

19. ETHELBERTA'S DRAWING-ROOM

Picotee's heart was fitfully glad. She was near the man who had enlarged her capacity from girl's to woman's, a little note or two of young feeling to a whole diapason; and though nearness was perhaps not in itself a great reason for felicity when viewed beside the complete realization of all that a woman can desire in such circumstances, it was much in comparison with the outer darkness of the previous time.

It became evident to all the family that some misunderstanding had arisen between Ethelberta and Mr. Julian. What Picotee hoped in the centre of her heart as to the issue of the affair it would be too complex a thing to say. If Christopher became cold towards her sister he would not come to the house; if he continued to come it would really be as Ethelberta's lover--altogether, a pretty game of perpetual check for Picotee.

He did not make his appearance for several days. Picotee, being a presentable girl, and decidedly finer-natured than her sisters below stairs, was allowed to sit occasionally with Ethelberta in the afternoon, when the teaching of the little ones had been done for the day; and thus she had an opportunity of observing Ethelberta's emotional condition with reference to Christopher, which Picotee did with an interest that the elder sister was very far from suspecting.

At first Ethelberta seemed blithe enough without him. One more day went,

and he did not come, and then her manner was that of apathy. Another day passed, and from fanciful elevations of the eyebrow, and long breathings, it became apparent that Ethelberta had decidedly passed the indifferent stage, and was getting seriously out of sorts about him. Next morning she looked all hope. He did not come that day either, and Ethelberta began to look pale with fear.

'Why don't you go out?' said Picotee timidly.

'I can hardly tell: I have been expecting some one.'

'When she comes I must run up to mother at once, must I not?' said clever Picotee.

'It is not a lady,' said Ethelberta blandly. She came then and stood by Picotee, and looked musingly out of the window. 'I may as well tell you, perhaps,' she continued. 'It is Mr. Julian. He is--I suppose--my lover, in plain English.'

'Ah!' said Picotee.

'Whom I am not going to marry until he gets rich.'

'Ah--how strange! If I had him--such a lover, I mean--I would marry him if he continued poor.'

'I don't doubt it, Picotee; just as you come to London without caring about consequences, or would do any other crazy thing and not mind in the least what came of it. But somebody in the family must take a practical view of affairs, or we should all go to the dogs.'

Picotee recovered from the snubbing which she felt that she deserved, and charged gallantly by saying, with delicate showings of indifference, 'Do you love this Mr. What's-his-name of yours?'

'Mr. Julian? O, he's a very gentlemanly man. That is, except when he is rude, and ill-uses me, and will not come and apologize!'

'If I had him--a lover, I would ask him to come if I wanted him to.'

Ethelberta did not give her mind to this remark; but, drawing a long breath, said, with a pouting laugh, which presaged unreality, 'The idea of his getting indifferent now! I have been intending to keep him on until I got tired of his attentions, and then put an end to them by marrying him; but here is he, before he has hardly declared himself, forgetting my existence as much as if he had vowed to love and cherish me for life. 'Tis an unnatural inversion of the manners of society.'

'When did you first get to care for him, dear Berta?'

'O--when I had seen him once or twice.'

'Goodness--how quick you were!'

'Yes--if I am in the mind for loving I am not to be hindered by shortness of acquaintanceship.'

'Nor I neither!' sighed Picotee.

'Nor any other woman. We don't need to know a man well in order to love him. That's only necessary when we want to leave off.'

'O Berta--you don't believe that!'

'If a woman did not invariably form an opinion of her choice before she has half seen him, and love him before she has half formed an opinion, there would be no tears and pining in the whole feminine world, and poets would starve for want of a topic. I don't believe it, do you say? Ah, well, we shall see.'

Picotee did not know what to say to this; and Ethelberta left the room to see about her duties as public story-teller, in which capacity she had undertaken to appear again this very evening.