

9. A LADY'S DRAWING-ROOMS--ETHELBERTA'S DRESSING-ROOM

It was a house on the north side of Hyde Park, between ten and eleven in the evening, and several intelligent and courteous people had assembled there to enjoy themselves as far as it was possible to do so in a neutral way--all carefully keeping every variety of feeling in a state of solution, in spite of any attempt such feelings made from time to time to crystallize on interesting subjects in hand.

'Neigh, who is that charming woman with her head built up in a novel way even for hair architecture--the one with her back towards us?' said a man whose coat fitted doubtfully to a friend whose coat fitted well.

'Just going to ask for the same information,' said Mr. Neigh, determining the very longest hair in his beard to an infinitesimal nicety by drawing its lower portion through his fingers. 'I have quite forgotten--cannot keep people's names in my head at all; nor could my father either--nor any of my family--a very odd thing. But my old friend Mrs. Napper knows for certain.' And he turned to one of a small group of middle-aged persons near, who, instead of skimming the surface of things in general, like the rest of the company, were going into the very depths of them.

'O--that is the celebrated Mrs. Petherwin, the woman who makes rhymes and

prints 'em,' said Mrs. Napper, in a detached sentence, and then continued

talking again to those on the other side of her.

The two loungers went on with their observations of Ethelberta's headdress, which, though not extraordinary or eccentric, did certainly convey an idea of indefinable novelty. Observers were sometimes half inclined to think that her cuts and modes were acquired by some secret communication with the mysterious clique which orders the livery of the fashionable world, for--and it affords a parallel to cases in which clever thinkers in other spheres arrive independently at one and the same conclusion--Ethelberta's fashion often turned out to be the coming one.

'O, is that the woman at last?' said Neigh, diminishing his broad general gaze at the room to a close criticism of Ethelberta.

"'The rhymes," as Mrs. Napper calls them, are not to be despised,' said his companion. 'They are not quite *virginibus puerisque*, and the writer's opinions of life and society differ very materially from mine, but I cannot help admiring her in the more reflective pieces; the songs I don't care for. The method in which she handles curious subjects, and at the same time impresses us with a full conviction of her modesty, is very adroit, and somewhat blinds us to the fact that no such poems were demanded of her at all.'

'I have not read them,' said Neigh, secretly wrestling with his jaw, to prevent a yawn; 'but I suppose I must. The truth is, that I never care much for reading what one ought to read; I wish I did, but I cannot help

it. And, no doubt, you admire the lady immensely for writing them: I don't. Everybody is so talented now-a-days that the only people I care to honour as deserving real distinction are those who remain in obscurity. I am myself hoping for a corner in some biographical dictionary when the time comes for those works only to contain lists of the exceptional individuals of whom nothing is known but that they lived and died.'

'Ah--listen. They are going to sing one of her songs,' said his friend, looking towards a bustling movement in the neighbourhood of the piano. 'I believe that song, "When tapers tall," has been set to music by three or four composers already.'

'Men of any note?' said Neigh, at last beaten by his yawn, which courtesy nevertheless confined within his person to such an extent that only a few unimportant symptoms, such as reduced eyes and a certain rectangular manner of mouth in speaking, were visible.

'Scarcely,' replied the other man. 'Established writers of music do not expend their energies upon new verse until they find that such verse is likely to endure; for should the poet be soon forgotten, their labour is in some degree lost.'

'Artful dogs--who would have thought it?' said Neigh, just as an exercise in words; and they drew nearer to the piano, less to become listeners to the singing than to be spectators of the scene in that quarter. But

among some others the interest in the songs seemed to be very great; and it was unanimously wished that the young lady who had practised the different pieces of music privately would sing some of them now in the order of their composers' reputations. The musical persons in the room unconsciously resolved themselves into a committee of taste.

One and another had been tried, when, at the end of the third, a lady spoke to Ethelberta.

'Now, Mrs. Petherwin,' she said, gracefully throwing back her face, 'your opinion is by far the most valuable. In which of the cases do you consider the marriage of verse and tune to have been most successful?'

Ethelberta, finding these and other unexpected calls made upon herself, came to the front without flinching.

'The sweetest and the best that I like by far,' she said, 'is none of these. It is one which reached me by post only this morning from a place in Wessex, and is written by an unheard-of man who lives somewhere down there--a man who will be, nevertheless, heard a great deal of some day, I hope--think. I have only practised it this afternoon; but, if one's own judgment is worth anything, it is the best.'

'Let us have your favourite, by all means,' said another friend of Ethelberta's who was present--Mrs. Doncastle.

'I am so sorry that I cannot oblige you, since you wish to hear it,' replied the poetess regretfully; 'but the music is at home. I had not received it when I lent the others to Miss Belmaine, and it is only in manuscript like the rest.'

'Could it not be sent for?' suggested an enthusiast who knew that Ethelberta lived only in the next street, appealing by a look to her, and then to the mistress of the house.

'Certainly, let us send for it,' said that lady. A footman was at once quietly despatched with precise directions as to where Christopher's sweet production might be found.

'What--is there going to be something interesting?' asked a young married friend of Mrs. Napper, who had returned to her original spot.

'Yes--the best song she has written is to be sung in the best manner to the best air that has been composed for it. I should not wonder if she were going to sing it herself.'

'Did you know anything of Mrs. Petherwin until her name leaked out in connection with these ballads?'

'No; but I think I recollect seeing her once before. She is one of those people who are known, as one may say, by subscription: everybody knows a little, till she is astonishingly well known altogether; but nobody knows

her entirely. She was the orphan child of some clergyman, I believe. Lady Petherwin, her mother-in-law, has been taking her about a great deal latterly.'

'She has apparently a very good prospect.'

'Yes; and it is through her being of that curious undefined character which interprets itself to each admirer as whatever he would like to have it. Old men like her because she is so girlish; youths because she is womanly; wicked men because she is good in their eyes; good men because she is wicked in theirs.'

'She must be a very anomalous sort of woman, at that rate.'

'Yes. Like the British Constitution, she owes her success in practice to her inconsistencies in principle.'

'These poems must have set her up. She appears to be quite the correct spectacle. Happy Mrs. Petherwin!'

The subject of their dialogue was engaged in a conversation with Mrs. Belmaine upon the management of households--a theme provoked by a discussion that was in progress in the pages of some periodical of the time. Mrs. Belmaine was very full of the argument, and went on from point to point till she came to servants.

The face of Ethelberta showed caution at once.

'I consider that Lady Plamby pets her servants by far too much,' said Mrs. Belmaine. 'O, you do not know her? Well, she is a woman with theories; and she lends her maids and men books of the wrong kind for their station, and sends them to picture exhibitions which they don't in the least understand--all for the improvement of their taste, and morals, and nobody knows what besides. It only makes them dissatisfied.'

The face of Ethelberta showed venturesomeness. 'Yes, and dreadfully ambitious!' she said.

'Yes, indeed. What a turn the times have taken! People of that sort push on, and get into business, and get great warehouses, until at last, without ancestors, or family, or name, or estate--'

'Or the merest scrap of heirloom or family jewel.'

'Or heirlooms, or family jewels, they are thought as much of as if their forefathers had glided unobtrusively through the peerage--'

'Ever since the first edition.'

'Yes.' Mrs. Belmaine, who really sprang from a good old family, had been going to say, 'for the last seven hundred years,' but fancying from Ethelberta's addendum that she might not date back more than a trifling

century or so, adopted the suggestion with her usual well-known courtesy, and blushed down to her locket at the thought of the mistake that she might have made. This sensitiveness was a trait in her character which gave great gratification to her husband, and, indeed, to all who knew her.

'And have you any theory on the vexed question of servant-government?' continued Mrs. Belmaine, smiling. 'But no--the subject is of far too practical a nature for one of your bent, of course.'

'O no--it is not at all too practical. I have thought of the matter often,' said Ethelberta. 'I think the best plan would be for somebody to write a pamphlet, "The Shortest Way with the Servants," just as there was once written a terribly stinging one, "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters," which had a great effect.'

'I have always understood that that was written by a dissenter as a satire upon the Church?'

'Ah--so it was: but the example will do to illustrate my meaning.'

'Quite so--I understand--so it will,' said Mrs. Belmaine, with clouded faculties.

Meanwhile Christopher's music had arrived. An accomplished gentleman who

had every musical talent except that of creation, scanned the notes carefully from top to bottom, and sat down to accompany the singer. There was no lady present of sufficient confidence or skill to venture into a song she had never seen before, and the only one who had seen it was Ethelberta herself; she did not deny having practised it the greater part of the afternoon, and was very willing to sing it now if anybody would derive pleasure from the performance. Then she began, and the sweetness of her singing was such that even the most unsympathetic honoured her by looking as if they would be willing to listen to every note the song contained if it were not quite so much trouble to do so. Some were so interested that, instead of continuing their conversation, they remained in silent consideration of how they would continue it when she had finished; while the particularly civil people arranged their countenances into every attentive form that the mind could devise. One emotional gentleman looked at the corner of a chair as if, till that moment, such an object had never crossed his vision before; the movement of his finger to the imagined tune was, for a deaf old clergyman, a perfect mine of interest; whilst a young man from the country was powerless to put an end to an enchanted gaze at nothing at all in the exact middle of the room before him. Neigh, and the general phalanx of cool men and celebrated club yawners, were so much affected that they raised their chronic look of great objection to things, to an expression of scarcely any objection at all.

'What makes it so interesting,' said Mrs. Doncastle to Ethelberta, when the song was over and she had retired from the focus of the company, 'is,

that it is played from the composer's own copy, which has never met the public eye, or any other than his own before to-day. And I see that he has actually sketched in the lines by hand, instead of having ruled paper--just as the great old composers used to do. You must have been as pleased to get it fresh from the stocks like that as he probably was pleased to get your thanks.'

Ethelberta became reflective. She had not thanked Christopher; moreover, she had decided, after some consideration, that she ought not to thank him. What new thoughts were suggested by that remark of Mrs. Doncastle's, and what new inclination resulted from the public presentation of his tune and her words as parts of one organic whole, are best explained by describing her doings at a later hour, when, having left her friends somewhat early, she had reached home and retired from public view for that evening.

Ethelberta went to her room, sent away the maid who did double duty for herself and Lady Petherwin, walked in circles about the carpet till the fire had grown haggard and cavernous, sighed, took a sheet of paper and wrote:--

'DEAR MR. JULIAN,--I have said I would not write: I have said it twice; but discretion, under some circumstances, is only another name for unkindness. Before thanking you for your sweet gift, let me tell you in a few words of something which may materially change an aspect of affairs under which I appear to you to deserve it.

'With regard to my history and origin you are altogether mistaken; and how can I tell whether your bitterness at my previous silence on those points may not cause you to withdraw your act of courtesy now? But the gratification of having at last been honest with you may compensate even for the loss of your respect.

'The matter is a small one to tell, after all. What will you say on learning that I am not the trodden-down "lady by birth" that you have supposed me? That my father is not dead, as you probably imagine; that he is working for his living as one among a peculiarly stigmatized and ridiculed multitude?

'Had he been a brawny cottager, carpenter, mason, blacksmith, well-digger, navvy, tree-feller--any effective and manly trade, in short, a worker in which can stand up in the face of the noblest and daintiest, and bare his gnarled arms and say, with a consciousness of superior power, "Look at a real man!" I should have been able to show you antecedents which, if not intensely romantic, are not altogether antagonistic to romance. But the present fashion of associating with one particular class everything that is ludicrous and bombastic overpowers me when I think of it in relation to myself and your known sensitiveness. When the well-born poetess of good report melts into. . .'

Having got thus far, a faint-hearted look, which had begun to show itself

several sentences earlier, became pronounced. She threw the writing into the dull fire, poked and stirred it till a red inflammation crept over the sheet, and then started anew:--

'DEAR MR. JULIAN,--Not knowing your present rank as composer--whether

on the very brink of fame, or as yet a long way off--I cannot decide what form of expression my earnest acknowledgments should take. Let me simply say in one short phrase, I thank you infinitely!

'I am no musician, and my opinion on music may not be worth much: yet I know what I like (as everybody says, but I do not use the words as a form to cover a hopeless blank on all connected with the subject), and this sweet air I love. You must have glided like a breeze about me--seen into a heart not worthy of scrutiny, jotted down words that cannot justify attention--before you could have apotheosized the song in so exquisite a manner. My gratitude took the form of wretchedness when, on hearing the effect of the ballad in public this evening, I thought that I had not power to withhold a reply which might do us both more harm than good. Then I said, "Away with all emotion--I wish the world was drained dry of it--I will take no notice," when a lady whispered at my elbow to the effect that of course I had expressed my gratification to you. I ought first to have mentioned that your creation has been played to-night to full drawing-rooms, and the original tones cooled the artificial air like a fountain almost.

'I prophesy great things of you. Perhaps, at the time when we are each but a row of bones in our individual graves, your genius will be remembered, while my mere cleverness will have been long forgotten.

'But--you must allow a woman of experience to say this--the undoubted power that you possess will do you socially no good unless you mix with it the ingredient of ambition--a quality in which I fear you are very deficient. It is in the hope of stimulating you to a better opinion of yourself that I write this letter.

'Probably I shall never meet you again. Not that I think circumstances to be particularly powerful to prevent such a meeting, rather it is that I shall energetically avoid it. There can be no such thing as strong friendship between a man and a woman not of one family.

'More than that there must not be, and this is why we will not meet. You see that I do not mince matters at all; but it is hypocrisy to avoid touching upon a subject which all men and women in our position inevitably think of, no matter what they say. Some women might have written distantly, and wept at the repression of their real feeling; but it is better to be more frank, and keep a dry eye.--Yours,
ETHELBERTA.'

Her feet felt cold and her heart weak as she directed the letter, and she was overpowered with weariness. But murmuring, 'If I let it stay till

the morning I shall not send it, and a man may be lost to fame because of a woman's squeamishness--it shall go,' she partially dressed herself, wrapped a large cloak around her, descended the stairs, and went out to the pillar-box at the corner, leaving the door not quite close. No gust of wind had realized her misgivings that it might be blown shut on her return, and she re-entered as softly as she had emerged.

It will be seen that Ethelberta had said nothing about her family after all.

10. LADY PETHERWIN'S HOUSE

The next day old Lady Petherwin, who had not accompanied Ethelberta the night before, came into the morning-room, with a newspaper in her hand.

'What does this mean, Ethelberta?' she inquired in tones from which every shade of human expressiveness was extracted by some awful and imminent mood that lay behind. She was pointing to a paragraph under the heading of 'Literary Notes,' which contained in a few words the announcement of Ethelberta's authorship that had more circumstantially appeared in the Wessex Reflector.