

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.

