

40. MELCHESTER (continued)

The commotion wrought in Julian's mind by the abrupt incursion of Ethelberta into his quiet sphere was thorough and protracted. The witchery of her presence he had grown strong enough to withstand in part; but her composed announcement that she had intended to marry another, and, as far as he could understand, was intending it still, added a new chill to the old shade of disappointment which custom was day by day enabling him to endure. During the whole interval in which he had produced those diapason blasts, heard with such inharmonious feelings by the three auditors outside the screen, his thoughts had wandered wider than his notes in conjectures on the character and position of the gentleman seen in Ethelberta's company. Owing to his assumption that Lord Mountclere was but a stranger who had accidentally come in at the side door, Christopher had barely cast a glance upon him, and the wide difference between the years of the viscount and those of his betrothed was not so particularly observed as to raise that point to an item in his objections now. Lord Mountclere was dressed with all the cunning that could be drawn from the metropolis by money and reiterated dissatisfaction; he prided himself on his upright carriage; his stick was so thin that the most malevolent could not insinuate that it was of any possible use in walking; his teeth had put on all the vigour and

freshness of a second spring. Hence his look was the slowest of possible clocks in respect of his age, and his manner was equally as much in the rear of his appearance.

Christopher was now over five-and-twenty. He was getting so well accustomed to the spectacle of a world passing him by and splashing him with its wheels that he wondered why he had ever minded it. His habit of dreaming instead of doing had led him up to a curious discovery. It is no new thing for a man to fathom profundities by indulging humours: the active, the rapid, the people of splendid momentum, have been surprised to behold what results attend the lives of those whose usual plan for discharging their active labours has been to postpone them indefinitely. Certainly, the immediate result in the present case was, to all but himself, small and invisible; but it was of the nature of highest things. What he had learnt was that a woman who has once made a permanent impression upon a man cannot altogether deny him her image by denying him her company, and that by sedulously cultivating the acquaintance of this Creature of Contemplation she becomes to him almost a living soul. Hence a sublimated Ethelberta accompanied him everywhere--one who never teased him, eluded him, or disappointed him: when he smiled she smiled, when he was sad she sorrowed. He may be said to have become the literal duplicate of that whimsical unknown rhapsodist who wrote of his own similar situation--

'By absence this good means I gain,

That I can catch her,
Where none can watch her,
In some close corner of my brain:
There I embrace and kiss her;
And so I both enjoy and miss her.'

This frame of mind naturally induced an amazing abstraction in the organist, never very vigilant at the best of times. He would stand and look fixedly at a frog in a shady pool, and never once think of batrachians, or pause by a green bank to split some tall blade of grass into filaments without removing it from its stalk, passing on ignorant that he had made a cat-o'-nine-tails of a graceful slip of vegetation. He would hear the cathedral clock strike one, and go the next minute to see what time it was. 'I never seed such a man as Mr. Julian is,' said the head blower. 'He'll meet me anywhere out-of-doors, and never wink or nod. You'd hardly expect it. I don't find fault, but you'd hardly expect it, seeing how I play the same instrument as he do himself, and have done it for so many years longer than he. How I have indulged that man, too! If 'tis Pedals for two martel hours of practice I never complain; and he has plenty of vagaries. When 'tis hot summer weather there's nothing will do for him but Choir, Great, and Swell altogether, till yer face is in a vapour; and on a frosty winter night he'll keep me there while he tweedles upon the Twelfth and Sixteenth till my arms be scrambled for want of motion. And never speak a word out-of-doors.' Somebody suggested that perhaps Christopher did not notice his coadjutor's presence in the street; and time proved to the organ-blower

that the remark was just.

Whenever Christopher caught himself at these vacuous tricks he would be struck with admiration of Ethelberta's wisdom, foresight, and self-command in refusing to wed such an incapable man: he felt that he ought to be thankful that a bright memory of her was not also denied to him, and resolved to be content with it as a possession, since it was as much of her as he could decently maintain.

Wrapped thus in a humorous sadness he passed the afternoon under notice, and in the evening went home to Faith, who still lived with him, and showed no sign of ever being likely to do otherwise. Their present place and mode of life suited her well. She revived at Melchester like an exotic sent home again. The leafy Close, the climbing buttresses, the pondering ecclesiastics, the great doors, the singular keys, the whispered talk, echoes of lonely footsteps, the sunset shadow of the tall steeple, reaching further into the town than the good bishop's teaching, and the general complexion of a spot where morning had the stillness of evening and spring some of the tones of autumn, formed a proper background to a person constituted as Faith, who, like Miss Hepzibah Pyncheon's chicken, possessed in miniature all the antiquity of her progenitors.

After tea Christopher went into the streets, as was frequently his custom, less to see how the world crept on there than to walk up and down

for nothing at all. It had been market-day, and remnants of the rural population that had visited the town still lingered at corners, their toes hanging over the edge of the pavement, and their eyes wandering about the street.

The angle which formed the turning-point of Christopher's promenade was occupied by a jeweller's shop, of a standing which completely outshone every other shop in that or any trade throughout the town. Indeed, it was a staple subject of discussion in Melchester how a shop of such pretensions could find patronage sufficient to support its existence in a place which, though well populated, was not fashionable. It had not long been established there, and was the enterprise of an incoming man whose whole course of procedure seemed to be dictated by an intention to astonish the native citizens very considerably before he had done. Nearly everything was glass in the frontage of this fairy mart, and its contents glittered like the hammochrysos stone. The panes being of plate-glass, and the shop having two fronts, a diagonal view could be had through it from one to the other of the streets to which it formed a corner.

This evening, as on all evenings, a flood of radiance spread from the window-lamps into the thick autumn air, so that from a distance that corner appeared as the glistening nucleus of all the light in the town. Towards it idle men and women unconsciously bent their steps, and closed in upon the panes like night-birds upon the lantern of a lighthouse.

When Christopher reached the spot there stood close to the pavement a

plain close carriage, apparently waiting for some person who was purchasing inside. Christopher would hardly have noticed this had he not also perceived, pressed against the glass of the shop window, an unusual number of local noses belonging to overgrown working lads, tosspots, an idiot, the ham-smoker's assistant with his sleeves rolled up, a scot-and-lot freeholder, three or four seamstresses, the young woman who brought home the washing, and so on. The interest of these gazers in some proceedings within, which by reason of the gaslight were as public as if carried on in the open air, was very great.

'Yes, that's what he's a buying o'--haw, haw!' said one of the young men, as the shopman removed from the window a gorgeous blue velvet tray of wedding-rings, and laid it on the counter.

"'Tis what you may come to yerself, sooner or later, God have mercy upon ye; and as such no scoffing matter,' said an older man. 'Faith, I'd as lief cry as laugh to see a man in that corner.'

'He's a gent getting up in years too. He must hev been through it a few times afore, seemingly, to sit down and buy the tools so cool as that.'

'Well, no. See what the shyest will do at such times. You bain't yerself then; no man living is hisself then.'

'True,' said the ham-smoker's man. "'Tis a thought to look at that a chap will take all this trouble to get a woman into his house, and a

twelvemonth after would as soon hear it thunder as hear her sing!

The policeman standing near was a humane man, through having a young family he could hardly keep, and he hesitated about telling them to move on. Christopher had before this time perceived that the articles were laid down before an old gentleman who was seated in the shop, and that the gentleman was none other than he who had been with Ethelberta in the concert-room. The discovery was so startling that, constitutionally indisposed as he was to stand and watch, he became as glued to the spot as the other idlers. Finding himself now for the first time directly confronting the preliminaries of Ethelberta's marriage to a stranger, he was left with far less equanimity than he could have supposed possible to the situation.

'So near the time!' he said, and looked hard at Lord Mountclere.

Christopher had now a far better opportunity than before for observing Ethelberta's betrothed. Apart from any bias of jealousy, disappointment, or mortification, he was led to judge that this was not quite the man to make Ethelberta happy. He had fancied her companion to be a man under fifty; he was now visibly sixty or more. And it was not the sort of sexagenarianism beside which a young woman's happiness can sometimes contrive to keep itself alive in a quiet sleepy way. Suddenly it occurred to him that this was the man whom he had helped in the carriage accident on the way to Knollsea. He looked again.

By no means undignified, the face presented that combination of slyness and jocundity which we are accustomed to imagine of the canonical jolly-dogs in mediaeval tales. The gamesome Curate of Meudon might have supplied some parts of the countenance; cunning Friar Tuck the remainder. Nothing but the viscount's constant habit of going to church every Sunday morning when at his country residence kept unholiness out of his features, for though he lived theologically enough on the Sabbath, as it became a man in his position to do, he was strikingly mundane all the rest of the week, always preferring the devil to God in his oaths. And nothing but antecedent good-humour prevented the short fits of crossness incident to his passing infirmities from becoming established. His look was exceptionally jovial now, and the corners of his mouth twitched as the telegraph-needles of a hundred little erotic messages from his heart to his brain. Anybody could see that he was a merry man still, who loved good company, warming drinks, nymph-like shapes, and pretty words, in spite of the disagreeable suggestions he received from the pupils of his eyes, and the joints of his lively limbs, that imps of mischief were busy sapping and mining in those regions, with the view of tumbling him into a certain cool cellar under the church aisle.

In general, if a lover can find any ground at all for serenity in the tide of an elderly rival's success, he finds it in the fact itself of that ancientness. The other side seems less a rival than a makeshift. But Christopher no longer felt this, and the significant signs before his eyes of the imminence of Ethelberta's union with this old hero filled him with restless dread. True, the gentleman, as he appeared illuminated by

the jeweller's gas-jets, seemed more likely to injure Ethelberta by indulgence than by severity, while her beauty lasted; but there was a nameless something in him less tolerable than this.

The purchaser having completed his dealings with the goldsmith, was conducted to the door by the master of the shop, and into the carriage, which was at once driven off up the street.

Christopher now much desired to know the name of the man whom a nice chain of circumstantial evidence taught him to regard as the happy winner where scores had lost. He was grieved that Ethelberta's confessed reserve should have extended so far as to limit her to mere indefinite hints of marriage when they were talking almost on the brink of the wedding-day. That the ceremony was to be a private one--which it probably would be because of the disparity of ages--did not in his opinion justify her secrecy. He had shown himself capable of a transmutation as valuable as it is rare in men, the change from pestering lover to staunch friend, and this was all he had got for it. But even an old lover sunk to an indifferentist might have been tempted to spend an unoccupied half-hour in discovering particulars now, and Christopher had not lapsed nearly so far as to absolute unconcern.

That evening, however, nothing came in his way to enlighten him. But the next day, when skirting the Close on his ordinary duties, he saw the same carriage standing at a distance, and paused to behold the same old gentleman come from a well-known office and re-enter the vehicle--Lord

Mountclere, in fact, in earnest pursuit of the business of yesternight, having just pocketed a document in which romance, rashness, law, and gospel are so happily made to work together that it may safely be regarded as the neatest compromise which has ever been invented since Adam sinned.

This time Julian perceived that the brougham was one belonging to the White Hart Hotel, which Lord Mountclere was using partly from the necessities of these hasty proceedings, and also because, by so doing, he escaped the notice that might have been bestowed upon his own equipage, or men-servants, the Mountclere hammer-cloths being known in Melchester. Christopher now walked towards the hotel, leisurely, yet with anxiety. He inquired of a porter what people were staying there that day, and was informed that they had only one person in the house, Lord Mountclere, whom sudden and unexpected business had detained in Melchester since the previous day.

Christopher lingered to hear no more. He retraced the street much more quickly than he had come; and he only said, 'Lord Mountclere--it must never be!'

As soon as he entered the house, Faith perceived that he was greatly agitated. He at once told her of his discovery, and she exclaimed, 'What a brilliant match!'

'O Faith,' said Christopher, 'you don't know! You are far from knowing. It is as gloomy as midnight. Good God, can it be possible?'

Faith blinked in alarm, without speaking.

'Did you never hear anything of Lord Mountclere when we lived at Sandbourne?'

'I knew the name--no more.'

'No, no--of course you did not. Well, though I never saw his face, to my knowledge, till a short time ago, I know enough to say that, if earnest representations can prevent it, this marriage shall not be. Father knew him, or about him, very well; and he once told me--what I cannot tell you. Fancy, I have seen him three times--yesterday, last night, and this morning--besides helping him on the road some weeks ago, and never once considered that he might be Lord Mountclere. He is here almost in disguise, one may say; neither man nor horse is with him; and his object accounts for his privacy. I see how it is--she is doing this to benefit her brothers and sisters, if possible; but she ought to know that if she is miserable they will never be happy. That's the nature of women--they take the form for the essence, and that's what she is doing now. I should think her guardian angel must have quitted her when she agreed to a marriage which may tear her heart out like a claw.'

'You are too warm about it, Kit--it cannot be so bad as that. It is not

the thing, but the sensitiveness to the thing, which is the true measure of its pain. Perhaps what seems so bad to you falls lightly on her mind. A campaigner in a heavy rain is not more uncomfortable than we are in a slight draught; and Ethelberta, fortified by her sapphires and gold cups and wax candles, will not mind facts which look like spectres to us outside. A title will turn troubles into romances, and she will shine as an interesting viscountess in spite of them.'

The discussion with Faith was not continued, Christopher stopping the argument by saying that he had a good mind to go off at once to Knollsea, and show her her danger. But till the next morning Ethelberta was certainly safe; no marriage was possible anywhere before then. He passed the afternoon in a state of great indecision, constantly reiterating, 'I will go!'