



The Hand of Ethelberta

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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 feelled 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 From, 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 it 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 furthestmost 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.

* * * * *

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.