

20. THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF THE HALL--THE ROAD HOME

London was illuminated by the broad full moon. The pavements looked white as if mantled with snow; ordinary houses were sublimated to the rank of public buildings, public buildings to palaces, and the faces of women walking the streets to those of calendared saints and guardian-angels, by the pure bleaching light from the sky.

In the quiet little street where opened the private door of the Hall chosen by Ethelberta for her story-telling, a brougham was waiting. The time was about eleven o'clock; and presently a lady came out from the building, the moonbeams forthwith flooding her face, which they showed to be that of the Story-teller herself. She hastened across to the carriage, when a second thought arrested her motion: telling the man-servant and a woman inside the brougham to wait for her, she wrapped up her features and glided round to the front of the house, where she paused to observe the carriages and cabs driving up to receive the fashionable crowd stepping down from the doors. Standing here in the throng which her own talent and ingenuity had drawn together, she appeared to enjoy herself by listening for a minute or two to the names of several persons of more or less distinction as they were called out, and then regarded attentively the faces of others of lesser degree: to scrutinize the latter was, as the event proved, the real object of the journey from round the corner. When nearly every one had left the doors,

she turned back disappointed. Ethelberta had been fancying that her alienated lover Christopher was in the back rows to-night, but, as far as could now be observed, the hopeful supposition was a false one.

When she got round to the back again, a man came forward. It was Ladywell, whom she had spoken to already that evening. 'Allow me to bring you your note-book, Mrs. Petherwin: I think you had forgotten it,' he said. 'I assure you that nobody has handled it but myself.'

Ethelberta thanked him, and took the book. 'I use it to look into between the parts, in case my memory should fail me,' she explained. 'I remember that I did lay it down, now you remind me.'

Ladywell had apparently more to say, and moved by her side towards the carriage; but she declined the arm he offered, and said not another word till he went on, haltingly:

'Your triumph to-night was very great, and it was as much a triumph to me as to you; I cannot express my feeling--I cannot say half that I would. If I might only--'

'Thank you much,' said Ethelberta, with dignity. 'Thank you for bringing my book, but I must go home now. I know that you will see that it is not necessary for us to be talking here.'

'Yes--you are quite right,' said the repressed young painter, struck by

her seriousness. 'Blame me; I ought to have known better. But perhaps a man--well, I will say it--a lover without indiscretion is no lover at all. Circumspection and devotion are a contradiction in terms. I saw that, and hoped that I might speak without real harm.'

'You calculated how to be uncalculating, and are natural by art!' she said, with the slightest accent of sarcasm. 'But pray do not attend me further--it is not at all necessary or desirable. My maid is in the carriage.' She bowed, turned, and entered the vehicle, seating herself beside Picotee.

'It was harsh!' said Ladywell to himself, as he looked after the retreating carriage. 'I was a fool; but it was harsh. Yet what man on earth likes a woman to show too great a readiness at first? She is right: she would be nothing without repulse!' And he moved away in an opposite direction.

'What man was that?' said Picotee, as they drove along.

'O--a mere Mr. Ladywell: a painter of good family, to whom I have been sitting for what he calls an Idealization. He is a dreadful simpleton.'

'Why did you choose him?'

'I did not: he chose me. But his silliness of behaviour is a hopeful sign for the picture. I have seldom known a man cunning with his brush

who was not simple with his tongue; or, indeed, any skill in particular that was not allied to general stupidity.'

'Your own skill is not like that, is it, Berta?'

'In men--in men. I don't mean in women. How childish you are!'

The slight depression at finding that Christopher was not present, which had followed Ethelberta's public triumph that evening, was covered over, if not removed, by Ladywell's declaration, and she reached home serene in spirit. That she had not the slightest notion of accepting the impulsive painter made little difference; a lover's arguments being apt to affect a lady's mood as much by measure as by weight. A useless declaration like a rare china teacup with a hole in it, has its ornamental value in enlarging a collection.

No sooner had they entered the house than Mr. Julian's card was discovered; and Joey informed them that he had come particularly to speak with Ethelberta, quite forgetting that it was her evening for tale-telling.

This was real delight, for between her excitements Ethelberta had been seriously sick-hearted at the horrible possibility of his never calling again. But alas! for Christopher. There being nothing like a dead silence for getting one's off-hand sweetheart into a corner, there is nothing like prematurely ending it for getting into that corner one's

self.

'Now won't I punish him for daring to stay away so long!' she exclaimed as soon as she got upstairs. 'It is as bad to show constancy in your manners as fickleness in your heart at such a time as this.'

'But I thought honesty was the best policy?' said Picotee.

'So it is, for the man's purpose. But don't you go believing in sayings, Picotee: they are all made by men, for their own advantages. Women who use public proverbs as a guide through events are those who have not ingenuity enough to make private ones as each event occurs.'

She sat down, and rapidly wrote a line to Mr. Julian:--

'EXONBURY CRESCENT.

'I return from Mayfair Hall to find you have called. You will, I know, be good enough to forgive my saying what seems an unfriendly thing, when I assure you that the circumstances of my peculiar situation make it desirable, if not necessary. It is that I beg you not to give me the pleasure of a visit from you for some little time, for unhappily the frequency of your kind calls has been noticed; and I am now in fear that we may be talked about--invidiously--to the injury of us both. The town, or a section of it, has turned its bull's-eye upon me with a brightness which I did not in the least anticipate; and

you will, I am sure, perceive how indispensable it is that I should be
circumspect.--Yours sincerely,

E. PETHERWIN.'

21. A STREET--NEIGH'S ROOMS--CHRISTOPHER'S ROOMS

As soon as Ethelberta had driven off from the Hall, Ladywell turned back again; and, passing the front entrance, overtook his acquaintance Mr. Neigh, who had been one of the last to emerge. The two were going in the same direction, and they walked a short distance together.

'Has anything serious happened?' said Neigh, noticing an abstraction in his companion. 'You don't seem in your usual mood to-night.'

'O, it is only that affair between us,' said Ladywell.

'Affair? Between you and whom?'

'Her and myself, of course. It will be in every fellow's mouth now, I suppose!'

'But--not anything between yourself and Mrs. Petherwin?'