

24. ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE (continued)--THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Mrs. Chickereel, in deploring the risks of their present speculative mode of life, was far from imagining that signs of the foul future so much dreaded were actually apparent to Ethelberta at the time the lament was spoken. Hence the daughter's uncommon sensitiveness to prophecy. It was as if a dead-reckoner poring over his chart should predict breakers ahead to one who already beheld them.

That her story-telling would prove so attractive Ethelberta had not ventured to expect for a moment; that having once proved attractive there should be any falling-off until such time had elapsed as would enable her to harvest some solid fruit was equally a surprise. Future expectations are often based without hesitation upon one happy accident, when the only similar condition remaining to subsequent sets of circumstances is that the same person forms the centre of them. Her situation was so peculiar, and so unlike that of most public people, that there was hardly an argument explaining this triumphant opening which could be used in forecasting the close; unless, indeed, more strategy were employed in the conduct of the campaign than Ethelberta seemed to show at present.

There was no denying that she commanded less attention than at first: the audience had lessened, and, judging by appearances, might soon be expected to be decidedly thin. In excessive lowness of spirit, Ethelberta translated these signs with the bias that a lingering echo of

her mother's dismal words naturally induced, reading them as conclusive evidence that her adventure had been chimerical in its birth. Yet it was very far less conclusive than she supposed. Public interest might without doubt have been renewed after a due interval, some of the falling-off being only an accident of the season. Her novelties had been hailed with pleasure, the rather that their freshness tickled than that their intrinsic merit was appreciated; and, like many inexperienced dispensers of a unique charm, Ethelberta, by bestowing too liberally and too frequently, was destroying the very element upon which its popularity depended. Her entertainment had been good in its conception, and partly good in its execution; yet her success had but little to do with that goodness. Indeed, what might be called its badness in a histrionic sense--that is, her look sometimes of being out of place, the sight of a beautiful woman on a platform, revealing tender airs of domesticity which showed her to belong by character to a quiet drawing-room--had been primarily an attractive feature. But alas, custom was staling this by improving her up to the mark of an utter impersonator, thereby eradicating the pretty abashments of a poetess out of her sphere; and more than one well-wisher who observed Ethelberta from afar feared that it might some day come to be said of her that she had

'Enfeoffed herself to popularity:

That, being daily swallowed by men's eyes,

They surfeited with honey, and began

To loathe the taste of sweetness, whereof a little

More than a little is by much too much.'

But this in its extremity was not quite yet.

We discover her one day, a little after this time, sitting before a table strewn with accounts and bills from different tradesmen of the neighbourhood, which she examined with a pale face, collecting their totals on a blank sheet. Picotee came into the room, but Ethelberta took no notice whatever of her. The younger sister, who subsisted on scraps of notice and favour, like a dependent animal, even if these were only an occasional glance of the eye, could not help saying at last, 'Berta, how silent you are. I don't think you know I am in the room.'

'I did not observe you,' said Ethelberta. 'I am very much engaged: these bills have to be paid.'

'What, and cannot we pay them?' said Picotee, in vague alarm.

'O yes, I can pay them. The question is, how long shall I be able to do it?'

'That is sad; and we are going on so nicely, too. It is not true that you have really decided to leave off story-telling now the people don't crowd to hear it as they did?'

'I think I shall leave off.'

'And begin again next year?'

'That is very doubtful.'

'I'll tell you what you might do,' said Picotee, her face kindling with a sense of great originality. 'You might travel about to country towns and tell your story splendidly.'

'A man in my position might perhaps do it with impunity; but I could not without losing ground in other domains. A woman may drive to Mayfair from her house in Exonbury Crescent, and speak from a platform there, and be supposed to do it as an original way of amusing herself; but when it comes to starring in the provinces she establishes herself as a woman of a different breed and habit. I wish I were a man! I would give up this house, advertise it to be let furnished, and sally forth with confidence. But I am driven to think of other ways to manage than that.'

Picotee fell into a conjectural look, but could not guess.

'The way of marriage,' said Ethelberta. 'Otherwise perhaps the poetess may live to become what Dryden called himself when he got old and poor--a rent-charge on Providence. . . . Yes, I must try that way,' she continued, with a sarcasm towards people out of hearing. I must buy a "Peerage" for one thing, and a "Baronetage," and a "House of Commons," and a "Landed Gentry," and learn what people are about me. 'I must go to Doctors' Commons and read up wills of the parents of any likely gudgeons

I may know. I must get a Herald to invent an escutcheon of my family, and throw a genealogical tree into the bargain in consideration of my taking a few second-hand heirlooms of a pawnbroking friend of his. I must get up sham ancestors, and find out some notorious name to start my pedigree from. It does not matter what his character was; either villain or martyr will do, provided that he lived five hundred years ago. It would be considered far more creditable to make good my descent from Satan in the age when he went to and fro on the earth than from a ministering angel under Victoria.'

'But, Berta, you are not going to marry any stranger who may turn up?' said Picotee, who had creeping sensations of dread when Ethelberta talked like this.

'I had no such intention. But, having once put my hand to the plough, how shall I turn back?'

'You might marry Mr. Ladywell,' said Picotee, who preferred to look at things in the concrete.

'Yes, marry him villainously; in cold blood, without a moment to prepare himself.'

'Ah, you won't!'

'I am not so sure about that. I have brought mother and the children to

town against her judgment and against my father's; they gave way to my opinion as to one who from superior education has larger knowledge of the world than they. I must prove my promises, even if Heaven should fall upon me for it, or what a miserable future will theirs be! We must not be poor in London. Poverty in the country is a sadness, but poverty in town is a horror. There is something not without grandeur in the thought of starvation on an open mountain or in a wide wood, and your bones lying there to bleach in the pure sun and rain; but a back garret in a rookery, and the other starvers in the room insisting on keeping the window shut--anything to deliver us from that!

'How gloomy you can be, Berta! It will never be so dreadful. Why, I can take in plain sewing, and you can do translations, and mother can knit stockings, and so on. How much longer will this house be yours?'

'Two years. If I keep it longer than that I shall have to pay rent at the rate of three hundred a year. The Petherwin estate provides me with it till then, which will be the end of Lady Petherwin's term.'

'I see it; and you ought to marry before the house is gone, if you mean to marry high,' murmured Picotee, in an inadequate voice, as one confronted by a world so tragic that any hope of her assisting therein was out of the question.

It was not long after this exposition of the family affairs that Christopher called upon them; but Picotee was not present, having gone to

think of superhuman work on the spur of Ethelberta's awakening talk. There was something new in the way in which Ethelberta received the announcement of his name; passion had to do with it, so had circumspection; the latter most, for the first time since their reunion.

'I am going to leave this part of England,' said Christopher, after a few gentle preliminaries. 'I was one of the applicants for the post of assistant-organist at Melchester Cathedral when it became vacant, and I find I am likely to be chosen, through the interest of one of my father's friends.'

'I congratulate you.'

'No, Ethelberta, it is not worth that. I did not originally mean to follow this course at all; but events seemed to point to it in the absence of a better.'

'I too am compelled to follow a course I did not originally mean to take.' After saying no more for a few moments, she added, in a tone of sudden openness, a richer tincture creeping up her cheek, 'I want to put a question to you boldly--not exactly a question--a thought. Have you considered whether the relations between us which have lately prevailed are--are the best for you--and for me?'

'I know what you mean,' said Christopher, hastily anticipating all that she might be going to say; 'and I am glad you have given me the

opportunity of speaking upon that subject. It has been very good and considerate in you to allow me to share your society so frequently as you have done since I have been in town, and to think of you as an object to exist for and strive for. But I ought to have remembered that, since you have nobody at your side to look after your interests, it behoved me to be doubly careful. In short, Ethelberta, I am not in a position to marry, nor can I discern when I shall be, and I feel it would be an injustice to ask you to be bound in any way to one lower and less talented than you. You cannot, from what you say, think it desirable that the engagement should continue. I have no right to ask you to be my betrothed, without having a near prospect of making you my wife. I don't mind saying this straight out--I have no fear that you will doubt my love; thank Heaven, you know what that is well enough! However, as things are, I wish you to know that I cannot conscientiously put in a claim upon your attention.'

A second meaning was written in Christopher's look, though he scarcely uttered it. A woman so delicately poised upon the social globe could not in honour be asked to wait for a lover who was unable to set bounds to the waiting period. Yet he had privily dreamed of an approach to that position--an unreserved, ideally perfect declaration from Ethelberta that time and practical issues were nothing to her; that she would stand as fast without material hopes as with them; that love was to be an end with her henceforth, having utterly ceased to be a means. Therefore this surreptitious hope of his, founded on no reasonable expectation, was like a guilty thing surprised when Ethelberta answered, with a predominance of

judgment over passion still greater than before:

'It is unspeakably generous in you to put it all before me so nicely, Christopher. I think infinitely more of you for being so unreserved, especially since I too have been thinking much on the indefiniteness of the days to come. We are not numbered among the blest few who can afford to trifle with the time. Yet to agree to anything like a positive parting will be quite unnecessary. You did not mean that, did you? for it is harsh if you did.' Ethelberta smiled kindly as she said this, as much as to say that she was far from really upbraiding him. 'Let it be only that we will see each other less. We will bear one another in mind as deeply attached friends if not as definite lovers, and keep up friendly remembrances of a sort which, come what may, will never have to be ended by any painful process termed breaking off. Different persons, different natures; and it may be that marriage would not be the most favourable atmosphere for our old affection to prolong itself in. When do you leave London?'

The disconnected query seemed to be subjoined to disperse the crude effect of what had gone before.

'I hardly know,' murmured Christopher. 'I suppose I shall not call here again.'

Whilst they were silent somebody entered the room softly, and they turned to discover Picotee.

'Come here, Picotee,' said Ethelberta.

Picotee came with an abashed bearing to where the other two were standing, and looked down steadfastly.

'Mr. Julian is going away,' she continued, with determined firmness. 'He will not see us again for a long time.' And Ethelberta added, in a lower tone, though still in the unflinching manner of one who had set herself to say a thing, and would say it--'He is not to be definitely engaged to me any longer. We are not thinking of marrying, you know, Picotee. It is best that we should not.'

'Perhaps it is,' said Christopher hurriedly, taking up his hat. 'Let me now wish you good-bye; and, of course, you will always know where I am, and how to find me.'

It was a tender time. He inclined forward that Ethelberta might give him her hand, which she did; whereupon their eyes met. Mastered by an impelling instinct she had not reckoned with, Ethelberta presented her cheek. Christopher kissed it faintly. Tears were in Ethelberta's eyes now, and she was heartfull of many emotions. Placing her arm round Picotee's waist, who had never lifted her eyes from the carpet, she drew the slight girl forward, and whispered quickly to him--'Kiss her, too. She is my sister, and I am yours.'

It seemed all right and natural to their respective moods and the tone of the moment that free old Wessex manners should prevail, and Christopher stooped and dropped upon Picotee's cheek likewise such a farewell kiss as he had imprinted upon Ethelberta's.

'Care for us both equally!' said Ethelberta.

'I will,' said Christopher, scarcely knowing what he said.

When he had reached the door of the room, he looked back and saw the two sisters standing as he had left them, and equally tearful. Ethelberta at once said, in a last futile struggle against letting him go altogether, and with thoughts of her sister's heart:

'I think that Picotee might correspond with Faith; don't you, Mr. Julian?'

'My sister would much like to do so,' said he.

'And you would like it too, would you not, Picotee?'

'O yes,' she replied. 'And I can tell them all about you.'

'Then it shall be so, if Miss Julian will.' She spoke in a settled way, as if something intended had been set in train; and Christopher having promised for his sister, he went out of the house with a parting smile of

misgiving.

He could scarcely believe as he walked along that those late words, yet hanging in his ears, had really been spoken, that still visible scene enacted. He could not even recollect for a minute or two how the final result had been produced. Did he himself first enter upon the long-looming theme, or did she? Christopher had been so nervously alive to the urgency of setting before the hard-striving woman a clear outline of himself, his surroundings and his fears, that he fancied the main impulse to this consummation had been his, notwithstanding that a faint initiative had come from Ethelberta. All had completed itself quickly, unceremoniously, and easily. Ethelberta had let him go a second time; yet on foregoing mornings and evenings, when contemplating the necessity of some such explanation, it had seemed that nothing less than Atlantean force could overpower their mutual gravitation towards each other.

On his reaching home Faith was not in the house, and, in the restless state which demands something to talk at, the musician went off to find her, well knowing her haunt at this time of the day. He entered the spiked and gilded gateway of the Museum hard by, turned to the wing devoted to sculptures, and descended to a particular basement room, which was lined with bas-reliefs from Nineveh. The place was cool, silent, and soothing; it was empty, save of a little figure in black, that was standing with its face to the wall in an innermost nook. This spot was Faith's own temple; here, among these deserted antiques, Faith was always happy. Christopher looked on at her for some time before she noticed

him, and dimly perceived how vastly differed her homely suit and unstudied contour--painfully unstudied to fastidious eyes--from Ethelberta's well-arranged draperies, even from Picotee's clever bits of ribbon, by which she made herself look pretty out of nothing at all. Yet this negligence was his sister's essence; without it she would have been a spoilt product. She had no outer world, and her rusty black was as appropriate to Faith's unseen courses as were Ethelberta's correct lights and shades to her more prominent career.

'Look, Kit,' said Faith, as soon as she knew who was approaching. 'This is a thing I never learnt before; this person is really Sennacherib, sitting on his throne; and these with fluted beards and hair like plough-furrows, and fingers with no bones in them, are his warriors--really carved at the time, you know. Only just think that this is not imagined of Assyria, but done in Assyrian times by Assyrian hands. Don't you feel as if you were actually in Nineveh; that as we now walk between these slabs, so walked Ninevites between them once?'

'Yes. . . . Faith, it is all over. Ethelberta and I have parted.'

'Indeed. And so my plan is to think of verses in the Bible about Sennacherib and his doings, which resemble these; this verse, for instance, I remember: "Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah did Sennacherib, King of Assyria, come up against all the fenced cities of Judah and took them. And Hezekiah, King of Judah, sent to the King of Assyria to Lachish," and so on. Well, there it actually is, you see.

There's Sennacherib, and there's Lachish. Is it not glorious to think that this is a picture done at the time of those very events?

'Yes. We did not quarrel this time, Ethelberta and I. If I may so put it, it is worse than quarrelling. We felt it was no use going on any longer, and so--Come, Faith, hear what I say, or else tell me that you won't hear, and that I may as well save my breath!'

'Yes, I will really listen,' she said, fluttering her eyelids in her concern at having been so abstracted, and excluding Sennacherib there and then from Christopher's affairs by the first settlement of her features to a present-day aspect, and her eyes upon his face. 'You said you had seen Ethelberta. Yes, and what did she say?'

'Was there ever anybody so provoking! Why, I have just told you!'

'Yes, yes; I remember now. You have parted. The subject is too large for me to know all at once what I think of it, and you must give me time, Kit. Speaking of Ethelberta reminds me of what I have done. I just looked into the Academy this morning--I thought I would surprise you by telling you about it. And what do you think I saw? Ethelberta--in the picture painted by Mr. Ladywell.'

'It is never hung?' said he, feeling that they were at one as to a topic at last.

'Yes. And the subject is an Elizabethan knight parting from a lady of the same period--the words explaining the picture being--

"Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know'st thy estimate."

The lady is Ethelberta, to the shade of a hair--her living face; and the knight is--'

'Not Ladywell?'

'I think so; I am not sure.'

'No wonder I am dismissed! And yet she hates him. Well, come along, Faith. Women allow strange liberties in these days.'