

## 8. CHRISTOPHER'S LODGINGS--THE GROUNDS ABOUT ROOKINGTON

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

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

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

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

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

Faith looked critically at the remoter caverns of the fire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I was thinking that, as I cannot very well write to her, I may as well

send her this,' said Christopher, with lightened spirits, voice to correspond, and eyes likewise; 'there can be no objection to it, for such things are done continually. Consider while I am gone, Faith. I shall be out this evening for an hour or two.'

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

sweetest of all conditions. New love is brightest, and long love is greatest; but revived love is the tenderest thing known upon earth.

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

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

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

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

by any possibility, Christopher set down that to imagination, or to the brushing of the wind over the trees.

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

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

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

'Yes, I forgot that I did not tell you.'

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

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

'No; not walking up and down the lane.'

'The turnpike-road to Rookington is pleasant.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What is it?' asked Faith.

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

'But can we believe--?'

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



'Yes: now read it, do.'

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

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

'I might have sent it before, but I wanted to deliver it personally.

However, it is all the same now, I suppose, whether I send it or not. I always knew that our destinies would lie apart, though she was once temporarily under a cloud. Her momentary inspiration to write that

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

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

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