

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.'