

31. KNOLLSEA--A LOFTY DOWN--A RUINED CASTLE

Knollsea was a seaside village lying snug within two headlands as between a finger and thumb. Everybody in the parish who was not a boatman was a quarrier, unless he were the gentleman who owned half the property and had been a quarryman, or the other gentleman who owned the other half, and had been to sea.

The knowledge of the inhabitants was of the same special sort as their pursuits. The quarrymen in white fustian understood practical geology, the laws and accidents of dips, faults, and cleavage, far better than the ways of the world and mammon; the seafaring men in Guernsey frocks had a clearer notion of Alexandria, Constantinople, the Cape, and the Indies than of any inland town in their own country. This, for them, consisted of a busy portion, the Channel, where they lived and laboured, and a dull portion, the vague unexplored miles of interior at the back of the ports, which they seldom thought of.

Some wives of the village, it is true, had learned to let lodgings, and others to keep shops. The doors of these latter places were formed of an upper hatch, usually kept open, and a lower hatch, with a bell attached, usually kept shut. Whenever a stranger went in, he would hear a whispering of astonishment from a back room, after which a woman came forward, looking suspiciously at him as an intruder, and advancing slowly

enough to allow her mouth to get clear of the meal she was partaking of. Meanwhile the people in the back room would stop their knives and forks in absorbed curiosity as to the reason of the stranger's entry, who by this time feels ashamed of his unwarrantable intrusion into this hermit's cell, and thinks he must take his hat off. The woman is quite alarmed at seeing that he is not one of the fifteen native women and children who patronize her, and nervously puts her hand to the side of her face, which she carries slanting. The visitor finds himself saying what he wants in an apologetic tone, when the woman tells him that they did keep that article once, but do not now; that nobody does, and probably never will again; and as he turns away she looks relieved that the dilemma of having to provide for a stranger has passed off with no worse mishap than disappointing him.

A cottage which stood on a high slope above this townlet and its bay resounded one morning with the notes of a merry company. Ethelberta had managed to find room for herself and her young relations in the house of one of the boatmen, whose wife attended upon them all. Captain Flower, the husband, assisted her in the dinner preparations, when he slipped about the house as lightly as a girl and spoke of himself as cook's mate. The house was so small that the sailor's rich voice, developed by shouting in high winds during a twenty years' experience in the coasting trade, could be heard coming from the kitchen between the chirpings of the children in the parlour. The furniture of this apartment consisted mostly of the painting of a full-rigged ship, done by a man whom the captain had specially selected for the purpose because he had been seven-

and-twenty years at sea before touching a brush, and thereby offered a sufficient guarantee that he understood how to paint a vessel properly.

Before this picture sat Ethelberta in a light linen dress, and with tightly-knotted hair--now again Berta Chickerel as of old--serving out breakfast to the rest of the party, and sometimes lifting her eyes to the outlook from the window, which presented a happy combination of grange scenery with marine. Upon the irregular slope between the house and the quay was an orchard of aged trees wherein every apple ripening on the boughs presented its rubicund side towards the cottage, because that building chanced to lie upwards in the same direction as the sun. Under the trees were a few Cape sheep, and over them the stone chimneys of the village below: outside these lay the tanned sails of a ketch or smack, and the violet waters of the bay, seamed and creased by breezes insufficient to raise waves; beyond all a curved wall of cliff, terminating in a promontory, which was flanked by tall and shining obelisks of chalk rising sheer from the trembling blue race beneath.

By one sitting in the room that commanded this prospect, a white butterfly among the apple-trees might be mistaken for the sails of a yacht far away on the sea; and in the evening when the light was dim, what seemed like a fly crawling upon the window-pane would turn out to be a boat in the bay.

When breakfast was over, Ethelberta sat leaning on the window-sill considering her movements for the day. It was the time fixed for the

meeting of the Imperial Association at Corvsgate Castle, the celebrated ruin five miles off, and the meeting had some fascinations for her. For one thing, she had never been present at a gathering of the kind, although what was left in any shape from the past was her constant interest, because it recalled her to herself and fortified her mind.

Persons waging a harassing social fight are apt in the interest of the combat to forget the smallness of the end in view; and the hints that perishing historical remnants afforded her of the attenuating effects of time even upon great struggles corrected the apparent scale of her own. She was reminded that in a strife for such a ludicrously small object as the entry of drawing-rooms, winning, equally with losing, is below the zero of the true philosopher's concern.

There could never be a more excellent reason than this for going to view the meagre stumps remaining from flourishing bygone centuries, and it had weight with Ethelberta this very day; but it would be difficult to state the whole composition of her motive. The approaching meeting had been one of the great themes at Mr. Doncastle's dinner-party, and Lord Mountclere, on learning that she was to be at Knollsea, had recommended her attendance at some, if not all of the meetings, as a desirable and exhilarating change after her laborious season's work in town. It was pleasant to have won her way so far in high places that her health of body and mind should be thus considered--pleasant, less as personal gratification, than that it casually reflected a proof of her good judgment in a course which everybody among her kindred had condemned by

calling a foolhardy undertaking.

And she might go without the restraint of ceremony.

Unconventionality--almost eccentricity--was de rigueur for one who had been first heard of as a poetess; from whose red lips magic romance had since trilled for weeks to crowds of listeners, as from a perennial spring.

So Ethelberta went, after a considerable pondering how to get there without the needless sacrifice either of dignity or cash. It would be inconsiderate to the children to spend a pound on a brougham when as much as she could spare was wanted for their holiday. It was almost too far to walk. She had, however, decided to walk, when she met a boy with a donkey, who offered to lend it to her for three shillings. The animal was rather sad-looking, but Ethelberta found she could sit upon the pad without discomfort. Considering that she might pull up some distance short of the castle, and leave the ass at a cottage before joining her four-wheeled friends, she struck the bargain and rode on her way.

This was, first by a path on the shore where the tide dragged huskily up and down the shingle without disturbing it, and thence up the steep crest of land opposite, whereon she lingered awhile to let the ass breathe. On one of the spires of chalk into which the hill here had been split was perched a cormorant, silent and motionless, with wings spread out to dry in the sun after his morning's fishing, their white surface shining like

mail. Retiring without disturbing him and turning to the left along the lofty ridge which ran inland, the country on each side lay beneath her like a map, domains behind domains, parishes by the score, harbours, fir-woods, and little inland seas mixing curiously together. Thence she ambled along through a huge cemetery of barrows, containing human dust from prehistoric times.

Standing on the top of a giant's grave in this antique land, Ethelberta lifted her eyes to behold two sorts of weather pervading Nature at the same time. Far below on the right hand it was a fine day, and the silver sunbeams lighted up a many-armed inland sea which stretched round an island with fir-trees and gorse, and amid brilliant crimson heaths wherein white paths and roads occasionally met the eye in dashes and zigzags like flashes of lightning. Outside, where the broad Channel appeared, a berylline and opalized variegation of ripples, currents, deeps, and shallows, lay as fair under the sun as a New Jerusalem, the shores being of gleaming sand. Upon the radiant heather bees and butterflies were busy, she knew, and the birds on that side were just beginning their autumn songs.

On the left, quite up to her position, was dark and cloudy weather, shading a valley of heavy greens and browns, which at its further side rose to meet the sea in tall cliffs, suggesting even here at their back how terrible were their aspects seaward in a growling southwest gale. Here grassed hills rose like knuckles gloved in dark olive, and little plantations between them formed a still deeper and sadder monochrome. A

zinc sky met a leaden sea on this hand, the low wind groaned and whined, and not a bird sang.

The ridge along which Ethelberta rode divided these two climates like a wall; it soon became apparent that they were wrestling for mastery immediately in her pathway. The issue long remained doubtful, and this being an imaginative hour with her, she watched as typical of her own fortunes how the front of battle swayed--now to the west, flooding her with sun, now to the east, covering her with shade: then the wind moved round to the north, a blue hole appeared in the overhanging cloud, at about the place of the north star; and the sunlight spread on both sides of her.

The towers of the notable ruin to be visited rose out of the furthestmost shoulder of the upland as she advanced, its site being the slope and crest of a smoothly nibbled mount at the toe of the ridge she had followed. When observing the previous uncertainty of the weather on this side Ethelberta had been led to doubt if the meeting would be held here to-day, and she was now strengthened in her opinion that it would not by the total absence of human figures amid the ruins, though the time of appointment was past. This disposed of another question which had perplexed her: where to find a stable for the ass during the meeting, for she had scarcely liked the idea of facing the whole body of lords and gentlemen upon the animal's back. She now decided to retain her seat, ride round the ruin, and go home again, without troubling further about the movements of the Association or acquaintance with the members

composing it.

Accordingly Ethelberta crossed the bridge over the moat, and rode under the first archway into the outer ward. As she had expected, not a soul was here. The arrow-slits, portcullis-grooves, and staircases met her eye as familiar friends, for in her childhood she had once paid a visit to the spot. Ascending the green incline and through another arch into the second ward, she still pressed on, till at last the ass was unable to clamber an inch further. Here she dismounted, and tying him to a stone which projected like a fang from a raw edge of wall, performed the remainder of the ascent on foot. Once among the towers above, she became so interested in the windy corridors, mildewed dungeons, and the tribe of daws peering invidiously upon her from overhead, that she forgot the flight of time.

Nearly three-quarters of an hour passed before she came out from the immense walls, and looked from an opening to the front over the wide expanse of the outer ward, by which she had ascended.

Ethelberta was taken aback to see there a file of shining carriages, which had arrived during her seclusion in the keep. From these began to burst a miscellany of many-coloured draperies, blue, buff, pied, and black; they united into one, and crept up the incline like a cloud, which then parted into fragments, dived into old doorways, and lost substance behind projecting piles. Recognizing in this the ladies and gentlemen of the meeting, her first thought was how to escape, for she was suddenly

overcome with dread to meet them all single-handed as she stood. She drew back and hurried round to the side, as the laughter and voices of the assembly began to be audible, and, more than ever vexed that she could not have fallen in with them in some unobtrusive way, Ethelberta found that they were immediately beneath her.

Venturing to peep forward again, what was her mortification at finding them gathered in a ring, round no object of interest belonging to the ruin, but round her faithful beast, who had loosened himself in some way from the stone, and stood in the middle of a plat of grass, placidly regarding them.

Being now in the teeth of the Association, there was nothing to do but to go on, since, if she did not, the next few steps of their advance would disclose her. She made the best of it, and began to descend in the broad view of the assembly, from the midst of which proceeded a laugh--'Hee-hee-hee!' Ethelberta knew that Lord Mountclere was there.

'The poor thing has strayed from its owner,' said one lady, as they all stood eyeing the apparition of the ass.

'It may belong to some of the villagers,' said the President in a historical voice: 'and it may be appropriate to mention that many were kept here in olden times: they were largely used as beasts of burden in victualling the castle previous to the last siege, in the year sixteen hundred and forty-five.'

'It is very weary, and has come a long way, I think,' said a lady; adding, in an imaginative tone, 'the humble creature looks so aged and is so quaintly saddled that we may suppose it to be only an animated relic, of the same date as the other remains.'

By this time Lord Mountclere had noticed Ethelberta's presence, and straightening himself to ten years younger, he lifted his hat in answer to her smile, and came up jauntily. It was a good time now to see what the viscount was really like. He appeared to be about sixty-five, and the dignified aspect which he wore to a gazer at a distance became depreciated to jocund slyness upon nearer view, when the small type could be read between the leading lines. Then it could be seen that his upper lip dropped to a point in the middle, as if impressing silence upon his too demonstrative lower one. His right and left profiles were different, one corner of his mouth being more compressed than the other, producing a deep line thence downwards to the side of his chin. Each eyebrow rose obliquely outwards and upwards, and was thus far above the little eye, shining with the clearness of a pond that has just been able to weather the heats of summer. Below this was a preternaturally fat jowl, which, by thrusting against cheeks and chin, caused the arch old mouth to be almost buried at the corners.

A few words of greeting passed, and Ethelberta told him how she was fearing to meet them all, united and primed with their morning's knowledge as they appeared to be.

'Well, we have not done much yet,' said Lord Mountclere. 'As for myself, I have given no thought at all to our day's work. I had not forgotten your promise to attend, if you could possibly drive across, and--hee-hee-hee!--I have frequently looked towards the hill where the road descends. . . . Will you now permit me to introduce some of my party--as many of them as you care to know by name? I think they would all like to speak to you.'

Ethelberta then found herself nominally made known to ten or a dozen ladies and gentlemen who had wished for special acquaintance with her. She stood there, as all women stand who have made themselves remarkable by their originality, or devotion to any singular cause, as a person freed of her hampering and inconvenient sex, and, by virtue of her popularity, unfettered from the conventionalities of manner prescribed by custom for household womankind. The charter to move abroad unchaperoned, which society for good reasons grants only to women of three sorts--the famous, the ministering, and the improper--Ethelberta was in a fair way to make splendid use of: instead of walking in protected lanes she experienced that luxury of isolation which normally is enjoyed by men alone, in conjunction with the attention naturally bestowed on a woman young and fair. Among the presentations were Mr. and Mrs. Tynn, member and member's mainspring for North Wessex; Sir Cyril and Lady Blandsbury; Lady Jane Joy; and the Honourable Edgar Mountclere, the viscount's brother. There also hovered near her the learned Doctor Yore; Mr. Small,

a profound writer, who never printed his works; the Reverend Mr. Brook, rector; the Very Reverend Dr. Taylor, dean; and the undoubtedly Reverend Mr. Tinkleton, Nonconformist, who had slipped into the fold by chance.

These and others looked with interest at Ethelberta: the old county fathers hard, as at a questionable town phenomenon, the county sons tenderly, as at a pretty creature, and the county daughters with great admiration, as at a lady reported by their mammas to be no better than she should be. It will be seen that Ethelberta was the sort of woman that well-rooted local people might like to look at on such a free and friendly occasion as an archaeological meeting, where, to gratify a pleasant whim, the picturesque form of acquaintance is for the nonce preferred to the useful, the spirits being so brisk as to swerve from strict attention to the select and sequent gifts of heaven, blood and acres, to consider for an idle moment the subversive Mephistophelian endowment, brains.

'Our progress in the survey of the castle has not been far as yet,' Lord Mountclere resumed; 'indeed, we have only just arrived, the weather this morning being so unsettled. When you came up we were engaged in a preliminary study of the poor animal you see there: how it could have got up here we cannot understand.'

He pointed as he spoke to the donkey which had brought Ethelberta thither, whereupon she was silent, and gazed at her untoward beast as if she had never before beheld him.

The ass looked at Ethelberta as though he would say, 'Why don't you own me, after safely bringing you over those weary hills?' But the pride and emulation which had made her what she was would not permit her, as the most lovely woman there, to take upon her own shoulders the ridicule that had already been cast upon the ass. Had he been young and gaily caparisoned, she might have done it; but his age, the clumsy trappings of rustic make, and his needy woful look of hard servitude, were too much to endure.

'Many come and picnic here,' she said serenely, 'and the animal may have been left till they return from some walk.'

'True,' said Lord Mountclere, without the slightest suspicion of the truth. The humble ass hung his head in his usual manner, and it demanded

little fancy from Ethelberta to imagine that he despised her. And then her mind flew back to her history and extraction, to her father--perhaps at that moment inventing a private plate-powder in an underground pantry--and with a groan at her inconsistency in being ashamed of the ass, she said in her heart, 'My God, what a thing am I!'

They then all moved on to another part of the castle, the viscount busying himself round and round her person like the head scraper at a pig-killing; and as they went indiscriminately mingled, jesting lightly or talking in earnest, she beheld ahead of her the form of Neigh among the

rest.

Now, there could only be one reason on earth for Neigh's presence--her remark that she might attend--for Neigh took no more interest in antiquities than in the back of the moon. Ethelberta was a little flurried; perhaps he had come to scold her, or to treat her badly in that indefinable way of his by which he could make a woman feel as nothing without any direct act at all. She was afraid of him, and, determining to shun him, was thankful that Lord Mountclere was near, to take off the edge of Neigh's manner towards her if he approached.

'Do you know in what part of the ruins the lecture is to be given?' she said to the viscount.

'Wherever you like,' he replied gallantly. 'Do you propose a place, and I will get Dr. Yore to adopt it. Say, shall it be here, or where they are standing?'

How could Ethelberta refrain from exercising a little power when it was put into her hands in this way?

'Let it be here,' she said, 'if it makes no difference to the meeting.'

'It shall be,' said Lord Mountclere.

And then the lively old nobleman skipped like a roe to the President and

to Dr. Yore, who was to read the paper on the castle, and they soon appeared coming back to where the viscount's party and Ethelberta were beginning to seat themselves. The bulk of the company followed, and Dr. Yore began.

He must have had a countenance of leather--as, indeed, from his colour he appeared to have--to stand unmoved in his position, and read, and look up to give explanations, without a change of muscle, under the dozens of bright eyes that were there converged upon him, like the sticks of a fan, from the ladies who sat round him in a semicircle upon the grass.

However, he went on calmly, and the women sheltered themselves from the heat with their umbrellas and sunshades, their ears lulled by the hum of insects, and by the drone of the doctor's voice. The reader buzzed on with the history of the castle, tracing its development from a mound with a few earthworks to its condition in Norman times; he related monkish marvels connected with the spot; its resistance under Matilda to Stephen, its probable shape while a residence of King John, and the sad story of the Damsel of Brittany, sister of his victim Arthur, who was confined here in company with the two daughters of Alexander, king of Scotland. He went on to recount the confinement of Edward II. herein, previous to his murder at Berkeley, the gay doings in the reign of Elizabeth, and so downward through time to the final overthrow of the stern old pile. As he proceeded, the lecturer pointed with his finger at the various features appertaining to the date of his story, which he told with splendid vigour when he had warmed to his work, till his narrative, particularly in the conjectural and romantic parts, where it became

coloured rather by the speaker's imagination than by the pigments of history, gathered together the wandering thoughts of all. It was easy for him then to meet those fair concentrated eyes, when the sunshades were thrown back, and complexions forgotten, in the interest of the history. The doctor's face was then no longer criticized as a rugged boulder, a dried fig, an oak carving, or a walnut shell, but became blotted out like a mountain top in a shining haze by the nebulous pictures conjured by his tale.

Then the lecture ended, and questions were asked, and individuals of the company wandered at will, the light dresses of the ladies sweeping over the hot grass and brushing up thistledown which had hitherto lain quiescent, so that it rose in a flight from the skirts of each like a comet's tail.

Some of Lord Mountclere's party, including himself and Ethelberta, wandered now into a cool dungeon, partly open to the air overhead, where long arms of ivy hung between their eyes and the white sky. While they were here, Lady Jane Joy and some other friends of the viscount told Ethelberta that they were probably coming on to Knollsea.

She instantly perceived that getting into close quarters in that way might be very inconvenient, considering the youngsters she had under her charge, and straightway decided upon a point that she had debated for several days--a visit to her aunt in Normandy. In London it had been a mere thought, but the Channel had looked so tempting from its brink that

the journey was virtually fixed as soon as she reached Knollsea, and found that a little pleasure steamer crossed to Cherbourg once a week during the summer, so that she would not have to enter the crowded routes at all.

'I am afraid I shall not see you in Knollsea,' she said. 'I am about to go to Cherbourg and then to Rouen.'

'How sorry I am. When do you leave?'

'At the beginning of next week,' said Ethelberta, settling the time there and then.

'Did I hear you say that you were going to Cherbourg and Rouen?' Lord Mountclere inquired.

'I think to do so,' said Ethelberta.

'I am going to Normandy myself,' said a voice behind her, and without turning she knew that Neigh was standing there.

They next went outside, and Lord Mountclere offered Ethelberta his arm on the ground of assisting her down the burnished grass slope. Ethelberta, taking pity upon him, took it; but the assistance was all on her side; she stood like a statue amid his slips and totterings, some of which taxed her strength heavily, and her ingenuity more, to appear as the

supported and not the supporter. The incident brought Neigh still further from his retirement, and she learnt that he was one of a yachting party which had put in at Knollsea that morning; she was greatly relieved to find that he was just now on his way to London, whence he would probably proceed on his journey abroad.

Ethelberta adhered as well as she could to her resolve that Neigh should not speak with her alone, but by dint of perseverance he did manage to address her without being overheard.

'Will you give me an answer?' said Neigh. 'I have come on purpose.'

'I cannot just now. I have been led to doubt you.'

'Doubt me? What new wrong have I done?'

'Spoken jestingly of my visit to Farnfield.'

'Good ---! I did not speak or think of you. When I told that incident I had no idea who the lady was--I did not know it was you till two days later, and I at once held my tongue. I vow to you upon my soul and life that what I say is true. How shall I prove my truth better than by my errand here?'

'Don't speak of this now. I am so occupied with other things. I am going to Rouen, and will think of it on my way.'

'I am going there too. When do you go?'

'I shall be in Rouen next Wednesday, I hope.'

'May I ask where?'

'Hotel Beau Sejour.'

'Will you give me an answer there? I can easily call upon you. It is now a month and more since you first led me to hope--'

'I did not lead you to hope--at any rate clearly.'

'Indirectly you did. And although I am willing to be as considerate as any man ought to be in giving you time to think over the question, there is a limit to my patience. Any necessary delay I will put up with, but I won't be trifled with. I hate all nonsense, and can't stand it.'

'Indeed. Good morning.'

'But Mrs. Petherwin--just one word.'

'I have nothing to say.'

'I will meet you at Rouen for an answer. I would meet you in Hades for

the matter of that. Remember this: next Wednesday, if I live, I shall call upon you at Rouen.'

She did not say nay.

'May I?' he added.

'If you will.'

'But say it shall be an appointment?'

'Very well.'

Lord Mountclere was by this time toddling towards them to ask if they would come on to his house, Enckworth Court, not very far distant, to lunch with the rest of the party. Neigh, having already arranged to go on to town that afternoon, was obliged to decline, and Ethelberta thought fit to do the same, idly asking Lord Mountclere if Enckworth Court lay in the direction of a gorge that was visible where they stood.

'No; considerably to the left,' he said. 'The opening you are looking at would reveal the sea if it were not for the trees that block the way. Ah, those trees have a history; they are half-a-dozen elms which I planted myself when I was a boy. How time flies!'

'It is unfortunate they stand just so as to cover the blue bit of sea.

That addition would double the value of the view from here.'

'You would prefer the blue sea to the trees?'

'In that particular spot I should; they might have looked just as well, and yet have hidden nothing worth seeing. The narrow slit would have been invaluable there.'

'They shall fall before the sun sets, in deference to your opinion,' said Lord Mountclere.

'That would be rash indeed,' said Ethelberta, laughing, 'when my opinion on such a point may be worth nothing whatever.'

'Where no other is acted upon, it is practically the universal one,' he replied gaily.

And then Ethelberta's elderly admirer bade her adieu, and away the whole party drove in a long train over the hills towards the valley wherein stood Enckworth Court. Ethelberta's carriage was supposed by her friends to have been left at the village inn, as were many others, and her retiring from view on foot attracted no notice.

She watched them out of sight, and she also saw the rest depart--those who, their interest in archaeology having begun and ended with this spot, had, like herself, declined the hospitable viscount's invitation, and

started to drive or walk at once home again. Thereupon the castle was quite deserted except by Ethelberta, the ass, and the jackdaws, now floundering at ease again in and about the ivy of the keep.

Not wishing to enter Knollsea till the evening shades were falling, she still walked amid the ruins, examining more leisurely some points which the stress of keeping herself companionable would not allow her to attend to while the assemblage was present. At the end of the survey, being somewhat weary with her clambering, she sat down on the slope commanding

the gorge where the trees grew, to make a pencil sketch of the landscape as it was revealed between the ragged walls. Thus engaged she weighed the circumstances of Lord Mountclere's invitation, and could not be certain if it were prudishness or simple propriety in herself which had instigated her to refuse. She would have liked the visit for many reasons, and if Lord Mountclere had been anybody but a remarkably attentive old widower, she would have gone. As it was, it had occurred to her that there was something in his tone which should lead her to hesitate. Were any among the elderly or married ladies who had appeared upon the ground in a detached form as she had done--and many had appeared

thus--invited to Enckworth; and if not, why were they not? That Lord Mountclere admired her there was no doubt, and for this reason it behoved her to be careful. His disappointment at parting from her was, in one aspect, simply laughable, from its odd resemblance to the unfeigned sorrow of a boy of fifteen at a first parting from his first love; in another aspect it caused reflection; and she thought again of his

curiosity about her doings for the remainder of the summer.

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While she sketched and thought thus, the shadows grew longer, and the sun

low. And then she perceived a movement in the gorge. One of the trees forming the curtain across it began to wave strangely: it went further to one side, and fell. Where the tree had stood was now a rent in the foliage, and through the narrow rent could be seen the distant sea.

Ethelberta uttered a soft exclamation. It was not caused by the surprise she had felt, nor by the intrinsic interest of the sight, nor by want of comprehension. It was a sudden realization of vague things hitherto dreamed of from a distance only--a sense of novel power put into her hands without request or expectation. A landscape was to be altered to suit her whim. She had in her lifetime moved essentially larger mountains, but they had seemed of far less splendid material than this; for it was the nature of the gratification rather than its magnitude which enchanted the fancy of a woman whose poetry, in spite of her necessities, was hardly yet extinguished. But there was something more, with which poetry had little to do. Whether the opinion of any pretty woman in England was of more weight with Lord Mountclere than memories of his boyhood, or whether that distinction was reserved for her alone; this was a point that she would have liked to know.

The enjoyment of power in a new element, an enjoyment somewhat resembling
in kind that which is given by a first ride or swim, held Ethelberta to
the spot, and she waited, but sketched no more. Another tree-top swayed
and vanished as before, and the slit of sea was larger still. Her mind
and eye were so occupied with this matter that, sitting in her nook, she
did not observe a thin young man, his boots white with the dust of a long
journey on foot, who arrived at the castle by the valley-road from
Knollsea. He looked awhile at the ruin, and, skirting its flank instead
of entering by the great gateway, climbed up the scarp and walked in
through a breach. After standing for a moment among the walls, now
silent and apparently empty, with a disappointed look he descended the
slope, and proceeded along on his way.

Ethelberta, who was in quite another part of the castle, saw the black
spot diminishing to the size of a fly as he receded along the dusty road,
and soon after she descended on the other side, where she remounted the
ass, and ambled homeward as she had come, in no bright mood. What,
seeing the precariousness of her state, was the day's triumph worth after
all, unless, before her beauty abated, she could ensure her position
against the attacks of chance?

'To be thus is nothing;

But to be safely thus.'

--she said it more than once on her journey that day.

On entering the sitting-room of their cot up the hill she found it empty, and from a change perceptible in the position of small articles of furniture, something unusual seemed to have taken place in her absence. The dwelling being of that sort in which whatever goes on in one room is audible through all the rest, Picotee, who was upstairs, heard the arrival and came down. Picotee's face was rosed over with the brilliance of some excitement. 'What do you think I have to tell you, Berta?' she said.

'I have no idea,' said her sister. 'Surely,' she added, her face intensifying to a wan sadness, 'Mr. Julian has not been here?'

'Yes,' said Picotee. 'And we went down to the sands--he, and Myrtle, and Georgina, and Emmeline, and I--and Cornelia came down when she had put away the dinner. And then we dug wriggles out of the sand with Myrtle's spade: we got such a lot, and had such fun; they are in a dish in the kitchen. Mr. Julian came to see you; but at last he could wait no longer, and when I told him you were at the meeting in the castle ruins he said he would try to find you there on his way home, if he could get there before the meeting broke up.'

'Then it was he I saw far away on the road--yes, it must have been.' She remained in gloomy reverie a few moments, and then said, 'Very well--let it be. Picotee, get me some tea: I do not want dinner.'

But the news of Christopher's visit seemed to have taken away her appetite for tea also, and after sitting a little while she flung herself down upon the couch, and told Picotee that she had settled to go and see their aunt Charlotte.

'I am going to write to Sol and Dan to ask them to meet me there,' she added. 'I want them, if possible, to see Paris. It will improve them greatly in their trades, I am thinking, if they can see the kinds of joinery and decoration practised in France. They agreed to go, if I should wish it, before we left London. You, of course, will go as my maid.'

Picotee gazed upon the sea with a crestfallen look, as if she would rather not cross it in any capacity just then.

'It would scarcely be worth going to the expense of taking me, would it?' she said.

The cause of Picotee's sudden sense of economy was so plain that her sister smiled; but young love, however foolish, is to a thinking person far too tragic a power for ridicule; and Ethelberta forbore, going on as if Picotee had not spoken: 'I must have you with me. I may be seen there: so many are passing through Rouen at this time of the year. Cornelia can take excellent care of the children while we are gone. I want to get out of England, and I will get out of England. There is nothing but vanity and vexation here.'

'I am sorry you were away when he called,' said Picotee gently.

'O, I don't mean that. I wish there were no different ranks in the world, and that contrivance were not a necessary faculty to have at all. Well, we are going to cross by the little steamer that puts in here, and we are going on Monday.' She added in another minute, 'What had Mr. Julian to tell us that he came here? How did he find us out?'

'I mentioned that we were coming here in my letter to Faith. Mr. Julian says that perhaps he and his sister may also come for a few days before the season is over. I should like to see Miss Julian again. She is such a nice girl.'

'Yes.' Ethelberta played with her hair, and looked at the ceiling as she reclined. 'I have decided after all,' she said, 'that it will be better to take Cornelia as my maid, and leave you here with the children. Cornelia is stronger as a companion than you, and she will be delighted to go. Do you think you are competent to keep Myrtle and Georgina out of harm's way?'

'O yes--I will be exceedingly careful,' said Picotee, with great vivacity. 'And if there is time I can go on teaching them a little.' Then Picotee caught Ethelberta's eye, and colouring red, sank down beside her sister, whispering, 'I know why it is! But if you would rather have me with you I will go, and not once wish to stay.'

Ethelberta looked as if she knew all about that, and said, 'Of course there will be no necessity to tell the Julians about my departure until they have fixed the time for coming, and cannot alter their minds.'

The sound of the children with Cornelia, and their appearance outside the window, pushing between the fuchsia bushes which overhung the path, put an end to this dialogue; they entered armed with buckets and spades, a very moist and sandy aspect pervading them as far up as the high-water mark of their clothing, and began to tell Ethelberta of the wonders of the deep.