

11. SANDBOURNE AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD--SOME LONDON STREETS

While this was going on in town, Christopher, at his lodgings in Sandbourne, had been thrown into rare old visions and dreams by the appearance of Ethelberta's letter. Flattered and encouraged to ambition as well as to love by her inspiring sermon, he put off now the last remnant of cynical doubt upon the genuineness of his old mistress, and once and for all set down as disloyal a belief he had latterly acquired that 'Come, woo me, woo me; for I am like enough to consent,' was all a young woman had to tell.

All the reasoning of political and social economists would not have convinced Christopher that he had a better chance in London than in Sandbourne of making a decent income by reasonable and likely labour; but a belief in a far more improbable proposition, impetuously expressed, warmed him with the idea that he might become famous there. The greater is frequently more readily credited than the less, and an argument which will not convince on a matter of halfpence appears unanswerable when applied to questions of glory and honour.

The regulation wet towel and strong coffee of the ambitious and intellectual student floated before him in visions; but it was with a sense of relief that he remembered that music, in spite of its drawbacks as a means of sustenance, was a profession happily unencumbered with those excruciating preliminaries to greatness.

Christopher talked about the new move to his sister, and he was vexed that her hopefulness was not roused to quite the pitch of his own. As with others of his sort, his too general habit of accepting the most clouded possibility that chances offered was only transcended by his readiness to kindle with a fitful excitement now and then. Faith was much more equable. 'If you were not the most melancholy man God ever created,' she said, kindly looking at his vague deep eyes and thin face, which was but a few degrees too refined and poetical to escape the epithet of lantern-jawed from any one who had quarrelled with him, 'you would not mind my coolness about this. It is a good thing of course to go; I have always fancied that we were mistaken in coming here. Mediocrity stamped "London" fetches more than talent marked "provincial." But I cannot feel so enthusiastic.'

'Still, if we are to go, we may as well go by enthusiasm as by calculation; it is a sensation pleasanter to the nerves, and leads to just as good a result when there is only one result possible.'

'Very well,' said Faith. 'I will not depress you. If I had to describe you I should say you were a child in your impulses, and an old man in your reflections. Have you considered when we shall start?'

'Yes.'

'What have you thought?'

'That we may very well leave the place in six weeks if we wish.'

'We really may?'

'Yes. And what is more, we will.'

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Christopher and Faith arrived in London on an afternoon at the end of winter, and beheld from one of the river bridges snow-white scrolls of steam from the tall chimneys of Lambeth, rising against the livid sky behind, as if drawn in chalk on toned cardboard.

The first thing he did that evening, when settled in their apartments near the British Museum, before applying himself to the beginning of the means by which success in life might be attained, was to go out in the direction of Ethelberta's door, leaving Faith unpacking the things, and sniffing extraordinary smoke-smells which she discovered in all nooks and crannies of the rooms. It was some satisfaction to see Ethelberta's house, although the single feature in which it differed from the other houses in the Crescent was that no lamp shone from the fanlight over the entrance--a speciality which, if he cared for omens, was hardly encouraging. Fearing to linger near lest he might be detected, Christopher stole a glimpse at the door and at the steps, imagined what a trifle of the depression worn in each step her feet had tended to

produce, and strolled home again.

Feeling that his reasons for calling just now were scarcely sufficient, he went next day about the business that had brought him to town, which referred to a situation as organist in a large church in the north-west district. The post was half ensured already, and he intended to make of it the nucleus of a professional occupation and income. Then he sat down to think of the preliminary steps towards publishing the song that had so pleased her, and had also, as far as he could understand from her letter, hit the popular taste very successfully; a fact which, however little it may say for the virtues of the song as a composition, was a great recommendation to it as a property. Christopher was delighted to perceive that out of this position he could frame an admissible, if not an unimpeachable, reason for calling upon Ethelberta. He determined to do so at once, and obtain the required permission by word of mouth.

He was greatly surprised, when the front of the house appeared in view on this spring afternoon, to see what a white and sightless aspect pervaded all the windows. He came close: the eyeball blankness was caused by all the shutters and blinds being shut tight from top to bottom. Possibly this had been the case for some time--he could not tell. In one of the windows was a card bearing the announcement, 'This House to be let Furnished.' Here was a merciless clash between fancy and fact.

Regretting now his faint-heartedness in not letting her know beforehand by some means that he was about to make a new start in the world, and coming to dwell near her, Christopher rang the bell to make inquiries. A

gloomy caretaker appeared after a while, and the young man asked whither the ladies had gone to live. He was beyond measure depressed to learn that they were in the South of France--Arles, the man thought the place was called--the time of their return to town being very uncertain; though one thing was clear, they meant to miss the forthcoming London season altogether.

As Christopher's hope to see her again had brought a resolve to do so, so now resolve led to dogged patience. Instead of attempting anything by letter, he decided to wait; and he waited well, occupying himself in publishing a 'March' and a 'Morning and Evening Service in E flat.' Some four-part songs, too, engaged his attention when the heavier duties of the day were over--these duties being the giving of lessons in harmony and counterpoint, in which he was aided by the introductions of a man well known in the musical world, who had been acquainted with young Julian as a promising amateur long before he adopted music as the staff of his pilgrimage.

It was the end of summer when he again tried his fortune at the house in Exonbury Crescent. Scarcely calculating upon finding her at this stagnant time of the town year, and only hoping for information, Julian was surprised and excited to see the shutters open, and the house wearing altogether a living look, its neighbours having decidedly died off meanwhile.

'The family here,' said a footman in answer to his inquiry, 'are only

temporary tenants of the house. It is not Lady Petherwin's people.'

'Do you know the Petherwins' present address?'

'Underground, sir, for the old lady. She died some time ago in Switzerland, and was buried there, I believe.'

'And Mrs. Petherwin--the young lady,' said Christopher, starting.

'We are not acquainted personally with the family,' the man replied. 'My master has only taken the house for a few months, whilst extensive alterations are being made in his own on the other side of the park, which he goes to look after every day. If you want any further information about Lady Petherwin, Mrs. Petherwin will probably give it. I can let you have her address.'

'Ah, yes; thank you,' said Christopher.

The footman handed him one of some cards which appeared to have been left

for the purpose. Julian, though tremblingly anxious to know where Ethelberta was, did not look at it till he could take a cool survey in private. The address was 'Arrowthorne Lodge, Upper Wessex.'

'Dear me!' said Christopher to himself, 'not far from Melchester; and not dreadfully far from Sandbourne.'

