

most comfortably, and it is by far the best thing for you to stay at the school. You used to be happy enough there.'

Picotee sighed, and said no more.

16. A LARGE PUBLIC HALL

It was the second week in February, Parliament had just met, and Ethelberta appeared for the first time before an audience in London.

There was some novelty in the species of entertainment that the active young woman had proposed to herself, and this doubtless had due effect in collecting the body of strangers that greeted her entry, over and above those friends who came to listen to her as a matter of course. Men and women who had become totally indifferent to new actresses, new readers, and new singers, once more felt the freshness of curiosity as they considered the promise of the announcement. But the chief inducement to attend lay in the fact that here was to be seen in the flesh a woman with whom the tongue of rumour had been busy in many romantic ways--a woman who, whatever else might be doubted, had certainly produced a volume of verses which had been the talk of the many who had read them, and of the

many more who had not, for several consecutive weeks.

What was her story to be? Persons interested in the inquiry--a small proportion, it may be owned, of the whole London public, and chiefly young men--answered this question for themselves by assuming that it would take the form of some pungent and gratifying revelation of the innermost events of her own life, from which her gushing lines had sprung as an inevitable consequence, and which being once known, would cause such musical poesy to appear no longer wonderful.

The front part of the room was well filled, rows of listeners showing themselves like a drilled-in crop of which not a seed has failed. They were listeners of the right sort, a majority having noses of the prominent and dignified type, which when viewed in oblique perspective ranged as regularly as bow-windows at a watering place. Ethelberta's plan was to tell her pretended history and adventures while sitting in a chair--as if she were at her own fireside, surrounded by a circle of friends. By this touch of domesticity a great appearance of truth and naturalness was given, though really the attitude was at first more difficult to maintain satisfactorily than any one wherein stricter formality should be observed. She gently began her subject, as if scarcely knowing whether a throng were near her or not, and, in her fear of seeming artificial, spoke too low. This defect, however, she soon corrected, and ultimately went on in a charmingly colloquial manner. What Ethelberta relied upon soon became evident. It was not upon the intrinsic merits of her story as a piece of construction, but upon her

method of telling it. Whatever defects the tale possessed--and they were not a few--it had, as delivered by her, the one pre-eminent merit of seeming like truth. A modern critic has well observed of De Foe that he had the most amazing talent on record for telling lies; and Ethelberta, in wishing her fiction to appear like a real narrative of personal adventure, did wisely to make De Foe her model. His is a style even better adapted for speaking than for writing, and the peculiarities of diction which he adopts to give verisimilitude to his narratives acquired enormous additional force when exhibited as viva-voce mannerisms. And although these artifices were not, perhaps, slavishly copied from that master of feigning, they would undoubtedly have reminded her hearers of him, had they not mostly been drawn from an easeful section in society which is especially characterized by the mental condition of knowing nothing about any author a week after they have read him. The few there who did remember De Foe were impressed by a fancy that his words greeted them anew in a winged auricular form, instead of by the weaker channels of print and eyesight. The reader may imagine what an effect this well-studied method must have produced when intensified by a clear, living voice, animated action, and the brilliant and expressive eye of a handsome woman--attributes which of themselves almost compelled belief. When she reached the most telling passages, instead of adding exaggerated action and sound, Ethelberta would lapse to a whisper and a sustained stillness, which were more striking than gesticulation. All that could be done by art was there, and if inspiration was wanting nobody missed it.

It was in performing this feat that Ethelberta seemed first to discover in herself the full power of that self-command which further onward in her career more and more impressed her as a singular possession, until at last she was tempted to make of it many fantastic uses, leading to results that affected more households than her own. A talent for demureness under difficulties without the cold-bloodedness which renders such a bearing natural and easy, a face and hand reigning unmoved outside a heart by nature turbulent as a wave, is a constitutional arrangement much to be desired by people in general; yet, had Ethelberta been framed with less of that gift in her, her life might have been more comfortable as an experience, and brighter as an example, though perhaps duller as a story.

'Ladywell, how came this Mrs. Petherwin to think of such a queer trick as telling romances, after doing so well as a poet?' said a man in the stalls to his friend, who had been gazing at the Story-teller with a rapt face.

'What--don't you know?--everybody did, I thought,' said the painter.

'A mistake. Indeed, I should not have come here at all had I not heard the subject mentioned by accident yesterday at Grey's; and then I remembered her to be the same woman I had met at some place--Belmaine's I think it was--last year, when I thought her just getting on for handsome and clever, not to put it too strongly.'

'Ah! naturally you would not know much,' replied Ladywell, in an eager whisper. 'Perhaps I am judging others by myself a little more than--but, as you have heard, she is an acquaintance of mine. I know her very well, and, in fact, I originally suggested the scheme to her as a pleasant way of adding to her fame. "Depend upon it, dear Mrs. Petherwin," I said, during a pause in one of our dances together some time ago, "any public appearance of yours would be successful beyond description."' "

'O, I had no idea that you knew her so well! Then it is quite through you that she has adopted this course?'

'Well, not entirely--I could not say entirely. She said that some day, perhaps, she might do such a thing; and, in short, I reduced her vague ideas to form.'

'I should not mind knowing her better--I must get you to throw us together in some way,' said Neigh, with some interest. 'I had no idea that you were such an old friend. You could do it, I suppose?'

'Really, I am afraid--hah-hah--may not have the opportunity of obliging you. I met her at Wyndway, you know, where she was visiting with Lady Petherwin. It was some time ago, and I cannot say that I have ever met her since.'

'Or before?' said Neigh.

'Well--no; I never did.'

'Ladywell, if I had half your power of going to your imagination for facts, I would be the greatest painter in England.'

'Now Neigh--that's too bad--but with regard to this matter, I do speak with some interest,' said Ladywell, with a pleased sense of himself.

'In love with her?--Smitten down?--Done for?'

'Now, now! However, several other fellows chaff me about her. It was only yesterday that Jones said--'

'Do you know why she cares to do this sort of thing?'

'Merely a desire for fame, I suppose.'

'I should think she has fame enough already.'

'That I can express no opinion upon. I am thinking of getting her permission to use her face in a subject I am preparing. It is a fine face for canvas. Glorious contour--glorious. Ah, here she is again, for the second part.'

'Dream on, young fellow. You'll make a rare couple!' said Neigh, with a

flavour of superciliousness unheeded by his occupied companion.

Further back in the room were a pair of faces whose keen interest in the performance contrasted much with the languidly permissive air of those in front. When the ten minutes' break occurred, Christopher was the first of the two to speak. 'Well, what do you think of her, Faith?' he said, shifting restlessly on his seat.

'I like the quiet parts of the tale best, I think,' replied the sister; 'but, of course, I am not a good judge of these things. How still the people are at times! I continually take my eyes from her to look at the listeners. Did you notice the fat old lady in the second row, with her cloak a little thrown back? She was absolutely unconscious, and stayed with her face up and lips parted like a little child of six.'

'She well may! the thing is a triumph. That fellow Ladywell is here, I believe--yes, it is he, busily talking to the man on his right. If I were a woman I would rather go donkey-driving than stick myself up there, for gaping fops to quiz and say what they like about! But she had no choice, poor thing; for it was that or nothing with her.'

Faith, who had secret doubts about the absolute necessity of Ethelberta's appearance in public, said, with remote meanings, 'Perhaps it is not altogether a severe punishment to her to be looked at by well-dressed men. Suppose she feels it as a blessing, instead of an affliction?'

'She is a different sort of woman, Faith, and so you would say if you knew her. Of course, it is natural for you to criticize her severely just now, and I don't wish to defend her.'

'I think you do a little, Kit.'

'No; I am indifferent about it all. Perhaps it would have been better for me if I had never seen her; and possibly it might have been better for her if she had never seen me. She has a heart, and the heart is a troublesome encumbrance when great things have to be done. I wish you knew her: I am sure you would like each other.'

'O yes,' said Faith, in a voice of rather weak conviction. 'But, as we live in such a plain way, it would be hardly desirable at present.'

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Ethelberta being regarded, in common with the latest conjurer, spirit-medium, aeronaut, giant, dwarf or monarch, as a new sensation, she was duly criticized in the morning papers, and even obtained a notice in some of the weekly reviews.

'A handsome woman,' said one of these, 'may have her own reasons for causing the flesh of the London public to creep upon its bones by her undoubtedly remarkable narrative powers; but we question if much good can

result from such a form of entertainment. Nevertheless, some praise is due. We have had the novel-writer among us for some time, and the novel-reader has occasionally appeared on our platforms; but we believe that this is the first instance on record of a Novel-teller--one, that is to say, who relates professedly as fiction a romantic tale which has never been printed--the whole owing its chief interest to the method whereby the teller identifies herself with the leading character in the story.'

Another observed: 'When once we get away from the magic influence of the story-teller's eye and tongue, we perceive how improbable, even impossible, is the tissue of events to which we have been listening with so great a sense of reality, and we feel almost angry with ourselves at having been the victims of such utter illusion.'

'Mrs. Petherwin's personal appearance is decidedly in her favour,' said another. 'She affects no unconsciousness of the fact that form and feature are no mean vehicles of persuasion, and she uses the powers of each to the utmost. There spreads upon her face when in repose an air of innocence which is charmingly belied by the subtlety we discover beneath it when she begins her tale; and this amusing discrepancy between her physical presentment and the inner woman is further illustrated by the misgiving, which seizes us on her entrance, that so impressionable a lady will never bear up in the face of so trying an audience. . . . The combinations of incident which Mrs. Petherwin persuades her hearers that she has passed through are not a little marvellous; and if what is rumoured be true, that the tales are to a great extent based upon her own

experiences, she has proved herself to be no less daring in adventure than facile in her power of describing it.'