

THOMAS HARDY

THE HAND OF
ETHELBERTA: A COMEDY
IN CHAPTERS

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**The Hand of Ethelberta:
A Comedy in Chapters**

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PREFACE

This somewhat frivolous narrative was produced as an interlude between stories of a more sober design, and it was given the sub-title of a comedy to indicate – though not quite accurately – the aim of the performance. A high degree of probability was not attempted in the arrangement of the incidents, and there was expected of the reader a certain lightness of mood, which should inform him with a good-natured willingness to accept the production in the spirit in which it was offered. The characters themselves, however, were meant to be consistent and human.

On its first appearance the novel suffered, perhaps deservedly, for what was involved in these intentions – for its quality of unexpectedness in particular – that unforgivable sin in the critic's sight – the immediate precursor of 'Ethelberta' having been a purely rural tale. Moreover, in its choice of medium, and line of perspective, it undertook a delicate task: to excite interest in a drama – if such a dignified word may be used in the connection – wherein servants were as important as, or more important than, their masters; wherein the drawing-room was sketched in many cases from the point of view of the servants' hall. Such a reversal of the social foreground has, perhaps, since grown more welcome, and readers even of the finer crusted kind may now be disposed to pardon a writer for presenting the sons and daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Chickerel as beings who come within the scope of a congenial regard.

T. H.

December 1895.

1. A STREET IN ANGLEBURY – A HEATH NEAR IT – INSIDE THE ‘RED LION’ INN

Young Mrs. Petherwin stepped from the door of an old and well-appointed inn in a Wessex town to take a country walk. By her look and carriage she appeared to belong to that gentle order of society which has no worldly sorrow except when its jewellery gets stolen; but, as a fact not generally known, her claim to distinction was rather one of brains than of blood. She was the daughter of a gentleman who lived in a large house not his own, and began life as a baby christened Ethelberta after an infant of title who does not come into the story at all, having merely furnished Ethelberta's mother with a subject of contemplation. She became teacher in a school, was praised by examiners, admired by gentlemen, not admired by gentlewomen, was touched up with accomplishments by masters who were coaxed into painstaking by her many graces, and, entering a mansion as governess to the daughter thereof, was stealthily married by the son. He, a minor like herself, died from a chill caught during the wedding tour, and a few weeks later was followed into the grave by Sir Ralph Petherwin, his unforgiving father, who had bequeathed his wealth to his wife absolutely.

These calamities were a sufficient reason to Lady Petherwin for pardoning all concerned. She took by the hand the forlorn Ethelberta – who seemed rather a detached bride than a widow – and finished her education by placing her for two or three years in a boarding-school at Bonn. Latterly she had brought the girl to England to live under her roof as daughter and companion, the condition attached being that Ethelberta was never openly to recognize her relations, for reasons which will hereafter appear.

The elegant young lady, as she had a full right to be called if she cared for the definition, arrested all the local attention when she emerged into the summer-evening light with that diadem-and-sceptre bearing – many people for reasons of heredity discovering such graces only in those whose vestibules are lined with ancestral mail, forgetting that a bear may be taught to dance. While this air of hers lasted, even the inanimate objects in the street appeared to know that she was there; but from a way she had of carelessly overthrowing her dignity by versatile moods, one could not calculate upon its presence to a certainty when she was round corners or in little lanes which demanded no repression of animal spirits.

‘Well to be sure!’ exclaimed a milkman, regarding her. ‘We should freeze in our beds if ’twere not for the sun, and, dang me! if she isn’t a pretty piece. A man could make a meal between them eyes and chin – eh, hostler? Odd nation dang my old sides if he couldn’t!’

The speaker, who had been carrying a pair of pails on a yoke, deposited them upon the edge of the pavement in front of the inn, and straightened his back to an excruciating perpendicular. His remarks had been addressed to a rickety person, wearing a waistcoat of that preternatural length from the top to the bottom button which prevails among men who have to do with horses. He was sweeping straws from the carriage-way beneath the stone arch that formed a passage to the stables behind.

‘Never mind the cursing and swearing, or somebody who’s never out of hearing may clap yer name down in his black book,’ said the hostler, also pausing, and lifting his eyes to the mullioned and transomed windows and moulded parapet above him – not to study them as features of ancient architecture, but just to give as healthful a stretch to the eyes as his acquaintance had done to his back. ‘Michael, a old man like you ought to think about other things, and not be looking two ways at your time of life. Pouncing upon young flesh like a carrion crow – ’tis a vile thing in a old man.’

‘’Tis; and yet ’tis not, for ’tis a naterel taste,’ said the milkman, again surveying Ethelberta, who had now paused upon a bridge in full view, to look down the river. ‘Now, if a poor needy feller like myself could only catch her alone when she’s dressed up to the nines for some grand party, and carry

her off to some lonely place – sakes, what a pot of jewels and goold things I warrant he'd find about her! 'Twould pay en for his trouble.'

'I don't dispute the picter; but 'tis sly and untimely to think such roguery. Though I've had thoughts like it, 'tis true, about high women – Lord forgive me for't.'

'And that figure of fashion standing there is a widow woman, so I hear?'

'Lady – not a penny less than lady. Ay, a thing of twenty-one or thereabouts.'

'A widow lady and twenty-one. 'Tis a backward age for a body who's so forward in her state of life.'

'Well, be that as 'twill, here's my showings for her age. She was about the figure of two or three-and-twenty when a' got off the carriage last night, tired out wi' boaming about the country; and nineteen this morning when she came downstairs after a sleep round the clock and a clane-washed face: so I thought to myself, twenty-one, I thought.'

'And what's the young woman's name, make so bold, hostler?'

'Ay, and the house were all in a stoor with her and the old woman, and their boxes and camp-kettles, that they carry to wash in because hand-basons bain't big enough, and I don't know what all; and t'other folk stopping here were no more than dirt thencefor'ard.'

'I suppose they've come out of some noble city a long way herefrom?'

'And there was her hair up in buckle as if she'd never seen a clay-cold man at all. However, to cut a long story short, all I know besides about 'em is that the name upon their luggage is Lady Petherwin, and she's the widow of a city gentleman, who was a man of valour in the Lord Mayor's Show.'

'Who's that chap in the gaiters and pack at his back, come out of the door but now?' said the milkman, nodding towards a figure of that description who had just emerged from the inn and trudged off in the direction taken by the lady – now out of sight.

'Chap in the gaiters? Chok' it all – why, the father of that nobleman that you call chap in the gaiters used to be hand in glove with half the Queen's court.'

'What d'ye tell o'?'

'That man's father was one of the mayor and corporation of Sandbourne, and was that familiar with men of money, that he'd slap 'em upon the shoulder as you or I or any other poor fool would the clerk of the parish.'

'O, what's my lordlin's name, make so bold, then?'

'Ay, the toppermost class nowadays have left off the use of wheels for the good of their constitutions, so they traipse and walk for many years up foreign hills, where you can see nothing but snow and fog, till there's no more left to walk up; and if they reach home alive, and ha'n't got too old and weared out, they walk and see a little of their own parishes. So they tower about with a pack and a stick and a clane white pocket-handkerchief over their hats just as you see he's got on his. He's been staying here a night, and is off now again. "Young man, young man," I think to myself, "if your shoulders were bent like a bandy and your knees bowed out as mine be, till there is not an inch of straight bone or gristle in 'ee, th' wouldstn't go doing hard work for play 'a b'lieve.'"

'True, true, upon my song. Such a pain as I have had in my lynes all this day to be sure; words don't know what shipwreck I suffer in these lynes o' mine – that they do not! And what was this young widow lady's maiden name, then, hostler? Folk have been peeping after her, that's true; but they don't seem to know much about her family.'

'And while I've tended horses fifty year that other folk might straddle 'em, here I be now not a penny the better! Often-times, when I see so many good things about, I feel inclined to help myself in common justice to my pocket.'

"Work hard and be poor,
Do nothing and get more."

But I draw in the horns of my mind and think to myself, “Forbear, John Hostler, forbear!” – Her maiden name? Faith, I don’t know the woman’s maiden name, though she said to me, “Good evening, John;” but I had no memory of ever seeing her afore – no, no more than the dead inside church-hatch – where I shall soon be likewise – I had not. “Ay, my nabs,” I think to myself, “more know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows.”

‘More know Tom Fool – what rambling old canticle is it you say, hostler?’ inquired the milkman, lifting his ear. ‘Let’s have it again – a good saying well spit out is a Christmas fire to my withered heart. More know Tom Fool –’

‘Than Tom Fool knows,’ said the hostler.

‘Ah! That’s the very feeling I’ve feeled over and over again, hostler, but not in such gifted language. ’Tis a thought I’ve had in me for years, and never could lick into shape! – O-ho-ho-ho! Splendid! Say it again, hostler, say it again! To hear my own poor notion that had no name brought into form like that – I wouldn’t ha’ lost it for the world! More know Tom Fool than – than – h-ho-ho-ho-ho!’

‘Don’t let your sense o’ vitness break out in such uproar, for heaven’s sake, or folk will surely think you’ve been laughing at the lady and gentleman. Well, here’s at it again – Night t’ee, Michael.’ And the hostler went on with his sweeping.

‘Night t’ee, hostler, I must move too,’ said the milkman, shouldering his yoke, and walking off; and there reached the inn in a gradual diminuendo, as he receded up the street, shaking his head convulsively, ‘More know – Tom Fool – than Tom Fool – ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!’

The ‘Red Lion,’ as the inn or hotel was called which of late years had become the fashion among tourists, because of the absence from its precincts of all that was fashionable and new, stood near the middle of the town, and formed a corner where in winter the winds whistled and assembled their forces previous to plunging helter-skelter along the streets. In summer it was a fresh and pleasant spot, convenient for such quiet characters as sojourned there to study the geology and beautiful natural features of the country round.

The lady whose appearance had asserted a difference between herself and the Anglebury people, without too clearly showing what that difference was, passed out of the town in a few moments and, following the highway across meadows fed by the Froom, she crossed the railway and soon got into a lonely heath. She had been watching the base of a cloud as it closed down upon the line of a distant ridge, like an upper upon a lower eyelid, shutting in the gaze of the evening sun. She was about to return before dusk came on, when she heard a commotion in the air immediately behind and above her head. The saunterer looked up and saw a wild-duck flying along with the greatest violence, just in its rear being another large bird, which a countryman would have pronounced to be one of the biggest duck-hawks that he had ever beheld. The hawk neared its intended victim, and the duck screamed and redoubled its efforts.

Ethelberta impulsively started off in a rapid run that would have made a little dog bark with delight and run after, her object being, if possible, to see the end of this desperate struggle for a life so small and unheard-of. Her stateliness went away, and it could be forgiven for not remaining; for her feet suddenly became as quick as fingers, and she raced along over the uneven ground with such force of tread that, being a woman slightly heavier than gossamer, her patent heels punched little D’s in the soil with unerring accuracy wherever it was bare, crippled the heather-twigs where it was not, and sucked the swampy places with a sound of quick kisses.

Her rate of advance was not to be compared with that of the two birds, though she went swiftly enough to keep them well in sight in such an open place as that around her, having at one point in the journey been so near that she could hear the whisk of the duck’s feathers against the wind as it lifted and lowered its wings. When the bird seemed to be but a few yards from its enemy she saw it strike downwards, and after a level flight of a quarter of a minute, vanish. The hawk swooped after,

and Ethelberta now perceived a whitely shining oval of still water, looking amid the swarthy level of the heath like a hole through to a nether sky.

Into this large pond, which the duck had been making towards from the beginning of its precipitate flight, it had dived out of sight. The excited and breathless runner was in a few moments close enough to see the disappointed hawk hovering and floating in the air as if waiting for the reappearance of its prey, upon which grim pastime it was so intent that by creeping along softly she was enabled to get very near the edge of the pool and witness the conclusion of the episode. Whenever the duck was under the necessity of showing its head to breathe, the other bird would dart towards it, invariably too late, however; for the diver was far too experienced in the rough humour of the buzzard family at this game to come up twice near the same spot, unaccountably emerging from opposite sides of the pool in succession, and bobbing again by the time its adversary reached each place, so that at length the hawk gave up the contest and flew away, a satanic moodiness being almost perceptible in the motion of its wings.

The young lady now looked around her for the first time, and began to perceive that she had run a long distance – very much further than she had originally intended to come. Her eyes had been so long fixed upon the hawk, as it soared against the bright and mottled field of sky, that on regarding the heather and plain again it was as if she had returned to a half-forgotten region after an absence, and the whole prospect was darkened to one uniform shade of approaching night. She began at once to retrace her steps, but having been indiscriminately wheeling round the pond to get a good view of the performance, and having followed no path thither, she found the proper direction of her journey to be a matter of some uncertainty.

‘Surely,’ she said to herself, ‘I faced the north at starting;’ and yet on walking now with her back where her face had been set, she did not approach any marks on the horizon which might seem to signify the town. Thus dubiously, but with little real concern, she walked on till the evening light began to turn to dusk, and the shadows to darkness.

Presently in front of her Ethelberta saw a white spot in the shade, and it proved to be in some way attached to the head of a man who was coming towards her out of a slight depression in the ground. It was as yet too early in the evening to be afraid, but it was too late to be altogether courageous; and with balanced sensations Ethelberta kept her eye sharply upon him as he rose by degrees into view. The peculiar arrangement of his hat and pugree soon struck her as being that she had casually noticed on a peg in one of the rooms of the ‘Red Lion,’ and when he came close she saw that his arms diminished to a peculiar smallness at their junction with his shoulders, like those of a doll, which was explained by their being girt round at that point with the straps of a knapsack that he carried behind him. Encouraged by the probability that he, like herself, was staying or had been staying at the ‘Red Lion,’ she said, ‘Can you tell me if this is the way back to Anglebury?’

‘It is one way; but the nearest is in this direction,’ said the tourist – the same who had been criticized by the two old men.

At hearing him speak all the delicate activities in the young lady’s person stood still: she stopped like a clock. When she could again fence with the perception which had caused all this, she breathed.

‘Mr. Julian!’ she exclaimed. The words were uttered in a way which would have told anybody in a moment that here lay something connected with the light of other days.

‘Ah, Mrs. Petherwin! – Yes, I am Mr. Julian – though that can matter very little, I should think, after all these years, and what has passed.’

No remark was returned to this rugged reply, and he continued unconcernedly, ‘Shall I put you in the path – it is just here?’

‘If you please.’

‘Come with me, then.’

She walked in silence at his heels, not a word passing between them all the way: the only noises which came from the two were the brushing of her dress and his gaiters against the heather, or the smart rap of a stray flint against his boot.

They had now reached a little knoll, and he turned abruptly: 'That is Anglebury – just where you see those lights. The path down there is the one you must follow; it leads round the hill yonder and directly into the town.'

'Thank you,' she murmured, and found that he had never removed his eyes from her since speaking, keeping them fixed with mathematical exactness upon one point in her face. She moved a little to go on her way; he moved a little less – to go on his.

'Good-night,' said Mr. Julian.

The moment, upon the very face of it, was critical; and yet it was one of those which have to wait for a future before they acquire a definite character as good or bad.

Thus much would have been obvious to any outsider; it may have been doubly so to Ethelberta, for she gave back more than she had got, replying, 'Good-bye – if you are going to say no more.'

Then in struck Mr. Julian: 'What can I say? You are nothing to me... I could forgive a woman doing anything for spite, except marrying for spite.'

'The connection of that with our present meeting does not appear, unless it refers to what you have done. It does not refer to me.'

'I am not married: you are.'

She did not contradict him, as she might have done. 'Christopher,' she said at last, 'this is how it is: you knew too much of me to respect me, and too little to pity me. A half knowledge of another's life mostly does injustice to the life half known.'

'Then since circumstances forbid my knowing you more, I must do my best to know you less, and elevate my opinion of your nature by forgetting what it consists in,' he said in a voice from which all feeling was polished away.

'If I did not know that bitterness had more to do with those words than judgment, I – should be – bitter too! You never knew half about me; you only knew me as a governess; you little think what my beginnings were.'

'I have guessed. I have many times told myself that your early life was superior to your position when I first met you. I think I may say without presumption that I recognize a lady by birth when I see her, even under reverses of an extreme kind. And certainly there is this to be said, that the fact of having been bred in a wealthy home does slightly redeem an attempt to attain to such a one again.'

Ethelberta smiled a smile of many meanings.

'However, we are wasting words,' he resumed cheerfully. 'It is better for us to part as we met, and continue to be the strangers that we have become to each other. I owe you an apology for having been betrayed into more feeling than I had a right to show, and let us part friends. Good night, Mrs. Petherwin, and success to you. We may meet again, some day, I hope.'

'Good night,' she said, extending her hand. He touched it, turned about, and in a short time nothing remained of him but quick regular brushings against the heather in the deep broad shadow of the moor.

Ethelberta slowly moved on in the direction that he had pointed out. This meeting had surprised her in several ways. First, there was the conjuncture itself; but more than that was the fact that he had not parted from her with any of the tragic resentment that she had from time to time imagined for that scene if it ever occurred. Yet there was really nothing wonderful in this: it is part of the generous nature of a bachelor to be not indisposed to forgive a portionless sweetheart who, by marrying elsewhere, has deprived him of the bliss of being obliged to marry her himself. Ethelberta would have been disappointed quite had there not been a comforting development of exasperation in the middle part of his talk; but after all it formed a poor substitute for the loving hatred she had expected.

When she reached the hotel the lamp over the door showed a face a little flushed, but the agitation which at first had possessed her was gone to a mere nothing. In the hall she met a slender woman wearing a silk dress of that peculiar black which in sunlight proclaims itself to have once seen better days as a brown, and days even better than those as a lavender, green, or blue.

‘Menlove,’ said the lady, ‘did you notice if any gentleman observed and followed me when I left the hotel to go for a walk this evening?’

The lady’s-maid, thus suddenly pulled up in a night forage after lovers, put a hand to her forehead to show that there was no mistake about her having begun to meditate on receiving orders to that effect, and said at last, ‘You once told me, ma’am, if you recollect, that when you were dressed, I was not to go staring out of the window after you as if you were a doll I had just manufactured and sent round for sale.’

‘Yes, so I did.’

‘So I didn’t see if anybody followed you this evening.’

‘Then did you hear any gentleman arrive here by the late train last night?’

‘O no, ma’am – how could I?’ said Mrs. Menlove – an exclamation which was more apposite than her mistress suspected, considering that the speaker, after retiring from duty, had slipped down her dark skirt to reveal a light, puffed, and festooned one, put on a hat and feather, together with several pennyweights of metal in the form of rings, brooches, and earrings – all in a time whilst one could count a hundred – and enjoyed half-an-hour of prime courtship by an honourable young waiter of the town, who had proved constant as the magnet to the pole for the space of the day and a half that she had known him.

Going at once upstairs, Ethelberta ran down the passage, and after some hesitation softly opened the door of the sitting-room in the best suite of apartments that the inn could boast of.

In this room sat an elderly lady writing by the light of two candles with green shades. Well knowing, as it seemed, who the intruder was, she continued her occupation, and her visitor advanced and stood beside the table. The old lady wore her spectacles low down her cheek, her glance being depressed to about the slope of her straight white nose in order to look through them. Her mouth was pursed up to almost a youthful shape as she formed the letters with her pen, and a slight move of the lip accompanied every downstroke. There were two large antique rings on her forefinger, against which the quill rubbed in moving backwards and forwards, thereby causing a secondary noise rivalling the primary one of the nib upon the paper.

‘Mamma,’ said the younger lady, ‘here I am at last.’

A writer’s mind in the midst of a sentence being like a ship at sea, knowing no rest or comfort till safely piloted into the harbour of a full stop, Lady Petherwin just replied with ‘What,’ in an occupied tone, not rising to interrogation. After signing her name to the letter, she raised her eyes.

‘Why, how late you are, Ethelberta, and how heated you look!’ she said. ‘I have been quite alarmed about you. What do you say has happened?’

The great, chief, and altogether eclipsing thing that had happened was the accidental meeting with an old lover whom she had once quarrelled with; and Ethelberta’s honesty would have delivered the tidings at once, had not, unfortunately, all the rest of her attributes been dead against that act, for the old lady’s sake even more than for her own.

‘I saw a great cruel bird chasing a harmless duck!’ she exclaimed innocently. ‘And I ran after to see what the end of it would be – much further than I had any idea of going. However, the duck came to a pond, and in running round it to see the end of the fight, I could not remember which way I had come.’

‘Mercy!’ said her mother-in-law, lifting her large eyelids, heavy as window-shutters, and spreading out her fingers like the horns of a snail. ‘You might have sunk up to your knees and got lost in that swampy place – such a time of night, too. What a tomboy you are! And how did you find your way home after all!’

‘O, some man showed me the way, and then I had no difficulty, and after that I came along leisurely.’

‘I thought you had been running all the way; you look so warm.’

‘It is a warm evening... Yes, and I have been thinking of old times as I walked along,’ she said, ‘and how people’s positions in life alter. Have I not heard you say that while I was at Bonn, at school, some family that we had known had their household broken up when the father died, and that the children went away you didn’t know where?’

‘Do you mean the Julians?’

‘Yes, that was the name.’

‘Why, of course you know it was the Julians. Young Julian had a day or two’s fancy for you one summer, had he not? – just after you came to us, at the same time, or just before it, that my poor boy and you were so desperately attached to each other.’

‘O yes, I recollect,’ said Ethelberta. ‘And he had a sister, I think. I wonder where they went to live after the family collapse.’

‘I do not know,’ said Lady Petherwin, taking up another sheet of paper. ‘I have a dim notion that the son, who had been brought up to no profession, became a teacher of music in some country town – music having always been his hobby. But the facts are not very distinct in my memory.’ And she dipped her pen for another letter.

Ethelberta, with a rather fallen countenance, then left her mother-in-law, and went where all ladies are supposed to go when they want to torment their minds in comfort – to her own room. Here she thoughtfully sat down awhile, and some time later she rang for her maid.

‘Menlove,’ she said, without looking towards a rustle and half a footstep that had just come in at the door, but leaning back in her chair and speaking towards the corner of the looking-glass, ‘will you go down and find out if any gentleman named Julian has been staying in this house? Get to know it, I mean, Menlove, not by directly inquiring; you have ways of getting to know things, have you not? If the devoted George were here now, he would help –’

‘George was nothing to me, ma’am.’

‘James, then.’

‘And I only had James for a week or ten days: when I found he was a married man, I encouraged his addresses very little indeed.’

‘If you had encouraged him heart and soul, you couldn’t have fumed more at the loss of him. But please to go and make that inquiry, will you, Menlove?’

In a few minutes Ethelberta’s woman was back again. ‘A gentleman of that name stayed here last night, and left this afternoon.’

‘Will you find out his address?’

Now the lady’s-maid had already been quick-witted enough to find out that, and indeed all about him; but it chanced that a fashionable illustrated weekly paper had just been sent from the bookseller’s, and being in want of a little time to look it over before it reached her mistress’s hands, Mrs. Menlove retired, as if to go and ask the question – to stand meanwhile under the gas-lamp in the passage, inspecting the fascinating engravings. But as time will not wait for tire-women, a natural length of absence soon elapsed, and she returned again and said,

‘His address is, Upper Street, Sandbourne.’

‘Thank you, that will do,’ replied her mistress.

The hour grew later, and that dreamy period came round when ladies’ fancies, that have lain shut up close as their fans during the day, begin to assert themselves anew. At this time a good guess at Ethelberta’s thoughts might have been made from her manner of passing the minutes away. Instead of reading, entering notes in her diary, or doing any ordinary thing, she walked to and fro, curled her pretty nether lip within her pretty upper one a great many times, made a cradle of her locked

fingers, and paused with fixed eyes where the walls of the room set limits upon her walk to look at nothing but a picture within her mind.

2. CHRISTOPHER'S HOUSE – SANDBOURNE TOWN – SANDBOURNE MOOR

During the wet autumn of the same year, the postman passed one morning as usual into a plain street that ran through the less fashionable portion of Sandbourne, a modern coast town and watering-place not many miles from the ancient Anglebury. He knocked at the door of a flat-faced brick house, and it was opened by a slight, thoughtful young man, with his hat on, just then coming out. The postman put into his hands a book packet, addressed, 'Christopher Julian, Esq.'

Christopher took the package upstairs, opened it with curiosity, and discovered within a green volume of poems, by an anonymous writer, the title-page bearing the inscription, 'Metres by E.' The book was new, though it was cut, and it appeared to have been looked into. The young man, after turning it over and wondering where it came from, laid it on the table and went his way, being in haste to fulfil his engagements for the day.

In the evening, on returning home from his occupations, he sat himself down cosily to read the newly-arrived volume. The winds of this uncertain season were snarling in the chimneys, and drops of rain spat themselves into the fire, revealing plainly that the young man's room was not far enough from the top of the house to admit of a twist in the flue, and revealing darkly a little more, if that social rule-of-three inverse, the higher in lodgings the lower in pocket, were applicable here. However, the aspect of the room, though homely, was cheerful, a somewhat contradictory group of furniture suggesting that the collection consisted of waifs and strays from a former home, the grimy faces of the old articles exercising a curious and subduing effect on the bright faces of the new. An oval mirror of rococo workmanship, and a heavy cabinet-piano with a cornice like that of an Egyptian temple, adjoined a harmonium of yesterday, and a harp that was almost as new. Printed music of the last century, and manuscript music of the previous evening, lay there in such quantity as to endanger the tidiness of a retreat which was indeed only saved from a chronic state of litter by a pair of hands that sometimes played, with the lightness of breezes, about the sewing-machine standing in a remote corner – if any corner could be called remote in a room so small.

Fire lights and shades from the shaking flames struck in a butterfly flutter on the underparts of the mantelshelf, and upon the reader's cheek as he sat. Presently, and all at once, a much greater intentness pervaded his face: he turned back again, and read anew the subject that had arrested his eyes. He was a man whose countenance varied with his mood, though it kept somewhat in the rear of that mood. He looked sad when he felt almost serene, and only serene when he felt quite cheerful. It is a habit people acquire who have had repressing experiences.

A faint smile and flush now lightened his face, and jumping up he opened the door and exclaimed, 'Faith! will you come here for a moment?'

A prompt step was heard on the stairs, and the young person addressed as Faith entered the room. She was small in figure, and bore less in the form of her features than in their shades when changing from expression to expression the evidence that she was his sister.

'Faith – I want your opinion. But, stop, read this first.' He laid his finger upon a page in the book, and placed it in her hand.

The girl drew from her pocket a little green-leather sheath, worn at the edges to whity-brown, and out of that a pair of spectacles, unconsciously looking round the room for a moment as she did so, as if to ensure that no stranger saw her in the act of using them. Here a weakness was uncovered at once; it was a small, pretty, and natural one; indeed, as weaknesses go in the great world, it might almost have been called a commendable trait. She then began to read, without sitting down.

These 'Metres by E.' composed a collection of soft and marvellously musical rhymes, of a nature known as the *vers de société*. The lines presented a series of playful defences of the supposed

strategy of womankind in fascination, courtship, and marriage – the whole teeming with ideas bright as mirrors and just as unsubstantial, yet forming a brilliant argument to justify the ways of girls to men. The pervading characteristic of the mass was the means of forcing into notice, by strangeness of contrast, the single mournful poem that the book contained. It was placed at the very end, and under the title of ‘Cancelled Words,’ formed a whimsical and rather affecting love-lament, somewhat in the tone of many of Sir Thomas Wyatt’s poems. This was the piece which had arrested Christopher’s attention, and had been pointed out by him to his sister Faith.

‘It is very touching,’ she said, looking up.

‘What do you think I suspect about it – that the poem is addressed to me! Do you remember, when father was alive and we were at Solentsea that season, about a governess who came there with a Sir Ralph Petherwin and his wife, people with a sickly little daughter and a grown-up son?’

‘I never saw any of them. I think I remember your knowing something about a young man of that name.’

‘Yes, that was the family. Well, the governess there was a very attractive woman, and somehow or other I got more interested in her than I ought to have done (this is necessary to the history), and we used to meet in romantic places – and – and that kind of thing, you know. The end of it was, she jilted me and married the son.’

‘You were anxious to get away from Solentsea.’

‘Was I? Then that was chiefly the reason. Well, I decided to think no more of her, and I was helped to do it by the troubles that came upon us shortly afterwards; it is a blessed arrangement that one does not feel a sentimental grief at all when additional grief comes in the shape of practical misfortune. However, on the first afternoon of the little holiday I took for my walking tour last summer, I came to Anglebury, and stayed about the neighbourhood for a day or two to see what it was like, thinking we might settle there if this place failed us. The next evening I left, and walked across the heath to Flychett – that’s a village about five miles further on – so as to be that distance on my way for next morning; and while I was crossing the heath there I met this very woman. We talked a little, because we couldn’t help it – you may imagine the kind of talk it was – and parted as coolly as we had met. Now this strange book comes to me; and I have a strong conviction that she is the writer of it, for that poem sketches a similar scene – or rather suggests it; and the tone generally seems the kind of thing she would write – not that she was a sad woman, either.’

‘She seems to be a warm-hearted, impulsive woman, to judge from these tender verses.’

‘People who print very warm words have sometimes very cold manners. I wonder if it is really her writing, and if she has sent it to me!’

‘Would it not be a singular thing for a married woman to do? Though of course’ – (she removed her spectacles as if they hindered her from thinking, and hid them under the timepiece till she should go on reading) – ‘of course poets have morals and manners of their own, and custom is no argument with them. I am sure I would not have sent it to a man for the world!’

‘I do not see any absolute harm in her sending it. Perhaps she thinks that, since it is all over, we may as well die friends.’

‘If I were her husband I should have doubts about the dying. And “all over” may not be so plain to other people as it is to you.’

‘Perhaps not. And when a man checks all a woman’s finer sentiments towards him by marrying her, it is only natural that it should find a vent somewhere. However, she probably does not know of my downfall since father’s death. I hardly think she would have cared to do it had she known that. (I am assuming that it is Ethelberta – Mrs. Petherwin – who sends it: of course I am not sure.) We must remember that when I knew her I was a gentleman at ease, who had not the least notion that I should have to work for a living, and not only so, but should have first to invent a profession to work at out of my old tastes.’

‘Kit, you have made two mistakes in your thoughts of that lady. Even though I don’t know her, I can show you that. Now I’ll tell you! the first is in thinking that a married lady would send the book with that poem in it without at any rate a slight doubt as to its propriety: the second is in supposing that, had she wished to do it, she would have given the thing up because of our misfortunes. With a true woman the second reason would have had no effect had she once got over the first. I’m a woman, and that’s why I know.’

Christopher said nothing, and turned over the poems.

* * * * *

He lived by teaching music, and, in comparison with starving, thrived; though the wealthy might possibly have said that in comparison with thriving he starved. During this night he hummed airs in bed, thought he would do for the ballad of the fair poetess what other musicians had done for the ballads of other fair poetesses, and dreamed that she smiled on him as her prototype Sappho smiled on Phaon.

The next morning before starting on his rounds a new circumstance induced him to direct his steps to the bookseller’s, and ask a question. He had found on examining the wrapper of the volume that it was posted in his own town.

‘No copy of the book has been sold by me,’ the bookseller’s voice replied from far up the Alpine height of the shop-ladder, where he stood dusting stale volumes, as was his habit of a morning before customers came. ‘I have never heard of it – probably never shall;’ and he shook out the duster, so as to hit the delicate mean between stifling Christopher and not stifling him.

‘Surely you don’t live by your shop?’ said Christopher, drawing back.

The bookseller’s eyes rested on the speaker’s; his face changed; he came down and placed his hand on the lapel of Christopher’s coat. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘country bookselling is a miserable, impoverishing, exasperating thing in these days. Can you understand the rest?’

‘I can; I forgive a starving man anything,’ said Christopher.

‘You go a long way very suddenly,’ said the book seller. ‘Half as much pity would have seemed better. However, wait a moment.’ He looked into a list of new books, and added: ‘The work you allude to was only published last week; though, mind you, if it had been published last century I might not have sold a copy.’

Although his time was precious, Christopher had now become so interested in the circumstance that the unseen sender was somebody breathing his own atmosphere, possibly the very writer herself – the book being too new to be known – that he again passed through the blue shadow of the spire which stretched across the street to-day, and went towards the post-office, animated by a bright intention – to ask the postmaster if he knew the handwriting in which the packet was addressed.

Now the postmaster was an acquaintance of Christopher’s, but, as regarded putting that question to him, there was a difficulty. Everything turned upon whether the postmaster at the moment of asking would be in his under-government manner, or in the manner with which mere nature had endowed him. In the latter case his reply would be all that could be wished; in the former, a man who had sunk in society might as well put his tongue into a mousetrap as make an inquiry so obviously outside the pale of legality as was this.

So he postponed his business for the present, and refrained from entering till he passed by after dinner, when pleasant malt liquor, of that capacity for cheering which is expressed by four large letter X’s marching in a row, had refilled the globular trunk of the postmaster and neutralized some of the effects of officiality. The time was well chosen, but the inquiry threatened to prove fruitless: the postmaster had never, to his knowledge, seen the writing before. Christopher was turning away when a clerk in the background looked up and stated that some young lady had brought a packet with such an address upon it into the office two days earlier to get it stamped.

‘Do you know her?’ said Christopher.

‘I have seen her about the neighbourhood. She goes by every morning; I think she comes into the town from beyond the common, and returns again between four and five in the afternoon.’

‘What does she wear?’

‘A white wool jacket with zigzags of black braid.’

Christopher left the post-office and went his way. Among his other pupils there were two who lived at some distance from Sandbourne – one of them in the direction indicated as that habitually taken by the young person; and in the afternoon, as he returned homeward, Christopher loitered and looked around. At first he could see nobody; but when about a mile from the outskirts of the town he discerned a light spot ahead of him, which actually turned out to be the jacket alluded to. In due time he met the wearer face to face; she was not Ethelberta Petherwin – quite a different sort of individual. He had long made up his mind that this would be the case, yet he was in some indescribable way disappointed.

Of the two classes into which gentle young women naturally divide, those who grow red at their weddings, and those who grow pale, the present one belonged to the former class. She was an April-natured, pink-cheeked girl, with eyes that would have made any jeweller in England think of his trade – one who evidently took her day in the daytime, frequently caught the early worm, and had little to do with yawns or candlelight. She came and passed him; he fancied that her countenance changed. But one may fancy anything, and the pair receded each from each without turning their heads. He could not speak to her, plain and simple as she seemed.

It is rarely that a man who can be entered and made to throb by the channel of his ears is not open to a similar attack through the channel of his eyes – for many doors will admit to one mansion – allowance being made for the readier capacity of chosen and practised organs. Hence the beauties, concords, and eloquences of the female form were never without their effect upon Christopher, a born musician, artist, poet, seer, mouthpiece – whichever a translator of Nature’s oracles into simple speech may be called. The young girl who had gone by was fresh and pleasant; moreover, she was a sort of mysterious link between himself and the past, which these things were vividly reviving in him.

The following week Christopher met her again. She had not much dignity, he had not much reserve, and the sudden resolution to have a holiday which sometimes impels a plump heart to rise up against a brain that overweights it was not to be resisted. He just lifted his hat, and put the only question he could think of as a beginning: ‘Have I the pleasure of addressing the author of a book of very melodious poems that was sent me the other day?’

The girl’s forefinger twirled rapidly the loop of braid that it had previously been twirling slowly, and drawing in her breath, she said, ‘No, sir.’

‘The sender, then?’

‘Yes.’

She somehow presented herself as so insignificant by the combined effect of the manner and the words that Christopher lowered his method of address to her level at once. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘such an atmosphere as the writer of “Metres by E.” seems to breathe would soon spoil cheeks that are fresh and round as lady-apples – eh, little girl? But are you disposed to tell me that writer’s name?’

By applying a general idea to a particular case a person with the best of intentions may find himself immediately landed in a quandary. In saying to the country girl before him what would have suited the mass of country lasses well enough, Christopher had offended her beyond the cure of compliment.

‘I am not disposed to tell the writer’s name,’ she replied, with a dudgeon that was very great for one whose whole stock of it was a trifle. And she passed on and left him standing alone.

Thus further conversation was checked; but, through having rearranged the hours of his country lessons, Christopher met her the next Wednesday, and the next Friday, and throughout the following week – no further words passing between them. For a while she went by very demurely, apparently

mindful of his offence. But effrontery is not proved to be part of a man's nature till he has been guilty of a second act: the best of men may commit a first through accident or ignorance – may even be betrayed into it by over-zeal for experiment. Some such conclusion may or may not have been arrived at by the girl with the lady-apple cheeks; at any rate, after the lapse of another week a new spectacle presented itself; her redness deepened whenever Christopher passed her by, and embarrassment pervaded her from the lowest stitch to the tip of her feather. She had little chance of escaping him by diverging from the road, for a figure could be seen across the open ground to the distance of half a mile on either side. One day as he drew near as usual, she met him as women meet a cloud of dust – she turned and looked backwards till he had passed.

This would have been disconcerting but for one reason: Christopher was ceasing to notice her. He was a man who often, when walking abroad, and looking as it were at the scene before his eyes, discerned successes and failures, friends and relations, episodes of childhood, wedding feasts and funerals, the landscape suffering greatly by these visions, until it became no more than the patterned wall-tints about the paintings in a gallery; something necessary to the tone, yet not regarded. Nothing but a special concentration of himself on externals could interrupt this habit, and now that her appearance along the way had changed from a chance to a custom he began to lapse again into the old trick. He gazed once or twice at her form without seeing it: he did not notice that she trembled.

He sometimes read as he walked, and book in hand he frequently approached her now. This went on till six weeks had passed from the time of their first encounter. Latterly might have been once or twice heard, when he had moved out of earshot, a sound like a small gasping sigh; but no arrangements were disturbed, and Christopher continued to keep down his eyes as persistently as a saint in a church window.

The last day of his engagement had arrived, and with it the last of his walks that way. On his final return he carried in his hand a bunch of flowers which had been presented to him at the country-house where his lessons were given. He was taking them home to his sister Faith, who prized the lingering blossoms of the seeding season. Soon appeared as usual his fellow-traveller; whereupon Christopher looked down upon his nosegay. 'Sweet simple girl,' he thought, 'I'll endeavour to make peace with her by means of these flowers before we part for good.'

When she came up he held them out to her and said, 'Will you allow me to present you with these?'

The bright colours of the nosegay instantly attracted the girl's hand – perhaps before there had been time for thought to thoroughly construe the position; for it happened that when her arm was stretched into the air she steadied it quickly, and stood with the pose of a statue – rigid with uncertainty. But it was too late to refuse: Christopher had put the nosegay within her fingers. Whatever pleasant expression of thanks may have appeared in her eyes fell only on the bunch of flowers, for during the whole transaction they reached to no higher level than that. To say that he was coming no more seemed scarcely necessary under the circumstances, and wishing her 'Good afternoon' very heartily, he passed on.

He had learnt by this time her occupation, which was that of pupil-teacher at one of the schools in the town, whither she walked daily from a village near. If he had not been poor and the little teacher humble, Christopher might possibly have been tempted to inquire more briskly about her, and who knows how such a pursuit might have ended? But hard externals rule volatile sentiment, and under these untoward influences the girl and the book and the truth about its author were matters upon which he could not afford to expend much time. All Christopher did was to think now and then of the pretty innocent face and round deep eyes, not once wondering if the mind which enlivened them ever thought of him.

3. SANDBOURNE MOOR (continued)

It was one of those hostile days of the year when chatterbox ladies remain miserably in their homes to save the carriage and harness, when clerks' wives hate living in lodgings, when vehicles and people appear in the street with duplicates of themselves underfoot, when bricklayers, slaters, and other out-door journeymen sit in a shed and drink beer, when ducks and drakes play with hilarious delight at their own family game, or spread out one wing after another in the slower enjoyment of letting the delicious moisture penetrate to their innermost down. The smoke from the flues of Sandbourne had barely strength enough to emerge into the drizzling rain, and hung down the sides of each chimney-pot like the streamer of a becalmed ship; and a troop of rats might have rattled down the pipes from roof to basement with less noise than did the water that day.

On the broad moor beyond the town, where Christopher's meetings with the teacher had so regularly occurred, were a stream and some large pools; and beside one of these, near some hatches and a weir, stood a little square building, not much larger inside than the Lord Mayor's coach. It was known simply as 'The Weir House.' On this wet afternoon, which was the one following the day of Christopher's last lesson over the plain, a nearly invisible smoke came from the puny chimney of the hut. Though the door was closed, sounds of chatting and mirth fizzed from the interior, and would have told anybody who had come near – which nobody did – that the usually empty shell was tenanted to-day.

The scene within was a large fire in a fireplace to which the whole floor of the house was no more than a hearthstone. The occupants were two gentlemanly persons, in shooting costume, who had been traversing the moor for miles in search of wild duck and teal, a waterman, and a small spaniel. In the corner stood their guns, and two or three wild mallards, which represented the scanty product of their morning's labour, the iridescent necks of the dead birds replying to every flicker of the fire. The two sportsmen were smoking, and their man was mostly occupying himself in poking and stirring the fire with a stick: all three appeared to be pretty well wetted.

One of the gentlemen, by way of varying the not very exhilarating study of four brick walls within microscopic distance of his eye, turned to a small square hole which admitted light and air to the hut, and looked out upon the dreary prospect before him. The wide concave of cloud, of the monotonous hue of dull pewter, formed an unbroken hood over the level from horizon to horizon; beneath it, reflecting its wan lustre, was the glazed high-road which stretched, hedgeless and ditchless, past a directing-post where another road joined it, and on to the less regular ground beyond, lying like a riband unrolled across the scene, till it vanished over the furthest undulation. Beside the pools were occasional tall sheaves of flags and sedge, and about the plain a few bushes, these forming the only obstructions to a view otherwise unbroken.

The sportsman's attention was attracted by a figure in a state of gradual enlargement as it approached along the road.

'I should think that if pleasure can't tempt a native out of doors to-day, business will never force him out,' he observed. 'There is, for the first time, somebody coming along the road.'

'If business don't drag him out pleasure'll never tempt en, is more like our nater in these parts, sir,' said the man, who was looking into the fire.

The conversation showed no vitality, and down it dropped dead as before, the man who was standing up continuing to gaze into the moisture. What had at first appeared as an epicene shape the decreasing space resolved into a cloaked female under an umbrella: she now relaxed her pace, till, reaching the directing-post where the road branched into two, she paused and looked about her. Instead of coming further she slowly retraced her steps for about a hundred yards.

'That's an appointment,' said the first speaker, as he removed the cigar from his lips; 'and by the lords, what a day and place for an appointment with a woman!'

‘What’s an appointment?’ inquired his friend, a town young man, with a Tussaud complexion and well-pencilled brows half way up his forehead, so that his upper eyelids appeared to possess the uncommon quality of tallness.

‘Look out here, and you’ll see. By that directing-post, where the two roads meet. As a man devoted to art, Ladywell, who has had the honour of being hung higher up on the Academy walls than any other living painter, you should take out your sketch-book and dash off the scene.’

Where nothing particular is going on, one incident makes a drama; and, interested in that proportion, the art-sportsman puts up his eyeglass (a form he adhered to before firing at game that had risen, by which merciful arrangement the bird got safe off), placed his face beside his companion’s, and also peered through the opening. The young pupil-teacher – for she was the object of their scrutiny – re-approached the spot whereon she had been accustomed for the last many weeks of her journey home to meet Christopher, now for the first time missing, and again she seemed reluctant to pass the hand-post, for that marked the point where the chance of seeing him ended. She glided backwards as before, this time keeping her face still to the front, as if trying to persuade the world at large, and her own shamefacedness, that she had not yet approached the place at all.

‘Query, how long will she wait for him (for it is a man to a certainty)?’ resumed the elder of the smokers, at the end of several minutes of silence, when, full of vacillation and doubt, she became lost to view behind some bushes. ‘Will she reappear?’ The smoking went on, and up she came into open ground as before, and walked by.

‘I wonder who the girl is, to come to such a place in this weather? There she is again,’ said the young man called Ladywell.

‘Some cottage lass, not yet old enough to make the most of the value set on her by her follower, small as that appears to be. Now we may get an idea of the hour named by the fellow for the appointment, for, depend upon it, the time when she first came – about five minutes ago – was the time he should have been there. It is now getting on towards five – half-past four was doubtless the time mentioned.’

‘She’s not come o’ purpose: ’tis her way home from school every day,’ said the waterman.

‘An experiment on woman’s endurance and patience under neglect. Two to one against her staying a quarter of an hour.’

‘The same odds against her not staying till five would be nearer probability. What’s half-an-hour to a girl in love?’

‘On a moorland in wet weather it is thirty perceptible minutes to any fireside man, woman, or beast in Christendom – minutes that can be felt, like the Egyptian plague of darkness. Now, little girl, go home: he is not worth it.’

Twenty minutes passed, and the girl returned miserably to the hand-post, still to wander back to her retreat behind the sedge, and lead any chance comer from the opposite quarter to believe that she had not yet reached this ultimate point beyond which a meeting with Christopher was impossible.

‘Now you’ll find that she means to wait the complete half-hour, and then off she goes with a broken heart.’

All three now looked through the hole to test the truth of the prognostication. The hour of five completed itself on their watches; the girl again came forward. And then the three in ambuscade could see her pull out her handkerchief and place it to her eyes.

‘She’s grieving now because he has not come. Poor little woman, what a brute he must be; for a broken heart in a woman means a broken vow in a man, as I infer from a thousand instances in experience, romance, and history. Don’t open the door till she is gone, Ladywell; it will only disturb her.’

As they had guessed, the pupil-teacher, hearing the distant town-clock strike the hour, gave way to her fancy no longer, and launched into the diverging path. This lingering for Christopher’s arrival had, as is known, been founded on nothing more of the nature of an assignation than lay in his

regular walk along the plain at that time every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of the six previous weeks. It must be said that he was very far indeed from divining that his injudicious peace-offering of the flowers had stirred into life such a wearing, anxious, hopeful, despairing solicitude as this, which had been latent for some time during his constant meetings with the little stranger.

She vanished in the mist towards the left, and the loiterers in the hut began to move and open the door, remarking, 'Now then for Wyndway House, a change of clothes, and a dinner.'

4. SANDBOURNE PIER – ROAD TO WYNDWAY – BALL-ROOM IN WYNDWAY HOUSE

The last light of a winter day had gone down behind the houses of Sandbourne, and night was shut close over all. Christopher, about eight o'clock, was standing at the end of the pier with his back towards the open sea, whence the waves were pushing to the shore in frills and coils that were just rendered visible in all their bleak instability by the row of lights along the sides of the jetty, the rapid motion landward of the wavetips producing upon his eye an apparent progress of the pier out to sea. This pier-head was a spot which Christopher enjoyed visiting on such moaning and sighing nights as the present, when the sportive and variegated throng that haunted the pier on autumn days was no longer there, and he seemed alone with weather and the invincible sea.

Somebody came towards him along the deserted footway, and rays from the nearest lamp streaked the face of his sister Faith.

'O Christopher, I knew you were here,' she said eagerly. 'You are wanted; there's a servant come from Wyndway House for you. He is sent to ask if you can come immediately to play at a little dance they have resolved upon this evening – quite suddenly it seems. If you can come, you must bring with you any assistant you can lay your hands upon at a moment's notice, he says.'

'Wyndway House; why should the people send for me above all other musicians in the town?'

Faith did not know. 'If you really decide to go,' she said, as they walked homeward, 'you might take me as your assistant. I should answer the purpose, should I not, Kit? since it is only a dance or two they seem to want.'

'And your harp I suppose you mean. Yes; you might be competent to take a part. It cannot be a regular ball; they would have had the quadrille band for anything of that sort. Faith – we'll go. However, let us see the man first, and inquire particulars.'

Reaching home, Christopher found at his door a horse and wagonette in charge of a man-servant in livery, who repeated what Faith had told her brother. Wyndway House was a well-known country-seat three or four miles out of the town, and the coachman mentioned that if they were going it would be well that they should get ready to start as soon as they conveniently could, since he had been told to return by ten if possible. Christopher quickly prepared himself, and put a new string or two into Faith's harp, by which time she also was dressed; and, wrapping up herself and her instrument safe from the night air, away they drove at half-past nine.

'Is it a large party?' said Christopher, as they whizzed along.

'No, sir; it is what we call a dance – that is, 'tis like a ball, you know, on a small scale – a ball on a spurt, that you never thought of till you had it. In short, it grew out of a talk at dinner, I believe; and some of the young people present wanted a jig, and didn't care to play themselves, you know, young ladies being an idle class of society at the best of times. We've a house full of sleeping company, you understand – been there a week some of 'em – most of 'em being mistress's relations.'

'They probably found it a little dull.'

'Well, yes – it is rather dull for 'em – Christmas-time and all. As soon as it was proposed they were wild for sending post-haste for somebody or other to play to them.'

'Did they name me particularly?' said Christopher.

'Yes; "Mr. Christopher Julian," she says. "The gent who's turned music-man?" I said. "Yes, that's him," says she.'

'There were music-men living nearer to your end of the town than I.'

'Yes, but I know it was you particular: though I don't think mistress thought anything about you at first. Mr. Joyce – that's the butler – said that your name was mentioned to our old party, when he was in the room, by a young lady staying with us, and mistress says then, "The Julians have had

a downfall, and the son has taken to music.” Then when dancing was talked of, they said, “O, let’s have him by all means.””

‘Was the young lady who first inquired for my family the same one who said, “Let’s have him by all means?”’

‘O no; but it was on account of her asking that the rest said they would like you to play – at least that’s as I had it from Joyce.’

‘Do you know that lady’s name?’

‘Mrs. Petherwin.’

‘Ah!’

‘Cold, sir?’

‘O no.’

Christopher did not like to question the man any further, though what he had heard added new life to his previous curiosity; and they drove along the way in silence, Faith’s figure, wrapped up to the top of her head, cutting into the sky behind them like a sugar-loaf. Such gates as crossed the roads had been left open by the forethought of the coachman, and, passing the lodge, they proceeded about half-a-mile along a private drive, then ascended a rise, and came in view of the front of the mansion, punctured with windows that were now mostly lighted up.

‘What is that?’ said Faith, catching a glimpse of something that the carriage-lamp showed on the face of one wall as they passed, a marble bas-relief of some battle-piece, built into the stonework.

‘That’s the scene of the death of one of the squire’s forefathers – Colonel Sir Martin Jones, who was killed at the moment of victory in the battle of Salamanca – but I haven’t been here long enough to know the rights of it. When I am in one of my meditations, as I wait here with the carriage sometimes, I think how many more get killed at the moment of victory than at the moment of defeat. This is the entrance for you, sir.’ And he turned the corner and pulled up before a side door.

They alighted and went in, Christopher shouldering Faith’s harp, and she marching modestly behind, with curly-eared music-books under her arm. They were shown into the house-steward’s room, and ushered thence along a badly-lit passage and past a door within which a hum and laughter were audible. The door next to this was then opened for them, and they entered.

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Scarcely had Faith, or Christopher either, ever beheld a more shining scene than was presented by the saloon in which they now found themselves. Coming direct from the gloomy park, and led to the room by that back passage from the servants’ quarter, the light from the chandelier and branches against the walls, striking on gilding at all points, quite dazzled their sight for a minute or two; it caused Faith to move forward with her eyes on the floor, and filled Christopher with an impulse to turn back again into some dusky corner where every thread of his not over-new dress suit – rather moth-eaten through lack of feasts for airing it – could be counted less easily.

He was soon seated before a grand piano, and Faith sat down under the shadow of her harp, both being arranged on a dais within an alcove at one end of the room. A screen of ivy and holly had been constructed across the front of this recess for the games of the children on Christmas Eve, and it still remained there, a small creep-hole being left for entrance and exit.

Then the merry guests tumbled through doors at the further end, and dancing began. The mingling of black-coated men and bright ladies gave a charming appearance to the groups as seen by Faith and her brother, the whole spectacle deriving an unexpected novelty from the accident of reaching their eyes through interstices in the tracery of green leaves, which added to the picture a softness that it would not otherwise have possessed. On the other hand, the musicians, having a much weaker light, could hardly be discerned by the performers in the dance.

The music was now rattling on, and the ladies in their foam-like dresses were busily threading and spinning about the floor, when Faith, casually looking up into her brother's face, was surprised to see that a change had come over it. At the end of the quadrille he leant across to her before she had time to speak, and said quietly, 'She's here!'

'Who?' said Faith, for she had not heard the words of the coachman.

'Ethelberta.'

'Which is she?' asked Faith, peeping through with the keenest interest.

'The one who has the skirts of her dress looped up with convolvulus flowers – the one with her hair fastened in a sort of Venus knot behind; she has just been dancing with that perfumed piece of a man they call Mr. Ladywell – it is he with the high eyebrows arched like a girl's.' He added, with a wrinkled smile, 'I cannot for my life see anybody answering to the character of husband to her, for every man takes notice of her.'

They were interrupted by another dance being called for, and then, his fingers tapping about upon the keys as mechanically as fowls pecking at barleycorns, Christopher gave himself up with a curious and far from unalloyed pleasure to the occupation of watching Ethelberta, now again crossing the field of his vision like a returned comet whose characteristics were becoming purely historical. She was a plump-armed creature, with a white round neck as firm as a fort – altogether a vigorous shape, as refreshing to the eye as the green leaves through which he beheld her. She danced freely, and with a zest that was apparently irrespective of partners. He had been waiting long to hear her speak, and when at length her voice did reach his ears, it was the revelation of a strange matter to find how great a thing that small event had become to him. He knew the old utterance – rapid but not frequent, an obstructive thought causing sometimes a sudden halt in the midst of a stream of words. But the features by which a cool observer would have singled her out from others in his memory when asking himself what she was like, was a peculiar gaze into imaginary far-away distance when making a quiet remark to a partner – not with contracted eyes like a seafaring man, but with an open full look – a remark in which little words in a low tone were made to express a great deal, as several single gentlemen afterwards found.

The production of dance-music when the criticizing stage among the dancers has passed, and they have grown full of excitement and animal spirits, does not require much concentration of thought in the producers thereof; and desultory conversation accordingly went on between Faith and her brother from time to time.

'Kit,' she said on one occasion, 'are you looking at the way in which the flowers are fastened to the leaves? – taking a mean advantage of being at the back of the tapestry? You cannot think how you stare at them.'

'I was looking through them – certainly not at them. I have a feeling of being moved about like a puppet in the hands of a person who legally can be nothing to me.'

'That charming woman with the shining bunch of hair and convolvuluses?'

'Yes: it is through her that we are brought here, and through her writing that poem, "Cancelled Words," that the book was sent me, and through the accidental renewal of acquaintance between us on Anglebury Heath, that she wrote the poem. I was, however, at the moment you spoke, thinking more particularly of the little teacher whom Ethelberta must have commissioned to send the book to me; and why that girl was chosen to do it.'

'There may be a hundred reasons. Kit, I have never yet seen her look once this way.'

Christopher had certainly not yet received look or gesture from her; but his time came. It was while he was for a moment outside the recess, and he caught her in the act. She became slightly confused, turned aside, and entered into conversation with a neighbour.

It was only a look, and yet what a look it was! One may say of a look that it is capable of division into as many species, genera, orders, and classes, as the animal world itself. Christopher saw

Ethelberta Petherwin's performance in this kind – the well-known spark of light upon the well-known depths of mystery – and felt something going out of him which had gone out of him once before.

Thus continually beholding her and her companions in the giddy whirl, the night wore on with the musicians, last dances and more last dances being added, till the intentions of the old on the matter were thrice exceeded in the interests of the young. Watching the couples whirl and turn, advance and recede as gently as spirits, knot themselves like house-flies and part again, and lullabied by the faint regular beat of their footsteps to the tune, the players sank into the peculiar mesmeric quiet which comes over impressionable people who play for a great length of time in the midst of such scenes; and at last the only noises that Christopher took cognizance of were those of the exceptional kind, breaking above the general sea of sound – a casual smart rustle of silk, a laugh, a stumble, the monosyllabic talk of those who happened to linger for a moment close to the leafy screen – all coming to his ears like voices from those old times when he had mingled in similar scenes, not as servant but as guest.

5. AT THE WINDOW – THE ROAD HOME

The dancing was over at last, and the radiant company had left the room. A long and weary night it had been for the two players, though a stimulated interest had hindered physical exhaustion in one of them for a while. With tingling fingers and aching arms they came out of the alcove into the long and deserted apartment, now pervaded by a dry haze. The lights had burnt low, and Faith and her brother were waiting by request till the wagonette was ready to take them home, a breakfast being in course of preparation for them meanwhile.

Christopher had crossed the room to relieve his cramped limbs, and now, peeping through a crevice in the window curtains, he said suddenly, 'Who's for a transformation scene? Faith, look here!'

He touched the blind, up it flew, and a gorgeous scene presented itself to her eyes. A huge inflamed sun was breasting the horizon of a wide sheet of sea which, to her surprise and delight, the mansion overlooked. The brilliant disc fired all the waves that lay between it and the shore at the bottom of the grounds, where the water tossed the ruddy light from one undulation to another in glares as large and clear as mirrors, incessantly altering them, destroying them, and creating them again; while further off they multiplied, thickened, and ran into one another like struggling armies, till they met the fiery source of them all.

'O, how wonderful it is!' said Faith, putting her hand on Christopher's arm. 'Who knew that whilst we were all shut in here with our puny illumination such an exhibition as this was going on outside! How sorry and mean the grand and stately room looks now!'

Christopher turned his back upon the window, and there were the hitherto beaming candle-flames shining no more radiantly than tarnished javelin-heads, while the snow-white lengths of wax showed themselves clammy and cadaverous as the fingers of a corpse. The leaves and flowers which had appeared so very green and blooming by the artificial light were now seen to be faded and dusty. Only the gilding of the room in some degree brought itself into keeping with the splendours outside, stray darts of light seizing upon it and lengthening themselves out along fillet, quirk, arris, and moulding, till wasted away.

'It seems,' said Faith, 'as if all the people who were lately so merry here had died: we ourselves look no more than ghosts.' She turned up her weary face to her brother's, which the incoming rays smote aslant, making little furrows of every wrinkle thereon, and shady ravines of every little furrow.

'You are very tired, Faith,' he said. 'Such a heavy night's work has been almost too much for you.'

'O, I don't mind that,' said Faith. 'But I could not have played so long by myself.'

'We filled up one another's gaps; and there were plenty of them towards the morning; but, luckily, people don't notice those things when the small hours draw on.'

'What troubles me most,' said Faith, 'is not that I have worked, but that you should be so situated as to need such miserable assistance as mine. We are poor, are we not, Kit?'

'Yes, we know a little about poverty,' he replied.

While thus lingering

'In shadowy thoroughfares of thought,'

Faith interrupted with, 'I believe there is one of the dancers now! – why, I should have thought they had all gone to bed, and wouldn't get up again for days.' She indicated to him a figure on the lawn towards the left, looking upon the same flashing scene as that they themselves beheld.

'It is your own particular one,' continued Faith. 'Yes, I see the blue flowers under the edge of her cloak.'

'And I see her squirrel-coloured hair,' said Christopher.

Both stood looking at this apparition, who once, and only once, thought fit to turn her head towards the front of the house they were gazing from. Faith was one in whom the meditative somewhat overpowered the active faculties; she went on, with no abundance of love, to theorize upon this gratuitously charming woman, who, striking freakishly into her brother's path, seemed likely to do him no good in her sisterly estimation. Ethelberta's bright and shapely form stood before her critic now, smartened by the motes of sunlight from head to heel: what Faith would have given to see her so clearly within!

'Without doubt she is already a lady of many romantic experiences,' she said dubiously.

'And on the way to many more,' said Christopher. The tone was just of the kind which may be imagined of a sombre man who had been up all night piping that others might dance.

Faith parted her lips as if in consternation at possibilities. Ethelberta, having already become an influence in Christopher's system, might soon become more – an indestructible fascination – to drag him about, turn his soul inside out, harrow him, twist him, and otherwise torment him, according to the stereotyped form of such processes.

They were interrupted by the opening of a door. A servant entered and came up to them.

'This is for you, I believe, sir,' he said. 'Two guineas;' and he placed the money in Christopher's hand. 'Some breakfast will be ready for you in a moment if you like to have it. Would you wish it brought in here; or will you come to the steward's room?'

'Yes, we will come.' And the man then began to extinguish the lights one by one. Christopher dropped the two pounds and two shillings singly into his pocket, and looking listlessly at the footman said, 'Can you tell me the address of that lady on the lawn? Ah, she has disappeared!'

'She wore a dress with blue flowers,' said Faith.

'And remarkable bright in her manner? O, that's the young widow, Mrs – what's that name – I forget for the moment.'

'Widow?' said Christopher, the eyes of his understanding getting wonderfully clear, and Faith uttering a private ejaculation of thanks that after all no commandments were likely to be broken in this matter. 'The lady I mean is quite a girlish sort of woman.'

'Yes, yes, so she is – that's the one. Coachman says she must have been born a widow, for there is not time for her ever to have been made one. However, she's not quite such a chicken as all that. Mrs. Petherwin, that's the party's name.'

'Does she live here?'

'No, she is staying in the house visiting for a few days with her mother-in-law. They are a London family, I don't know her address.'

'Is she a poetess?'

'That I cannot say. She is very clever at verses; but she don't lean over gates to see the sun, and goes to church as regular as you or I, so I should hardly be inclined to say that she's the complete thing. When she's up in one of her vagaries she'll sit with the ladies and make up pretty things out of her head as fast as sticks a-breaking. They will run off her tongue like cotton from a reel, and if she can ever be got in the mind of telling a story she will bring it out that serious and awful that it makes your flesh creep upon your bones; if she's only got to say that she walked out of one door into another, she'll tell it so that there seems something wonderful in it. 'Tis a bother to start her, so our people say behind her back, but, once set going, the house is all alive with her. However, it will soon be dull enough; she and Lady Petherwin are off to-morrow for Rookington, where I believe they are going to stay over New Year's Day.'

'Where do you say they are going?' inquired Christopher, as they followed the footman.

'Rookington Park – about three miles out of Sandbourne, in the opposite direction to this.'

'A widow,' Christopher murmured.

Faith overheard him. 'That makes no difference to us, does it?' she said wistfully.

Forty minutes later they were driving along an open road over a ridge which commanded a view of a small inlet below them, the sands of this nook being sheltered by crumbling cliffs. Here at once they saw, in the full light of the sun, two women standing side by side, their faces directed over the sea.

‘There she is again!’ said Faith. ‘She has walked along the shore from the lawn where we saw her before.’

‘Yes,’ said the coachman, ‘she’s a curious woman seemingly. She’ll talk to any poor body she meets. You see she had been out for a morning walk instead of going to bed, and that is some queer mortal or other she has picked up with on her way.’

‘I wonder she does not prefer some rest,’ Faith observed.

The road then dropped into a hollow, and the women by the sea were no longer within view from the carriage, which rapidly neared Sandbourne with the two musicians.

6. THE SHORE BY WYNDWAY

The east gleamed upon Ethelberta's squirrel-coloured hair as she said to her companion, 'I have come, Picotee; but not, as you imagine, from a night's sleep. We have actually been dancing till daylight at Wyndway.'

'Then you should not have troubled to come! I could have borne the disappointment under such circumstances,' said the pupil-teacher, who, wearing a dress not so familiar to Christopher's eyes as had been the little white jacket, had not been recognized by him from the hill. 'You look so tired, Berta. I could not stay up all night for the world!'

'One gets used to these things,' said Ethelberta quietly. 'I should have been in bed certainly, had I not particularly wished to use this opportunity of meeting you before you go home to-morrow. I could not have come to Sandbourne to-day, because we are leaving to return again to Rookington. This is all that I wish you to take to mother – only a few little things which may be useful to her; but you will see what it contains when you open it.' She handed to Picotee a small parcel. 'This is for yourself,' she went on, giving a small packet besides. 'It will pay your fare home and back, and leave you something to spare.'

'Thank you,' said Picotee docilely.

'Now, Picotee,' continued the elder, 'let us talk for a few minutes before I go back: we may not meet again for some time.' She put her arm round the waist of Picotee, who did the same by Ethelberta; and thus interlaced they walked backwards and forwards upon the firm flat sand with the motion of one body animated by one will.

'Well, what did you think of my poems?'

'I liked them; but naturally, I did not understand all the experience you describe. It is so different from mine. Yet that made them more interesting to me. I thought I should so much like to mix in the same scenes; but that of course is impossible.'

'I am afraid it is. And you posted the book as I said?'

'Yes.' She added hurriedly, as if to change the subject, 'I have told nobody that we are sisters, or that you are known in any way to me or to mother or to any of us. I thought that would be best, from what you said.'

'Yes, perhaps it is best for the present.'

'The box of clothes came safely, and I find very little alteration will be necessary to make the dress do beautifully for me on Sundays. It is quite new-fashioned to me, though I suppose it was old-fashioned to you. O, and Berta, will the title of Lady Petherwin descend to you when your mother-in-law dies?'

'No, of course not. She is only a knight's widow, and that's nothing.'

'The lady of a knight looks as good on paper as the lady of a lord.'

'Yes. And in other places too sometimes. However, about your journey home. Be very careful; and don't make any inquiries at the stations of anybody but officials. If any man wants to be friendly with you, try to find out if it is from a genuine wish to assist you, or from admiration of your fresh face.'

'How shall I know which?' said Picotee.

Ethelberta laughed. 'If Heaven does not tell you at the moment I cannot,' she said. 'But humanity looks with a different eye from love, and upon the whole it is most to be prized by all of us. I believe it ends oftener in marriage than do a lover's flying smiles. So that for this and other reasons love from a stranger is mostly worthless as a speculation; and it is certainly dangerous as a game. Well, Picotee, has any one paid you real attentions yet?'

'No – that is –'

'There is something going on.'

‘Only a wee bit.’

‘I thought so. There was a dishonesty about your dear eyes which has never been there before, and love-making and dishonesty are inseparable as coupled hounds. Up comes man, and away goes innocence. Are you going to tell me anything about him?’

‘I would rather not, Ethelberta; because it is hardly anything.’

‘Well, be careful. And mind this, never tell him what you feel.’

‘But then he will never know it.’

‘Nor must he. He must think it only. The difference between his thinking and knowing is often the difference between your winning and losing. But general advice is not of much use, and I cannot give more unless you tell more. What is his name?’

Picotee did not reply.

‘Never mind: keep your secret. However, listen to this: not a kiss – not so much as the shadow, hint, or merest seedling of a kiss!’

‘There is no fear of it,’ murmured Picotee; ‘though not because of me!’

‘You see, my dear Picotee, a lover is not a relative; and he isn’t quite a stranger; but he may end in being either, and the way to reduce him to whichever of the two you wish him to be is to treat him like the other. Men who come courting are just like bad cooks: if you are kind to them, instead of ascribing it to an exceptional courtesy on your part, they instantly set it down to their own marvellous worth.’

‘But I ought to favour him just a little, poor thing? Just the smallest glimmer of a gleam!’

‘Only a very little indeed – so that it comes as a relief to his misery, not as adding to his happiness.’

‘It is being too clever, all this; and we ought to be harmless as doves.’

‘Ah, Picotee! to continue harmless as a dove you must be wise as a serpent, you’ll find – ay, ten serpents, for that matter.’

‘But if I cannot get at him, how can I manage him in these ways you speak of?’

‘Get at him? I suppose he gets at you in some way, does he not? – tries to see you, or to be near you?’

‘No – that’s just the point – he doesn’t do any such thing, and there’s the worry of it!’

‘Well, what a silly girl! Then he is not your lover at all?’

‘Perhaps he’s not. But I am his, at any rate – twice over.’

‘That’s no use. Supply the love for both sides? Why, it’s worse than furnishing money for both. You don’t suppose a man will give his heart in exchange for a woman’s when he has already got hers for nothing? That’s not the way old Adam does business at all.’

Picotee sighed. ‘Have you got a young man, too, Berta?’

‘A young man?’

‘A lover I mean – that’s what we call ’em down here.’

‘It is difficult to explain,’ said Ethelberta evasively. ‘I knew one many years ago, and I have seen him again, and – that is all.’

‘According to my idea you have one, but according to your own you have not; he does not love you, but you love him – is that how it is?’

‘I have not quite considered how it is.’

‘Do you love him?’

‘I have never seen a man I hate less.’

‘A great deal lies covered up there, I expect!’

‘He was in that carriage which drove over the hill at the moment we met here.’

‘Ah-ah – some great lord or another who has his day by candlelight, and so on. I guess the style. Somebody who no more knows how much bread is a loaf than I do the price of diamonds and pearls.’

‘I am afraid he’s only a commoner as yet, and not a very great one either. But surely you guess, Picotee? But I’ll set you an example of frankness by telling his name. My friend, Mr. Julian, to whom you posted the book. Such changes as he has seen! – from affluence to poverty. He and his sister have been playing dances all night at Wyndway – What is the matter?’

‘Only a pain!’

‘My dear Picotee –’

‘I think I’ll sit down for a moment, Berta.’

‘What – have you over-walked yourself, dear?’

‘Yes – and I got up very early, you see.’

‘I hope you are not going to be ill, child. You look as if you ought not to be here.’

‘O, it is quite trifling. Does not getting up in a hurry cause a sense of faintness sometimes?’

‘Yes, in people who are not strong.’

‘If we don’t talk about being faint it will go off. Faintness is such a queer thing that to think of it is to have it. Let us talk as we were talking before – about your young man and other indifferent matters, so as to divert my thoughts from fainting, dear Berta. I have always thought the book was to be forwarded to that gentleman because he was a connection of yours by marriage, and he had asked for it. And so you have met this – this Mr. Julian, and gone for walks with him in evenings, I suppose, just as young men and women do who are courting?’

‘No, indeed – what an absurd child you are!’ said Ethelberta. ‘I knew him once, and he is interesting; a few little things like that make it all up.’

‘The love is all on one side, as with me.’

‘O no, no: there is nothing like that. I am not attached to any one, strictly speaking – though, more strictly speaking, I am not unattached.’

‘Tis a delightful middle mind to be in. I know it, for I was like it once; but I had scarcely been so long enough to know where I was before I was gone past.’

‘You should have commanded yourself, or drawn back entirely; for let me tell you that at the beginning of caring for a man – just when you are suspended between thinking and feeling – there is a hair’s-breadth of time at which the question of getting into love or not getting in is a matter of will – quite a thing of choice. At the same time, drawing back is a tame dance, and the best of all is to stay balanced awhile.’

‘You do that well, I’ll warrant.’

‘Well, no; for what between continually wanting to love, to escape the blank lives of those who do not, and wanting not to love, to keep out of the miseries of those who do, I get foolishly warm and foolishly cold by turns.’

‘Yes – and I am like you as far as the “foolishly” goes. I wish we poor girls could contrive to bring a little wisdom into our love by way of a change!’

‘That’s the very thing that leading minds in town have begun to do, but there are difficulties. It is easy to love wisely, but the rich man may not marry you; and it is not very hard to reject wisely, but the poor man doesn’t care. Altogether it is a precious problem. But shall we clamber out upon those shining blocks of rock, and find some of the little yellow shells that are in the crevices? I have ten minutes longer, and then I must go.’

7. THE DINING-ROOM OF A TOWN HOUSE – THE BUTLER’S PANTRY

A few weeks later there was a friendly dinner-party at the house of a gentleman called Doncastle, who lived in a moderately fashionable square of west London. All the friends and relatives present were nice people, who exhibited becoming signs of pleasure and gaiety at being there; but as regards the vigour with which these emotions were expressed, it may be stated that a slight laugh from far down the throat and a slight narrowing of the eye were equivalent as indices of the degree of mirth felt to a Ha-ha-ha! and a shaking of the shoulders among the minor traders of the kingdom; and to a Ho-ho-ho! contorted features, purple face, and stamping foot among the gentlemen in corduroy and fustian who adorn the remoter provinces.

The conversation was chiefly about a volume of musical, tender, and humorous rhapsodies lately issued to the world in the guise of verse, which had been reviewed and talked about everywhere. This topic, beginning as a private dialogue between a young painter named Ladywell and the lady on his right hand, had enlarged its ground by degrees, as a subject will extend on those rare occasions when it happens to be one about which each person has thought something beforehand, instead of, as in the natural order of things, one to which the oblivious listener replies mechanically, with earnest features, but with thoughts far away. And so the whole table made the matter a thing to inquire or reply upon at once, and isolated rills of other chat died out like a river in the sands.

‘Witty things, and occasionally Anacreontic: and they have the originality which such a style must naturally possess when carried out by a feminine hand,’ said Ladywell.

‘If it is a feminine hand,’ said a man near.

Ladywell looked as if he sometimes knew secrets, though he did not wish to boast.

‘Written, I presume you mean, in the Anacreontic measure of three feet and a half – spondees and iambics?’ said a gentleman in spectacles, glancing round, and giving emphasis to his inquiry by causing bland glares of a circular shape to proceed from his glasses towards the person interrogated.

The company appeared willing to give consideration to the words of a man who knew such things as that, and hung forward to listen. But Ladywell stopped the whole current of affairs in that direction by saying —

‘O no; I was speaking rather of the matter and tone. In fact, the *Seven Days’ Review* said they were Anacreontic, you know; and so they are – any one may feel they are.’

The general look then implied a false encouragement, and the man in spectacles looked down again, being a nervous person, who never had time to show his merits because he was so much occupied in hiding his faults.

‘Do you know the authoress, Mr. Neigh?’ continued Ladywell.

‘Can’t say that I do,’ he replied.

Neigh was a man who never disturbed the flesh upon his face except when he was obliged to do so, and paused ten seconds where other people only paused one; as he moved his chin in speaking, motes of light from under the candle-shade caught, lost, and caught again the outlying threads of his burnished beard.

‘She will be famous some day; and you ought at any rate to read her book.’

‘Yes, I ought, I know. In fact, some years ago I should have done it immediately, because I had a reason for pushing on that way just then.’

‘Ah, what was that?’

‘Well, I thought of going in for Westminster Abbey myself at that time; but a fellow has so much to do, and –’

‘What a pity that you didn’t follow it up. A man of your powers, Mr. Neigh –’

‘Afterwards I found I was too steady for it, and had too much of the respectable householder in me. Besides, so many other men are on the same tack; and then I didn’t care about it, somehow.’

‘I don’t understand high art, and am utterly in the dark on what are the true laws of criticism,’ a plain married lady, who wore archaeological jewellery, was saying at this time. ‘But I know that I have derived an unusual amount of amusement from those verses, and I am heartily thankful to “E.” for them.’

‘I am afraid,’ said a gentleman who was suffering from a bad shirt-front, ‘that an estimate which depends upon feeling in that way is not to be trusted as permanent opinion.’

The subject now flitted to the other end.

‘Somebody has it that when the heart flies out before the understanding, it saves the judgment a world of pains,’ came from a voice in that quarter.

‘I, for my part, like something merry,’ said an elderly woman, whose face was bisected by the edge of a shadow, which toned her forehead and eyelids to a livid neutral tint, and left her cheeks and mouth like metal at a white heat in the uninterrupted light. ‘I think the liveliness of those ballads as great a recommendation as any. After all, enough misery is known to us by our experiences and those of our friends, and what we see in the newspapers, for all purposes of chastening, without having gratuitous grief inflicted upon us.’

‘But you would not have wished that “Romeo and Juliet” should have ended happily, or that Othello should have discovered the perfidy of his Ancient in time to prevent all fatal consequences?’

‘I am not afraid to go so far as that,’ said the old lady. ‘Shakespeare is not everybody, and I am sure that thousands of people who have seen those plays would have driven home more cheerfully afterwards if by some contrivance the characters could all have been joined together respectively. I uphold our anonymous author on the general ground of her levity.’

‘Well, it is an old and worn argument – that about the inexpediency of tragedy – and much may be said on both sides. It is not to be denied that the anonymous Sappho’s verses – for it seems that she is really a woman – are clever.’

‘Clever!’ said Ladywell – the young man who had been one of the shooting-party at Sandbourne – ‘they are marvellously brilliant.’

‘She is rather warm in her assumed character.’

‘That’s a sign of her actual coldness; she lets off her feeling in theoretic grooves, and there is sure to be none left for practical ones. Whatever seems to be the most prominent vice, or the most prominent virtue in anybody’s writing is the one thing you are safest from in personal dealings with the writer.’

‘O, I don’t mean to call her warmth of feeling a vice or virtue exactly –’

‘I agree with you,’ said Neigh to the last speaker but one, in tones as emphatic as they possibly could be without losing their proper character of indifference to the whole matter. ‘Warm sentiment of any sort, whenever we have it, disturbs us too much to leave us repose enough for writing it down.’

‘I am sure, when I was at the ardent age,’ said the mistress of the house, in a tone of pleasantly agreeing with every one, particularly those who were diametrically opposed to each other, ‘I could no more have printed such emotions and made them public than I – could have helped privately feeling them.’

‘I wonder if she has gone through half she says? If so, what an experience!’

‘O no – not at all likely,’ said Mr. Neigh. ‘It is as risky to calculate people’s ways of living from their writings as their incomes from their way of living.’

‘She is as true to nature as fashion is false,’ said the painter, in his warmth becoming scarcely complimentary, as sometimes happens with young persons. ‘I don’t think that she has written a word more than what every woman would deny feeling in a society where no woman says what she means or does what she says. And can any praise be greater than that?’

‘Ha-ha! Capital!’

‘All her verses seem to me,’ said a rather stupid person, ‘to be simply —

“Tral’-la-la-lal’-la-la-la’,
Tral’-la-la-lal’-la-la-lu’,
Tral’-la-la-lal’-la-la-lalla’,
Tral’-la-la-lu’.”

When you take away the music there is nothing left. Yet she is plainly a woman of great culture.’

‘Have you seen what the *London Light* says about them – one of the finest things I have ever read in the way of admiration?’ continued Ladywell, paying no attention to the previous speaker. He lingered for a reply, and then impulsively quoted several lines from the periodical he had named, without aid or hesitation. ‘Good, is it not?’ added Ladywell.

They assented, but in such an unqualified manner that half as much readiness would have meant more. But Ladywell, though not experienced enough to be quite free from enthusiasm, was too experienced to mind indifference for more than a minute or two. When the ladies had withdrawn, the young man went on —

‘Colonel Staff said a funny thing to me yesterday about these very poems. He asked me if I knew her, and — ’

‘Her? Why, he knows that it is a lady all the time, and we were only just now doubting whether the sex of the writer could be really what it seems. Shame, Ladywell!’ said his friend Neigh.

‘Ah, Mr. Ladywell,’ said another, ‘now we have found you out. You know her!’

‘Now – I say – ha-ha!’ continued the painter, with a face expressing that he had not at all tried to be found out as the man possessing incomparably superior knowledge of the poetess. ‘I beg pardon really, but don’t press me on the matter. Upon my word the secret is not my own. As I was saying, the Colonel said, “Do you know her?” – but you don’t care to hear?’

‘We shall be delighted!’

‘So the Colonel said, “Do you know her?” adding, in a most comic way, “Between U. and E., Ladywell, I believe there is a close affinity” – meaning me, you know, by U. Just like the Colonel – ha-ha-ha!’

The older men did not oblige Ladywell a second time with any attempt at appreciation; but a weird silence ensued, during which the smile upon Ladywell’s face became frozen to painful permanence.

‘Meaning by E., you know, the “E” of the poems – heh-heh!’ he added.

‘It was a very humorous incident certainly,’ said his friend Neigh, at which there was a laugh – not from anything connected with what he said, but simply because it was the right thing to laugh when Neigh meant you to do so.

‘Now don’t, Neigh – you are too hard upon me. But, seriously, two or three fellows were there when I said it, and they all began laughing – but, then, the Colonel said it in such a queer way, you know. But you were asking me about her? Well, the fact is, between ourselves, I do know that she is a lady; and I don’t mind telling a word — ’

‘But we would not for the world be the means of making you betray her confidence – would we, Jones?’

‘No, indeed; we would not.’

‘No, no; it is not that at all – this is really too bad! – you must listen just for a moment — ’

‘Ladywell, don’t betray anybody on our account.’

‘Whoever the illustrious young lady may be she has seen a great deal of the world,’ said Mr. Doncastle blandly, ‘and puts her experience of the comedy of its emotions, and of its method of showing them, in a very vivid light.’

‘I heard a man say that the novelty with which the ideas are presented is more noticeable than the originality of the ideas themselves,’ observed Neigh. ‘The woman has made a great talk about herself; and I am quite weary of people asking of her condition, place of abode, has she a father, has she a mother, or dearer one yet than all other.’

‘I would have burlesque quotation put down by Act of Parliament, and all who dabble in it placed with him who can cite Scripture for his purposes,’ said Ladywell, in retaliation.

After a pause Neigh remarked half-privately to their host, who was his uncle: ‘Your butler Chickerel is a very intelligent man, as I have heard.’

‘Yes, he does very well,’ said Mr. Doncastle.

‘But is he not a – very extraordinary man?’

‘Not to my knowledge,’ said Doncastle, looking up surprised. ‘Why do you think that, Alfred?’

‘Well, perhaps it was not a matter to mention. He reads a great deal, I dare say?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘I noticed how wonderfully his face kindled when we began talking about the poems during dinner. Perhaps he is a poet himself in disguise. Did you observe it?’

‘No. To the best of my belief he is a very trustworthy and honourable man. He has been with us – let me see, how long? – five months, I think, and he was fifteen years in his last place. It certainly is a new side to his character if he publicly showed any interest in the conversation, whatever he might have felt.’

‘Since the matter has been mentioned,’ said Mr. Jones, ‘I may say that I too noticed the singularity of it.’

‘If you had not said otherwise,’ replied Doncastle somewhat warmly, ‘I should have asserted him to be the last man-servant in London to infringe such an elementary rule. If he did so this evening, it is certainly for the first time, and I sincerely hope that no annoyance was caused –’

‘O no, no – not at all – it might have been a mistake of mine,’ said Jones. ‘I should quite have forgotten the circumstance if Mr. Neigh’s words had not brought it to my mind. It was really nothing to notice, and I beg that you will not say a word to him about it on my account.’

‘He has a taste that way, my dear uncle, nothing more, depend upon it,’ said Neigh. ‘If I had such a man belonging to me I should only be too proud. Certainly do not mention it.’

‘Of course Chickerel is Chickerel,’ Mr. Doncastle rejoined. ‘We all know what that means. And really, on reflecting, I do remember that he is of a literary turn of mind – not further by an inch than is commendable, you know. I am quite aware as I glance down the papers and prints any morning that Chickerel’s eyes have been over the ground before mine, and that he generally forestalls the rest of us by a chapter or so in the last new book sent home; but in these vicious days that particular weakness is really virtue, just because it is not quite a vice.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Jones, the reflective man in spectacles, ‘positive virtues are getting moved off the stage: negative ones are moved on to the place of positives; we thank bare justice as we used only to thank generosity; call a man honest who steals only by law, and consider him a benefactor if he does not steal at all.’

‘Hear, hear!’ said Neigh. ‘We will decide that Chickerel is even a better trained fellow than if he had shown no interest at all in his face.’

‘The action being like those trifling irregularities in art at its vigorous periods, which seemed designed to hide the unpleasant monotony of absolute symmetry,’ said Ladywell.

‘On the other hand, an affected want of training of that sort would be even a better disguise for an artful man than a perfectly impassible demeanour. He is two removes from discovery in a hidden scheme, whilst a neutral face is only one.’

‘You quite alarm me by these subtle theories,’ said Mr. Doncastle, laughing; and the subject then became compounded with other matters, till the speakers rose to rejoin the charming flock upstairs.

* * * * *

In the basement story at this hour Mr. Chickereel the butler, who had formed the subject of discussion on the floor above, was busily engaged in looking after his two subordinates as they bustled about in the operations of clearing away. He was a man of whom, if the shape of certain bones and muscles of the face is ever to be taken as a guide to the character, one might safely have predicated conscientiousness in the performance of duties, a thorough knowledge of all that appertained to them, a general desire to live on without troubling his mind about anything which did not concern him. Any person interested in the matter would have assumed without hesitation that the estimate his employer had given of Chickereel was a true one – more, that not only would the butler under all ordinary circumstances resolutely prevent his face from showing curiosity in an unbecoming way, but that, with the soul of a true gentleman, he would, if necessary, equivocate as readily as the noblest of his betters to remove any stain upon his honour in such trifles. Hence it is apparent that if Chickereel's countenance really appeared, as Neigh had asserted, full of curiosity with regard to the gossip that was going on, the feelings which led to the exhibition must have been of a very unusual and irrepressible kind.

His hair was of that peculiar bluish-white which is to be observed when the oncoming years, instead of singling out special locks of a man's head for operating against, advance uniformly over the whole field, and enfeeble the colour at all points before absolutely extinguishing it anywhere; his nose was of the knotty shape in the gristle and earthward tendency in the flesh which is commonly said to carry sound judgment above it, his eyes were thoughtful, and his face was thin – a contour which, if it at once abstracted from his features that cheerful assurance of single-minded honesty which adorns the exteriors of so many of his brethren, might have raised a presumption in the minds of some beholders that perhaps in this case the quality might not be altogether wanting within.

The coffee having been served to the people upstairs, one of the footmen rushed into his bedroom on the lower floor, and in a few minutes emerged again in the dress of a respectable clerk who had been born for better things, with the trifling exceptions that he wore a low-crowned hat, and instead of knocking his heels on the pavement walked with a gait as delicate as a lady's. Going out of the area-door with a cigar in his mouth, he mounted the steps hastily to keep an appointment round the corner – the keeping of which as a private gentleman necessitated the change of the greater part of his clothes twice within a quarter of an hour – the limit of his time of absence. The other footman was upstairs, and the butler, finding that he had a few minutes to himself, sat down at the table and wrote: —

‘MY DEAR ETHELBERTA, – I did not intend to write to you for some few days to come, but the way in which you have been talked about here this evening makes me anxious to send a line or two at once, though I have very little time to spare, as usual. We have just had a dinner-party – indeed the carriages have not yet been brought round – and the talk at dinner was about your verses, of course. The thing was brought up by a young fellow named Ladywell – do you know him? He is a painter by profession, but he has a pretty good private income beyond what he gets by practising his line of business among the nobility, and that I expect is not little, for he is well known, and encouraged because he is young, and good-looking, and so forth. His family own a good bit of land somewhere out Aldbrickham way. However, I am before my story. From what they all said it is pretty clear that you are thought a great deal of in fashionable society as a poetess – but perhaps you know this as well as I – moving in it as you do yourself, my dear.

‘The ladies afterwards got very curious about your age, so curious, in fact, and so full of certainty that you were thirty-five and a blighted existence, if an hour, that I felt inclined to rap out there and then, and hang what came of it: “My daughter, ladies, was to my own and her mother’s certain knowledge only twenty-one last birthday, and has as bright a heart as anybody in London.” One of them actually said that you must be fifty to have got such an experience. Her guess was a very shrewd one in the bottom of it, however, for it was grounded upon the way you use those strange experiences of mine in the society that I tell you of, and dress them up as if they were yours; and, as you see, she hit off my own age to a year. I thought it was very sharp of her to be so right, although so wrong.

‘I do not want to influence your plans in any way about things which your school learning fits you to understand much better than I, who never had such opportunities, but I think that if I were in your place, Berta, I would not let my name be known just yet, for people always want what’s kept from them, and don’t value what’s given. I am not sure, but I think that after the women had gone upstairs the others turned their thoughts upon you again; what they said about you I don’t know, for if there’s one thing I hate ’tis hanging about the doors when the men begin to get moved by their wine, which they did to a large extent to-night, and spoke very loud. They always do here, for old Don is a hearty giver in his way. However, as you see these people from their own level now, it is not much that I can tell you in seeing them only from the under side, though I see strange things sometimes, and of course —

“What great ones do the less will prattle of,”

as it says in that book of select pieces that you gave me.

‘Well, my dear girl, I hope you will prosper. One thing above all others you’ll have to mind, and it is that folk must continually strain to advance in order to remain where they are: and you particularly. But as for trying too hard, I wouldn’t do it. Much lies in minding this, that your best plan for lightness of heart is to raise yourself a little higher than your old mates, but not so high as to be quite out of their reach. All human beings enjoy themselves from the outside, and so getting on a little has this good in it, you still keep in your old class where your feelings are, and are thoughtfully treated by this class: while by getting on too much you are sneered at by your new acquaintance, who don’t know the skill of your rise, and you are parted from and forgot by the old ones who do. Whatever happens, don’t be too quick to feel. You will surely get some hard blows when you are found out, for if the great can find no excuse for hitting with a mind, they’ll do it and say ’twas in fun. But you are young and healthy, and youth and health are power. I wish I could have a decent footman here with me, but I suppose it is no use trying. It is such men as these that provoke the contempt we get. Well, thank God a few years will see the end of me, for I am growing ashamed of my company – so different as they are to the servants of old times. – Your affectionate father, R. CHICKEREL.

‘P.S. – Do not press Lady Petherwin any further to remove the rules on which you live with her. She is quite right: she cannot keep us, and to recognize us would do you no good, nor us either. We are content to see you secretly, since it is best for you.’

8. CHRISTOPHER'S LODGINGS – THE GROUNDS ABOUT ROOKINGTON

Meanwhile, in the distant town of Sandbourne, Christopher Julian had recovered from the weariness produced by his labours at the Wyndway evening-party where Ethelberta had been a star. Instead of engaging his energies to clear encumbrances from the tangled way of his life, he now set about reading the popular 'Metres by E.' with more interest and assiduity than ever; for though Julian was a thinker by instinct, he was a worker by effort only; and the higher of these kinds being dependent upon the lower for its exhibition, there was often a lamentable lack of evidence of his power in either. It is a provoking correlation, and has conduced to the obscurity of many a genius.

'Kit,' said his sister, on reviving at the end of the bad headache which had followed the dance, 'those poems seem to have increased in value with you. The lady, lofty as she appears to be, would be flattered if she only could know how much you study them. Have you decided to thank her for them? Now let us talk it over – I like having a chat about such a pretty new subject.'

'I would thank her in a moment if I were absolutely certain that she had anything to do with sending them, or even writing them. I am not quite sure of that yet.'

'How strange that a woman could bring herself to write those verses!'

'Not at all strange – they are natural outpourings.'

Faith looked critically at the remoter caverns of the fire.

'Why strange?' continued Christopher. 'There is no harm in them.'

'O no – no harm. But I cannot explain to you – unless you see it partly of your own accord – that to write them she must be rather a fast lady – not a bad fast lady; a nice fast lady, I mean, of course. There, I have said it now, and I daresay you are vexed with me, for your interest in her has deepened to what it originally was, I think. I don't mean any absolute harm by "fast," Kit.'

'Bold, forward, you mean, I suppose?'

Faith tried to hit upon a better definition which should meet all views; and, on failing to do so, looked concerned at her brother's somewhat grieved appearance, and said, helplessly, 'Yes, I suppose I do.'

'My idea of her is quite the reverse. A poetess must intrinsically be sensitive, or she could never feel: but then, frankness is a rhetorical necessity even with the most modest, if their inspirations are to do any good in the world. You will, for certain, not be interested in something I was going to tell you, which I thought would have pleased you immensely; but it is not worth mentioning now.'

'If you will not tell me, never mind. But don't be crabbed, Kit! You know how interested I am in all your affairs.'

'It is only that I have composed an air to one of the prettiest of her songs, "When tapers tall" – but I am not sure about the power of it. This is how it begins – I threw it off in a few minutes, after you had gone to bed.'

He went to the piano and lightly touched over an air, the manuscript copy of which he placed in front of him, and listened to hear her opinion, having proved its value frequently; for it was not that of a woman merely, but impersonally human. Though she was unknown to fame, this was a great gift in Faith, since to have an unsexed judgment is as precious as to be an unsexed being is deplorable.

'It is very fair indeed,' said the sister, scarcely moving her lips in her great attention. 'Now again, and again, and again. How could you do it in the time!'

Kit knew that she admired his performance: passive assent was her usual praise, and she seldom insisted vigorously upon any view of his compositions unless for purposes of emendation.

'I was thinking that, as I cannot very well write to her, I may as well send her this,' said Christopher, with lightened spirits, voice to correspond, and eyes likewise; 'there can be no objection

to it, for such things are done continually. Consider while I am gone, Faith. I shall be out this evening for an hour or two.'

When Christopher left the house shortly after, instead of going into the town on some errand, as was customary whenever he went from home after dark, he ascended a back street, passed over the hills behind, and walked at a brisk pace inland along the road to Rookington Park, where, as he had learnt, Ethelberta and Lady Petherwin were staying for a time, the day or two which they spent at Wyndway having formed a short break in the middle of this visit. The moon was shining to-night, and Christopher sped onwards over the pallid high-road as readily as he could have done at noonday. In three-quarters of an hour he reached the park gates; and entering now upon a tract which he had never before explored, he went along more cautiously and with some uncertainty as to the precise direction that the road would take. A frosted expanse of even grass, on which the shadow of his head appeared with an opal halo round it, soon allowed the house to be discovered beyond, the other portions of the park abounding with timber older and finer than that of any other spot in the neighbourhood. Christopher withdrew into the shade, and wheeled round to the front of the building that contained his old love. Here he gazed and idled, as many a man has done before him – wondering which room the fair poetess occupied, waiting till lights began to appear in the upper windows – which they did as uncertainly as glow-worms blinking up at eventide – and warming with currents of revived feeling in perhaps the sweetest of all conditions. New love is brightest, and long love is greatest; but revived love is the tenderest thing known upon earth.

Occupied thus, Christopher was greatly surprised to see, on casually glancing to one side, another man standing close to the shadowy trunk of another tree, in a similar attitude to his own, gazing, with arms folded, as blankly at the windows of the house as Christopher himself had been gazing. Not willing to be discovered, Christopher stuck closer to his tree. While he waited thus, the stranger began murmuring words, in a slow soft voice. Christopher listened till he heard the following:

—

‘Pale was the day and rayless, love,
That had an eve so dim.’

Two well-known lines from one of Ethelberta's poems.

Jealousy is a familiar kind of heat which disfigures, licks playfully, clouds, blackens, and boils a man as a fire does a pot; and on recognizing these pilferings from what he had grown to regard as his own treasury, Christopher's fingers began to nestle with great vigour in the palms of his hands. Three or four minutes passed, when the unknown rival gave a last glance at the windows, and walked away. Christopher did not like the look of that walk at all – there was grace enough in it to suggest that his antagonist had no mean chance of finding favour in a woman's eyes. A sigh, too, seemed to proceed from the stranger's breast; but as their distance apart was too great for any such sound to be heard by any possibility, Christopher set down that to imagination, or to the brushing of the wind over the trees.

The lighted windows went out one by one, and all the house was in darkness. Julian then walked off himself, with a vigour that was spasmodic only, and with much less brightness of mind than he had experienced on his journey hither. The stranger had gone another way, and Christopher saw no more of him. When he reached Sandbourne, Faith was still sitting up.

‘But I told you I was going to take a long walk,’ he said.

‘No, Christopher: really you did not. How tired and sad you do look – though I always know beforehand when you are in that state: one of your feet has a drag about it as you pass along the pavement outside the window.’

‘Yes, I forgot that I did not tell you.’

He could not begin to describe his pilgrimage: it was too silly a thing even for her to hear of.

‘It does not matter at all about my staying up,’ said Faith assuringly; ‘that is, if exercise benefits you. Walking up and down the lane, I suppose?’

‘No; not walking up and down the lane.’

‘The turnpike-road to Rookington is pleasant.’

‘Faith, that is really where I have been. How came you to know?’

‘I only guessed. Verses and an accidental meeting produce a special journey.’

‘Ethelberta is a fine woman, physically and mentally, both. I wonder people do not talk about her twice as much as they do.’

‘Then surely you are getting attached to her again. You think you discover in her more than anybody else does; and love begins with a sense of superior discernment.’

‘No, no. That is only nonsense,’ he said hurriedly. ‘However, love her or love her not, I can keep a corner of my heart for you, Faith. There is another brute after her too, it seems.’

‘Of course there is: I expect there are many. Her position in society is above ours, so that it is an unwise course to go troubling yourself more about her.’

‘No. If a needy man must be so foolish as to fall in love, it is best to do so where he cannot double his foolishness by marrying the woman.’

‘I don’t like to hear you talk so slightingly of what poor father did.’

Christopher fixed his attention on the supper. That night, late as it was, when Faith was in bed and sleeping, he sat before a sheet of music-paper, neatly copying his composition upon it. The manuscript was intended as an offering to Ethelberta at the first convenient opportunity.

* * * * *

‘Well, after all my trouble to find out about Ethelberta, here comes the clue unasked for,’ said the musician to his sister a few days later.

She turned and saw that he was reading the *Wessex Reflector*.

‘What is it?’ asked Faith.

‘The secret of the true authorship of the book is out at last, and it is Ethelberta of course. I am so glad to have it proved hers.’

‘But can we believe – ?’

‘O yes. Just hear what “Our London Correspondent” says. It is one of the nicest bits of gossip that he has furnished us with for a long time.’

‘Yes: now read it, do.’

“‘The author of ‘Metres by E.’” Christopher began, “a book of which so much has been said and conjectured, and one, in fact, that has been the chief talk for several weeks past of the literary circles to which I belong, is a young lady who was a widow before she reached the age of eighteen, and is now not far beyond her fourth lustrum. I was additionally informed by a friend whom I met yesterday on his way to the House of Lords, that her name is Mrs. Petherwin – Christian name Ethelberta; and that she resides with her mother-in-law at their house in Exonbury Crescent. She is, moreover, the daughter of the late Bishop of Silchester (if report may be believed), whose active benevolence, as your readers know, left his family in comparatively straitened circumstances at his death. The marriage was a secret one, and much against the wish of her husband’s friends, who are wealthy people on all sides. The death of the bridegroom two or three weeks after the wedding led to a reconciliation; and the young poetess was taken to the home which she still occupies, devoted to the composition of such brilliant effusions as those the world has lately been favoured with from her pen.”

‘If you want to send her your music, you can do so now,’ said Faith.

‘I might have sent it before, but I wanted to deliver it personally. However, it is all the same now, I suppose, whether I send it or not. I always knew that our destinies would lie apart, though she was once temporarily under a cloud. Her momentary inspiration to write that “Cancelled Words” was

the worst possible omen for me. It showed that, thinking me no longer useful as a practical chance, she would make me ornamental as a poetical regret. But I'll send the manuscript of the song.'

'In the way of business, as a composer only; and you must say to yourself, "Ethelberta, as thou art but woman, I dare; but as widow I fear thee."'

Notwithstanding Christopher's affected carelessness, that evening saw a great deal of nicety bestowed upon the operation of wrapping up and sending off the song. He dropped it into the box and heard it fall, and with the curious power which he possessed of setting his wisdom to watch any particular folly in himself that it could not hinder, speculated as he walked on the result of this first tangible step of return to his old position as Ethelberta's lover.

9. A LADY'S DRAWING-ROOMS – ETHELBERTA'S DRESSING-ROOM

It was a house on the north side of Hyde Park, between ten and eleven in the evening, and several intelligent and courteous people had assembled there to enjoy themselves as far as it was possible to do so in a neutral way – all carefully keeping every variety of feeling in a state of solution, in spite of any attempt such feelings made from time to time to crystallize on interesting subjects in hand.

‘Neigh, who is that charming woman with her head built up in a novel way even for hair architecture – the one with her back towards us?’ said a man whose coat fitted doubtfully to a friend whose coat fitted well.

‘Just going to ask for the same information,’ said Mr. Neigh, determining the very longest hair in his beard to an infinitesimal nicety by drawing its lower portion through his fingers. ‘I have quite forgotten – cannot keep people’s names in my head at all; nor could my father either – nor any of my family – a very odd thing. But my old friend Mrs. Napper knows for certain.’ And he turned to one of a small group of middle-aged persons near, who, instead of skimming the surface of things in general, like the rest of the company, were going into the very depths of them.

‘O – that is the celebrated Mrs. Petherwin, the woman who makes rhymes and prints ’em,’ said Mrs. Napper, in a detached sentence, and then continued talking again to those on the other side of her.

The two loungers went on with their observations of Ethelberta’s headdress, which, though not extraordinary or eccentric, did certainly convey an idea of indefinable novelty. Observers were sometimes half inclined to think that her cuts and modes were acquired by some secret communication with the mysterious clique which orders the livery of the fashionable world, for – and it affords a parallel to cases in which clever thinkers in other spheres arrive independently at one and the same conclusion – Ethelberta’s fashion often turned out to be the coming one.

‘O, is that the woman at last?’ said Neigh, diminishing his broad general gaze at the room to a close criticism of Ethelberta.

‘“The rhymes,” as Mrs. Napper calls them, are not to be despised,’ said his companion. ‘They are not quite *virginibus puerisque*, and the writer’s opinions of life and society differ very materially from mine, but I cannot help admiring her in the more reflective pieces; the songs I don’t care for. The method in which she handles curious subjects, and at the same time impresses us with a full conviction of her modesty, is very adroit, and somewhat blinds us to the fact that no such poems were demanded of her at all.’

‘I have not read them,’ said Neigh, secretly wrestling with his jaw, to prevent a yawn; ‘but I suppose I must. The truth is, that I never care much for reading what one ought to read; I wish I did, but I cannot help it. And, no doubt, you admire the lady immensely for writing them: I don’t. Everybody is so talented now-a-days that the only people I care to honour as deserving real distinction are those who remain in obscurity. I am myself hoping for a corner in some biographical dictionary when the time comes for those works only to contain lists of the exceptional individuals of whom nothing is known but that they lived and died.’

‘Ah – listen. They are going to sing one of her songs,’ said his friend, looking towards a bustling movement in the neighbourhood of the piano. ‘I believe that song, “When tapers tall,” has been set to music by three or four composers already.’

‘Men of any note?’ said Neigh, at last beaten by his yawn, which courtesy nevertheless confined within his person to such an extent that only a few unimportant symptoms, such as reduced eyes and a certain rectangular manner of mouth in speaking, were visible.

‘Scarcely,’ replied the other man. ‘Established writers of music do not expend their energies upon new verse until they find that such verse is likely to endure; for should the poet be soon forgotten, their labour is in some degree lost.’

‘Artful dogs – who would have thought it?’ said Neigh, just as an exercise in words; and they drew nearer to the piano, less to become listeners to the singing than to be spectators of the scene in that quarter. But among some others the interest in the songs seemed to be very great; and it was unanimously wished that the young lady who had practised the different pieces of music privately would sing some of them now in the order of their composers’ reputations. The musical persons in the room unconsciously resolved themselves into a committee of taste.

One and another had been tried, when, at the end of the third, a lady spoke to Ethelberta.

‘Now, Mrs. Petherwin,’ she said, gracefully throwing back her face, ‘your opinion is by far the most valuable. In which of the cases do you consider the marriage of verse and tune to have been most successful?’

Ethelberta, finding these and other unexpected calls made upon herself, came to the front without flinching.

‘The sweetest and the best that I like by far,’ she said, ‘is none of these. It is one which reached me by post only this morning from a place in Wessex, and is written by an unheard-of man who lives somewhere down there – a man who will be, nevertheless, heard a great deal of some day, I hope – think. I have only practised it this afternoon; but, if one’s own judgment is worth anything, it is the best.’

‘Let us have your favourite, by all means,’ said another friend of Ethelberta’s who was present – Mrs. Doncastle.

‘I am so sorry that I cannot oblige you, since you wish to hear it,’ replied the poetess regretfully; ‘but the music is at home. I had not received it when I lent the others to Miss Belmaine, and it is only in manuscript like the rest.’

‘Could it not be sent for?’ suggested an enthusiast who knew that Ethelberta lived only in the next street, appealing by a look to her, and then to the mistress of the house.

‘Certainly, let us send for it,’ said that lady. A footman was at once quietly despatched with precise directions as to where Christopher’s sweet production might be found.

‘What – is there going to be something interesting?’ asked a young married friend of Mrs. Napper, who had returned to her original spot.

‘Yes – the best song she has written is to be sung in the best manner to the best air that has been composed for it. I should not wonder if she were going to sing it herself.’

‘Did you know anything of Mrs. Petherwin until her name leaked out in connection with these ballads?’

‘No; but I think I recollect seeing her once before. She is one of those people who are known, as one may say, by subscription: everybody knows a little, till she is astonishingly well known altogether; but nobody knows her entirely. She was the orphan child of some clergyman, I believe. Lady Petherwin, her mother-in-law, has been taking her about a great deal latterly.’

‘She has apparently a very good prospect.’

‘Yes; and it is through her being of that curious undefined character which interprets itself to each admirer as whatever he would like to have it. Old men like her because she is so girlish; youths because she is womanly; wicked men because she is good in their eyes; good men because she is wicked in theirs.’

‘She must be a very anomalous sort of woman, at that rate.’

‘Yes. Like the British Constitution, she owes her success in practice to her inconsistencies in principle.’

‘These poems must have set her up. She appears to be quite the correct spectacle. Happy Mrs. Petherwin!’

The subject of their dialogue was engaged in a conversation with Mrs. Belmaine upon the management of households – a theme provoked by a discussion that was in progress in the pages of some periodical of the time. Mrs. Belmaine was very full of the argument, and went on from point to point till she came to servants.

The face of Ethelberta showed caution at once.

‘I consider that Lady Plamby pets her servants by far too much,’ said Mrs. Belmaine. ‘O, you do not know her? Well, she is a woman with theories; and she lends her maids and men books of the wrong kind for their station, and sends them to picture exhibitions which they don’t in the least understand – all for the improvement of their taste, and morals, and nobody knows what besides. It only makes them dissatisfied.’

The face of Ethelberta showed venturesomeness. ‘Yes, and dreadfully ambitious!’ she said.

‘Yes, indeed. What a turn the times have taken! People of that sort push on, and get into business, and get great warehouses, until at last, without ancestors, or family, or name, or estate – ’

‘Or the merest scrap of heirloom or family jewel.’

‘Or heirlooms, or family jewels, they are thought as much of as if their forefathers had glided unobtrusively through the peerage – ’

‘Ever since the first edition.’

‘Yes.’ Mrs. Belmaine, who really sprang from a good old family, had been going to say, ‘for the last seven hundred years,’ but fancying from Ethelberta’s addendum that she might not date back more than a trifling century or so, adopted the suggestion with her usual well-known courtesy, and blushed down to her locket at the thought of the mistake that she might have made. This sensitiveness was a trait in her character which gave great gratification to her husband, and, indeed, to all who knew her.

‘And have you any theory on the vexed question of servant-government?’ continued Mrs. Belmaine, smiling. ‘But no – the subject is of far too practical a nature for one of your bent, of course.’

‘O no – it is not at all too practical. I have thought of the matter often,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I think the best plan would be for somebody to write a pamphlet, “The Shortest Way with the Servants,” just as there was once written a terribly stinging one, “The Shortest Way with the Dissenters,” which had a great effect.’

‘I have always understood that that was written by a dissenter as a satire upon the Church?’

‘Ah – so it was: but the example will do to illustrate my meaning.’

‘Quite so – I understand – so it will,’ said Mrs. Belmaine, with clouded faculties.

Meanwhile Christopher’s music had arrived. An accomplished gentleman who had every musical talent except that of creation, scanned the notes carefully from top to bottom, and sat down to accompany the singer. There was no lady present of sufficient confidence or skill to venture into a song she had never seen before, and the only one who had seen it was Ethelberta herself; she did not deny having practised it the greater part of the afternoon, and was very willing to sing it now if anybody would derive pleasure from the performance. Then she began, and the sweetness of her singing was such that even the most unsympathetic honoured her by looking as if they would be willing to listen to every note the song contained if it were not quite so much trouble to do so. Some were so interested that, instead of continuing their conversation, they remained in silent consideration of how they would continue it when she had finished; while the particularly civil people arranged their countenances into every attentive form that the mind could devise. One emotional gentleman looked at the corner of a chair as if, till that moment, such an object had never crossed his vision before; the movement of his finger to the imagined tune was, for a deaf old clergyman, a perfect mine of interest; whilst a young man from the country was powerless to put an end to an enchanted gaze at nothing at all in the exact middle of the room before him. Neigh, and the general phalanx of cool men and celebrated club yawners, were so much affected that they raised their chronic look of great objection to things, to an expression of scarcely any objection at all.

‘What makes it so interesting,’ said Mrs. Doncastle to Ethelberta, when the song was over and she had retired from the focus of the company, ‘is, that it is played from the composer’s own copy, which has never met the public eye, or any other than his own before to-day. And I see that he has actually sketched in the lines by hand, instead of having ruled paper – just as the great old composers used to do. You must have been as pleased to get it fresh from the stocks like that as he probably was pleased to get your thanks.’

Ethelberta became reflective. She had not thanked Christopher; moreover, she had decided, after some consideration, that she ought not to thank him. What new thoughts were suggested by that remark of Mrs. Doncastle’s, and what new inclination resulted from the public presentation of his tune and her words as parts of one organic whole, are best explained by describing her doings at a later hour, when, having left her friends somewhat early, she had reached home and retired from public view for that evening.

Ethelberta went to her room, sent away the maid who did double duty for herself and Lady Petherwin, walked in circles about the carpet till the fire had grown haggard and cavernous, sighed, took a sheet of paper and wrote: —

‘DEAR MR. JULIAN, – I have said I would not write: I have said it twice; but discretion, under some circumstances, is only another name for unkindness. Before thanking you for your sweet gift, let me tell you in a few words of something which may materially change an aspect of affairs under which I appear to you to deserve it.

‘With regard to my history and origin you are altogether mistaken; and how can I tell whether your bitterness at my previous silence on those points may not cause you to withdraw your act of courtesy now? But the gratification of having at last been honest with you may compensate even for the loss of your respect.

‘The matter is a small one to tell, after all. What will you say on learning that I am not the trodden-down “lady by birth” that you have supposed me? That my father is not dead, as you probably imagine; that he is working for his living as one among a peculiarly stigmatized and ridiculed multitude?

‘Had he been a brawny cottager, carpenter, mason, blacksmith, well-digger, navvy, tree-feller – any effective and manly trade, in short, a worker in which can stand up in the face of the noblest and daintiest, and bare his gnarled arms and say, with a consciousness of superior power, “Look at a real man!” I should have been able to show you antecedents which, if not intensely romantic, are not altogether antagonistic to romance. But the present fashion of associating with one particular class everything that is ludicrous and bombastic overpowers me when I think of it in relation to myself and your known sensitiveness. When the well-born poetess of good report melts into..’

Having got thus far, a faint-hearted look, which had begun to show itself several sentences earlier, became pronounced. She threw the writing into the dull fire, poked and stirred it till a red inflammation crept over the sheet, and then started anew: —

‘DEAR MR. JULIAN, – Not knowing your present rank as composer – whether on the very brink of fame, or as yet a long way off – I cannot decide what form of expression my earnest acknowledgments should take. Let me simply say in one short phrase, I thank you infinitely!

‘I am no musician, and my opinion on music may not be worth much: yet I know what I like (as everybody says, but I do not use the words as a form to cover a hopeless blank on all connected with the subject), and this sweet air I love. You must have glided like a breeze about me – seen into a heart not worthy of scrutiny, jotted down words that cannot justify attention – before you could have apotheosized the

song in so exquisite a manner. My gratitude took the form of wretchedness when, on hearing the effect of the ballad in public this evening, I thought that I had not power to withhold a reply which might do us both more harm than good. Then I said, "Away with all emotion – I wish the world was drained dry of it – I will take no notice," when a lady whispered at my elbow to the effect that of course I had expressed my gratification to you. I ought first to have mentioned that your creation has been played to-night to full drawing-rooms, and the original tones cooled the artificial air like a fountain almost.

'I prophesy great things of you. Perhaps, at the time when we are each but a row of bones in our individual graves, your genius will be remembered, while my mere cleverness will have been long forgotten.

'But – you must allow a woman of experience to say this – the undoubted power that you possess will do you socially no good unless you mix with it the ingredient of ambition – a quality in which I fear you are very deficient. It is in the hope of stimulating you to a better opinion of yourself that I write this letter.

'Probably I shall never meet you again. Not that I think circumstances to be particularly powerful to prevent such a meeting, rather it is that I shall energetically avoid it. There can be no such thing as strong friendship between a man and a woman not of one family.

'More than that there must not be, and this is why we will not meet. You see that I do not mince matters at all; but it is hypocrisy to avoid touching upon a subject which all men and women in our position inevitably think of, no matter what they say. Some women might have written distantly, and wept at the repression of their real feeling; but it is better to be more frank, and keep a dry eye. – Yours, ETHELBERTA.'

Her feet felt cold and her heart weak as she directed the letter, and she was overpowered with weariness. But murmuring, 'If I let it stay till the morning I shall not send it, and a man may be lost to fame because of a woman's squeamishness – it shall go,' she partially dressed herself, wrapped a large cloak around her, descended the stairs, and went out to the pillar-box at the corner, leaving the door not quite close. No gust of wind had realized her misgivings that it might be blown shut on her return, and she re-entered as softly as she had emerged.

It will be seen that Ethelberta had said nothing about her family after all.

10. LADY PETHERWIN'S HOUSE

The next day old Lady Petherwin, who had not accompanied Ethelberta the night before, came into the morning-room, with a newspaper in her hand.

'What does this mean, Ethelberta?' she inquired in tones from which every shade of human expressiveness was extracted by some awful and imminent mood that lay behind. She was pointing to a paragraph under the heading of 'Literary Notes,' which contained in a few words the announcement of Ethelberta's authorship that had more circumstantially appeared in the *Wessex Reflector*.

'It means what it says,' said Ethelberta quietly.

'Then it is true?'

'Yes. I must apologize for having kept it such a secret from you. It was not done in the spirit that you may imagine: it was merely to avoid disturbing your mind that I did it so privately.'

'But surely you have not written every one of those ribald verses?'

Ethelberta looked inclined to exclaim most vehemently against this; but what she actually did say was, "Ribald" – what do you mean by that? I don't think that you are aware what "ribald" means.'

'I am not sure that I am. As regards some words as well as some persons, the less you are acquainted with them the more it is to your credit.'

'I don't quite deserve this, Lady Petherwin.'

'Really, one would imagine that women wrote their books during those dreams in which people have no moral sense, to see how improper some, even virtuous, ladies become when they get into print.'

'I might have done a much more unnatural thing than write those poems. And perhaps I might have done a much better thing, and got less praise. But that's the world's fault, not mine.'

'You might have left them unwritten, and shown more fidelity.'

'Fidelity! it is more a matter of humour than principle. What has fidelity to do with it?'

'Fidelity to my dear boy's memory.'

'It would be difficult to show that because I have written so-called tender and gay verse, I feel tender and gay. It is too often assumed that a person's fancy is a person's real mind. I believe that in the majority of cases one is fond of imagining the direct opposite of one's principles in sheer effort after something fresh and free; at any rate, some of the lightest of those rhymes were composed between the deepest fits of dismals I have ever known. However, I did expect that you might judge in the way you have judged, and that was my chief reason for not telling you what I had done.'

'You don't deny that you tried to escape from recollections you ought to have cherished? There is only one thing that women of your sort are as ready to do as to take a man's name, and that is, drop his memory.'

'Dear Lady Petherwin – don't be so unreasonable as to blame a live person for living! No woman's head is so small as to be filled for life by a memory of a few months. Four years have passed since I last saw my boy-husband. We were mere children; see how I have altered since in mind, substance, and outline – I have even grown half an inch taller since his death. Two years will exhaust the regrets of widows who have long been faithful wives; and ought I not to show a little new life when my husband died in the honeymoon?'

'No. Accepting the protection of your husband's mother was, in effect, an avowal that you rejected the idea of being a widow to prolong the idea of being a wife; and the sin against your conventional state thus assumed is almost as bad as would have been a sin against the married state itself. If you had gone off when he died, saying, "Thank heaven, I am free!" you would, at any rate, have shown some real honesty.'

'I should have been more virtuous by being more unfeeling. That often happens.'

‘I have taken to you, and made a great deal of you – given you the inestimable advantages of foreign travel and good society to enlarge your mind. In short, I have been like a Naomi to you in everything, and I maintain that writing these poems saps the foundation of it all.’

‘I do own that you have been a very good Naomi to me thus far; but Ruth was quite a fast widow in comparison with me, and yet Naomi never blamed her. You are unfortunate in your illustration. But it is dreadfully flippant of me to answer you like this, for you have been kind. But why will you provoke me!’

‘Yes, you are flippant, Ethelberta. You are too much given to that sort of thing.’

‘Well, I don’t know how the secret of my name has leaked out; and I am not ribald, or anything you say,’ said Ethelberta, with a sigh.

‘Then you own you do not feel so ardent as you seem in your book?’

‘I do own it.’

‘And that you are sorry your name has been published in connection with it?’

‘I am.’

‘And you think the verses may tend to misrepresent your character as a gay and rapturous one, when it is not?’

‘I do fear it.’

‘Then, of course, you will suppress the poems instantly. That is the only way in which you can regain the position you have hitherto held with me.’

Ethelberta said nothing; and the dull winter atmosphere had far from light enough in it to show by her face what she might be thinking.

‘Well?’ said Lady Petherwin.

‘I did not expect such a command as that,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I have been obedient for four years, and would continue so – but I cannot suppress the poems. They are not mine now to suppress.’

‘You must get them into your hands. Money will do it, I suppose?’

‘Yes, I suppose it would – a thousand pounds.’

‘Very well; the money shall be forthcoming,’ said Lady Petherwin, after a pause. ‘You had better sit down and write about it at once.’

‘I cannot do it,’ said Ethelberta; ‘and I will not. I don’t wish them to be suppressed. I am not ashamed of them; there is nothing to be ashamed of in them; and I shall not take any steps in the matter.’

‘Then you are an ungrateful woman, and wanting in natural affection for the dead! Considering your birth – ’

‘That’s an intolerable – ’

Lady Petherwin crashed out of the room in a wind of indignation, and went upstairs and heard no more. Adjoining her chamber was a smaller one called her study, and, on reaching this, she unlocked a cabinet, took out a small deed-box, removed from it a folded packet, unfolded it, crumpled it up, and turning round suddenly flung it into the fire. Then she stood and beheld it eaten away word after word by the flames, ‘Testament’ – ‘all that freehold’ – ‘heirs and assigns’ appearing occasionally for a moment only to disappear for ever. Nearly half the document had turned into a glossy black when the lady clasped her hands.

‘What have I done!’ she exclaimed. Springing to the tongs she seized with them the portion of the writing yet unconsumed, and dragged it out of the fire. Ethelberta appeared at the door.

‘Quick, Ethelberta!’ said Lady Petherwin. ‘Help me to put this out!’ And the two women went trampling wildly upon the document and smothering it with a corner of the hearth-rug.

‘What is it?’ said Ethelberta.

‘My will!’ said Lady Petherwin. ‘I have kept it by me lately, for I have wished to look over it at leisure – ’

‘Good heavens!’ said Ethelberta. ‘And I was just coming in to tell you that I would always cling to you, and never desert you, ill-use me how you might!’

‘Such an affectionate remark sounds curious at such a time,’ said Lady Petherwin, sinking down in a chair at the end of the struggle.

‘But,’ cried Ethelberta, ‘you don’t suppose – ’

‘Selfishness, my dear, has given me such crooked looks that I can see it round a corner.’

‘If you mean that what is yours to give may not be mine to take, it would be as well to name it in an impersonal way, if you must name it at all,’ said the daughter-in-law, with wet eyelids. ‘God knows I had no selfish thought in saying that. I came upstairs to ask you to forgive me, and knew nothing about the will. But every explanation distorts it all the more!’

‘We two have got all awry, dear – it cannot be concealed – awry – awry. Ah, who shall set us right again? However, now I must send for Mr. Chancerly – no, I am going out on other business, and I will call upon him. There, don’t spoil your eyes: you may have to sell them.’

She rang the bell and ordered the carriage; and half-an-hour later Lady Petherwin’s coachman drove his mistress up to the door of her lawyer’s office in Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

11. SANDBOURNE AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD – SOME LONDON STREETS

While this was going on in town, Christopher, at his lodgings in Sandbourne, had been thrown into rare old visions and dreams by the appearance of Ethelberta's letter. Flattered and encouraged to ambition as well as to love by her inspiriting sermon, he put off now the last remnant of cynical doubt upon the genuineness of his old mistress, and once and for all set down as disloyal a belief he had latterly acquired that 'Come, woo me, woo me; for I am like enough to consent,' was all a young woman had to tell.

All the reasoning of political and social economists would not have convinced Christopher that he had a better chance in London than in Sandbourne of making a decent income by reasonable and likely labour; but a belief in a far more improbable proposition, impetuously expressed, warmed him with the idea that he might become famous there. The greater is frequently more readily credited than the less, and an argument which will not convince on a matter of halfpence appears unanswerable when applied to questions of glory and honour.

The regulation wet towel and strong coffee of the ambitious and intellectual student floated before him in visions; but it was with a sense of relief that he remembered that music, in spite of its drawbacks as a means of sustenance, was a profession happily unencumbered with those excruciating preliminaries to greatness.

Christopher talked about the new move to his sister, and he was vexed that her hopefulness was not roused to quite the pitch of his own. As with others of his sort, his too general habit of accepting the most clouded possibility that chances offered was only transcended by his readiness to kindle with a fitful excitement now and then. Faith was much more equable. 'If you were not the most melancholy man God ever created,' she said, kindly looking at his vague deep eyes and thin face, which was but a few degrees too refined and poetical to escape the epithet of lantern-jawed from any one who had quarrelled with him, 'you would not mind my coolness about this. It is a good thing of course to go; I have always fancied that we were mistaken in coming here. Mediocrity stamped "London" fetches more than talent marked "provincial." But I cannot feel so enthusiastic.'

'Still, if we are to go, we may as well go by enthusiasm as by calculation; it is a sensation pleasanter to the nerves, and leads to just as good a result when there is only one result possible.'

'Very well,' said Faith. 'I will not depress you. If I had to describe you I should say you were a child in your impulses, and an old man in your reflections. Have you considered when we shall start?'

'Yes.'

'What have you thought?'

'That we may very well leave the place in six weeks if we wish.'

'We really may?'

'Yes. And what is more, we will.'

* * * * *

Christopher and Faith arrived in London on an afternoon at the end of winter, and beheld from one of the river bridges snow-white scrolls of steam from the tall chimneys of Lambeth, rising against the livid sky behind, as if drawn in chalk on toned cardboard.

The first thing he did that evening, when settled in their apartments near the British Museum, before applying himself to the beginning of the means by which success in life might be attained, was to go out in the direction of Ethelberta's door, leaving Faith unpacking the things, and sniffing extraordinary smoke-smells which she discovered in all nooks and crannies of the rooms. It was some

satisfaction to see Ethelberta's house, although the single feature in which it differed from the other houses in the Crescent was that no lamp shone from the fanlight over the entrance – a speciality which, if he cared for omens, was hardly encouraging. Fearing to linger near lest he might be detected, Christopher stole a glimpse at the door and at the steps, imagined what a trifle of the depression worn in each step her feet had tended to produce, and strolled home again.

Feeling that his reasons for calling just now were scarcely sufficient, he went next day about the business that had brought him to town, which referred to a situation as organist in a large church in the north-west district. The post was half ensured already, and he intended to make of it the nucleus of a professional occupation and income. Then he sat down to think of the preliminary steps towards publishing the song that had so pleased her, and had also, as far as he could understand from her letter, hit the popular taste very successfully; a fact which, however little it may say for the virtues of the song as a composition, was a great recommendation to it as a property. Christopher was delighted to perceive that out of this position he could frame an admissible, if not an unimpeachable, reason for calling upon Ethelberta. He determined to do so at once, and obtain the required permission by word of mouth.

He was greatly surprised, when the front of the house appeared in view on this spring afternoon, to see what a white and sightless aspect pervaded all the windows. He came close: the eyeball blankness was caused by all the shutters and blinds being shut tight from top to bottom. Possibly this had been the case for some time – he could not tell. In one of the windows was a card bearing the announcement, 'This House to be let Furnished.' Here was a merciless clash between fancy and fact. Regretting now his faint-heartedness in not letting her know beforehand by some means that he was about to make a new start in the world, and coming to dwell near her, Christopher rang the bell to make inquiries. A gloomy caretaker appeared after a while, and the young man asked whither the ladies had gone to live. He was beyond measure depressed to learn that they were in the South of France – Arles, the man thought the place was called – the time of their return to town being very uncertain; though one thing was clear, they meant to miss the forthcoming London season altogether.

As Christopher's hope to see her again had brought a resolve to do so, so now resolve led to dogged patience. Instead of attempting anything by letter, he decided to wait; and he waited well, occupying himself in publishing a 'March' and a 'Morning and Evening Service in E flat.' Some four-part songs, too, engaged his attention when the heavier duties of the day were over – these duties being the giving of lessons in harmony and counterpoint, in which he was aided by the introductions of a man well known in the musical world, who had been acquainted with young Julian as a promising amateur long before he adopted music as the staff of his pilgrimage.

It was the end of summer when he again tried his fortune at the house in Exonbury Crescent. Scarcely calculating upon finding her at this stagnant time of the town year, and only hoping for information, Julian was surprised and excited to see the shutters open, and the house wearing altogether a living look, its neighbours having decidedly died off meanwhile.

'The family here,' said a footman in answer to his inquiry, 'are only temporary tenants of the house. It is not Lady Petherwin's people.'

'Do you know the Petherwins' present address?'

'Underground, sir, for the old lady. She died some time ago in Switzerland, and was buried there, I believe.'

'And Mrs. Petherwin – the young lady,' said Christopher, starting.

'We are not acquainted personally with the family,' the man replied. 'My master has only taken the house for a few months, whilst extensive alterations are being made in his own on the other side of the park, which he goes to look after every day. If you want any further information about Lady Petherwin, Mrs. Petherwin will probably give it. I can let you have her address.'

'Ah, yes; thank you,' said Christopher.

The footman handed him one of some cards which appeared to have been left for the purpose. Julian, though tremblingly anxious to know where Ethelberta was, did not look at it till he could take a cool survey in private. The address was 'Arrowthorne Lodge, Upper Wessex.'

'Dear me!' said Christopher to himself, 'not far from Melchester; and not dreadfully far from Sandbourne.'

12. ARROWTHORNE PARK AND LODGE

Summer was just over when Christopher Julian found himself rattling along in the train to Sandbourne on some trifling business appertaining to his late father's affairs, which would afford him an excuse for calling at Arrowthorne about the song of hers that he wished to produce. He alighted in the afternoon at a little station some twenty miles short of Sandbourne, and leaving his portmanteau behind him there, decided to walk across the fields, obtain if possible the interview with the lady, and return then to the station to finish the journey to Sandbourne, which he could thus reach at a convenient hour in the evening, and, if he chose, take leave of again the next day.

It was an afternoon which had a fungous smell out of doors, all being sunless and stagnant overhead and around. The various species of trees had begun to assume the more distinctive colours of their decline, and where there had been one pervasive green were now twenty greenish yellows, the air in the vistas between them being half opaque with blue exhalation. Christopher in his walk overtook a countryman, and inquired if the path they were following would lead him to Arrowthorne Lodge.

'Twill take 'ee into Arr'thorne Park,' the man replied. 'But you won't come anigh the Lodge, unless you bear round to the left as might be.'

'Mrs. Petherwin lives there, I believe?'

'No, sir. Leastwise unless she's but lately come. I have never heard of such a woman.'

'She may possibly be only visiting there.'

'Ah, perhaps that's the shape o't. Well, now you tell o't, I have seen a strange face thereabouts once or twice lately. A young good-looking maid enough, seemingly.'

'Yes, she's considered a very handsome lady.'

'I've heard the woodmen say, now that you tell o't, that they meet her every now and then, just at the closing in of the day, as they come home along with their nitches of sticks; ay, stalking about under the trees by herself – a tall black martel, so long-legged and awful-like that you'd think 'twas the old feller himself a-coming, they say. Now a woman must be a queer body to my thinking, to roam about by night so lonesome and that? Ay, now that you tell o't, there is such a woman, but 'a never have showed in the parish; sure I never thought who the body was – no, not once about her, nor where 'a was living and that – not I, till you spoke. Well, there, sir, that's Arr'thorne Lodge; do you see they three elms?' He pointed across the glade towards some confused foliage a long way off.

'I am not sure about the sort of tree you mean,' said Christopher, 'I see a number of trees with edges shaped like edges of clouds.'

'Ay, ay, they be oaks; I mean the elms to the left hand.'

'But a man can hardly tell oaks from elms at that distance, my good fellow!'

'That 'a can very well – leastwise, if he's got the sense.'

'Well, I think I see what you mean,' said Christopher. 'What next?'

'When you get there, you bear away smart to nor'-west, and you'll come straight as a line to the Lodge.'

'How the deuce am I to know which is north-west in a strange place, with no sun to tell me?'

'What, not know nor-west? Well, I should think a boy could never live and grow up to be a man without knowing the four quarters. I knowed 'em when I was a mossel of a chiel. We be no great scholars here, that's true, but there isn't a Tom-rig or Jack-straw in these parts that don't know where they lie as well as I. Now I've lived, man and boy, these eight-and-sixty years, and never met a man in my life afore who hadn't learnt such a common thing as the four quarters.'

Christopher parted from his companion and soon reached a stile, clambering over which he entered a park. Here he threaded his way, and rounding a clump of aged trees the young man came in view of a light and elegant country-house in the half-timbered Gothic style of the late revival, apparently only a few years old. Surprised at finding himself so near, Christopher's heart fluttered

unmanageably till he had taken an abstract view of his position, and, in impatience at his want of nerve, adopted a sombre train of reasoning to convince himself that, far from indulgence in the passion of love bringing bliss, it was a folly, leading to grief and disquiet – certainly one which would do him no good. Cooled down by this, he stepped into the drive and went up to the house.

‘Is Mrs. Petherwin at home?’ he said modestly.

‘Who did you say, sir?’

He repeated the name.

‘Don’t know the person.’

‘The lady may be a visitor – I call on business.’

‘She is not visiting in this house, sir.’

‘Is not this Arrowthorne Lodge?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Then where is Arrowthorne Lodge, please?’

‘Well, it is nearly a mile from here. Under the trees by the high-road. If you go across by that footpath it will bring you out quicker than by following the bend of the drive.’

Christopher wondered how he could have managed to get into the wrong park; but, setting it down to his ignorance of the difference between oak and elm, he immediately retraced his steps, passing across the park again, through the gate at the end of the drive, and into the turnpike road. No other gate, park, or country seat of any description was within view.

‘Can you tell me the way to Arrowthorne Lodge?’ he inquired of the first person he met, who was a little girl.

‘You are just coming away from it, sir,’ said she. ‘I’ll show you; I am going that way.’

They walked along together. Getting abreast the entrance of the park he had just emerged from, the child said, ‘There it is, sir; I live there too.’

Christopher, with a dazed countenance, looked towards a cottage which stood nestling in the shrubbery and ivy like a mushroom among grass. ‘Is that Arrowthorne Lodge?’ he repeated.

‘Yes, and if you go up the drive, you come to Arrowthorne House.’

‘Arrowthorne Lodge – where Mrs. Petherwin lives, I mean.’

‘Yes. She lives there along wi’ mother and we. But she don’t want anybody to know it, sir, cause she’s celebrate, and ’twouldn’t do at all.’

Christopher said no more, and the little girl became interested in the products of the bank and ditch by the wayside. He left her, pushed open the heavy gate, and tapped at the Lodge door.

The latch was lifted. ‘Does Mrs. Petherwin,’ he began, and, determined that there should be no mistake, repeated, ‘Does Mrs. Ethelberta Petherwin, the poetess, live here?’ turning full upon the person who opened the door.

‘She does, sir,’ said a faltering voice; and he found himself face to face with the pupil-teacher of Sandbourne.

13. THE LODGE (continued) – THE COPSE BEHIND

‘This is indeed a surprise; I – am glad to see you!’ Christopher stammered, with a wire-drawn, radically different smile from the one he had intended – a smile not without a tinge of ghastliness.

‘Yes – I am home for the holidays,’ said the blushing maiden; and, after a critical pause, she added, ‘If you wish to speak to my sister, she is in the plantation with the children.’

‘O no – no, thank you – not necessary at all,’ said Christopher, in haste. ‘I only wish for an interview with a lady called Mrs. Petherwin.’

‘Yes; Mrs Petherwin – my sister,’ said Picotee. ‘She is in the plantation. That little path will take you to her in five minutes.’

The amazed Christopher persuaded himself that this discovery was very delightful, and went on persuading so long that at last he felt it to be so. Unable, like many other people, to enjoy being satirized in words because of the irritation it caused him as aimed-at victim, he sometimes had philosophy enough to appreciate a satire of circumstance, because nobody intended it. Pursuing the path indicated, he found himself in a thicket of scrubby undergrowth, which covered an area enclosed from the park proper by a decaying fence. The boughs were so tangled that he was obliged to screen his face with his hands, to escape the risk of having his eyes filliped out by the twigs that impeded his progress. Thus slowly advancing, his ear caught, between the rustles, the tones of a voice in earnest declamation; and, pushing round in that direction, he beheld through some beech boughs an open space about ten yards in diameter, floored at the bottom with deep beds of curled old leaves, and cushions of furry moss. In the middle of this natural theatre was the stump of a tree that had been felled by a saw, and upon the flat stool thus formed stood Ethelberta, whom Christopher had not beheld since the ball at Wyndway House.

Round her, leaning against branches or prostrate on the ground, were five or six individuals. Two were young mechanics – one of them evidently a carpenter. Then there was a boy about thirteen, and two or three younger children. Ethelberta’s appearance answered as fully as ever to that of an English lady skilfully perfected in manner, carriage, look, and accent; and the incongruity of her present position among lives which had had many of Nature’s beauties stamped out of them, and few of the beauties of Art stamped in, brought him, as a second feeling, a pride in her that almost equalled his first sentiment of surprise. Christopher’s attention was meanwhile attracted from the constitution of the group to the words of the speaker in the centre of it – words to which her auditors were listening with still attention.

It appeared to Christopher that Ethelberta had lately been undergoing some very extraordinary experiences. What the beginning of them had been he could not in the least understand, but the portion she was describing came distinctly to his ears, and he wondered more and more.

‘He came forward till he, like myself, was about twenty yards from the edge. I instinctively grasped my useless stiletto. How I longed for the assistance which a little earlier I had so much despised! Reaching the block or boulder upon which I had been sitting, he clasped his arms around from behind; his hands closed upon the empty seat, and he jumped up with an oath. This method of attack told me a new thing with wretched distinctness; he had, as I suppose, discovered my sex, male attire was to serve my turn no longer. The next instant, indeed, made it clear, for he exclaimed, “You don’t escape me, masquerading madam,” or some such words, and came on. My only hope was that in his excitement he might forget to notice where the grass terminated near the edge of the cliff, though this could be easily felt by a careful walker: to make my own feeling more distinct on this point I hastily bared my feet.’

The listeners moistened their lips, Ethelberta took breath, and then went on to describe the scene that ensued, ‘A dreadful variation on the game of Blindman’s buff,’ being the words by which she characterized it.

Ethelberta's manner had become so impassioned at this point that the lips of her audience parted, the children clung to their elders, and Christopher could control himself no longer. He thrust aside the boughs, and broke in upon the group.

'For Heaven's sake, Ethelberta,' he exclaimed with great excitement, 'where did you meet with such a terrible experience as that?'

The children shrieked, as if they thought that the interruption was in some way the catastrophe of the events in course of narration. Every one started up; the two young mechanics stared, and one of them inquired, in return, 'What's the matter, friend?'

Christopher had not yet made reply when Ethelberta stepped from her pedestal down upon the crackling carpet of deep leaves.

'Mr. Julian!' said she, in a serene voice, turning upon him eyes of such a disputable stage of colour, between brown and grey, as would have commended itself to a gallant duellist of the last century as a point on which it was absolutely necessary to take some friend's life or other. But the calmness was artificially done, and the astonishment that did not appear in Ethelberta's tones was expressed by her gaze. Christopher was not in a mood to draw fine distinctions between recognized and unrecognized organs of speech. He replied to the eyes.

'I own that your surprise is natural,' he said, with an anxious look into her face, as if he wished to get beyond this interpolated scene to something more congenial and understood. 'But my concern at such a history of yourself since I last saw you is even more natural than your surprise at my manner of breaking in.'

'That history would justify any conduct in one who hears it –'

'Yes, indeed.'

'If it were true,' added Ethelberta, smiling. 'But it is as false as –' She could name nothing notoriously false without raising an image of what was disagreeable, and she continued in a better manner: 'The story I was telling is entirely a fiction, which I am getting up for a particular purpose – very different from what appears at present.'

'I am sorry there was such a misunderstanding,' Christopher stammered, looking upon the ground uncertain and ashamed. 'Yet I am not, either, for I am very glad you have not undergone such trials, of course. But the fact is, I – being in the neighbourhood – I ventured to call on a matter of business, relating to a poem which I had the pleasure of setting to music at the beginning of the year.'

Ethelberta was only a little less ill at ease than Christopher showed himself to be by this way of talking.

'Will you walk slowly on?' she said gently to the two young men, 'and take the children with you; this gentleman wishes to speak to me on business.'

The biggest young man caught up a little one under his arm, and plunged amid the boughs; another little one lingered behind for a few moments to look shyly at Christopher, with an oblique manner of hiding her mouth against her shoulder and her eyes behind her pinafore. Then she vanished, the boy and the second young man followed, and Ethelberta and Christopher stood within the wood-bound circle alone.

'I hope I have caused no inconvenience by interrupting the proceedings,' said Christopher softly; 'but I so very much wished to see you!'

'Did you, indeed – really wish to see me?' she said gladly. 'Never mind inconvenience then; it is a word which seems shallow in meaning under the circumstances. I surely must say that a visit is to my advantage, must I not? I am not as I was, you see, and may receive as advantages what I used to consider as troubles.'

'Has your life really changed so much?'

'It has changed. But what I first meant was that an interesting visitor at a wrong time is better than a stupid one at a right time.'

‘I had been behind the trees for some minutes, looking at you, and thinking of you; but what you were doing rather interrupted my first meditation. I had thought of a meeting in which we should continue our intercourse at the point at which it was broken off years ago, as if the omitted part had not existed at all; but something, I cannot tell what, has upset all that feeling, and –’

‘I can soon tell you the meaning of my extraordinary performance,’ Ethelberta broke in quickly, and with a little trepidation. ‘My mother-in-law, Lady Petherwin, is dead; and she has left me nothing but her house and furniture in London – more than I deserve, but less than she had distinctly led me to expect; and so I am somewhat in a corner.’

‘It is always so.’

‘Not always, I think. But this is how it happened. Lady Petherwin was very capricious; when she was not foolishly kind she was unjustly harsh. A great many are like it, never thinking what a good thing it would be, instead of going on tacking from side to side between favour and cruelty, to keep to a mean line of common justice. And so we quarrelled, and she, being absolute mistress of all her wealth, destroyed her will that was in my favour, and made another, leaving me nothing but the fag-end of the lease of the town-house and the furniture in it. Then, when we were abroad, she turned to me again, forgave everything, and, becoming ill afterwards, wrote a letter to the brother, to whom she had left the bulk of her property, stating that I was to have twenty-thousand of the one-hundred-thousand pounds she had bequeathed to him – as in the original will – doing this by letter in case anything should happen to her before a new will could be considered, drawn, and signed, and trusting to his honour quite that he would obey her expressed wish should she die abroad. Well, she did die, in the full persuasion that I was provided for; but her brother (as I secretly expected all the time) refused to be morally bound by a document which had no legal value, and the result is that he has everything, except, of course, the furniture and the lease. It would have been enough to break the heart of a person who had calculated upon getting a fortune, which I never did; for I felt always like an intruder and a bondswoman, and had wished myself out of the Petherwin family a hundred times, with my crust of bread and liberty. For one thing, I was always forbidden to see my relatives, and it pained me much. Now I am going to move for myself, and consider that I have a good chance of success in what I may undertake, because of an indifference I feel about succeeding which gives the necessary coolness that any great task requires.’

‘I presume you mean to write more poems?’

‘I cannot – that is, I can write no more that satisfy me. To blossom into rhyme on the sparkling pleasures of life, you must be under the influence of those pleasures, and I am at present quite removed from them – surrounded by gaunt realities of a very different description.’

‘Then try the mournful. Trade upon your sufferings: many do, and thrive.’

‘It is no use to say that – no use at all. I cannot write a line of verse. And yet the others flowed from my heart like a stream. But nothing is so easy as to seem clever when you have money.’

‘Except to seem stupid when you have none,’ said Christopher, looking at the dead leaves.

Ethelberta allowed herself to linger on that thought for a few seconds; and continued, ‘Then the question arose, what was I to do? I felt that to write prose would be an uncongenial occupation, and altogether a poor prospect for a woman like me. Finally I have decided to appear in public.’

‘Not on the stage?’

‘Certainly not on the stage. There is no novelty in a poor lady turning actress, and novelty is what I want. Ordinary powers exhibited in a new way effect as much as extraordinary powers exhibited in an old way.’

‘Yes – so they do. And extraordinary powers, and a new way too, would be irresistible.’

‘I don’t calculate upon both. I had written a prose story by request, when it was found that I had grown utterly inane over verse. It was written in the first person, and the style was modelled after De Foe’s. The night before sending it off, when I had already packed it up, I was reading about

the professional story-tellers of Eastern countries, who devoted their lives to the telling of tales. I unfastened the manuscript and retained it, convinced that I should do better by *telling* the story.'

'Well thought of!' exclaimed Christopher, looking into her face. 'There is a way for everybody to live, if they can only find it out.'

'It occurred to me,' she continued, blushing slightly, 'that tales of the weird kind were made to be told, not written. The action of a teller is wanted to give due effect to all stories of incident; and I hope that a time will come when, as of old, instead of an unsocial reading of fiction at home alone, people will meet together cordially, and sit at the feet of a professed romancer. I am going to tell my tales before a London public. As a child, I had a considerable power in arresting the attention of other children by recounting adventures which had never happened; and men and women are but children enlarged a little. Look at this.'

She drew from her pocket a folded paper, shook it abroad, and disclosed a rough draft of an announcement to the effect that Mrs. Petherwin, Professed Story-teller, would devote an evening to that ancient form of the romancer's art, at a well-known fashionable hall in London. 'Now you see,' she continued, 'the meaning of what you observed going on here. That you heard was one of three tales I am preparing, with a view of selecting the best. As a reserved one, I have the tale of my own life – to be played as a last card. It was a private rehearsal before my brothers and sisters – not with any view of obtaining their criticism, but that I might become accustomed to my own voice in the presence of listeners.'

'If I only had had half your enterprise, what I might have done in the world!'

'Now did you ever consider what a power De Foe's manner would have if practised by word of mouth? Indeed, it is a style which suits itself infinitely better to telling than to writing, abounding as it does in colloquialisms that are somewhat out of place on paper in these days, but have a wonderful power in making a narrative seem real. And so, in short, I am going to talk De Foe on a subject of my own. Well?'

The last word had been given tenderly, with a long-drawn sweetness, and was caused by a look that Christopher was bending upon her at the moment, in which he revealed that he was thinking less of the subject she was so eagerly and hopefully descanting upon than upon her aspect in explaining it. It is a fault of manner particularly common among men newly imported into the society of bright and beautiful women; and we will hope that, springing as it does from no unworthy source, it is as soon forgiven in the general world as it was here.

'I was only following a thought,' said Christopher: – 'a thought of how I used to know you, and then lost sight of you, and then discovered you famous, and how we are here under these sad autumn trees, and nobody in sight.'

'I think it must be tea-time,' she said suddenly. 'Tea is a great meal with us here – you will join us, will you not?' And Ethelberta began to make for herself a passage through the boughs. Another rustle was heard a little way off, and one of the children appeared.

'Emmeline wants to know, please, if the gentleman that come to see 'ee will stay to tea; because, if so, she's agoing to put in another spoonful for him and a bit of best green.'

'O Georgina – how candid! Yes, put in some best green.'

Before Christopher could say any more to her, they were emerging by the corner of the cottage, and one of the brothers drew near them. 'Mr. Julian, you'll bide and have a cup of tea wi' us?' he inquired of Christopher. 'An old friend of yours, is he not, Mrs. Petherwin? Dan and I be going back to Sandbourne to-night, and we can walk with 'ee as far as the station.'

'I shall be delighted,' said Christopher; and they all entered the cottage. The evening had grown clearer by this time; the sun was peeping out just previous to departure, and sent gold wires of light across the glades and into the windows, throwing a pattern of the diamond quarries, and outlines of the geraniums in pots, against the opposite wall. One end of the room was polygonal, such a shape being dictated by the exterior design; in this part the windows were placed, as at the east end of continental

churches. Thus, from the combined effects of the ecclesiastical lancet lights and the apsidal shape of the room, it occurred to Christopher that the sisters were all a delightful set of pretty saints, exhibiting themselves in a lady chapel, and backed up by unkempt major prophets, as represented by the forms of their big brothers.

Christopher sat down to tea as invited, squeezing himself in between two children whose names were almost as long as their persons, and whose tin cups discoursed primitive music by means of spoons rattled inside them until they were filled. The tea proceeded pleasantly, notwithstanding that the cake, being a little burnt, tasted on the outside like the latter plums in snapdragon. Christopher never could meet the eye of Picotee, who continued in a wild state of flushing all the time, fixing her looks upon the sugar-basin, except when she glanced out of the window to see how the evening was going on, and speaking no word at all unless it was to correct a small sister of somewhat crude manners as regards filling the mouth, which Picotee did in a whisper, and a gentle inclination of her mouth to the little one's ear, and a still deeper blush than before.

Their visitor next noticed that an additional cup-and-saucer and plate made their appearance occasionally at the table, were silently replenished, and then carried off by one of the children to an inner apartment.

'Our mother is bedridden,' said Ethelberta, noticing Christopher's look at the proceeding. 'Emmeline attends to the household, except when Picotee is at home, and Joey attends to the gate; but our mother's affliction is a very unfortunate thing for the poor children. We are thinking of a plan of living which will, I hope, be more convenient than this is; but we have not yet decided what to do.' At this minute a carriage and pair of horses became visible through one of the angular windows of the apse, in the act of turning in from the highway towards the park gate. The boy who answered to the name of Joey sprang up from the table with the promptness of a Jack-in-the-box, and ran out at the door. Everybody turned as the carriage passed through the gate, which Joey held open, putting his other hand where the brim of his hat would have been if he had worn one, and lapsing into a careless boy again the instant that the vehicle had gone by.

'There's a tremendous large dinner-party at the House to-night,' said Emmeline methodically, looking at the equipage over the edge of her teacup, without leaving off sipping. 'That was Lord Mountclere. He's a wicked old man, they say.'

'Lord Mountclere?' said Ethelberta musingly. 'I used to know some friends of his. In what way is he wicked?'

'I don't know,' said Emmeline, with simplicity. 'I suppose it is because he breaks the commandments. But I wonder how a big rich lord can want to steal anything.' Emmeline's thoughts of breaking commandments instinctively fell upon the eighth, as being in her ideas the only case wherein the gain could be considered as at all worth the hazard.

Ethelberta said nothing; but Christopher thought that a shade of depression passed over her.

'Hook back the gate, Joey,' shouted Emmeline, when the carriage had proceeded up the drive. 'There's more to come.'

Joey did as ordered, and by the time he got indoors another carriage turned in from the public road – a one-horse brougham this time.

'I know who that is: that's Mr. Ladywell,' said Emmeline, in the same matter-of-fact tone. 'He's been here afore: he's a distant relation of the squire's, and he once gave me sixpence for picking up his gloves.'

'What shall I live to see?' murmured the poetess, under her breath, nearly dropping her teacup in an involuntary trepidation, from which she made it a point of dignity to recover in a moment. Christopher's eyes, at that exhibition from Ethelberta, entered her own like a pair of lances. Picotee, seeing Christopher's quick look of jealousy, became involved in her turn, and grew pale as a lily in her endeavours to conceal the complications to which it gave birth in her poor little breast likewise.

‘You judge me very wrongly,’ said Ethelberta, in answer to Christopher’s hasty look of resentment.

‘In supposing Mr. Ladywell to be a great friend of yours?’ said Christopher, who had in some indescribable way suddenly assumed a right to Ethelberta as his old property.

‘Yes: for I hardly know him, and certainly do not value him.’

After this there was something in the mutual look of the two, though their words had been private, which did not tend to remove the anguish of fragile Picotee. Christopher, assured that Ethelberta’s embarrassment had been caused by nothing more than the sense of her odd social subsidence, recovered more bliss than he had lost, and regarded calmly the profile of young Ladywell between the two windows of his brougham as it passed the open cottage door, bearing him along unconscious as the dead of the nearness of his beloved one, and of the sad buffoonery that fate, fortune, and the guardian angels had been playing with Ethelberta of late. He recognized the face as that of the young man whom he had encountered when watching Ethelberta’s window from Rookington Park.

‘Perhaps you remember seeing him at the Christmas dance at Wyndway?’ she inquired. ‘He is a good-natured fellow. Afterwards he sent me that portfolio of sketches you see in the corner. He might possibly do something in the world as a painter if he were obliged to work at the art for his bread, which he is not.’ She added with bitter pleasantry: ‘In bare mercy to his self-respect I must remain unseen here.’

It impressed Christopher to perceive how, under the estrangement which arose from differences of education, surroundings, experience, and talent, the sympathies of close relationship were perceptible in Ethelberta’s bearing towards her brothers and sisters. At a remark upon some simple pleasure wherein she had not participated because absent and occupied by far more comprehensive interests, a gloom as of banishment would cross her face and dim it for awhile, showing that the free habits and enthusiasms of country life had still their charm with her, in the face of the subtler gratifications of abridged bodices, candlelight, and no feelings in particular, which prevailed in town. Perhaps the one condition which could work up into a permanent feeling the passing revival of his fancy for a woman whose chief attribute he had supposed to be sprightliness was added now by the romantic ubiquity of station that attached to her. A discovery which might have grated on the senses of a man wedded to conventionality was a positive pleasure to one whose faith in society had departed with his own social ruin.

The room began to darken, whereupon Christopher arose to leave; and the brothers Sol and Dan offered to accompany him.

14. A TURNPIKE ROAD

‘We be thinking of coming to London ourselves soon,’ said Sol, a carpenter and joiner by trade, as he walked along at Christopher’s left hand. ‘There’s so much more chance for a man up the country. Now, if you was me, how should you set about getting a job, sir?’

‘What can you do?’ said Christopher.

‘Well, I am a very good staircase hand; and I have been called neat at sash-frames; and I can knock together doors and shutters very well; and I can do a little at the cabinet-making. I don’t mind framing a roof, neither, if the rest be busy; and I am always ready to fill up my time at planing floor-boards by the foot.’

‘And I can mix and lay flat tints,’ said Dan, who was a house painter, ‘and pick out mouldings, and grain in every kind of wood you can mention – oak, maple, walnut, satinwood, cherry-tree – ’

‘You can both do too much to stand the least chance of being allowed to do anything in a city, where limitation is all the rule in labour. To have any success, Sol, you must be a man who can thoroughly look at a door to see what ought to be done to it, but as to looking at a window, that’s not your line; or a person who, to the remotest particular, understands turning a screw, but who does not profess any knowledge of how to drive a nail. Dan must know how to paint blue to a marvel, but must be quite in the dark about painting green. If you stick to some such principle of specialty as this, you may get employment in London.’

‘Ha-ha-ha!’ said Dan, striking at a stone in the road with the stout green hazel he carried. ‘A wink is as good as a nod: thank’ee – we’ll mind all that now.’

‘If we do come,’ said Sol, ‘we shall not mix up with Mrs. Petherwin at all.’

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