

15. AN INNER ROOM AT THE LODGE

At the Lodge at this time a discussion of some importance was in progress. The scene was Mrs. Chickereel's bedroom, to which, unfortunately, she was confined by some spinal complaint; and here she now appeared as an interesting woman of five-and-forty, properly dressed as far as visible, and propped up in a bed covered with a quilt which presented a field of little squares in many tints, looking altogether like a bird's-eye view of a market garden.

Mrs. Chickereel had been nurse in a nobleman's family until her marriage, and after that she played the part of wife and mother, upon the whole, affectionately and well. Among her minor differences with her husband had been one about the naming of the children; a matter that was at last compromised by an agreement under which the choice of the girls' names became her prerogative, and that of the boys' her husband's, who limited his field of selection to strict historical precedent as a set-off to Mrs. Chickereel's tendency to stray into the regions of romance.

The only grown-up daughters at home, Ethelberta and Picotee, with their brother Joey, were sitting near her; the two youngest children, Georgina and Myrtle, who had been strutting in and out of the room, and otherwise endeavouring to walk, talk, and speak like the gentleman just gone away, were packed off to bed. Emmeline, of that transitional age which causes its exponent to look wistfully at the sitters when romping and at the

rompers when sitting, uncertain whether her position in the household is that of child or woman, was idling in a corner. The two absent brothers and two absent sisters--eldest members of the family--completed the round ten whom Mrs. Chickereel with thoughtless readiness had presented to a crowded world, to cost Ethelberta many wakeful hours at night while she revolved schemes how they might be decently maintained.

'I still think,' Ethelberta was saying, 'that the plan I first proposed is the best. I am convinced that it will not do to attempt to keep on the Lodge. If we are all together in town, I can look after you much better than when you are far away from me down here.'

'Shall we not interfere with you--your plans for keeping up your connections?' inquired her mother, glancing up towards Ethelberta by lifting the flesh of her forehead, instead of troubling to raise her face altogether.

'Not nearly so much as by staying here.'

'But,' said Picotee, 'if you let lodgings, won't the gentlemen and ladies know it?'

'I have thought of that,' said Ethelberta, 'and this is how I shall manage. In the first place, if mother is there, the lodgings can be let in her name, all bills will be receipted by her, and all tradesmen's orders will be given as from herself. Then, we will take no English

lodgers at all; we will advertise the rooms only in Continental newspapers, as suitable for a French or German gentleman or two, and by this means there will be little danger of my acquaintance discovering that my house is not entirely a private one, or of any lodger being a friend of my acquaintance. I have thought over every possible way of combining the dignified social position I must maintain to make my story-telling attractive, with my absolute lack of money, and I can see no better one.'

'Then if Gwendoline is to be your cook, she must soon give notice at her present place?'

'Yes. Everything depends upon Gwendoline and Cornelia. But there is time enough for them to give notice--Christmas will be soon enough. If they cannot or will not come as cook and housemaid, I am afraid the plan will break down. A vital condition is that I do not have a soul in the house (beyond the lodgers) who is not one of my own relations. When we have put Joey into buttons, he will do very well to attend to the door.'

'But s'pose,' said Joey, after a glassy look at his future appearance in the position alluded to, 'that any of your gentle-people come to see ye, and when I opens the door and lets 'em in a swinging big lodger stalks downstairs. What will 'em think? Up will go their eye-glasses at one another till they glares each other into holes. My gracious!'

'The one who calls will only think that another visitor is leaving, Joey.'

But I shall have no visitors, or very few. I shall let it be well known among my late friends that my mother is an invalid, and that on this account we receive none but the most intimate friends. These intimate friends not existing, we receive nobody at all.'

'Except Sol and Dan, if they get a job in London? They'll have to call upon us at the back door, won't they, Berta?' said Joey.

'They must go down the area steps. But they will not mind that; they like the idea.'

'And father, too, must he go down the steps?'

'He may come whichever way he likes. He will be glad enough to have us near at any price. I know that he is not at all happy at leaving you down here, and he away in London. You remember that he has only taken the situation at Mr. Doncastle's on the supposition that you all come to town as soon as he can see an opening for getting you there; and as nothing of the sort has offered itself to him, this will be the very thing. Of course, if I succeed wonderfully well in my schemes for story-tellings, readings of my ballads and poems, lectures on the art of versification, and what not, we need have no lodgers; and then we shall all be living a happy family--all taking our share in keeping the establishment going.'

'Except poor me!' sighed the mother.

'My dear mother, you will be necessary as a steady power--a flywheel, in short, to the concern. I wish that father could live there, too.'

'He'll never give up his present way of life--it has grown to be a part of his nature. Poor man, he never feels at home except in somebody else's house, and is nervous and quite a stranger in his own. Such is the fatal effects of service!'

'O mother, don't!' said Ethelberta tenderly, but with her teeth on edge; and Picotee curled up her toes, fearing that her mother was going to moralize.

'Well, what I mean is, that your father would not like to live upon your earnings, and so forth. But in town we shall be near him--that's one comfort, certainly.'

'And I shall not be wanted at all,' said Picotee, in a melancholy tone.

'It is much better to stay where you are,' her mother said. 'You will come and spend the holidays with us, of course, as you do now.'

'I should like to live in London best,' murmured Picotee, her head sinking mournfully to one side. 'I HATE being in Sandbourne now!'

'Nonsense!' said Ethelberta severely. 'We are all contriving how to live

most comfortably, and it is by far the best thing for you to stay at the school. You used to be happy enough there.'

Picotee sighed, and said no more.

16. A LARGE PUBLIC HALL

It was the second week in February, Parliament had just met, and Ethelberta appeared for the first time before an audience in London.

There was some novelty in the species of entertainment that the active young woman had proposed to herself, and this doubtless had due effect in collecting the body of strangers that greeted her entry, over and above those friends who came to listen to her as a matter of course. Men and women who had become totally indifferent to new actresses, new readers, and new singers, once more felt the freshness of curiosity as they considered the promise of the announcement. But the chief inducement to attend lay in the fact that here was to be seen in the flesh a woman with whom the tongue of rumour had been busy in many romantic ways--a woman who, whatever else might be doubted, had certainly produced a volume of verses which had been the talk of the many who had read them, and of the