

23. ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE (continued)

Picotee was heard on the stairs: Ethelberta covered her face.

'Is he waiting?' she said faintly, on finding that Picotee did not begin to speak.

'No; he is gone,' said Picotee.

'Ah, why is that?' came quickly from under the handkerchief. 'He has forgotten me--that's what it is!'

'O no, he has not!' said Picotee, just as bitterly.

Ethelberta had far too much heroism to let much in this strain escape her, though her sister was prepared to go any lengths in the same. 'I suppose,' continued Ethelberta, in the quiet way of one who had only a headache the matter with her, 'that he remembered you after the meeting at Anglebury?'

'Yes, he remembered me.'

'Did you tell me you had seen him before that time?'

'I had seen him at Sandbourne. I don't think I told you.'

'At whose house did you meet him?'

'At nobody's. I only saw him sometimes,' replied Picotee, in great distress.

Ethelberta, though of all women most miserable, was brimming with compassion for the throbbing girl so nearly related to her, in whom she continually saw her own weak points without the counterpoise of her strong ones. But it was necessary to repress herself awhile: the intended ways of her life were blocked and broken up by this jar of interests, and she wanted time to ponder new plans. 'Picotee, I would rather be alone now, if you don't mind,' she said. 'You need not leave me any light; it makes my eyes ache, I think.'

Picotee left the room. But Ethelberta had not long been alone and in darkness when somebody gently opened the door, and entered without a candle.

'Berta,' said the soft voice of Picotee again, 'may I come in?'

'O yes,' said Ethelberta. 'Has everything gone right with the house this evening?'

'Yes; and Gwendoline went out just now to buy a few things, and she is going to call round upon father when he has got his dinner cleared away.'

'I hope she will not stay and talk to the other servants. Some day she will let drop something or other before father can stop her.'

'O Berta!' said Picotee, close beside her. She was kneeling in front of the couch, and now flinging her arm across Ethelberta's shoulder and shaking violently, she pressed her forehead against her sister's temple, and breathed out upon her cheek:

'I came in again to tell you something which I ought to have told you just now, and I have come to say it at once because I am afraid I shan't be able to to-morrow. Mr. Julian was the young man I spoke to you of a long time ago, and I should have told you all about him, but you said he was your young man too, and--and I didn't know what to do then, because I thought it was wrong in me to love your young man; and Berta, he didn't mean me to love him at all, but I did it myself, though I did not want to do it, either; it would come to me! And I didn't know he belonged to you when I began it, or I would not have let him meet me at all; no I wouldn't!'

'Meet you? You don't mean to say he used to meet you?' whispered Ethelberta.

'Yes,' said Picotee; 'but he could not help it. We used to meet on the road, and there was no other road unless I had gone ever so far round. But it is worse than that, Berta! That was why I couldn't bide in

Sandbourne, and--and ran away to you up here; it was not because I wanted

to see you, Berta, but because I--I wanted--'

'Yes, yes, I know,' said Ethelberta hurriedly.

'And then when I went downstairs he mistook me for you for a moment, and that caused--a confusion!'

'O, well, it does not much matter,' said Ethelberta, kissing Picotee soothingly. 'You ought not of course to have come to London in such a manner; but, since you have come, we will make the best of it. Perhaps it may end happily for you and for him. Who knows?'

'Then don't you want him, Berta?'

'O no; not at all!'

'What--and don't you really want him, Berta?' repeated Picotee, starting up.

'I would much rather he paid his addresses to you. He is not the sort of man I should wish to--think it best to marry, even if I were to marry, which I have no intention of doing at present. He calls to see me because we are old friends, but his calls do not mean anything more than that he takes an interest in me. It is not at all likely that I shall

see him again! and I certainly never shall see him unless you are present.'

'That will be very nice.'

'Yes. And you will be always distant towards him, and go to leave the room when he comes, when I will call you back; but suppose we continue this to-morrow? I can tell you better than what to do.'

When Picotee had left her the second time, Ethelberta turned over upon her breast and shook in convulsive sobs which had little relationship with tears. This abandonment ended as suddenly as it had begun--not lasting more than a minute and a half altogether--and she got up in an unconsidered and unusual impulse to seek relief from the stinging sarcasm of this event--the unhappy love of Picotee--by mentioning something of it to another member of the family, her eldest sister Gwendoline, who was a woman full of sympathy.

Ethelberta descended to the kitchen, it being now about ten o'clock. The room was empty, Gwendoline not having yet returned, and Cornelia, being busy about her own affairs upstairs. The French family had gone to the theatre, and the house on that account was very quiet to-night.

Ethelberta sat down in the dismal place without turning up the gas, and in a few minutes admitted Gwendoline.

The round-faced country cook floundered in, untying her bonnet as she

came, laying it down on a chair, and talking at the same time. 'Such a place as this London is, to be sure!' she exclaimed, turning on the gas till it whistled. 'I wish I was down in Wessex again. Lord-a-mercy, Berta, I didn't see it was you! I thought it was Cornelia. As I was saying, I thought that, after biding in this underground cellar all the week, making up messes for them French folk, and never pleasing 'em, and never shall, because I don't understand that line, I thought I would go out and see father, you know.'

'Is he very well?' said Ethelberta.

'Yes; and he is going to call round when he has time. Well, as I was a-coming home-along I thought, "Please the Lord I'll have some chippols for supper just for a plain trate," and I went round to the late greengrocer's for 'em; and do you know they swore me down that they hadn't got such things as chippols in the shop, and had never heard of 'em in their lives. At last I said, "Why, how can you tell me such a brazen story?--here they be, heaps of 'em!" It made me so vexed that I came away there and then, and wouldn't have one--no, not at a gift.'

'They call them young onions here,' said Ethelberta quietly; 'you must always remember that. But, Gwendoline, I wanted--'

Ethelberta felt sick at heart, and stopped. She had come down on the wings of an impulse to unfold her trouble about Picotee to her hard-headed and much older sister, less for advice than to get some heart-

ease by interchange of words; but alas, she could proceed no further. The wretched homeliness of Gwendoline's mind seemed at this particular juncture to be absolutely intolerable, and Ethelberta was suddenly convinced that to involve Gwendoline in any such discussion would simply be increasing her own burden, and adding worse confusion to her sister's already confused existence.

'What were you going to say?' said the honest and unsuspecting Gwendoline.

'I will put it off until to-morrow,' Ethelberta murmured gloomily; 'I have a bad headache, and I am afraid I cannot stay with you after all.'

As she ascended the stairs, Ethelberta ached with an added pain not much less than the primary one which had brought her down. It was that old sense of disloyalty to her class and kin by feeling as she felt now which caused the pain, and there was no escaping it. Gwendoline would have gone to the ends of the earth for her: she could not confide a thought to Gwendoline!

'If she only knew of that unworthy feeling of mine, how she would grieve,' said Ethelberta miserably.

She next went up to the servants' bedrooms, and to where Cornelia slept. On Ethelberta's entrance Cornelia looked up from a perfect wonder of a bonnet, which she held in her hands. At sight of Ethelberta the look of

keen interest in her work changed to one of gaiety.

'I am so glad--I was just coming down,' Cornelia said in a whisper; whenever they spoke as relations in this house it was in whispers. 'Now, how do you think this bonnet will do? May I come down, and see how I look in your big glass?' She clapped the bonnet upon her head. 'Won't it do beautiful for Sunday afternoon?'

'It looks very attractive, as far as I can see by this light,' said Ethelberta. 'But is it not rather too brilliant in colour--blue and red together, like that? Remember, as I often tell you, people in town never wear such bright contrasts as they do in the country.'

'O Berta!' said Cornelia, in a deprecating tone; 'don't object. If there's one thing I do glory in it is a nice flare-up about my head o' Sundays--of course if the family's not in mourning, I mean.' But, seeing that Ethelberta did not smile, she turned the subject, and added docilely: 'Did you come up for me to do anything? I will put off finishing my bonnet if I am wanted.'

'I was going to talk to you about family matters, and Picotee,' said Ethelberta. 'But, as you are busy, and I have a headache, I will put it off till to-morrow.'

Cornelia seemed decidedly relieved, for family matters were far from attractive at the best of times; and Ethelberta went down to the next



floor, and entered her mother's room.

After a short conversation Mrs. Chickereel said, 'You say you want to ask me something?'

'Yes: but nothing of importance, mother. I was thinking about Picotee, and what would be the best thing to do--'

'Ah, well you may, Berta. I am so uneasy about this life you have led us into, and full of fear that your plans may break down; if they do, whatever will become of us? I know you are doing your best; but I cannot help thinking that the coming to London and living with you was wild and rash, and not well weighed afore we set about it. You should have counted the cost first, and not advised it. If you break down, and we are all discovered living so queer and unnatural, right in the heart of the aristocracy, we should be the laughing-stock of the country: it would kill me, and ruin us all--utterly ruin us!'

'O mother, I know all that so well!' exclaimed Ethelberta, tears of anguish filling her eyes. 'Don't depress me more than I depress myself by such fears, or you will bring about the very thing we strive to avoid! My only chance is in keeping in good spirits, and why don't you try to help me a little by taking a brighter view of things?'

'I know I ought to, my dear girl, but I cannot. I do so wish that I never let you tempt me and the children away from the Lodge. I cannot

think why I allowed myself to be so persuaded--cannot think! You are not to blame--it is I. I am much older than you, and ought to have known better than listen to such a scheme. This undertaking seems too big--the bills frighten me. I have never been used to such wild adventure, and I can't sleep at night for fear that your tale-telling will go wrong, and we shall all be exposed and shamed. A story-teller seems such an impossible castle-in-the-air sort of a trade for getting a living by--I cannot think how ever you came to dream of such an unheard-of thing.'

'But it is not a castle in the air, and it does get a living!' said Ethelberta, her lip quivering.

'Well, yes, while it is just a new thing; but I am afraid it cannot last--that's what I fear. People will find you out as one of a family of servants, and their pride will be stung at having gone to hear your romancing; then they will go no more, and what will happen to us and the poor little ones?'

'We must all scatter again!'

'If we could get as we were once, I wouldn't mind that. But we shall have lost our character as simple country folk who know nothing, which are the only class of poor people that squires will give any help to; and I much doubt if the girls would get places after such a discovery--it would be so awkward and unheard-of.'

'Well, all I can say is,' replied Ethelberta, 'that I will do my best. All that I have is theirs and yours as much as mine, and these arrangements are simply on their account. I don't like my relations being my servants; but if they did not work for me, they would have to work for others, and my service is much lighter and pleasanter than any other lady's would be for them, so the advantages are worth the risk. If I stood alone, I would go and hide my head in any hole, and care no more about the world and its ways. I wish I was well out of it, and at the bottom of a quiet grave--anybody might have the world for me then! But don't let me disturb you longer; it is getting late.'

Ethelberta then wished her mother good-night, and went away. To attempt confidences on such an ethereal matter as love was now absurd; her hermit spirit was doomed to dwell apart as usual; and she applied herself to deep thinking without aid and alone. Not only was there Picotee's misery to disperse; it became imperative to consider how best to overpass a more general catastrophe.