public pleasure garden she'd ever laid eyes on. Will cut rather a fine figure, with his polished boots, his slender build, the fob chain dangling from his waistcoat, and his clipped auburn moustache. She knew herself to be somewhat more modest in appearance, though her new hat was a fine affair. It had been her mother's treat. A dark blue felt, with black imitation feathers twirling around the brim, intertwined with knots of delicate silken lace. As Will propelled her along the Broad Walk, his hand squarely on her back, she began to see it. His questions as to what might interest her, were they to have a day off? His instructions to be sure to wrap up and bring a bag of bread. Ellen wasn't someone who enjoyed second guessing everything that came up. Quite the opposite. It was a relief to simply take Will's words at face value. She had the bag of bread. Suddenly a roar was heard and then another. With a quick intake of breath, Ellen broke into a run - towards the high, ornate railings which she now realized enclosed the Zoological Gardens. Will found himself putting on a spurt to keep up.

The sign said that black swans mated for life. How could they know that, about a bird? And what did it mean, anyway? Ellen and Will were standing on the

gravel at the edge of Three Island Pond. They'd been to see the lions and passed the emus with their double shafted beaks. But it was the waterfowl that were closest to Ellen's heart. Seeing the bread, two swans approached, although it was maybe simple curiosity on their part for the bread remained untouched. At close quarters, they had exceptionally long necks and the dense thickness of ruffled black feathers curling along their backs was a sight to behold. Their beaks - being a bright crimson - might have been alarming, but the swans floated on the water with such grace and self-possession that it was impossible to feel afraid. Then something extraordinary unfolded. One swan stretched its neck out low across the water and responding to the invitation, the other swan did the same. They then began dipping their heads under the water, raising their beaks and arching and intertwining their necks in a kind of synchronised dance. This continued for some time until Will and Ellen turned away from the swans and found each other's lips.

Later they had tea in the nearby Refreshment Room and Ellen chose a card. Then of a sudden, there was a need to take a cab and when they came onto the Outer Circle, a waiting horse was champing at the bit. As they pulled out of Euston Street Station, Will took her hand and wrapped his fingers lightly around hers and with the train beating its rhythm into the darkening countryside around them, Ellen dozed, overcome by a newly awakened awareness of the stillness and depth within him. Arriving at Birmingham New Street, she saw that late as it was, her mother and Clara were waiting on the platform. Clara was jumping out of her skin. "Did you see the lions? What was the best?" Linking her arms through theirs, Ellen's fingers touched the card in her pocket. She would give it to Clara in the morning. It was the swans that had been the best.

The following weeks at the Press passed by in a haze. Late one afternoon Ellen noticed some pages, already cut, which had fallen to the floor. Stooping to retrieve them, a title caught her eye - My Dear and Only Love. She read the poem through once, slowly, and then read it through again.

*He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
That puts it not unto the touch
To win or lose it all.*

*But if thou wilt be constant then,
And faithful of thy word,
I'll serve thee in such noble ways
And love thee evermore.*

Ellen was as honest as the day was long. Hoping that the pages wouldn't be missed, she tucked them inside her pocket. It was not for her to task herself, or Will, or even Sidney for that matter, with the charge. The verses were simply a statement of the way it needed to be, if you were going to throw caution to the wind and embark upon a marriage. It would mean leaving the Press.

By the May Day holiday Will had invited them to visit his home on Park Road. Ellen wore her hat, Clara had on a new dress and her parents simply took it all in their stride. Coming into the main room from the yard, Ellen noticed the dog. Bony, gray and possessed of a large wet nose, it followed them in and stretched out with an air of easy proprietorship in front of the freshly blacked stove. The dog's eyes, which reminded her of muddy puddles, could have been doleful but were not. Will's mother was resting on a chaise longue with a rug draped over her knees and welcomed them warmly. Will took great care with the pouring of the tea, they nibbled delicately on the egg and cucumber sandwiches prepared by Ellen that morning, and there was a Swiss roll for afters. Both families shared in the feeling that there was something quite special about this day. And although the dog had

barely given Ellen a glance, by the time they were ready to depart, it seemed to be lying across her boots and she was obliged, with a smile, to give it a few scratches behind its ears.

As a rule, neither Will nor Ellen gave much away, both being quite private people. Now a feeling of expectation hung in the thoughts of others regarding them. But Will had one more thing in mind and his intentions soon became clear. Their mothers were to spend the day together – Clara would be visiting with a friend – and Will had arranged for Ellen and her father to accompany him to Handsworth to look at the new developments. Ellen's father had seen a lot of changes in the city of his birth, and the biggest change by far had been the railway, which had arrived in the decade before he began fashioning his first pair of darbies. It had to be said that the railway had brought great opportunities. The population of Birmingham had almost doubled in the past thirty years and Ellen's father believed there was yet more change to come. He was keen to see what Will had to show them.

Mid-morning found the three of them alighting from a tram, close to the Council House on Soho Road. This building, which had been commissioned by the Handsworth Board of Health and housed a Free Library and the Local Board Offices, was an impressive Gothic Revival showpiece. Will himself had laid many of the building's red bricks in his early years in the trade and drew their attention to the detail in the polygonal bays and the oriel window. Gesturing towards the nearby fields, he explained that there was planning for more housing and for a substantial public park with a lake. Impressing her father and encouraging in Ellen the feeling that she had some idea of what might be to come. It was then that Will asked for Ellen's hand – the word 'Sir' might have crossed his lips – and grasping Will's outstretched palm, Ellen's father nodded his assent.

The wedding ceremony was conducted without fanfare. Ellen wore the silver pendant necklace given to her by Will on the announcement of their forthcoming nuptials. They had their individual portraits taken and later when they had them

finely tinted, Will's hair showed the deep auburn that would remain with him throughout his life. Sidney and Mister Cornelius surpassed themselves, presenting the newlyweds with a handsome Stiffel Brothers Odessa plate, with transfer printed roses and delphiniums hand-coloured in carmine and azure-blue. A plate that in centuries to come will be held and admired by those of Will and Ellen's descendants residing in Australia. Though this on the day would be the furthest thing from Ellen's thoughts.