7. THE DINING-ROOM OF A TOWN HOUSE--THE BUTLER'S PANTRY

A few weeks later there was a friendly dinner-party at the house of a gentleman called Doncastle, who lived in a moderately fashionable square of west London. All the friends and relatives present were nice people, who exhibited becoming signs of pleasure and gaiety at being there; but as regards the vigour with which these emotions were expressed, it may be stated that a slight laugh from far down the throat and a slight narrowing of the eye were equivalent as indices of the degree of mirth felt to a Ha-ha-ha! and a shaking of the shoulders among the minor traders of the kingdom; and to a Ho-ho-ho! contorted features, purple face, and stamping foot among the gentlemen in corduroy and fustian who adorn the remoter provinces.

The conversation was chiefly about a volume of musical, tender, and humorous rhapsodies lately issued to the world in the guise of verse, which had been reviewed and talked about everywhere. This topic, beginning as a private dialogue between a young painter named Ladywell and the lady on his right hand, had enlarged its ground by degrees, as a subject will extend on those rare occasions when it happens to be one about which each person has thought something beforehand, instead of, as in the natural order of things, one to which the oblivious listener replies mechanically, with earnest features, but with thoughts far away. And so the whole table made the matter a thing to inquire or reply upon at once, and isolated rills of other chat died out like a river in the

sands.

'Witty things, and occasionally Anacreontic: and they have the originality which such a style must naturally possess when carried out by a feminine hand,' said Ladywell.

'If it is a feminine hand,' said a man near.

Ladywell looked as if he sometimes knew secrets, though he did not wish to boast.

'Written, I presume you mean, in the Anacreontic measure of three feet and a half--spondees and iambics?' said a gentleman in spectacles, glancing round, and giving emphasis to his inquiry by causing bland glares of a circular shape to proceed from his glasses towards the person interrogated.

The company appeared willing to give consideration to the words of a man who knew such things as that, and hung forward to listen. But Ladywell stopped the whole current of affairs in that direction by saying--

'O no; I was speaking rather of the matter and tone. In fact, the Seven Days' Review said they were Anacreontic, you know; and so they are--any one may feel they are.'

The general look then implied a false encouragement, and the man in

spectacles looked down again, being a nervous person, who never had time to show his merits because he was so much occupied in hiding his faults.

'Do you know the authoress, Mr. Neigh?' continued Ladywell.

'Can't say that I do,' he replied.

Neigh was a man who never disturbed the flesh upon his face except when he was obliged to do so, and paused ten seconds where other people only paused one; as he moved his chin in speaking, motes of light from under the candle-shade caught, lost, and caught again the outlying threads of his burnished beard.

'She will be famous some day; and you ought at any rate to read her book.'

'Yes, I ought, I know. In fact, some years ago I should have done it immediately, because I had a reason for pushing on that way just then.'

'Ah, what was that?'

'Well, I thought of going in for Westminster Abbey myself at that time; but a fellow has so much to do, and--'

'What a pity that you didn't follow it up. A man of your powers, Mr. Neigh--'

'Afterwards I found I was too steady for it, and had too much of the respectable householder in me. Besides, so many other men are on the same tack; and then I didn't care about it, somehow.'

'I don't understand high art, and am utterly in the dark on what are the true laws of criticism,' a plain married lady, who wore archaeological jewellery, was saying at this time. 'But I know that I have derived an unusual amount of amusement from those verses, and I am heartily thankful
to "E." for them.'

'I am afraid,' said a gentleman who was suffering from a bad shirt-front, 'that an estimate which depends upon feeling in that way is not to be trusted as permanent opinion.'

The subject now flitted to the other end.

'Somebody has it that when the heart flies out before the understanding, it saves the judgment a world of pains,' came from a voice in that quarter.

'I, for my part, like something merry,' said an elderly woman, whose face was bisected by the edge of a shadow, which toned her forehead and eyelids to a livid neutral tint, and left her cheeks and mouth like metal at a white heat in the uninterrupted light. 'I think the liveliness of

those ballads as great a recommendation as any. After all, enough misery is known to us by our experiences and those of our friends, and what we see in the newspapers, for all purposes of chastening, without having gratuitous grief inflicted upon us.'

'But you would not have wished that "Romeo and Juliet" should have ended happily, or that Othello should have discovered the perfidy of his Ancient in time to prevent all fatal consequences?'

'I am not afraid to go so far as that,' said the old lady. 'Shakespeare is not everybody, and I am sure that thousands of people who have seen those plays would have driven home more cheerfully afterwards if by some contrivance the characters could all have been joined together respectively. I uphold our anonymous author on the general ground of her levity.'

'Well, it is an old and worn argument--that about the inexpedience of tragedy--and much may be said on both sides. It is not to be denied that the anonymous Sappho's verses--for it seems that she is really a woman--are clever.'

'Clever!' said Ladywell--the young man who had been one of the shooting-party at Sandbourne--'they are marvellously brilliant.'

'She is rather warm in her assumed character.'

'That's a sign of her actual coldness; she lets off her feeling in theoretic grooves, and there is sure to be none left for practical ones. Whatever seems to be the most prominent vice, or the most prominent virtue in anybody's writing is the one thing you are safest from in personal dealings with the writer.'

'O, I don't mean to call her warmth of feeling a vice or virtue exactly--'

'I agree with you,' said Neigh to the last speaker but one, in tones as emphatic as they possibly could be without losing their proper character of indifference to the whole matter. 'Warm sentiment of any sort, whenever we have it, disturbs us too much to leave us repose enough for writing it down.'

'I am sure, when I was at the ardent age,' said the mistress of the house, in a tone of pleasantly agreeing with every one, particularly those who were diametrically opposed to each other, 'I could no more have printed such emotions and made them public than I--could have helped privately feeling them.'

'I wonder if she has gone through half she says? If so, what an experience!'

'O no--not at all likely,' said Mr. Neigh. 'It is as risky to calculate people's ways of living from their writings as their incomes from their way of living.'

'She is as true to nature as fashion is false,' said the painter, in his warmth becoming scarcely complimentary, as sometimes happens with young persons. 'I don't think that she has written a word more than what every woman would deny feeling in a society where no woman says what she means or does what she says. And can any praise be greater than that?'

'Ha-ha! Capital!'

'All her verses seem to me,' said a rather stupid person, 'to be simply--

"Tral'-la-la-lal'-la-la-la',
Tral'-la-la-lal'-la-la-lu',
Tral'-la-la-lal'-la-la-lalla',
Tral'-la-la-lu'."

When you take away the music there is nothing left. Yet she is plainly a woman of great culture.'

'Have you seen what the London Light says about them--one of the finest things I have ever read in the way of admiration?' continued Ladywell, paying no attention to the previous speaker. He lingered for a reply, and then impulsively quoted several lines from the periodical he had named, without aid or hesitation. 'Good, is it not?' added Ladywell.

They assented, but in such an unqualified manner that half as much readiness would have meant more. But Ladywell, though not experienced enough to be quite free from enthusiasm, was too experienced to mind indifference for more than a minute or two. When the ladies had withdrawn, the young man went on--

'Colonel Staff said a funny thing to me yesterday about these very poems. He asked me if I knew her, and--'

'Her? Why, he knows that it is a lady all the time, and we were only just now doubting whether the sex of the writer could be really what it seems. Shame, Ladywell!' said his friend Neigh.

'Ah, Mr. Ladywell,' said another, 'now we have found you out. You know her!'

'Now--I say--ha-ha!' continued the painter, with a face expressing that he had not at all tried to be found out as the man possessing incomparably superior knowledge of the poetess. 'I beg pardon really, but don't press me on the matter. Upon my word the secret is not my own. As I was saying, the Colonel said, "Do you know her?"--but you don't care to hear?'

'We shall be delighted!'

'So the Colonel said, "Do you know her?" adding, in a most comic way,

"Between U. and E., Ladywell, I believe there is a close affinity"--meaning me, you know, by U. Just like the Colonel--ha-ha-ha!'

The older men did not oblige Ladywell a second time with any attempt at appreciation; but a weird silence ensued, during which the smile upon Ladywell's face became frozen to painful permanence.

'Meaning by E., you know, the "E" of the poems--heh-heh!' he added.

'It was a very humorous incident certainly,' said his friend Neigh, at which there was a laugh--not from anything connected with what he said, but simply because it was the right thing to laugh when Neigh meant you to do so.

'Now don't, Neigh--you are too hard upon me. But, seriously, two or three fellows were there when I said it, and they all began laughing--but, then, the Colonel said it in such a queer way, you know. But you were asking me about her? Well, the fact is, between ourselves, I do know that she is a lady; and I don't mind telling a word--'

'But we would not for the world be the means of making you betray her confidence--would we, Jones?'

'No, indeed; we would not.'

'No, no; it is not that at all--this is really too bad!--you must listen

just for a moment--'

'Ladywell, don't betray anybody on our account.'

'Whoever the illustrious young lady may be she has seen a great deal of the world,' said Mr. Doncastle blandly, 'and puts her experience of the comedy of its emotions, and of its method of showing them, in a very vivid light.'

'I heard a man say that the novelty with which the ideas are presented is more noticeable than the originality of the ideas themselves,' observed Neigh. 'The woman has made a great talk about herself; and I am quite weary of people asking of her condition, place of abode, has she a father, has she a mother, or dearer one yet than all other.'

'I would have burlesque quotation put down by Act of Parliament, and all who dabble in it placed with him who can cite Scripture for his purposes,' said Ladywell, in retaliation.

After a pause Neigh remarked half-privately to their host, who was his uncle: 'Your butler Chickerel is a very intelligent man, as I have heard.'

'Yes, he does very well,' said Mr. Doncastle.

'But is he not a--very extraordinary man?'

'Not to my knowledge,' said Doncastle, looking up surprised. 'Why do you think that, Alfred?'

'Well, perhaps it was not a matter to mention. He reads a great deal, I dare say?'

'I don't think so.'

'I noticed how wonderfully his face kindled when we began talking about the poems during dinner. Perhaps he is a poet himself in disguise. Did you observe it?'

'No. To the best of my belief he is a very trustworthy and honourable man. He has been with us--let me see, how long?--five months, I think, and he was fifteen years in his last place. It certainly is a new side to his character if he publicly showed any interest in the conversation, whatever he might have felt.'

'Since the matter has been mentioned,' said Mr. Jones, 'I may say that I too noticed the singularity of it.'

'If you had not said otherwise,' replied Doncastle somewhat warmly, 'I should have asserted him to be the last man-servant in London to infringe such an elementary rule. If he did so this evening, it is certainly for the first time, and I sincerely hope that no annoyance was caused--'

'O no, no--not at all--it might have been a mistake of mine,' said Jones. 'I should quite have forgotten the circumstance if Mr. Neigh's words had not brought it to my mind. It was really nothing to notice, and I beg that you will not say a word to him about it on my account.'

'He has a taste that way, my dear uncle, nothing more, depend upon it,' said Neigh. 'If I had such a man belonging to me I should only be too proud. Certainly do not mention it.'

'Of course Chickerel is Chickerel,' Mr. Doncastle rejoined. 'We all know what that means. And really, on reflecting, I do remember that he is of a literary turn of mind--not further by an inch than is commendable, you know. I am quite aware as I glance down the papers and prints any morning that Chickerel's eyes have been over the ground before mine, and that he generally forestalls the rest of us by a chapter or so in the last new book sent home; but in these vicious days that particular weakness is really virtue, just because it is not quite a vice.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Jones, the reflective man in spectacles, 'positive virtues are getting moved off the stage: negative ones are moved on to the place of positives; we thank bare justice as we used only to thank generosity; call a man honest who steals only by law, and consider him a benefactor if he does not steal at all.'

'Hear, hear!' said Neigh. 'We will decide that Chickerel is even a

better trained fellow than if he had shown no interest at all in his face.'

'The action being like those trifling irregularities in art at its vigorous periods, which seemed designed to hide the unpleasant monotony of absolute symmetry,' said Ladywell.

'On the other hand, an affected want of training of that sort would be even a better disguise for an artful man than a perfectly impassible demeanour. He is two removes from discovery in a hidden scheme, whilst a neutral face is only one.'

'You quite alarm me by these subtle theories,' said Mr. Doncastle, laughing; and the subject then became compounded with other matters, till the speakers rose to rejoin the charming flock upstairs.

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In the basement story at this hour Mr. Chickerel the butler, who had formed the subject of discussion on the floor above, was busily engaged in looking after his two subordinates as they bustled about in the operations of clearing away. He was a man of whom, if the shape of certain bones and muscles of the face is ever to be taken as a guide to the character, one might safely have predicated conscientiousness in the performance of duties, a thorough knowledge of all that appertained to them, a general desire to live on without troubling his mind about

anything which did not concern him. Any person interested in the matter would have assumed without hesitation that the estimate his employer had given of Chickerel was a true one--more, that not only would the butler under all ordinary circumstances resolutely prevent his face from showing curiosity in an unbecoming way, but that, with the soul of a true gentleman, he would, if necessary, equivocate as readily as the noblest of his betters to remove any stain upon his honour in such trifles. Hence it is apparent that if Chickerel's countenance really appeared, as Neigh had asserted, full of curiosity with regard to the gossip that was going on, the feelings which led to the exhibition must have been of a very unusual and irrepressible kind.

His hair was of that peculiar bluish-white which is to be observed when the oncoming years, instead of singling out special locks of a man's head for operating against, advance uniformly over the whole field, and enfeeble the colour at all points before absolutely extinguishing it anywhere; his nose was of the knotty shape in the gristle and earthward tendency in the flesh which is commonly said to carry sound judgment above it, his eyes were thoughtful, and his face was thin--a contour which, if it at once abstracted from his features that cheerful assurance of single-minded honesty which adorns the exteriors of so many of his brethren, might have raised a presumption in the minds of some beholders that perhaps in this case the quality might not be altogether wanting within.

The coffee having been served to the people upstairs, one of the footmen

rushed into his bedroom on the lower floor, and in a few minutes emerged again in the dress of a respectable clerk who had been born for better things, with the trifling exceptions that he wore a low-crowned hat, and instead of knocking his heels on the pavement walked with a gait as delicate as a lady's. Going out of the area-door with a cigar in his mouth, he mounted the steps hastily to keep an appointment round the corner--the keeping of which as a private gentleman necessitated the change of the greater part of his clothes twice within a quarter of an hour--the limit of his time of absence. The other footman was upstairs, and the butler, finding that he had a few minutes to himself, sat down at the table and wrote:--

'MY DEAR ETHELBERTA,--I did not intend to write to you for some few days to come, but the way in which you have been talked about here this evening makes me anxious to send a line or two at once, though I have very little time to spare, as usual. We have just had a dinner-party--indeed the carriages have not yet been brought round--and the talk at dinner was about your verses, of course. The thing was brought up by a young fellow named Ladywell--do you know him? He is a painter by profession, but he has a pretty good private income beyond what he gets by practising his line of business among the nobility, and that I expect is not little, for he is well known, and encouraged because he is young, and good-looking, and so forth. His family own a good bit of land somewhere out Aldbrickham way. However, I am before my story. From what they all said it is pretty clear that you are thought a great deal of in fashionable society as a poetess--but

perhaps you know this as well as I--moving in it as you do yourself, my dear.

'The ladies afterwards got very curious about your age, so curious, in fact, and so full of certainty that you were thirty-five and a blighted existence, if an hour, that I felt inclined to rap out there and then, and hang what came of it: "My daughter, ladies, was to my own and her mother's certain knowledge only twenty-one last birthday, and has as bright a heart as anybody in London." One of them actually said that you must be fifty to have got such an experience. Her guess was a very shrewd one in the bottom of it, however, for it was grounded upon the way you use those strange experiences of mine in the society that I tell you of, and dress them up as if they were yours; and, as you see, she hit off my own age to a year. I thought it was very sharp of her to be so right, although so wrong.

'I do not want to influence your plans in any way about things which your school learning fits you to understand much better than I, who never had such opportunities, but I think that if I were in your place, Berta, I would not let my name be known just yet, for people always want what's kept from them, and don't value what's given. I am not sure, but I think that after the women had gone upstairs the others turned their thoughts upon you again; what they said about you I don't know, for if there's one thing I hate 'tis hanging about the doors when the men begin to get moved by their wine, which they did to a large extent to-night, and spoke very loud. They always do here,

for old Don is a hearty giver in his way. However, as you see these people from their own level now, it is not much that I can tell you in seeing them only from the under side, though I see strange things sometimes, and of course--

"What great ones do the less will prattle of,"

as it says in that book of select pieces that you gave me.

'Well, my dear girl, I hope you will prosper. One thing above all others you'll have to mind, and it is that folk must continually strain to advance in order to remain where they are: and you particularly. But as for trying too hard, I wouldn't do it. Much lies in minding this, that your best plan for lightness of heart is to raise yourself a little higher than your old mates, but not so high as to be quite out of their reach. All human beings enjoy themselves from the outside, and so getting on a little has this good in it, you still keep in your old class where your feelings are, and are thoughtfully treated by this class: while by getting on too much you are sneered at by your new acquaintance, who don't know the skill of your rise, and you are parted from and forgot by the old ones who do. Whatever happens, don't be too quick to feel. You will surely get some hard blows when you are found out, for if the great can find no excuse for hitting with a mind, they'll do it and say 'twas in fun. But you are young and healthy, and youth and health are power. I wish I could have a decent footman here with me, but I suppose it is no use

trying. It is such men as these that provoke the contempt we get. Well, thank God a few years will see the end of me, for I am growing ashamed of my company--so different as they are to the servants of old times.--Your affectionate father, R. CHICKEREL.

'P.S.--Do not press Lady Petherwin any further to remove the rules on which you live with her. She is quite right: she cannot keep us, and to recognize us would do you no good, nor us either. We are content to see you secretly, since it is best for you.'