

The Hand of Ethelberta

by

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1.A Street In Anglebury - A Heath Near It - Inside The 'Red Lion' Inn

Young Mrs. Petherwin stepped from the door of an old and well-appointed inn in a Wessex town to take a country walk. By her look and carriage she appeared to belong to that gentle order of society which has no worldly sorrow except when its jewellery gets stolen; but, as a fact not generally known, her claim to distinction was rather one of brains than of blood. She was the daughter of a gentleman who lived in a large house not his own, and began life as a baby christened Ethelberta after an infant of title who does not come into the story at all, having merely furnished Ethelberta's mother with a subject of contemplation. She became teacher in a school, was praised by examiners, admired by gentlemen, not admired by gentlewomen, was touched up with accomplishments by masters who were coaxed into painstaking by her many graces, and, entering a mansion as governess to the daughter thereof, was stealthily married by the son. He, a minor like herself, died from a chill caught during the wedding tour, and a few weeks later was followed into the grave by Sir Ralph Petherwin, his unforgiving father, who had bequeathed his wealth to his wife absolutely.

These calamities were a sufficient reason to Lady Petherwin for pardoning all concerned. She took by the hand the forlorn Ethelberta--who seemed rather a detached bride than a widow--and finished her education by placing her for two or three years in a boarding-school at Bonn. Latterly she had brought the girl to England to live under her roof as daughter and companion, the condition attached being that Ethelberta was never openly to recognize her relations, for reasons which will hereafter appear.

The elegant young lady, as she had a full right to be called if she cared for the definition, arrested all the local attention when she emerged into the summer-evening light with that diadem-and-sceptre bearing--many people for reasons of heredity discovering such graces only in those whose vestibules are lined with ancestral mail, forgetting that a bear may be taught to dance. While this air of hers lasted, even the inanimate objects in the street appeared to know that she was there; but from a way she had of carelessly overthrowing her dignity by versatile moods, one could not calculate upon its presence to a certainty when she was round corners or in little lanes which demanded no repression of animal spirits.

'Well to be sure!' exclaimed a milkman, regarding her. 'We should freeze in our beds if 'twere not for the sun, and, dang me! if she isn't a pretty piece. A man could make a meal between them eyes and chin--eh, hostler? Odd nation dang my old sides if he couldn't!'

The speaker, who had been carrying a pair of pails on a yoke, deposited them upon the edge of the pavement in front of the inn, and straightened his back to an excruciating perpendicular. His remarks had been addressed to a rickety person, wearing a waistcoat of that preternatural length from the top to the bottom button which prevails among men who have to do with horses. He was sweeping straws from the carriage-way beneath the stone arch that formed a passage to the stables behind.

'Never mind the cursing and swearing, or somebody who's never out of hearing may clap yer name down in his black book,' said the hostler, also pausing, and lifting his eyes to the mullioned and transomed windows and moulded parapet above him--not to study them as features of ancient architecture, but just to give as healthful a stretch to the eyes as his acquaintance had done to his back. 'Michael, a old man like you ought to think about other things, and not be

looking two ways at your time of life. Pouncing upon young flesh like a carrion crow--'tis a vile thing in a old man.'

'Tis; and yet 'tis not, for 'tis a naterel taste,' said the milkman, again surveying Ethelberta, who had now paused upon a bridge in full view, to look down the river. 'Now, if a poor needy feller like myself could only catch her alone when she's dressed up to the nines for some grand party, and carry her off to some lonely place--sakes, what a pot of jewels and goold things I warrant he'd find about her! 'Twould pay en for his trouble.'

'I don't dispute the picter; but 'tis sly and untimely to think such roguery. Though I've had thoughts like it, 'tis true, about high women--Lord forgive me for't.'

'And that figure of fashion standing there is a widow woman, so I hear?'

'Lady--not a penny less than lady. Ay, a thing of twenty-one or thereabouts.'

'A widow lady and twenty-one. 'Tis a backward age for a body who's so forward in her state of life.'

'Well, be that as 'twill, here's my showings for her age. She was about the figure of two or three-and-twenty when a' got off the carriage last night, tired out wi' boaming about the country; and nineteen this morning when she came downstairs after a sleep round the clock and a clane-washed face: so I thought to myself, twenty- one, I thought.'

'And what's the young woman's name, make so bold, hostler?'

'Ay, and the house were all in a stoor with her and the old woman, and their boxes and camp-kettles, that they carry to wash in because hand-basons bain't big enough, and I don't know what all; and t'other folk stopping here were no more than dirt thencefor'ard.'

'I suppose they've come out of some noble city a long way herefrom?'

'And there was her hair up in buckle as if she'd never seen a clay-cold man at all. However, to cut a long story short, all I know besides about 'em is that the name upon their luggage is Lady Petherwin, and she's the widow of a city gentleman, who was a man of valour in the Lord Mayor's Show.'

'Who's that chap in the gaiters and pack at his back, come out of the door but now?' said the milkman, nodding towards a figure of that description who had just emerged from the inn and trudged off in the direction taken by the lady--now out of sight.

'Chap in the gaiters? Chok' it all--why, the father of that nobleman that you call chap in the gaiters used to be hand in glove with half the Queen's court.'

'What d'ye tell o'?'

'That man's father was one of the mayor and corporation of Sandbourne, and was that familiar with men of money, that he'd slap 'em upon the shoulder as you or I or any other poor fool would the clerk of the parish.'

'O, what's my lordlin's name, make so bold, then?'

'Ay, the toppermost class nowadays have left off the use of wheels for the good of their constitutions, so they traipse and walk for many years up foreign hills, where you can see nothing but snow and fog, till there's no more left to walk up; and if they reach home alive, and ha'n't got too old and weared out, they walk and see a little of their own parishes. So they tower about with a pack and a stick and a clane white pocket-handkerchief over their hats just as you see he's got on his. He's been staying here a night, and is off now again. "Young man, young man," I think to myself, "if your shoulders were bent like a bandy and your knees bowed out as mine be, till there is not an inch of straight bone or gristle in 'ee, th' wouldstn't go doing hard work for play 'a b'lieve.'"

'True, true, upon my song. Such a pain as I have had in my lynes all this day to be sure; words don't know what

shipwreck I suffer in these lynes o' mine--that they do not! And what was this young widow lady's maiden name, then, hostler? Folk have been peeping after her, that's true; but they don't seem to know much about her family.'

'And while I've tended horses fifty year that other folk might straddle 'em, here I be now not a penny the better! Often-times, when I see so many good things about, I feel inclined to help myself in common justice to my pocket.

"Work hard and be poor, Do nothing and get more."

But I draw in the horns of my mind and think to myself, "Forbear, John Hostler, forbear!"--Her maiden name? Faith, I don't know the woman's maiden name, though she said to me, "Good evening, John;" but I had no memory of ever seeing her afore--no, no more than the dead inside church-hatch--where I shall soon be likewise--I had not. "Ay, my nabs," I think to myself, "more know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows."

'More know Tom Fool--what rambling old canticle is it you say, hostler?' inquired the milkman, lifting his ear. 'Let's have it again--a good saying well spit out is a Christmas fire to my withered heart. More know Tom Fool--'

'Than Tom Fool knows,' said the hostler.

'Ah! That's the very feeling I've feeled over and over again, hostler, but not in such gifted language. 'Tis a thought I've had in me for years, and never could lick into shape!--O-ho-ho-ho! Splendid! Say it again, hostler, say it again! To hear my own poor notion that had no name brought into form like that--I wouldn't ha' lost it for the world! More know Tom Fool than--than--h-ho-ho-ho- ho!'

'Don't let your sense o' vitness break out in such uproar, for heaven's sake, or folk will surely think you've been laughing at the lady and gentleman. Well, here's at it again--Night t'ee, Michael.' And the hostler went on with his sweeping.

'Night t'ee, hostler, I must move too,' said the milkman, shouldering his yoke, and walking off; and there reached the

inn in a gradual diminuendo, as he receded up the street, shaking his head convulsively, 'More know--Tom Fool--than Tom Fool--ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!'

The 'Red Lion,' as the inn or hotel was called which of late years had become the fashion among tourists, because of the absence from its precincts of all that was fashionable and new, stood near the middle of the town, and formed a corner where in winter the winds whistled and assembled their forces previous to plunging helter-skelter along the streets. In summer it was a fresh and pleasant spot, convenient for such quiet characters as sojourned there to study the geology and beautiful natural features of the country round.

The lady whose appearance had asserted a difference between herself and the Anglebury people, without too clearly showing what that difference was, passed out of the town in a few moments and, following the highway across meadows fed by the From, she crossed the railway and soon got into a lonely heath. She had been watching the base of a cloud as it closed down upon the line of a distant ridge, like an upper upon a lower eyelid, shutting in the gaze of the evening sun. She was about to return before dusk came on, when she heard a commotion in the air immediately behind and above her head. The saunterer looked up and saw a wild-duck flying along with the greatest violence, just in its rear being another large bird, which a countryman would have pronounced to be one of the biggest duck-hawks that he had ever beheld. The hawk neared its intended victim, and the duck screamed and redoubled its efforts.

Ethelberta impulsively started off in a rapid run that would have made a little dog bark with delight and run after, her object being, if possible, to see the end of this desperate struggle for a life so small and unheard-of. Her stateliness went away, and it could be forgiven for not remaining; for her

feet suddenly became as quick as fingers, and she raced along over the uneven ground with such force of tread that, being a woman slightly heavier than gossamer, her patent heels punched little D's in the soil with unerring accuracy wherever it was bare, crippled the heather-twigs where it was not, and sucked the swampy places with a sound of quick kisses.

Her rate of advance was not to be compared with that of the two birds, though she went swiftly enough to keep them well in sight in such an open place as that around her, having at one point in the journey been so near that she could hear the whisk of the duck's feathers against the wind as it lifted and lowered its wings. When the bird seemed to be but a few yards from its enemy she saw it strike downwards, and after a level flight of a quarter of a minute, vanish. The hawk swooped after, and Ethelberta now perceived a whitely shining oval of still water, looking amid the swarthy level of the heath like a hole through to a nether sky.

Into this large pond, which the duck had been making towards from the beginning of its precipitate flight, it had dived out of sight. The excited and breathless runner was in a few moments close enough to see the disappointed hawk hovering and floating in the air as if waiting for the reappearance of its prey, upon which grim pastime it was so intent that by creeping along softly she was enabled to get very near the edge of the pool and witness the conclusion of the episode. Whenever the duck was under the necessity of showing its head to breathe, the other bird would dart towards it, invariably too late, however; for the diver was far too experienced in the rough humour of the buzzard family at this game to come up twice near the same spot, unaccountably emerging from opposite sides of the pool in succession, and bobbing again by the time its adversary reached each place, so that at length the hawk gave up the

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