

**WITHIN
THE PRECINCTS**

VOL. III.

BY
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CHAPTER XXXIII.

LOTTIE'S SIDE OF THE QUESTION.

LOTTIE made her way down the Slopes alone, with feelings which had greatly changed from those of a few minutes ago. How happy she had been! The hour that had passed under the falling leaves had been like paradise; but the portals of exit from paradise are perhaps never so sweet as those of entrance. Her coming away was with a sense of humiliation and shame. As she wound her way down her favourite by-road winding among the shrubs and trees, she could not help feeling that she was making her escape, as if from some guilty meeting, some clandestine rendezvous. In all her life Lottie had never known this sensation before. She had been shy, and had shrunk from the gaze of people who had stared at her, in admiration of her beauty or of her singing, but in her shyness there had always been the pride of innocence; and never before had she been afraid to meet any eye, or felt it necessary to steal away, to keep out of sight as if she were guilty. She had not done anything wrong, but yet she had all the feeling of having done something wrong—the desire to escape, the horror of detection. To some the secret meeting, the romance and mystery, would have been only an additional happiness, but Lottie, proud and frank and open-hearted, could not bear the very thought of doing anything of which she was ashamed. The sensation hurt and humiliated her. All had been very different *before*: to meet her lover unawares, yet not without intention, with a delightful element of chance in each encounter—to look out secretly for him, yet wonder innocently to find him—to let her steps be drawn here or there by a sense of his presence, with a fond pretence of avoiding him, a sweet certainty

of meeting him—all these risks and hazards of emotion had been natural. But Lottie felt with a sudden jar of her nerves and mind that this ought not to continue so. She had felt a little wondering disappointment on the previous night when he had asked her to meet him again, without any suggestion that he should go to her, or make the new bond between them known. Even then there had been a faint jar, a sigh of unfulfilled expectation. But now their hurried parting, her own flight, the little panic lest they should be seen, and discovery follow, made Lottie's heart sick. How well she could imagine how this ought to have been! They ought not to have fled from each other, or been afraid of any man's eye. It ought not to have mattered whether the Signor or anyone suspected. Blushing and shy, yet with full faith in the sympathy of all who saw her, Lottie should have walked down the Dean's Walk with her betrothed: she should have avoided no one. She should have been shamefaced but not ashamed. What a difference between the two! all the difference that there is between the soft blush of happiness and the miserable burning of guilt. And this was what ought to have been. Half the misery of Lottie—as half the misery of all imaginative inexperienced women—arose from the pain and disappointment of feeling that those she loved did not come up to the ideal standard she had set up in her soul. She was disappointed, not so much because of the false position in which she herself was placed (for this, except instinctively, she had but little realised), but because Rollo was not doing, not yet, all that it seemed right for him to do. She would have forced and beaten (had she been able) Law into the fulfilment of his duty, she would even have made him generous to herself, not for the sake of herself, but that he should be a model of brotherhood, an example of all a true man ought to be; and if this was so in the case of her brother, how much more with her lover? If to be harsh as a tyrant or indifferent as a sultan,

was the highest ideal of a man's conduct, how much happier many a poor creature would be! It seems a paradox to say so, but it is true enough; for the worst of all, in a woman's mind, is to feel that the wrong done to *her* is worse wrong to *him*, an infringement of the glory of the being whom she would fain see perfect. This, however, is a mystery beyond the comprehension of the crowd. Lottie was used to being disappointed with Law—was she fated to another disappointment more cruel and bitter? She did not ask herself the question, she would not have thought it even, much less said it for all the world; but secretly there was a wonder, a pang, a faintness of failure in her heart.

It is not without an effort, however, that the heart will permanently admit any such disappointment. As Lottie went her ways thus drooping, ashamed and discouraged, thinking of everything that had been done and that ought to have been done, there drifted vaguely across her mind a kind of picture of Rollo's meeting with her father, and what it would be. She had no sooner thought of this than a glow of alarm came over her face, bringing insensibly consolation to her mind. Rollo and her father! What would the Captain say to him? He would put on his grand air, in which even Lottie had no faith; he would exhibit himself in all his vain greatness, in all his self-importance, jaunty and fine, to his future son-in-law. He would give Lottie herself a word of commendation in passing, and he would spread himself forth before the stranger as if it was he whom Rollo wanted and cared for. Lottie's steps quickened out of the languid pace into which they had fallen, and her very forehead grew crimson as she realised that meeting. Thank heaven, it had not taken place yet! Rollo had been too wise, too kind, too delicate to humble his love by hurrying into the presence of the Captain, into the house where the

Captain's new wife now reigned supreme. The new wife—she too would have a share in it, she would be called into counsel, she would give her advice in everything, and claim a right to interfere. Oh, Lottie thought, how foolish she had been! how much wiser was Rollo, no doubt casting about in his mind how it was best to be done, and pondering over it carefully to spare her pain. She felt herself enveloped in one blush from the crown of her head to the sole of her feet; but how sweet was that shame! It was she who was foolish, not he who had failed. Her cheeks burned with a penitential flush, but he was faultless. There was nothing in him to disappoint, but only the most delicate kindness, the tenderest care of her. How could she have thought otherwise? It was not possible that Rollo should like secret meetings, should fear discovery. In the first days of their acquaintance he had shown no reluctance to come to the humble little lodge. But now—his finer feeling shrank from it now—he wanted to take his love away from that desecrated place, not to shame her by prying into its ignoble mysteries. He was wiser, better, kinder than anyone. And she was ashamed of *herself*, not any longer of anything else, ashamed of her poor, mean, unworthy interpretation of him; and as happy in her new, changed consciousness of guilt, and penitence and self-disgust—as happy as if, after her downfall into earth, she had now safely got back into heaven.

By this time she had got out of the wooded Slopes, and over the stile, and into the steep thoroughfare at the foot of the Abbey walls, the pavement of St. Michael's Hill. Lottie did not feel that there was any harm in walking through the street alone, as Rollo thought there was. She wanted no attendant. A little bodyguard, invisible, but with a radiance going out from them which shone about her, attended upon her way—love and innocence and

happiness, no longer with drooping heads but brave and sweet, a band invisible, guaranteeing their charge against all ills. As she went along the street with this shining retinue, there was nothing in all the world that could have harmed her; and nobody wanted to harm the girl—of whom, but that she was proud, no soul in St. Michael's had an unkind word to say. Everybody knew the domestic trouble that had come upon her, and all the town was sorry for Lottie—all the more that there was perhaps a human satisfaction in being sorry for one whose fault was that she was proud. She met Captain Temple as she entered the Abbey Gate. Many thoughts about her had been in the kind old man's heart all the morning, and it was partly to look for her, after vain walks about the Abbey Precincts, that he was turning his steps towards the town. He came up to her eagerly, taking her hand between his. He thought she must have been wandering out disconsolate, no matter where, to get away from the house which was no longer a fit home for one like her. He was so disturbed and anxious about her, that the shadow which was in his mind seemed to darken over Lottie, and cast a reflection of gloom upon her face. "You have been out early, my dear? Why did you not send for me to go with you? After matins I am always at your service," he said.

But there was none of the gloom which Captain Temple imagined in Lottie's face. She looked up at him out of the soft mist of her own musings with a smile. "I went out before matins," she said; "I have been out a long time. I had—something to do."

"My poor child! I fear you have been wandering, keeping out of the way," said the old Captain. Then another thought seized him. Had she begun already to serve the new wife and do her errands? "My dear," he said, "what have you been doing? you must not be too good—you must not forget yourself too much. Your duty to

your father is one thing, but you must not let yourself be made use of now—you must recollect your own position, my dear.”

“My position?” she looked up at him bewildered; for she was thinking only of Rollo, while he thought only of her father’s wife.

“Yes, Lottie, my dear child, you have thought only of your duty hitherto, but you must not yield to every encroachment. You must not allow it to be supposed that you give up everything.”

“Ah,” said Lottie, lifting to him eyes which seemed to swim in a haze of light; “to give up everything would be so—I don’t know what you mean,” she added hastily, in a half-terrified tone. As for Captain Temple, he was quite bewildered, and did not know what to think.

“Need I explain, my dear, what I mean? There can be but one thing that all your friends are thinking of. This new relation, this new connection. I could not sleep all night for thinking of you, in the house with that woman. My poor child! and my wife too. You were the last thing we talked of at night, the first thing in the morning——”

“Ah,” said Lottie again, coming back to reality with a long-drawn breath. “I was not thinking of her; but I understand you now.”

Lottie had, however, some difficulty in thinking of *her*, even now; for one moment, being thus recalled to the idea, her countenance changed; but soon came back to its original expression. Her eyes were dewy and sweet—a suspicion of tears in them like the morning dew on flowers with the sunshine reflected in it, the long eyelashes moist, but the blue beneath as clear as a

summer sky; and the corners of her mouth would run into curves of smiling unawares; her face was not the face of one upon whom the cares of the world were lying heavy, but of one to whom some new happiness had come. She was not thinking of what he was saying, but of something in her own mind. The kind old Captain could not tell what to think; he was alarmed, though he did not know why.

“Then it is not so bad,” he said, “as you feared?”

“What is not so bad? Things at home? Oh, Captain Temple! But I try not to think about it,” Lottie said hastily, with a quiver in her lip. She looked at him wistfully, with a sudden longing. “I wish—I wish—but it is better not to say anything.”

“You may trust to me, my dear; whatever is in your heart I will never betray you; you may trust to me.”

Lottie’s eyes filled with tears as she looked at him, but she shook her head. They were not bitter tears, only a little bitter-sweet of happiness that wanted expression, but which she dared not reveal. If she could but have told him! If Rollo, failing her father, would but come and speak to this kind and true friend! But she shook her head. She was no longer free to say and do whatever pleased her out of her own heart. She must think of *him*; and while he did not speak, what could she say? She put out her hand to her old friend again with a little sudden artifice unlike Lottie. “I have been out all the morning,” she said; “I must make haste and get back now.”

“I am very glad you are not unhappy,” said the old Captain, looking at her regretfully. He was not quite sincere. To tell the truth it gave him a shock to find that Lottie was not unhappy; how could she put up with such a companion, with such a fate? He went

in to his wife, who had been watching furtively at the window while this conversation was going on, to talk it all over. Mrs. Temple was almost glad to find something below perfection in the girl about whom secretly she thought as much as her husband talked. "We have been thinking too much about it," she said; "if she can find the stepmother congenial, it will be better for her."

"Congenial! you are talking folly. How could she be congenial?" cried Captain Temple, with great heat, but he did not know what to make of it. He was disappointed in Lottie. When he had met her the day before she had been quivering with pain and shame, revolted and outraged, as it was right and natural she should be: but now it seemed to have passed altogether from her mind. He could not make it out. He was disappointed; he went on talking of this wonder all day long and shaking his white head.

As for Lottie, when she went home, she passed through the house, light and silent as a ghost, to her own little room, where, abstracted from everything else, she could live in the new little world of her own which had come out of the mists into such sudden and beautiful life. It was very unlike Lottie, but what more does the young soul want when the *vita nuova* has just begun, but such a possibility of self-abstraction and freedom to pursue its dreams? Rapt in these, she gave up her occupation, her charge, without a sigh. When she was called to table she came quite gently, and took no notice of anything that passed there, having enough in her own mind to keep her busy. Law was as much astonished as Captain Temple. He had thought that Lottie would not endure it for a day; but, thanks to that happy preoccupation, Lottie sailed serenely through these troubled waters for more than a week, during which she spent a considerable portion of her time on the Slopes, though the weather grew colder and colder every day, and

the rest in her own room, in which she sat fireless, doing her accustomed needlework, her darnings and mendings, mechanically, while Polly remodelled the drawing-room, covering it up with crocheted antimacassars, and all the cheap and coarse devices of vulgar upholstery. While this was going on, she too was content to have Lottie out of the way. Polly pervaded the house with high-pitched voice and noisy step; and she filled it with savoury odours, giving the two men hot suppers, instead of poor Lottie's cold beef, which they had often found monotonous. The Captain now came in for this meal, which in former times he had rarely favoured; he spent the evenings chiefly at home, having not yet dropped out of the fervour of the honeymoon; and on the whole even Law was not sure that there was not something to be said for the new administration of the house. There was no cold beef—that was an improvement patent to the meanest capacity. As for Polly, nothing had yet occurred to mar her glory and happiness. She wore her blue silk every day, she walked gloriously about the streets in her orange-blossoms, pointed out by everybody as one of the ladies of the Abbey. She went to the afternoon service and sat in her privileged seat, and looked down with dignified sweetness upon “the girls” who were as she once was. She felt herself as a goddess, sitting there in the elevated place to which she had a right, and it seemed to her that to be a Chevalier's wife was as grand as to be a princess. But Polly did not soil her lips with so vulgar a word as wife. She called herself a Chevalier's lady, and her opinion of her class was great. “Chevalier means the same thing as knight, and, instead of being simple missis, I am sure we should all be My lady,” Polly said, “if we had our rights.” Even her husband laughed, but this did not change her opinion. It was ungrateful of the other Chevaliers' ladies that they took no notice of this new champion of their order. But for the moment Polly, in the elation of her success,

did not mind this, and was content to wait for the recognition which sooner or later she felt would be sure to come.

This elation kept her from interfering with Lottie, whose self-absorbed life in her own room, and her exits and entrances, Mrs. Despard tolerated and seemed to accept as natural; she had so many things to occupy and to please her, that she could afford to let her step-daughter alone. And thus Lottie pursued for a little time that life out of nature to which she had been driven. She lived in those moments on the Slopes, and in the hours she spent at the Signor's piano, singing; and then brooded over these intervals of life in the silence. Her lessons had increased to three in the week, and these hours of so-called study were each like a drama of intense and curious interest. Rollo was always there—a fact which he explained to the Signor by his professional interest in the new singer, and which to Lottie required no explanation; and there too was her humble lover, young Purcell, who as she grew familiar with the sight of him, and showed no displeasure at his appearance, grew daily a little more courageous, sometimes daring to turn the leaves of the music, and even to speak to her. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, who sat by, watching them all with lively but not extravagant interest, was the only one in the little party who was not more or less excited. As for Lottie, this lesson was the centre of all her life. If music be the food of love, love was the very inspiration of music to her; the two re-acted upon each other, raising her to such a height of primitive heroic passion as nobody near her divined—as nobody, indeed, except perhaps the Signor, with his Italian susceptibility, was capable of divining. He saw indeed with dissatisfaction, with an interest which was almost angry, that it was not art that moved her, and that the secret of the astonishing progress she made, was not in his instructions. What was it? The

Signor was angry, for he felt no certainty that this wonderful progress was real. Something made her sing like an angel. What was it? not art. The natural qualities of her voice were not to be gainsayed; but the musician felt that the training under which she seemed to be advancing visibly, was all fictitious, and that it was something else that inspired her. But Rollo had no such enlightenment. He remarked with all the technicality of an amateur how her high notes gained in clearness, and her low notes in melody, at every new effort. It was wonderful; but then the Signor was a wonderful teacher, a wonderful accompanist, and what so natural as that a creature of genius like this, should grow under his teaching like a flower? Though it was to him she sang, and though her love for him was her inspiration, Rollo was as unaware of this as old Pickering in the hall, who listened and shook his head, and decided in his heart that a woman with a voice like that was a deal too grand for Mr. John. "She's more like Jenny Lind than anything," old Pick said; and in this Mr. Ridsdale agreed, as he sat and listened, and thought over the means which should be employed to secure her success. As for young Purcell, he stood entranced and turned over the leaves of the music. Should he ever dare to speak to her again, to offer her his love, as he had once ventured to do,—she who seemed born to enthral the whole world? But then, the young fellow thought, who was there but he who had an 'ome to offer Lottie? He was the nobler of the two between whom she stood, the two men who loved her: all his thought was, that she being unhappy, poor, her father's house made wretched to her, he had an 'ome to offer her; whereas Rollo thought of nothing but of the success she must achieve in which he would have his share. In order to achieve that success Rollo had no mind to lend her even his name; but the idea that it was a thing certain, comforted him much in the consciousness of his own imprudent

engagement, and gave a kind of sanction to his love. To marry a woman with such a faculty for earning money could not be called entirely imprudent. These were the calculations, generous and the reverse, which were made about her. Only Lottie herself made no calculations, but sang out of the fulness of her heart, and the delicate passion that possessed her; and the Signor stood and watched, dissatisfied, sympathetic, the only one that understood at all, though he but poorly, the high emotion and spring-tide of life which produced that flood of song.

In this highly-strained unnatural way, life went on amid this little group of people, few of whom were conscious of any volcano under their feet. It went on day by day, and they neither perceived the gathering rapidity of movement in the events, nor any other sign that to-day should not be as yesterday. Shortly after the explanation had taken place between Rollo and Lottie, Augusta Huntington, now Mrs. Daventry, arrived upon her first visit home. She was the Dean's only child, and naturally every honour was done to her. All the country round, everyone that was of sufficient importance to meet the Dean's daughter, was invited to hail her return. The Dean himself took the matter in hand to see that no one was overlooked. They would all like, he thought, to see Augusta, the princess royal of the reigning house; and Augusta was graciously pleased to like it too. One of these entertainments ended in a great musical party, to which all who had known Miss Huntington, all the singers in the madrigals and choruses of which she had been so fond, were asked. When Lottie's invitation came, there was a great thrill and commotion in Captain Despard's house. Lottie did not even suspect the feeling which had been roused on the subject when she took out her white muslin dress, now, alas, no longer so fresh as at first, and inspected it anxiously. It would do

still with judicious ironing, but what must she do for ornaments, now that roses were no longer to be had? This troubled Lottie's mind greatly, though it may be thought a frivolous question, until a few hours before the time, when two different presents came for her, of flowers: one being a large and elaborate bouquet, the other a bunch of late roses, delicate, lovely, half-opened buds, which could only have come out of some conservatory. One of these was from Rollo, and who could doubt which it was? Who but he would have remembered her sole decoration, and found for her in winter those ornaments of June? What did she care who sent the other? She decked herself with her roses, in a glow of grateful tenderness, as proud as she was happy, to find herself thus provided by his delicate care and forethought. It did not even occur to Lottie to notice the dark looks that were thrown at her as she came downstairs all white and shining, and was wrapped by Law (always ostentatiously attentive to his sister in Polly's presence) in the borrowed glory of Mrs. O'Shaughnessy's great Indian shawl.

The party was large and crowded, and Lottie, all alone in it, was frightened and confused at first; but they were all very kind to her, she thought. Lady Caroline said, "How do you do, Miss Despard?" with something like a smile, and looked as if she might have given Lottie her hand, had not the girl been afraid; and Augusta, when she found her out, came forward with a welcome which was almost effusive. "I hear you have improved so much," she said, taking in at one glance all the particulars of Lottie's appearance, with a wondering question within herself where the roses came from, though she perceived at once that it was the same white muslin frock. And when Lottie sang, which the Signor managed she should do with great effect towards the close of the evening, Augusta rushed to her with great eyes of astonishment.

“Where did you get all that voice?” she cried; “you did not have that voice when I went away.” “I flatter myself it was I that found Miss Despard out,” said Rollo, suffering himself to look at her, which hitherto he had only done when there was a shield of crowding groups between him and his cousin. Before this he had managed to make the evening sweet to Lottie by many a whispered word: but when he looked at her now, unawares, under Augusta’s very eyes, with that fond look of proprietorship which is so unmistakable by the experienced, and to which Lottie responded shyly by a smile and blush, and conscious tremor of happiness, neither of them knew what a fatal moment it was. Augusta, looking on, suddenly woke up to the meaning of it, the meaning of Rollo’s long stay at the Deanery, and various other wonders. She gave the pair but one look, and then she turned away. But Lottie did not see that anything strange had happened. She was so happy that even when Rollo too left her, her heart was touched and consoled by the kindly looks of the people whom she knew in the crowd, the ladies who had heard her sing before at the Deanery, and who were gracious to her, and Mr. Ashford who kept by her side and watched over her—“like a father,” Lottie said to herself, with affectionate gratitude, such as might have become that impossible relationship. The Minor Canon did not leave her for the rest of the evening, and he it was who saw her home, waiting till the door was opened, and pressing kindly her trembling cold hand: for, she could not tell how, the end of the evening was depressing and discouraging, and the pleasure went all out of it when Rollo whispered to her in passing, “Take care, for heaven’s sake, or Augusta will find us out!” Why should it matter so much to him that Augusta should find it out? Was not she more to him than Augusta? Lottie shrank within herself and trembled with a nervous chill. She was half grateful to, half angry with even Mr. Ashford. Why should he be so much

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