

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.

'It means what it says,' said Ethelberta quietly.

'Then it is true?'

'Yes. I must apologize for having kept it such a secret from you. It was not done in the spirit that you may imagine: it was merely to avoid disturbing your mind that I did it so privately.'

'But surely you have not written every one of those ribald verses?'

Ethelberta looked inclined to exclaim most vehemently against this; but what she actually did say was, "'Ribald"--what do you mean by that? I don't think that you are aware what "ribald" means.'

'I am not sure that I am. As regards some words as well as some persons, the less you are acquainted with them the more it is to your credit.'

'I don't quite deserve this, Lady Petherwin.'

'Really, one would imagine that women wrote their books during those dreams in which people have no moral sense, to see how improper some, even virtuous, ladies become when they get into print.'

'I might have done a much more unnatural thing than write those poems. And perhaps I might have done a much better thing, and got less praise. But that's the world's fault, not mine.'

'You might have left them unwritten, and shown more fidelity.'

'Fidelity! it is more a matter of humour than principle. What has fidelity to do with it?'

'Fidelity to my dear boy's memory.'

'It would be difficult to show that because I have written so-called tender and gay verse, I feel tender and gay. It is too often assumed that a person's fancy is a person's real mind. I believe that in the majority of cases one is fond of imagining the direct opposite of one's principles in sheer effort after something fresh and free; at any rate, some of the lightest of those rhymes were composed between the deepest fits of dismals I have ever known. However, I did expect that you might judge in the way you have judged, and that was my chief reason for not telling you what I had done.'

'You don't deny that you tried to escape from recollections you ought to have cherished? There is only one thing that women of your sort are as ready to do as to take a man's name, and that is, drop his memory.'

'Dear Lady Petherwin--don't be so unreasonable as to blame a live person for living! No woman's head is so small as to be filled for life by a memory of a few months. Four years have passed since I last saw my boy-husband. We were mere children; see how I have altered since in mind,

substance, and outline--I have even grown half an inch taller since his death. Two years will exhaust the regrets of widows who have long been faithful wives; and ought I not to show a little new life when my husband died in the honeymoon?'

'No. Accepting the protection of your husband's mother was, in effect, an avowal that you rejected the idea of being a widow to prolong the idea of being a wife; and the sin against your conventional state thus assumed is almost as bad as would have been a sin against the married state itself. If you had gone off when he died, saying, "Thank heaven, I am free!" you would, at any rate, have shown some real honesty.'

'I should have been more virtuous by being more unfeeling. That often happens.'

'I have taken to you, and made a great deal of you--given you the inestimable advantages of foreign travel and good society to enlarge your mind. In short, I have been like a Naomi to you in everything, and I maintain that writing these poems saps the foundation of it all.'

'I do own that you have been a very good Naomi to me thus far; but Ruth was quite a fast widow in comparison with me, and yet Naomi never blamed her. You are unfortunate in your illustration. But it is dreadfully flippant of me to answer you like this, for you have been kind. But why will you provoke me!'

'Yes, you are flippant, Ethelberta. You are too much given to that sort of thing.'

'Well, I don't know how the secret of my name has leaked out; and I am not ribald, or anything you say,' said Ethelberta, with a sigh.

'Then you own you do not feel so ardent as you seem in your book?'

'I do own it.'

'And that you are sorry your name has been published in connection with it?'

'I am.'

'And you think the verses may tend to misrepresent your character as a gay and rapturous one, when it is not?'

'I do fear it.'

'Then, of course, you will suppress the poems instantly. That is the only way in which you can regain the position you have hitherto held with me.'

Ethelberta said nothing; and the dull winter atmosphere had far from light enough in it to show by her face what she might be thinking.

'Well?' said Lady Petherwin.

'I did not expect such a command as that,' said Ethelberta. 'I have been obedient for four years, and would continue so--but I cannot suppress the poems. They are not mine now to suppress.'

'You must get them into your hands. Money will do it, I suppose?'

'Yes, I suppose it would--a thousand pounds.'

'Very well; the money shall be forthcoming,' said Lady Petherwin, after a pause. 'You had better sit down and write about it at once.'

'I cannot do it,' said Ethelberta; 'and I will not. I don't wish them to be suppressed. I am not ashamed of them; there is nothing to be ashamed of in them; and I shall not take any steps in the matter.'

'Then you are an ungrateful woman, and wanting in natural affection for the dead! Considering your birth--'

'That's an intolerable--'

Lady Petherwin crashed out of the room in a wind of indignation, and went upstairs and heard no more. Adjoining her chamber was a smaller one called her study, and, on reaching this, she unlocked a cabinet, took out

a small deed-box, removed from it a folded packet, unfolded it, crumpled it up, and turning round suddenly flung it into the fire. Then she stood and beheld it eaten away word after word by the flames, 'Testament'--'all that freehold'--'heirs and assigns' appearing occasionally for a moment only to disappear for ever. Nearly half the document had turned into a glossy black when the lady clasped her hands.

'What have I done!' she exclaimed. Springing to the tongs she seized with them the portion of the writing yet unconsumed, and dragged it out of the fire. Ethelberta appeared at the door.

'Quick, Ethelberta!' said Lady Petherwin. 'Help me to put this out!' And the two women went trampling wildly upon the document and smothering it with a corner of the hearth-rug.

'What is it?' said Ethelberta.

'My will!' said Lady Petherwin. 'I have kept it by me lately, for I have wished to look over it at leisure--'

'Good heavens!' said Ethelberta. 'And I was just coming in to tell you that I would always cling to you, and never desert you, ill-use me how you might!'

'Such an affectionate remark sounds curious at such a time,' said Lady Petherwin, sinking down in a chair at the end of the struggle.

'But,' cried Ethelberta, 'you don't suppose--'

'Selfishness, my dear, has given me such crooked looks that I can see it round a corner.'

'If you mean that what is yours to give may not be mine to take, it would be as well to name it in an impersonal way, if you must name it at all,' said the daughter-in-law, with wet eyelids. 'God knows I had no selfish thought in saying that. I came upstairs to ask you to forgive me, and knew nothing about the will. But every explanation distorts it all the more!'

'We two have got all awry, dear--it cannot be concealed--awry--awry. Ah, who shall set us right again? However, now I must send for Mr. Chancerly--no, I am going out on other business, and I will call upon him. There, don't spoil your eyes: you may have to sell them.'

She rang the bell and ordered the carriage; and half-an-hour later Lady Petherwin's coachman drove his mistress up to the door of her lawyer's office in Lincoln's Inn Fields.