

18. NEAR SANDBOURNE--LONDON STREETS--ETHELBERTA'S

When this letter reached its destination the next morning, Picotee, in her over-anxiety, could not bring herself to read it in anybody's presence, and put it in her pocket till she was on her walk across the moor. She still lived at the cottage out of the town, though at some inconvenience to herself, in order to teach at a small village night-school whilst still carrying on her larger occupation of pupil-teacher in Sandbourne.

So she walked and read, and was soon in tears. Moreover, when she thought of what Ethelberta would have replied had that keen sister known the wildness of her true reason in wishing to go, she shuddered with misery. To wish to get near a man only because he had been kind to her, and had admired her pretty face, and had given her flowers, to nourish a passion all the more because of its hopeless impracticability, were things to dream of, not to tell. Picotee was quite an unreasoning animal. Her sister arranged situations for her, told her how to conduct herself in them, how to make up anew, in unobtrusive shapes, the valuable wearing apparel she sent from time to time--so as to provoke neither exasperation in the little gentry, nor superciliousness in the great. Ethelberta did everything for her, in short; and Picotee obeyed orders with the abstracted ease of mind which people show who have their thinking done for them, and put out their troubles as they do their washing. She was quite willing not to be clever herself, since it was

unnecessary while she had a much-admired sister, who was clever enough for two people and to spare.

This arrangement, by which she gained an untroubled existence in exchange for freedom of will, had worked very pleasantly for Picotee until the anomaly of falling in love on her own account created a jar in the machinery. Then she began to know how wearing were miserable days, and how much more wearing were miserable nights. She pictured Christopher in

London calling upon her dignified sister (for Ethelberta innocently mentioned his name sometimes in writing) and imagined over and over again

the mutual signs of warm feeling between them. And now Picotee resolved upon a noble course. Like Juliet, she had been troubled with a consciousness that perhaps her love for Christopher was a trifle forward and unmaidenly, even though she had determined never to let him or anybody in the whole world know of it. To set herself to pray that she might have strength to see him without a pang the lover of her sister, who deserved him so much more than herself, would be a grand penance and corrective.

After uttering petitions to this effect for several days, she still felt very bad; indeed, in the psychological difficulty of striving for what in her soul she did not desire, rather worse, if anything. At last, weary of walking the old road and never meeting him, and blank in a general powerlessness, she wrote the letter to Ethelberta, which was only the

last one of a series that had previously been written and torn up.

Now this hope had been whirled away like thistledown, and the case was grievous enough to distract a greater stoic than Picotee. The end of it was that she left the school on insufficient notice, gave up her cottage home on the plea--true in the letter--that she was going to join a relative in London, and went off thither by a morning train, leaving her things packed ready to be sent on when she should write for them.

Picotee arrived in town late on a cold February afternoon, bearing a small bag in her hand. She crossed Westminster Bridge on foot, just after dusk, and saw a luminous haze hanging over each well-lighted street as it withdrew into distance behind the nearer houses, showing its direction as a train of morning mist shows the course of a distant stream when the stream itself is hidden. The lights along the riverside towards Charing Cross sent an inverted palisade of gleaming swords down into the shaking water, and the pavement ticked to the touch of pedestrians' feet, most of whom tripped along as if walking only to practise a favourite quick step, and held handkerchiefs to their mouths to strain off the river mist from their lungs. She inquired her way to Exonbury Crescent, and between five and six o'clock reached her sister's door.

Two or three minutes were passed in accumulating resolution sufficient to ring the bell, which when at last she did, was not performed in a way at all calculated to make the young man Joey hasten to the door. After the lapse of a certain time he did, however, find leisure to stroll and see

what the caller might want, out of curiosity to know who there could be in London afraid to ring a bell twice.

Joey's delight exceeded even his surprise, the ruling maxim of his life being the more the merrier, under all circumstances. The beaming young man was about to run off and announce her upstairs and downstairs, left and right, when Picotee called him hastily to her. In the hall her quick young eye had caught sight of an umbrella with a peculiar horn handle--an umbrella she had been accustomed to meet on Sandbourne Moor on many happy afternoons. Christopher was evidently in the house.

'Joey,' she said, as if she were ready to faint, 'don't tell Berta I am come. She has company, has she not?'

'O no--only Mr. Julian!' said the brother. 'He's quite one of the family!'

'Never mind--can't I go down into the kitchen with you?' she inquired. There had been bliss and misery mingled in those tidings, and she scarcely knew for a moment which way they affected her. What she did know was that she had run her dear fox to earth, and a sense of satisfaction at that feat prevented her just now from counting the cost of the performance.

'Does Mr. Julian come to see her very often?' said she.

'O yes--he's always a-coming--a regular bore to me.'

'A regular what?'

'Bore!--Ah, I forgot, you don't know our town words. However, come along.'

They passed by the doors on tiptoe, and their mother upstairs being, according to Joey's account, in the midst of a nap, Picotee was unwilling to disturb her; so they went down at once to the kitchen, when forward rushed Gwendoline the cook, flourishing her floury hands, and Cornelia the housemaid, dancing over her brush; and these having welcomed and made

Picotee comfortable, who should ring the area-bell, and be admitted down the steps, but Sol and Dan. The workman-brothers, their day's duties being over, had called to see their relations, first, as usual, going home to their lodgings in Marylebone and making themselves as spruce as bridegrooms, according to the rules of their newly-acquired town experience. For the London mechanic is only nine hours a mechanic, though the country mechanic works, eats, drinks, and sleeps a mechanic throughout the whole twenty-four.

'God bless my soul--Picotee!' said Dan, standing fixed. 'Well--I say, this is splendid! ha-ha!'

'Picotee--what brought you here?' said Sol, expanding the circumference of his face in satisfaction. 'Well, come along--never mind so long as you be here.'

Picotee explained circumstances as well as she could without stating them, and, after a general conversation of a few minutes, Sol interrupted with--'Anybody upstairs with Mrs. Petherwin?'

'Mr. Julian was there just now,' said Joey; 'but he may be gone. Berta always lets him slip out how he can, the form of ringing me up not being necessary with him. Wait a minute--I'll see.'

Joseph vanished up the stairs; and, the question whether Christopher were gone or not being an uninteresting one to the majority, the talking went on upon other matters. When Joey crept down again a minute later, Picotee was sitting aloof and silent, and he accordingly singled her out to speak to.

'Such a lark, Picotee!' he whispered. 'Berta's a-courting of her young man. Would you like to see how they carries on a bit?'

'Dearly I should!' said Picotee, the pupils of her eyes dilating.

Joey conducted her to the top of the basement stairs, and told her to listen. Within a few yards of them was the morning-room door, now standing ajar; and an intermittent flirtation in soft male and female

tones could be heard going on inside. Picotee's lips parted at thus learning the condition of things, and she leant against the stair-newel.

'My? What's the matter?' said Joey.

'If this is London, I don't like it at all!' moaned Picotee.

'Well--I never see such a girl--fainting all over the stairs for nothing in the world.'

'O--it will soon be gone--it is--it is only indigestion.'

'Indigestion? Much you simple country people can know about that! You should see what devils of indigestions we get in high life--eating 'normous great dinners and suppers that require clever physicians to carry 'em off, or else they'd carry us off with gout next day; and waking in the morning with such a splitting headache, and dry throat, and inward cusses about human nature, that you feel all the world like some great lord. However, now let's go down again.'

'No, no, no!' said the unhappy maiden imploringly. 'Hark!'

They listened again. The voices of the musician and poetess had changed: there was a decided frigidity in their tone--then came a louder expression--then a silence.

'You needn't be afeard,' said Joey. 'They won't fight; bless you, they busts out quarrelling like this times and times when they've been over-friendly, but it soon gets straight with 'em again.'

There was now a quick walk across the room, and Joey and his sister drew down their heads out of sight. Then the room door was slammed, quick footsteps went along the hall, the front door closed just as loudly, and Christopher's tread passed into nothing along the pavement.

'That's rather a wuss one than they mostly have; but Lord, 'tis nothing at all.'

'I don't much like biding here listening!' said Picotee.

'O, 'tis how we do all over the West End,' said Joey. "'Tis yer ignorance of town life that makes it seem a good deal to 'ee.'

'You can't make much boast about town life; for you haven't left off talking just as they do down in Wessex.'

'Well, I own to that--what's fair is fair, and 'tis a true charge; but if I talk the Wessex way 't isn't for want of knowing better; 'tis because my staunch nater makes me bide faithful to our old ancient institutions. You'd soon own 'twasn't ignorance in me, if you knowed what large quantities of noblemen I gets mixed up with every day. In fact 'tis thoughted here and there that I shall do very well in the world.'

'Well, let us go down,' said Picotee. 'Everything seems so overpowering here.'

'O, you'll get broke in soon enough. I felt just the same when I first entered into society.'

'Do you think Berta will be angry with me? How does she treat you?'

'Well, I can't complain. You see she's my own flesh and blood, and what can I say? But, in secret truth, the wages is terrible low, and barely pays for the tobacco I consooms.'

'O Joey, you wicked boy! If mother only knew that you smoked!'

'I don't mind the wickedness so much as the smell. And Mrs. Petherwin has got such a nose for a fellow's clothes. 'Tis one of the greatest knots in service--the smoke question. 'Tis thoughted that we shall make a great stir about it in the mansions of the nobility soon.'

'How much more you know of life than I do--you only fourteen and me seventeen!'

'Yes, that's true. You see, age is nothing--'tis opportunity. And even I can't boast, for many a younger man knows more.'

'But don't smoke, Joey--there's a dear!'

'What can I do? Society hev its rules, and if a person wishes to keep himself up, he must do as the world do. We be all Fashion's slave--as much a slave as the meanest in the land!'

They got downstairs again; and when the dinner of the French lady and gentleman had been sent up and cleared away, and also Ethelberta's evening tea (which she formed into a genuine meal, making a dinner of luncheon, when nobody was there, to give less trouble to her servant-sisters), they all sat round the fire. Then the rustle of a dress was heard on the staircase, and squirrel-haired Ethelberta appeared in person. It was her custom thus to come down every spare evening, to teach Joey and her sisters something or other--mostly French, which she spoke fluently; but the cook and housemaid showed more ambition than intelligence in acquiring that tongue, though Joey learnt it readily enough.

There was consternation in the camp for a moment or two, on account of poor Picotee, Ethelberta being not without firmness in matters of discipline. Her eye instantly lighted upon her disobedient sister, now looking twice as disobedient as she really was.

'O, you are here, Picotee? I am glad to see you,' said the mistress of the house quietly.

This was altogether to Picotee's surprise, for she had expected a round rating at least, in her freshness hardly being aware that this reserve of feeling was an acquired habit of Ethelberta's, and that civility stood in town for as much vexation as a tantrum represented in Wessex.

Picotee lamely explained her outward reasons for coming, and soon began to find that Ethelberta's opinions on the matter would not be known by the tones of her voice. But innocent Picotee was as wily as a religionist in sly elusions of the letter whilst infringing the spirit of a dictum; and by talking very softly and earnestly about the wondrous good she could do by remaining in the house as governess to the children, and playing the part of lady's-maid to her sister at show times, she so far coaxed Ethelberta out of her intentions that she almost accepted the plan as a good one. It was agreed that for the present, at any rate, Picotee should remain. Then a visit was made to Mrs. Chickerel's room, where the remainder of the evening was passed; and harmony reigned in the household.