

## 22. ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE

Ethelberta came indoors one day from the University boat-race, and sat down, without speaking, beside Picotee, as if lost in thought.

'Did you enjoy the sight?' said Picotee.

'I scarcely know. We couldn't see at all from Mrs. Belmaine's carriage, so two of us--very rashly--agreed to get out and be rowed across to the other side where the people were quite few. But when the boatman had us in the middle of the river he declared he couldn't land us on the other side because of the barges, so there we were in a dreadful state--tossed up and down like corks upon great waves made by steamers till I made up my mind for a drowning. Well, at last we got back again, but couldn't reach the carriage for the crowd; and I don't know what we should have done if a gentleman hadn't come--sent by Mrs. Belmaine, who was in a great fright about us; then he was introduced to me, and--I wonder how it will end!'

'Was there anything so wonderful in the beginning, then?'

'Yes. One of the coolest and most practised men in London was ill-mannered towards me from sheer absence of mind--and could there be higher flattery? When a man of that sort does not give you the politeness you deserve, it means that in his heart he is rebelling

against another feeling which his pride suggests that you do not deserve. O, I forgot to say that he is a Mr. Neigh, a nephew of Mr. Doncastle's, who lives at ease about Piccadilly and Pall Mall, and has a few acres somewhere--but I don't know much of him. The worst of my position now is that I excite this superficial interest in many people and a deep friendship in nobody. If what all my supporters feel could be collected into the hearts of two or three they would love me better than they love themselves; but now it pervades all and operates in none.'

'But it must operate in this gentleman?'

'Well, yes--just for the present. But men in town have so many contrivances for getting out of love that you can't calculate upon keeping them in for two days together. However, it is all the same to me. There's only--but let that be.'

'What is there only?' said Picotee coaxingly.

'Only one man,' murmured Ethelberta, in much lower tones. 'I mean, whose wife I should care to be; and the very qualities I like in him will, I fear, prevent his ever being in a position to ask me.'

'Is he the man you punished the week before last by forbidding him to come?'

'Perhaps he is: but he does not want civility from me. Where there's

much feeling there's little ceremony.'

'It certainly seems that he does not want civility from you to make him attentive to you,' said Picotee, stifling a sigh; 'for here is a letter in his handwriting, I believe.'

'You might have given it to me at once,' said Ethelberta, opening the envelope hastily. It contained very few sentences: they were to the effect that Christopher had received her letter forbidding him to call; that he had therefore at first resolved not to call or even see her more, since he had become such a shadow in her path. Still, as it was always best to do nothing hastily, he had on second thoughts decided to ask her to grant him a last special favour, and see him again just once, for a few minutes only that afternoon, in which he might at least say Farewell. To avoid all possibility of compromising her in anybody's eyes, he would call at half-past six, when other callers were likely to be gone, knowing that from the peculiar constitution of the household the hour would not interfere with her arrangements. There being no time for an answer, he would assume that she would see him, and keep the engagement; the request being one which could not rationally be objected to.

'There--read it!' said Ethelberta, with glad displeasure. 'Did you ever hear such audacity? Fixing a time so soon that I cannot reply, and thus making capital out of a pretended necessity, when it is really an arbitrary arrangement of his own. That's real rebellion--forcing himself

into my house when I said strictly he was not to come; and then, that it cannot rationally be objected to--I don't like his "rationally."

'Where there's much love there's little ceremony, didn't you say just now?' observed innocent Picotee.

'And where there's little love, no ceremony at all. These manners of his are dreadful, and I believe he will never improve.'

'It makes you care not a bit about him, does it not, Berta?' said Picotee hopefully.

'I don't answer for that,' said Ethelberta. 'I feel, as many others do, that a want of ceremony which is produced by abstraction of mind is no defect in a poet or musician, fatal as it may be to an ordinary man.'

'Mighty me! You soon forgive him.'

'Picotee, don't you be so quick to speak. Before I have finished, how do you know what I am going to say? I'll never tell you anything again, if you take me up so. Of course I am going to punish him at once, and make him remember that I am a lady, even if I do like him a little.'

'How do you mean to punish him?' said Picotee, with interest.

'By writing and telling him that on no account is he to come.'

'But there is not time for a letter--'

'That doesn't matter. It will show him that I did not mean him to come.'

At hearing the very merciful nature of the punishment, Picotee sighed without replying; and Ethelberta despatched her note. The hour of appointment drew near, and Ethelberta showed symptoms of unrest. Six o'clock struck and passed. She walked here and there for nothing, and it was plain that a dread was filling her: her letter might accidentally have had, in addition to the moral effect which she had intended, the practical effect which she did not intend, by arriving before, instead of after, his purposed visit to her, thereby stopping him in spite of all her care.

'How long are letters going to Bloomsbury?' she said suddenly.

'Two hours, Joey tells me,' replied Picotee, who had already inquired on her own private account.

'There!' exclaimed Ethelberta petulantly. 'How I dislike a man to misrepresent things! He said there was not time for a reply!'

'Perhaps he didn't know,' said Picotee, in angel tones; 'and so it happens all right, and he has got it, and he will not come after all.'

They waited and waited, but Christopher did not appear that night; the true case being that his declaration about insufficient time for a reply was merely an ingenious suggestion to her not to be so cruel as to forbid him. He was far from suspecting when the letter of denial did reach him--about an hour before the time of appointment--that it was sent by a refinement of art, of which the real intention was futility, and that but for his own misstatement it would have been carefully delayed.

The next day another letter came from the musician, decidedly short and to the point. The irate lover stated that he would not be made a fool of any longer: under any circumstances he meant to come that self-same afternoon, and should decidedly expect her to see him.

'I will not see him!' said Ethelberta. 'Why did he not call last night?'

'Because you told him not to,' said Picotee.

'Good gracious, as if a woman's words are to be translated as literally as Homer! Surely he is aware that more often than not "No" is said to a man's importunities because it is traditionally the correct modest reply, and for nothing else in the world. If all men took words as superficially as he does, we should die of decorum in shoals.'

'Ah, Berta! how could you write a letter that you did not mean should be obeyed?'

'I did in a measure mean it, although I could have shown Christian forgiveness if it had not been. Never mind; I will not see him. I'll plague my heart for the credit of my sex.'

To ensure the fulfilment of this resolve, Ethelberta determined to give way to a headache that she was beginning to be aware of, go to her room, disorganize her dress, and ruin her hair by lying down; so putting it out of her power to descend and meet Christopher on any momentary impulse.

Picotee sat in the room with her, reading, or pretending to read, and Ethelberta pretended to sleep. Christopher's knock came up the stairs, and with it the end of the farce.

'I'll tell you what,' said Ethelberta in the prompt and broadly-awake tone of one who had been concentrated on the expectation of that sound for a length of time, 'it was a mistake in me to do this! Joey will be sure to make a muddle of it.'

Joey was heard coming up the stairs. Picotee opened the door, and said, with an anxiety transcending Ethelberta's, 'Well?'

'O, will you tell Mrs. Petherwin that Mr. Julian says he'll wait.'

'You were not to ask him to wait,' said Ethelberta, within.

'I know that,' said Joey, 'and I didn't. He's doing that out of his own

head.'

'Then let Mr. Julian wait, by all means,' said Ethelberta. 'Allow him to wait if he likes, but tell him it is uncertain if I shall be able to come down.'

Joey then retired, and the two sisters remained in silence.

'I wonder if he's gone,' Ethelberta said, at the end of a long time.

'I thought you were asleep,' said Picotee. 'Shall we ask Joey? I have not heard the door close.'

Joey was summoned, and after a leisurely ascent, interspersed by various gymnastic performances over the handrail here and there, appeared again.

'He's there jest the same: he don't seem to be in no hurry at all,' said Joey.

'What is he doing?' inquired Picotee solicitously.

'O, only looking at his watch sometimes, and humming tunes, and playing rat-a-tat-tat upon the table. He says he don't mind waiting a bit.'

'You must have made a mistake in the message,' said Ethelberta, within.



'Well, no. I am correct as a jeneral thing. I jest said perhaps you would be engaged all the evening, and perhaps you wouldn't.'

When Joey had again retired, and they had waited another ten minutes, Ethelberta said, 'Picotee, do you go down and speak a few words to him. I am determined he shall not see me. You know him a little; you remember when he came to the Lodge?'

'What must I say to him?'

Ethelberta paused before replying. 'Try to find out if--if he is much grieved at not seeing me, and say--give him to understand that I will forgive him, Picotee.'

'Very well.'

'And Picotee--'

'Yes.'

'If he says he must see me--I think I will get up. But only if he says must: you remember that.'

Picotee departed on her errand. She paused on the staircase trembling, and thinking between the thrills how very far would have been the conduct of her poor slighted self from proud recalcitration had Mr. Julian's

gentle request been addressed to her instead of to Ethelberta; and she went some way in the painful discovery of how much more tantalizing it was to watch an envied situation that was held by another than to be out of sight of it altogether. Here was Christopher waiting to bestow love, and Ethelberta not going down to receive it: a commodity unequalled in value by any other in the whole wide world was being wantonly wasted within that very house. If she could only have stood to-night as the beloved Ethelberta, and not as the despised Picotee, how different would be this going down! Thus she went along, red and pale moving in her cheeks as in the Northern Lights at their strongest time.

Meanwhile Christopher had sat waiting minute by minute till the evening shades grew browner, and the fire sank low. Joey, finding himself not particularly wanted upon the premises after the second inquiry, had slipped out to witness a nigger performance round the corner, and Julian began to think himself forgotten by all the household. The perception gradually cooled his emotions and enabled him to hold his hat quite steadily.

When Picotee gently thrust open the door she was surprised to find the room in darkness, the fire gone completely out, and the form of Christopher only visible by a faint patch of light, which, coming from a lamp on the opposite side of the way and falling upon the mirror, was thrown as a pale nebulosity upon his shoulder. Picotee was too flurried at sight of the familiar outline to know what to do, and, instead of going or calling for a light, she mechanically advanced into the room.

Christopher did not turn or move in any way, and then she perceived that he had begun to doze in his chair.

Instantly, with the precipitancy of the timorous, she said, 'Mr. Julian!' and touched him on the shoulder--murmuring then, 'O, I beg pardon, I--I will get a light.'

Christopher's consciousness returned, and his first act, before rising, was to exclaim, in a confused manner, 'Ah--you have come--thank you, Berta!' then impulsively to seize her hand, as it hung beside his head, and kiss it passionately. He stood up, still holding her fingers.

Picotee gasped out something, but was completely deprived of articulate utterance, and in another moment being unable to control herself at this sort of first meeting with the man she had gone through fire and water to be near, and more particularly by the overpowering kiss upon her hand, burst into hysterical sobbing. Julian, in his inability to imagine so much emotion--or at least the exhibition of it--in Ethelberta, gently drew Picotee further forward by the hand he held, and utilized the solitary spot of light from the mirror by making it fall upon her face. Recognizing the childish features, he at once, with an exclamation, dropped her hand and started back. Being in point of fact a complete bundle of nerves and nothing else, his thin figure shook like a harp-string in painful excitement at a contretemps which would scarcely have quickened the pulse of an ordinary man.

Poor Picotee, feeling herself in the wind of a civil d---, started back also, sobbing more than ever. It was a little too much that the first result of his discovery of the mistake should be absolute repulse. She leant against the mantelpiece, when Julian, much bewildered at her superfluity of emotion, assisted her to a seat in sheer humanity. But Christopher was by no means pleased when he again thought round the circle of circumstances.

'How could you allow such an absurd thing to happen?' he said, in a stern, though trembling voice. 'You knew I might mistake. I had no idea you were in the house: I thought you were miles away, at Sandbourne or somewhere! But I see: it is just done for a joke, ha-ha!'

This made Picotee rather worse still. 'O-O-O-O!' she replied, in the tone of pouring from a bottle. 'What shall I do-o-o-o! It is--not done for a--joke at all-l-l-l!'

'Not done for a joke? Then never mind--don't cry, Picotee. What was it done for, I wonder?'

Picotee, mistaking the purport of his inquiry, imagined him to refer to her arrival in the house, quite forgetting, in her guilty sense of having come on his account, that he would have no right or thought of asking questions about a natural visit to a sister, and she said: 'When you--went away from--Sandbourne, I--I--I didn't know what to do, and then I ran away, and came here, and then Ethelberta--was angry with me; but she says

I may stay; but she doesn't know that I know you, and how we used to meet along the road every morning--and I am afraid to tell her--O, what shall I do!

'Never mind it,' said Christopher, a sense of the true state of her case dawning upon him with unpleasant distinctness, and bringing some irritation at his awkward position; though it was impossible to be long angry with a girl who had not reasoning foresight enough to perceive that doubtful pleasure and certain pain must be the result of any meeting whilst hearts were at cross purposes in this way.

'Where is your sister?' he asked.

'She wouldn't come down, unless she MUST,' said Picotee. 'You have vexed her, and she has a headache besides that, and I came instead.'

'So that I mightn't be wasted altogether. Well, it's a strange business between the three of us. I have heard of one-sided love, and reciprocal love, and all sorts, but this is my first experience of a concatenated affection. You follow me, I follow Ethelberta, and she follows--Heaven knows who!

'Mr. Ladywell!' said the mortified Picotee.

'Good God, if I didn't think so!' said Christopher, feeling to the soles of his feet like a man in a legitimate drama.

'No, no, no!' said the frightened girl hastily. 'I am not sure it is Mr. Ladywell. That's altogether a mistake of mine!'

'Ah, yes, you want to screen her,' said Christopher, with a withering smile at the spot of light. 'Very sisterly, doubtless; but none of that will do for me. I am too old a bird by far--by very far! Now are you sure she does not love Ladywell?'

'Yes!'

'Well, perhaps I blame her wrongly. She may have some little good faith--a woman has, here and there. How do you know she does not love Ladywell?'

'Because she would prefer Mr. Neigh to him, any day.'

'Ha!'

'No, no--you mistake, sir--she doesn't love either at all--Ethelberta doesn't. I meant that she cannot love Mr. Ladywell because he stands lower in her opinion than Mr. Neigh, and him she certainly does not care for. She only loves you. If you only knew how true she is you wouldn't be so suspicious about her, and I wish I had not come here--yes, I do!'

'I cannot tell what to think of it. Perhaps I don't know much of this

world after all, or what girls will do. But you don't excuse her to me, Picotee.'

Before this time Picotee had been simulating haste in getting a light; but in her dread of appearing visibly to Christopher's eyes, and showing him the precise condition of her tear-stained face, she put it off moment after moment, and stirred the fire, in hope that the faint illumination thus produced would be sufficient to save her from the charge of stupid conduct as entertainer.

Fluttering about on the horns of this dilemma, she was greatly relieved when Christopher, who read her difficulty, and the general painfulness of the situation, said that since Ethelberta was really suffering from a headache he would not wish to disturb her till to-morrow, and went off downstairs and into the street without further ceremony.

Meanwhile other things had happened upstairs. No sooner had Picotee left her sister's room, than Ethelberta thought it would after all have been much better if she had gone down herself to speak to this admirably persistent lover. Was she not drifting somewhat into the character of coquette, even if her ground of offence--a word of Christopher's about somebody else's mean parentage, which was spoken in utter forgetfulness of her own position, but had wounded her to the quick nevertheless--was to some extent a tenable one? She knew what facilities in suffering Christopher always showed; how a touch to other people was a blow to him, a blow to them his deep wound, although he took such pains to look stolid

and unconcerned under those inflictions, and tried to smile as if he had no feelings whatever. It would be more generous to go down to him, and be kind. She jumped up with that alertness which comes so spontaneously at those sweet bright times when desire and duty run hand in hand.

She hastily set her hair and dress in order--not such matchless order as she could have wished them to be in, but time was precious--and descended the stairs. When on the point of pushing open the drawing-room door, which wanted about an inch of being closed, she was astounded to discover that the room was in total darkness, and still more to hear Picotee sobbing inside. To retreat again was the only action she was capable of at that moment: the clash between this picture and the anticipated scene of Picotee and Christopher sitting in frigid propriety at opposite sides of a well-lighted room was too great. She flitted upstairs again with the least possible rustle, and flung herself down on the couch as before, panting with excitement at the new knowledge that had come to her.

There was only one possible construction to be put upon this in Ethelberta's rapid mind, and that approximated to the true one. She had known for some time that Picotee once had a lover, or something akin to it, and that he had disappointed her in a way which had never been told. No stranger, save in the capacity of the one beloved, could wound a woman sufficiently to make her weep, and it followed that Christopher was the man of Picotee's choice. As Ethelberta recalled the conversations, conclusion after conclusion came like pulsations in an aching head. 'O, how did it happen, and who is to blame?' she exclaimed. 'I cannot doubt



his faith, and I cannot doubt hers; and yet how can I keep doubting them both?

It was characteristic of Ethelberta's jealous motherly guard over her young sisters that, amid these contending inquiries, her foremost feeling was less one of hope for her own love than of championship for Picotee's.