

you will, I am sure, perceive how indispensable it is that I should be circumspect.--Yours sincerely,

E. PETHERWIN.'

21. A STREET--NEIGH'S ROOMS--CHRISTOPHER'S ROOMS

As soon as Ethelberta had driven off from the Hall, Ladywell turned back again; and, passing the front entrance, overtook his acquaintance Mr. Neigh, who had been one of the last to emerge. The two were going in the same direction, and they walked a short distance together.

'Has anything serious happened?' said Neigh, noticing an abstraction in his companion. 'You don't seem in your usual mood to-night.'

'O, it is only that affair between us,' said Ladywell.

'Affair? Between you and whom?'

'Her and myself, of course. It will be in every fellow's mouth now, I suppose!'

'But--not anything between yourself and Mrs. Petherwin?'

'A mere nothing. But surely you started, Neigh, when you suspected it just this moment?'

'No--you merely fancied that.'

'Did she not speak well to-night! You were in the room, I believe?'

'Yes, I just turned in for half-an-hour: it seems that everybody does, so I thought I must. But I had no idea that you were feeble that way.'

'It is very kind of you, Neigh--upon my word it is--very kind; and of course I appreciate the delicacy which--which--'

'What's kind?'

'I mean your well-intentioned plan for making me believe that nothing is known of this. But stories will of course get wind; and if our attachment has made more noise in the world than I intended it should, and causes any public interest, why--ha-ha!--it must. There is some little romance in it perhaps, and people will talk of matters of that sort between individuals of any repute--little as that is with one of the pair.'

'Of course they will--of course. You are a rising man, remember, whom some day the world will delight to honour.'

'Thank you for that, Neigh. Thank you sincerely.'

'Not at all. It is merely justice to say it, and one must be generous to deserve thanks.'

'Ha-ha!--that's very nicely put, and undeserved I am sure. And yet I need a word of that sort sometimes!'

'Genius is proverbially modest.'

'Pray don't, Neigh--I don't deserve it, indeed. Of course it is well meant in you to recognize any slight powers, but I don't deserve it. Certainly, my self-assurance was never too great. 'Tis the misfortune of all children of art that they should be so dependent upon any scraps of praise they can pick up to help them along.'

'And when that child gets so deep in love that you can only see the whites of his eyes--'

'Ah--now, Neigh--don't, I say!'

'But why did--'

'Why did I love her?'

'Yes, why did you love her?'

'Ah, if I could only turn self-vivisector, and watch the operation of my heart, I should know!'

'My dear fellow, you must be very bad indeed to talk like that. A poet himself couldn't be cleaner gone.'

'Now, don't chaff, Neigh; do anything, but don't chaff. You know that I am the easiest man in the world for taking it at most times. But I can't stand it now; I don't feel up to it. A glimpse of paradise, and then perdition. What would you do, Neigh?'

'She has refused you, then?'

'Well--not positively refused me; but it is so near it that a dull man couldn't tell the difference. I hardly can myself.'

'How do you really stand with her?' said Neigh, with an anxiety ill-concealed.

'Off and on--neither one thing nor the other. I was determined to make an effort the last time she sat to me, and so I met her quite coolly, and spoke only of technicalities with a forced smile--you know that way of mine for drawing people out, eh, Neigh?'

'Quite, quite.'

'A forced smile, as much as to say, "I am obliged to entertain you, but as a mere model for art purposes." But the deuce a bit did she care. And then I frequently looked to see what time it was, as the end of the sitting drew near--rather a rude thing to do, as a rule.'

'Of course. But that was your finesse. Ha-ha!--capital! Yet why not struggle against such slavery? It is regularly pulling you down. What's a woman's beauty, after all?'

'Well you may say so! A thing easier to feel than define,' murmured Ladywell. 'But it's no use, Neigh--I can't help it as long as she repulses me so exquisitely! If she would only care for me a little, I might get to trouble less about her.'

'And love her no more than one ordinarily does a girl by the time one gets irrevocably engaged to her. But I suppose she keeps you back so thoroughly that you carry on the old adoration with as much vigour as if it were a new fancy every time?'

'Partly yes, and partly no! It's very true, and it's not true!'

'Tis to be hoped she won't hate you outright, for then you would absolutely die of idolizing her.'

'Don't, Neigh!--Still there's some truth in it--such is the perversity of our hearts. Fancy marrying such a woman!'

'We should feel as eternally united to her after years and years of marriage as to a dear new angel met at last night's dance.'

'Exactly--just what I should have said. But did I hear you say "We," Neigh? You didn't say "WE should feel?"'

'Say "we"?--yes--of course--putting myself in your place just in the way of speaking, you know.'

'Of course, of course; but one is such a fool at these times that one seems to detect rivalry in every trumpety sound! Were you never a little touched?'

'Not I. My heart is in the happy position of a country which has no history or debt.'

'I suppose I should rejoice to hear it,' said Ladywell. 'But the consciousness of a fellow-sufferer being in just such another hole is such a relief always, and softens the sense of one's folly so very much.'

'There's less Christianity in that sentiment than in your confessing to it, old fellow. I know the truth of it nevertheless, and that's why married men advise others to marry. Were all the world tied up, the

pleasantly tied ones would be equivalent to those at present free. But what if your fellow-sufferer is not only in another such a hole, but in the same one?'

'No, Neigh--never! Don't trifle with a friend who--'

'That is, refused like yourself, as well as in love.'

'Ah, thanks, thanks! It suddenly occurred to me that we might be dead against one another as rivals, and a friendship of many long--days be snapped like a--like a reed.'

'No--no--only a jest,' said Neigh, with a strangely accelerated speech.

'Love-making is an ornamental pursuit that matter-of-fact fellows like me are quite unfit for. A man must have courted at least half-a-dozen women before he's a match for one; and since triumph lies so far ahead, I shall keep out of the contest altogether.'

'Your life would be pleasanter if you were engaged. It is a nice thing, after all.'

'It is. The worst of it would be that, when the time came for breaking it off, a fellow might get into an action for breach--women are so fond of that sort of thing now; and I hate love-affairs that don't end peaceably!'

'But end it by peaceably marrying, my dear fellow!'

'It would seem so singular. Besides, I have a horror of antiquity: and you see, as long as a man keeps single, he belongs in a measure to the rising generation, however old he may be; but as soon as he marries and has children, he belongs to the last generation, however young he may be. Old Jones's son is a deal younger than young Brown's father, though they are both the same age.'

'At any rate, honest courtship cures a man of many evils he had no power to stem before.'

'By substituting an incurable matrimony!'

'Ah--two persons must have a mind for that before it can happen!' said Ladywell, sorrowfully shaking his head.

'I think you'll find that if one has a mind for it, it will be quite sufficient. But here we are at my rooms. Come in for half-an-hour?'

'Not to-night, thanks!'

They parted, and Neigh went in. When he got upstairs he murmured in his deepest chest note, 'O, lords, that I should come to this! But I shall never be such a fool as to marry her! What a flat that poor young devil was not to discover that we were tarred with the same brush. O, the

deuce, the deuce!' he continued, walking about the room as if passionately stamping, but not quite doing it because another man had rooms below.

Neigh drew from his pocket-book an envelope embossed with the name of a fashionable photographer, and out of this pulled a portrait of the lady who had, in fact, enslaved his secret self equally with his frank young friend the painter. After contemplating it awhile with a face of cynical adoration, he murmured, shaking his head, 'Ah, my lady; if you only knew this, I should be snapped up like a snail! Not a minute's peace for me till I had married you. I wonder if I shall!--I wonder.'

Neigh was a man of five-and-thirty--Ladywell's senior by ten years; and, being of a phlegmatic temperament, he had glided thus far through the period of eligibility with impunity. He knew as well as any man how far he could go with a woman and yet keep clear of having to meet her in church without her bonnet; but it is doubtful if his mind that night were less disturbed with the question how to guide himself out of the natural course which his passion for Ethelberta might tempt him into, than was Ladywell's by his ardent wish to secure her.

* * * * *

About the time at which Neigh and Ladywell parted company, Christopher Julian was entering his little place in Bloomsbury. The quaint figure of Faith, in her bonnet and cloak, was kneeling on the hearth-rug

endeavouring to stir a dull fire into a bright one.

'What--Faith! you have never been out alone?' he said.

Faith's soft, quick-shutting eyes looked unutterable things, and she replied, 'I have been to hear Mrs. Petherwin's story-telling again.'

'And walked all the way home through the streets at this time of night, I suppose!'

'Well, nobody molested me, either going or coming back.'

'Faith, I gave you strict orders not to go into the streets after two o'clock in the day, and now here you are taking no notice of what I say at all!'

'The truth is, Kit, I wanted to see with my spectacles what this woman was really like, and I went without them last time. I slipped in behind, and nobody saw me.'

'I don't think much of her after what I have seen tonight,' said Christopher, moodily recurring to a previous thought.

'Why? What is the matter?'

'I thought I would call on her this afternoon, but when I got there I

found she had left early for the performance. So in the evening, when I thought it would be all over, I went to the private door of the Hall to speak to her as she came out, and ask her flatly a question or two which I was fool enough to think I must ask her before I went to bed. Just as I was drawing near she came out, and, instead of getting into the brougham that was waiting for her, she went round the corner. When she came back a man met her and gave her something, and they stayed talking together two or three minutes. The meeting may certainly not have been intentional on her part; but she has no business to be going on so coolly when--when--in fact, I have come to the conclusion that a woman's affection is not worth having. The only feeling which has any dignity or permanence or worth is family affection between close blood-relations.'

'And yet you snub me sometimes, Mr. Kit.'

'And, for the matter of that, you snub me. Still, you know what I mean--there's none of that off-and-on humbug between us. If we grumble with one another we are united just the same: if we don't write when we are parted, we are just the same when we meet--there has been some rational reason for silence; but as for lovers and sweethearts, there is nothing worth a rush in what they feel!'

Faith said nothing in reply to this. The opinions she had formed upon the wisdom of her brother's pursuit of Ethelberta would have come just then with an ill grace. It must, however, have been evident to Christopher, had he not been too preoccupied for observation, that

Faith's impressions of Ethelberta were not quite favourable as regarded her womanhood, notwithstanding that she greatly admired her talents.