

## 17. ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE

After such successes as these, Christopher could not forego the seductive intention of calling upon the poetess and romancer, at her now established town residence in Exonbury Crescent. One wintry afternoon he reached the door--now for the third time--and gave a knock which had in it every tender refinement that could be thrown into the somewhat antagonistic vehicle of noise. Turning his face down the street he waited restlessly on the step. There was a strange light in the atmosphere: the glass of the street-lamps, the varnished back of a passing cab, a milk-woman's cans, and a row of church-windows glared in his eyes like new-rubbed copper; and on looking the other way he beheld a bloody sun hanging among the chimneys at the upper end, as a danger-lamp to warn him off.

By this time the door was opened, and before him stood Ethelberta's young brother Joey, thickly populated with little buttons, the remainder of him consisting of invisible green.

'Ah, Joseph,' said Christopher, instantly recognizing the boy. 'What, are you here in office? Is your--'

Joey lifted his forefinger and spread his mouth in a genial manner, as if to signify particular friendliness mingled with general caution.

'Yes, sir, Mrs. Petherwin is my mistress. I'll see if she is at home, sir,' he replied, raising his shoulders and winking a wink of strategic meanings by way of finish--all which signs showed, if evidence were wanted, how effectually this pleasant young page understood, though quite fresh from Wessex, the duties of his peculiar position. Mr. Julian was shown to the drawing-room, and there he found Ethelberta alone.

She gave him a hand so cool and still that Christopher, much as he desired the contact, was literally ashamed to let her see and feel his own, trembling with unmanageable excess of feeling. It was always so, always had been so, always would be so, at these meetings of theirs: she was immeasurably the strongest; and the deep-eyed young man fancied, in the chagrin which the perception of this difference always bred in him, that she triumphed in her superior control. Yet it was only in little things that their sexes were thus reversed: Christopher would receive quite a shock if a little dog barked at his heels, and be totally unmoved when in danger of his life.

Certainly the most self-possessed woman in the world, under pressure of the incongruity between their last meeting and the present one, might have shown more embarrassment than Ethelberta showed on greeting him to-day. Christopher was only a man in believing that the shyness which she did evince was chiefly the result of personal interest. She might or might not have been said to blush--perhaps the stealthy change upon her

face was too slow an operation to deserve that name: but, though pale when he called, the end of ten minutes saw her colour high and wide. She soon set him at his ease, and seemed to relax a long-sustained tension as she talked to him of her arrangements, hopes, and fears.

'And how do you like London society?' said Ethelberta.

'Pretty well, as far as I have seen it: to the surface of its front door.'

'You will find nothing to be alarmed at if you get inside.'

'O no--of course not--except my own shortcomings,' said the modest musician. 'London society is made up of much more refined people than society anywhere else.'

'That's a very prevalent opinion; and it is nowhere half so prevalent as in London society itself. However, come and see my house--unless you think it a trouble to look over a house?'

'No; I should like it very much.'

The decorations tended towards the artistic gymnastics prevalent in some quarters at the present day. Upon a general flat tint of duck's-egg green appeared quaint patterns of conventional foliage, and birds, done in bright auburn, several shades nearer to redbreast-red than was

Ethelberta's hair, which was thus thrust further towards brown by such juxtaposition--a possible reason for the choice of tint. Upon the glazed tiles within the chimney-piece were the forms of owls, bats, snakes, frogs, mice, spiders in their webs, moles, and other objects of aversion and darkness, shaped in black and burnt in after the approved fashion.

'My brothers Sol and Dan did most of the actual work,' said Ethelberta, 'though I drew the outlines, and designed the tiles round the fire. The flowers, mice, and spiders are done very simply, you know: you only press a real flower, mouse, or spider out flat under a piece of glass, and then copy it, adding a little more emaciation and angularity at pleasure.'

'In that "at pleasure" is where all the art lies,' said he.

'Well, yes--that is the case,' said Ethelberta thoughtfully; and preceding him upstairs, she threw open a door on one of the floors, disclosing Dan in person, engaged upon a similar treatment of this floor also. Sol appeared bulging from the door of a closet, a little further on, where he was fixing some shelves; and both wore workmen's blouses. At once coming down from the short ladder he was standing upon, Dan shook Christopher's hand with some velocity.

'We do a little at a time, you see,' he said, 'because Colonel down below, and Mrs. Petherwin's visitors, shan't smell the turpentine.'

'We be pushing on to-day to get it out of the way,' said Sol, also coming

forward and greeting their visitor, but more reluctantly than his brother had done. 'Now I'll tell ye what--you two,' he added, after an uneasy pause, turning from Christopher to Ethelberta and back again in great earnestness; 'you'd better not bide here, talking to we rough ones, you know, for folks might find out that there's something closer between us than workmen and employer and employer's friend. So Berta and Mr. Julian, if you'll go on and take no more notice o' us, in case of visitors, it would be wiser--else, perhaps, if we should be found out intimate with ye, and bring down your gentility, you'll blame us for it. I get as nervous as a cat when I think I may be the cause of any disgrace to ye.'

'Don't be so silly, Sol,' said Ethelberta, laughing.

'Ah, that's all very well,' said Sol, with an unbelieving smile; 'but if we bain't company for you out of doors, you bain't company for we within--not that I find fault with ye or mind it, and shan't take anything for painting your house, nor will Dan neither, any more for that--no, not a penny; in fact, we are glad to do it for 'ee. At the same time, you keep to your class, and we'll keep to ours. And so, good afternoon, Berta, when you like to go, and the same to you, Mr. Julian. Dan, is that your mind?'

'I can but own it,' said Dan.

The two brothers then turned their backs upon their visitors, and went on

working, and Ethelberta and her lover left the room. 'My brothers, you perceive,' said she, 'represent the respectable British workman in his entirety, and a touchy individual he is, I assure you, on points of dignity, after imbibing a few town ideas from his leaders. They are painfully off-hand with me, absolutely refusing to be intimate, from a mistaken notion that I am ashamed of their dress and manners; which, of course, is absurd.'

'Which, of course, is absurd,' said Christopher.

'Of course it is absurd!' she repeated with warmth, and looking keenly at him. But, finding no harm in his face, she continued as before: 'Yet, all the time, they will do anything under the sun that they think will advance my interests. In our hearts we are one. All they ask me to do is to leave them to themselves, and therefore I do so. Now, would you like to see some more of your acquaintance?'

She introduced him to a large attic; where he found himself in the society of two or three persons considerably below the middle height, whose manners were of that gushing kind sometimes called Continental, their ages ranging from five years to eight. These were the youngest children, presided over by Emmeline, as professor of letters, capital and small.

'I am giving them the rudiments of education here,' said Ethelberta; 'but I foresee several difficulties in the way of keeping them here, which I

must get over as best I can. One trouble is, that they don't get enough air and exercise.'

'Is Mrs. Chickereel living here as well?' Christopher ventured to inquire, when they were downstairs again.

'Yes; but confined to her room as usual, I regret to say. Two more sisters of mine, whom you have never seen at all, are also here. They are older than any of the rest of us, and had, broadly speaking, no education at all, poor girls. The eldest, Gwendoline, is my cook, and Cornelia is my housemaid. I suffer much sadness, and almost misery sometimes, in reflecting that here are we, ten brothers and sisters, born of one father and mother, who might have mixed together and shared all in the same scenes, and been properly happy, if it were not for the strange accidents that have split us up into sections as you see, cutting me off from them without the compensation of joining me to any others. They are all true as steel in keeping the secret of our kin, certainly; but that brings little joy, though some satisfaction perhaps.'

'You might be less despondent, I think. The tale-telling has been one of the successes of the season.'

'Yes, I might; but I may observe that you scarcely set the example of blitheness.'

'Ah--that's not because I don't recognize the pleasure of being here. It

is from a more general cause: simply an underfeeling I have that at the most propitious moment the distance to the possibility of sorrow is so short that a man's spirits must not rise higher than mere cheerfulness out of bare respect to his insight.

"As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,  
Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,  
Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow."

Ethelberta bowed uncertainly; the remark might refer to her past conduct or it might not. 'My great cause of uneasiness is the children,' she presently said, as a new page of matter. 'It is my duty, at all risk and all sacrifice of sentiment, to educate and provide for them. The grown-up ones, older than myself, I cannot help much, but the little ones I can. I keep my two French lodgers for the sake of them.'

'The lodgers, of course, don't know the relationship between yourself and the rest of the people in the house?'

'O no!--nor will they ever. My mother is supposed to let the ground and first floors to me--a strange lady--as she does the second and third floors to them. Still, I may be discovered.'

'Well--if you are?'

'Let me be. Life is a battle, they say; but it is only so in the sense



that a game of chess is a battle--there is no seriousness in it; it may be put an end to at any inconvenient moment by owning yourself beaten, with a careless "Ha-ha!" and sweeping your pieces into the box.

Experimentally, I care to succeed in society; but at the bottom of my heart, I don't care.'

'For that very reason you are likely to do it. My idea is, make ambition your business and indifference your relaxation, and you will fail; but make indifference your business and ambition your relaxation, and you will succeed. So impish are the ways of the gods.'

'I hope that you at any rate will succeed,' she said, at the end of a silence.

'I never can--if success means getting what one wants.'

'Why should you not get that?'

'It has been forbidden to me.'

Her complexion changed just enough to show that she knew what he meant.

'If you were as bold as you are subtle, you would take a more cheerful view of the matter,' she said, with a look signifying innermost things.

'I will instantly! Shall I test the truth of my cheerful view by a word of question?'

'I deny that you are capable of taking that view, and until you prove that you are, no question is allowed,' she said, laughing, and still warmer in the face and neck. 'Nothing but melancholy, gentle melancholy, now as in old times when there was nothing to cause it.'

'Ah--you only tease.'

'You will not throw aside that bitter medicine of distrust, for the world. You have grown so used to it, that you take it as food, as some invalids do their mixtures.'

'Ethelberta, you have my heart--my whole heart. You have had it ever since I first saw you. Now you understand me, and no pretending that you don't, mind, this second time.'

'I understood you long ago; you have not understood me.'

'You are mysterious,' he said lightly; 'and perhaps if I disentangle your mystery I shall find it to cover--indifference. I hope it does--for your sake.'

'How can you say so!' she exclaimed reproachfully. 'Yet I wish it did too--I wish it did cover indifference--for yours. But you have all of me that you care to have, and may keep it for life if you wish to. Listen, surely there was a knock at the door? Let us go inside the room: I am

always uneasy when anybody comes, lest any awkward discovery should be made by a visitor of my miserable contrivances for keeping up the establishment.'

Joey met them before they had left the landing.

'Please, Berta,' he whispered, 'Mr. Ladywell has called, and I've showed him into the liberry. You know, Berta, this is how it was, you know: I thought you and Mr. Julian were in the drawing-room, and wouldn't want him to see ye together, and so I asked him to step into the liberry a minute.'

'You must improve your way of speaking,' she said, with quick embarrassment, whether at the mention of Ladywell's name before Julian, or at the way Joey coupled herself with Christopher, was quite uncertain. 'Will you excuse me for a few moments?' she said, turning to Christopher. 'Pray sit down; I shall not be long.' And she glided downstairs.

They had been standing just by the drawing-room door, and Christopher turned back into the room with no very satisfactory countenance. It was very odd, he thought, that she should go down to Ladywell in that mysterious manner, when he might have been admitted to where they were talking without any trouble at all. What could Ladywell have to say, as an acquaintance calling upon her for a few minutes, that he was not to hear? Indeed, if it came to that, what right had Ladywell to call upon her at all, even though she were a widow, and to some extent chartered to

live in a way which might be considered a trifle free if indulged in by other young women. This was the first time that he himself had ventured into her house on that very account--a doubt whether it was quite proper to call, considering her youth, and the fertility of her position as ground for scandal. But no sooner did he arrive than here was Ladywell blundering in, and, since this conjunction had occurred on his first visit, the chances were that Ladywell came very often.

Julian walked up and down the room, every moment expanding itself to a minute in his impatience at the delay and vexation at the cause. After scrutinizing for the fifth time every object on the walls as if afflicted with microscopic closeness of sight, his hands under his coat-tails, and his person jiggling up and down upon his toes, he heard her coming up the stairs. When she entered the apartment her appearance was decidedly that of a person subsiding after some little excitement.

'I did not calculate upon being so long,' she said sweetly, at the same time throwing back her face and smiling. 'But I--was longer than I expected.'

'It seemed rather long,' said Christopher gloomily, 'but I don't mind it.'

'I am glad of that,' said Ethelberta.

'As you asked me to stay, I was very pleased to do so, and always should

be; but I think that now I will wish you good-bye.'

'You are not vexed with me?' she said, looking quite into his face. 'Mr. Ladywell is nobody, you know.'

'Nobody?'

'Well, he is not much, I mean. The case is, that I am sitting to him for a subject in which my face is to be used--otherwise than as a portrait--and he called about it.'

'May I say,' said Christopher, 'that if you want yourself painted, you are ill-advised not to let it be done by a man who knows how to use the brush a little?'

'O, he can paint!' said Ethelberta, rather warmly. 'His last picture was excellent, I think. It was greatly talked about.'

'I imagined you to say that he was a mere nobody!'

'Yes, but--how provoking you are!--nobody, I mean, to talk to. He is a true artist, nevertheless.'

Christopher made no reply. The warm understanding between them had quite

ended now, and there was no fanning it up again. Sudden tiffs had been

the constant misfortune of their courtship in days gone by, had been the remote cause of her marriage to another; and the familiar shadows seemed to be rising again to cloud them with the same persistency as ever.

Christopher went downstairs with well-behaved moodiness, and left the house forthwith. The postman came to the door at the same time.

Ethelberta opened a letter from Picotee--now at Sandbourne again; and, stooping to the fire-light, she began to read:--

'MY DEAR ETHELBERTA,--I have tried to like staying at Sandbourne because you wished it, but I can't endure the town at all, dear Berta; everything is so wretched and dull! O, I only wish you knew how dismal it is here, and how much I would give to come to London! I cannot help thinking that I could do better in town. You see, I should be close to you, and should have the benefit of your experience. I would not mind what I did for a living could I be there where you all are. It is so like banishment to be here. If I could not get a pupil-teachership in some London school (and I believe I could by advertising) I could stay with you, and be governess to Georgina and Myrtle, for I am sure you cannot spare time enough to teach them as they ought to be taught, and Emmeline is not old enough to have any command over them. I could also assist at your dressmaking, and you must require a great deal of that to be done if you continue to appear in public. Mr. Long read in the papers the account of your first evening, and afterwards I heard two ladies of our committee talking about it; but of course not one of them knew my

personal interest in the discussion. Now will you, Ethelberta, think if I may not come: Do, there's a dear sister! I will do anything you set me about if I may only come.--Your ever affectionate,  
PICOTEE.'

'Great powers above--what worries do beset me!' cried Ethelberta, jumping up. 'What can possess the child so suddenly?--she used to like Sandbourne well enough!' She sat down, and hastily scribbled the following reply:--

'MY DEAR PICOTEE--There is only a little time to spare before the post goes, but I will try to answer your letter at once. Whatever is the reason of this extraordinary dislike to Sandbourne? It is a nice healthy place, and you are likely to do much better than either of our elder sisters, if you follow straight on in the path you have chosen. Of course, if such good fortune should attend me that I get rich by my contrivances of public story-telling and so on, I shall share everything with you and the rest of us, in which case you shall not work at all. But (although I have been unexpectedly successful so far) this is problematical; and it would be rash to calculate upon all of us being able to live, or even us seven girls only, upon the fortune I am going to make that way. So, though I don't mean to be harsh, I must impress upon you the necessity of going on as you are going just at present. I know the place must be dull, but we must all put up with dulness sometimes. You, being next to me in age, must aid me as well as you can in doing something for the younger ones; and if

anybody at all comes and lives here otherwise than as a servant, it must be our father--who will not, however, at present hear of such a thing when I mention it to him. Do think of all this, Picotee, and bear up! Perhaps we shall all be happy and united some day. Joey is waiting to run to the post-office with this at once. All are well. Sol and Dan have nearly finished the repairs and decorations of my house--but I will tell you of that another time.--Your affectionate sister,                   BERTA.'