

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 ambush 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.'