## 25. THE ROYAL ACADEMY--THE FARNFIELD ESTATE

Ethelberta was a firm believer in the kindly effects of artistic education upon the masses. She held that defilement of mind often arose from ignorance of eye; and her philanthropy being, by the simple force of her situation, of that sort which lingers in the neighbourhood of home, she concentrated her efforts in this kind upon Sol and Dan. Accordingly, the Academy exhibition having now just opened, she ordered the brothers to appear in their best clothes at the entrance to Burlington House just after noontide on the Saturday of the first week, this being the only day and hour at which they could attend without 'losing a half' and therefore it was necessary to put up with the inconvenience of arriving at a crowded and enervating time.

When Ethelberta was set down in the quadrangle she perceived the faithful pair, big as the Zamzummims of old time, standing like sentinels in the particular corner that she had named to them: for Sol and Dan would as soon have attempted petty larceny as broken faith with their admired lady-sister Ethelberta. They welcomed her with a painfully lavish exhibition of large new gloves, and chests covered with broad triangular areas of padded blue silk, occupying the position that the shirt-front had occupied in earlier days, and supposed to be lineally descended from the tie of a neckerchief.

The dress of their sister for to-day was exactly that of a respectable

workman's relative who had no particular ambition in the matter of fashion--a black stuff gown, a plain bonnet to match. A veil she wore for obvious reasons: her face was getting well known in London, and it had already appeared at the private view in an uncovered state, when it was scrutinized more than the paintings around. But now homely and useful labour was her purpose.

Catalogue in hand she took the two brothers through the galleries, teaching them in whispers as they walked, and occasionally correcting them--first, for too reverential a bearing towards the well-dressed crowd, among whom they persisted in walking with their hats in their hands and with the contrite bearing of meek people in church; and, secondly, for a tendency which they too often showed towards straying from the contemplation of the pictures as art to indulge in curious speculations on the intrinsic nature of the delineated subject, the gilding of the frames, the construction of the skylights overhead, or admiration for the bracelets, lockets, and lofty eloquence of persons around them.

'Now,' said Ethelberta, in a warning whisper, 'we are coming near the picture which was partly painted from myself. And, Dan, when you see it, don't you exclaim "Hullo!" or "That's Berta to a T," or anything at all. It would not matter were it not dangerous for me to be noticed here to-day. I see several people who would recognize me on the least provocation.'

'Not a word,' said Dan. 'Don't you be afeard about that. I feel that I baint upon my own ground to-day; and wouldn't do anything to cause an upset, drown me if I would. Would you, Sol?'

In this temper they all pressed forward, and Ethelberta could not but be gratified at the reception of Ladywell's picture, though it was accorded by critics not very profound. It was an operation of some minutes to get exactly opposite, and when side by side the three stood there they overheard the immediate reason of the pressure. 'Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing' had been lengthily discoursed upon that morning by the Coryphaeus of popular opinion; and the spirit having once been poured out sons and daughters could prophesy. But, in truth, Ladywell's work, if not emphatically original, was happily centred on a middle stratum of taste, and apart from this adventitious help commanded, and deserved to command, a wide area of appreciation.

While they were standing here in the very heart of the throng Ethelberta's ears were arrested by two male voices behind her, whose words formed a novel contrast to those of the other speakers around.

'Some men, you see, with extravagant expectations of themselves, coolly get them gratified, while others hope rationally and are disappointed. Luck, that's what it is. And the more easily a man takes life the more persistently does luck follow him.'

'Of course; because, if he's industrious he does not want luck's

assistance.  Natural laws will help him instead.'

'Well, if it is true that Ladywell has painted a good picture he has done it by an exhaustive process.  He has painted every possible bad one till nothing more of that sort is left for him.  You know what lady's face served as the original to this, I suppose?'

'Mrs. Petherwin's, I hear.'

'Yes, Mrs. Alfred Neigh that's to be.'

'What, that elusive fellow caught at last?'

'So it appears; but she herself is hardly so well secured as yet, it seems, though he takes the uncertainty as coolly as possible.  I knew nothing about it till he introduced the subject as we were standing here on Monday, and said, in an off-hand way, "I mean to marry that lady."  I asked him how.  "Easily," he said; "I will have her if there are a hundred at her heels."  You will understand that this was quite in confidence.'

'Of course, of course.'  Then there was a slight laugh, and the companions proceeded to other gossip.

Ethelberta, calm and compressed in manner, sidled along to extricate herself, not daring to turn round, and Dan and Sol followed, till they

were all clear of the spot. The brothers, who had heard the words equally well with Ethelberta, made no remark to her upon them, assuming that they referred to some peculiar system of courtship adopted in high life, with which they had rightly no concern.

Ethelberta ostensibly continued her business of tutoring the young workmen just as before, though every emotion in her had been put on the alert by this discovery. She had known that Neigh admired her; yet his presumption in uttering such a remark as he was reported to have uttered, confidentially or otherwise, nearly took away her breath. Perhaps it was not altogether disagreeable to have her breath so taken away.

'I mean to marry that lady.' She whispered the words to herself twenty times in the course of the afternoon. Sol and Dan were left considerably longer to their private perceptions of the false and true in art than they had been earlier in the day.

When she reached home Ethelberta was still far removed in her reflections; and it was noticed afterwards that about this time in her career her openness of manner entirely deserted her. She mostly was silent as to her thoughts, and she wore an air of unusual stillness. It was the silence and stillness of a starry sky, where all is force and motion. This deep undecipherable habit sometimes suggested, though it did not reveal, Ethelberta's busy brain to her sisters, and they said to one another, 'I cannot think what's coming to Berta: she is not so nice as she used to be.'

The evening under notice was passed desultorily enough after the discovery of Neigh's self-assured statement. Among other things that she did after dark, while still musingly examining the probabilities of the report turning out true, was to wander to the large attic where the children slept, a frequent habit of hers at night, to learn if they were snug and comfortable. They were talking now from bed to bed, the person under discussion being herself. Herself seemed everywhere to-day.

'I know that she is a fairy,' Myrtle was insisting, 'because she must be, to have such pretty things in her house, and wear silk dresses such as mother and we and Picotee haven't got, and have money to give us whenever we want it.'

'Emmeline says perhaps she knows the fairy's godmother, and is not a fairy herself, because Berta is too tall for a real fairy.'

'She must be one; for when there was a notch burnt in the hem of my pretty blue frock she said it should be gone in the morning if I would go to bed and not cry; and in the morning it was gone, and all nice and straight as new.'

Ethelberta was recalling to mind how she had sat up and repaired the damage alluded to by cutting off half an inch of the skirt all round and hemming it anew, when the breathing of the children became regular, and they fell asleep. Here were bright little minds ready for a training,

which without money and influence she could never give them. The wisdom which knowledge brings, and the power which wisdom may bring, she had always assumed would be theirs in her dreams for their social elevation. By what means were these things to be ensured to them if her skill in bread-winning should fail her? Would not a well-contrived marriage be of service? She covered and tucked in one more closely, lifted another upon the pillow and straightened the soft limbs to an easy position; then sat down by the window and looked out at the flashing stars. Thoughts of Neigh's audacious statement returned again upon Ethelberta. He had said that he meant to marry her. Of what standing was the man who had uttered
such an intention respecting one to whom a politic marriage had become almost a necessity of existence?

She had often heard Neigh speak indefinitely of some estate--'my little place' he had called it--which he had purchased no very long time ago. All she knew was that its name was Farnfield, that it lay thirty or forty miles out of London in a south-westerly direction, a railway station in the district bearing the same name, so that there was probably a village or small town adjoining. Whether the dignity of this landed property was that of domain, farmstead, allotment, or garden-plot, Ethelberta had not the slightest conception. She was almost certain that Neigh never lived there, but that might signify nothing. The exact size and value of the estate would, she mused, be curious, interesting, and almost necessary information to her who must become mistress of it were she to allow him to carry out his singularly cool and crude, if tender, intention.

Moreover, its importance would afford a very good random sample of his worldly substance throughout, from which alone, after all, could the true spirit and worth and seriousness of his words be apprehended. Impecuniosity may revel in unqualified vows and brim over with confessions as blithely as a bird of May, but such careless pleasures are not for the solvent, whose very dreams are negotiable, and are expressed with due care accordingly.

That Neigh had used the words she had far more than prima-facie appearances for believing. Neigh's own conduct towards her, though peculiar rather than devoted, found in these words alone a reasonable key. But, supposing the estate to be such a verbal hallucination as, for instance, hers had been at Arrowthorne, when her poor, unprogressive, hopelessly impracticable Christopher came there to visit her, and was so wonderfully undeceived about her social standing: what a fiasco, and what a cuckoo-cry would his utterances about marriage seem then. Christopher had often told her of his expectations from 'Arrowthorne Lodge,' and of the blunders that had resulted in consequence. Had not Ethelberta's affection for Christopher partaken less of lover's passion than of old-established tutelary tenderness she might have been reminded by this reflection of the transcendent fidelity he had shown under that trial--as severe a trial, considering the abnormal, almost morbid, development of the passion for position in present-day society, as can be prepared for men who move in the ordinary, unheroic channels of life.

By the following evening the consideration of this possibility, that

Neigh's position might furnish scope for such a disillusive discovery by herself as hers had afforded to Christopher, decoyed Ethelberta into a curious little scheme. She was piqued into a practical undertaking by the man who could say to his friend with such sangfroid, 'I mean to marry that lady.'

Merely telling Picotee to prepare for an evening excursion, of which she was to talk to no one, Ethelberta made ready likewise, and they left the house in a cab about half-an-hour before sunset, and drove to the Waterloo Station.

With the decline and departure of the sun a fog gathered itself out of the low meadow-land that bordered the railway as they went along towards the west, stretching over it like a placid lake, till at the end of the journey, the mist became generally pervasive, though not dense. Avoiding observation as much as they conveniently could, the two sisters walked from the long wooden shed which formed the station here, into the rheumy air and along the road to the open country. Picotee occasionally questioned Ethelberta on the object of the strange journey: she did not question closely, being satisfied that in such sure hands as Ethelberta's she was safe.

Deeming it unwise to make any inquiry just yet beyond the simple one of the way to Farnfield, Ethelberta led her companion along a newly-fenced road across a heath. In due time they came to an ornamental gate with a curved sweep of wall on each side, signifying the entrance to some

enclosed property or other. Ethelberta, being quite free from any digested plan for encouraging Neigh in his resolve to wive, was startled to find a hope in her that this very respectable beginning before their eyes was the entrance to the Farnfield property: that she hoped it was nevertheless unquestionable. Just beyond lay a turnpike-house, where was dimly visible a woman in the act of putting up a shutter to the front window.

Compelled by this time to come to special questions, Ethelberta instructed Picotee to ask of this person if the place they had just passed was the entrance to Farnfield Park. The woman replied that it was. Directly she had gone indoors Ethelberta turned back again towards the park gate.

'What have we come for, Berta?' said Picotee, as she turned also.

'I'll tell you some day,' replied her sister.

It was now much past eight o'clock, and, from the nature of the evening, dusk. The last stopping up-train was about ten, so that half-an-hour could well be afforded for looking round. Ethelberta went to the gate, which was found to be fastened by a chain and padlock.

'Ah, the London season,' she murmured.

There was a wicket at the side, and they entered. An avenue of young fir

trees three or four feet in height extended from the gate into the mist, and down this they walked. The drive was not in very good order, and the two women were frequently obliged to walk on the grass to avoid the rough stones in the carriage-way. The double line of young firs now abruptly terminated, and the road swept lower, bending to the right, immediately in front being a large lake, calm and silent as a second sky. They could hear from somewhere on the margin the purl of a weir, and around were clumps of shrubs, araucarias and deodars being the commonest.

Ethelberta could not resist being charmed with the repose of the spot, and hastened on with curiosity to reach the other side of the pool, where, by every law of manorial topography, the mansion would be situate. The fog concealed all objects beyond a distance of twenty yards or thereabouts, but it was nearly full moon, and though the orb was hidden, a pale diffused light enabled them to see objects in the foreground. Reaching the other side of the lake the drive enlarged itself most legitimately to a large oval, as for a sweep before a door, a pile of rockwork standing in the midst.

But where should have been the front door of a mansion was simply a rough rail fence, about four feet high. They drew near and looked over.

In the enclosure, and on the site of the imaginary house, was an extraordinary group. It consisted of numerous horses in the last stage of decrepitude, the animals being such mere skeletons that at first Ethelberta hardly recognized them to be horses at all; they seemed rather

to be specimens of some attenuated heraldic animal, scarcely thick enough through the body to throw a shadow: or enlarged castings of the fire-dog of past times. These poor creatures were endeavouring to make a meal from herbage so trodden and thin that scarcely a wholesome blade remained; the little that there was consisted of the sourer sorts common on such sandy soils, mingled with tufts of heather and sprouting ferns.

'Why have we come here, dear Berta?' said Picotee, shuddering.

'I hardly know,' said Ethelberta.

Adjoining this enclosure was another and smaller one, formed of high boarding, within which appeared to be some sheds and outhouses. Ethelberta looked through the crevices, and saw that in the midst of the yard stood trunks of trees as if they were growing, with branches also extending, but these were sawn off at the points where they began to be flexible, no twigs or boughs remaining. Each torso was not unlike a huge hat-stand, and suspended to the pegs and prongs were lumps of some substance which at first she did not recognize; they proved to be a chronological sequel to the previous scene. Horses' skulls, ribs, quarters, legs, and other joints were hung thereon, the whole forming a huge open-air larder emitting not too sweet a smell.

But what Stygian sound was this? There had arisen at the moment upon the

mute and sleepy air a varied howling from a hundred tongues. It had

burst from a spot close at hand--a low wooden building by a stream which fed the lake--and reverberated for miles. No further explanation was required.

'We are close to a kennel of hounds,' said Ethelberta, as Picotee held tightly to her arm. 'They cannot get out, so you need not fear. They have a horrid way of suddenly beginning thus at different hours of the night, for no apparent reason: though perhaps they hear us. These poor horses are waiting to be killed for their food.'

The experience altogether, from its intense melancholy, was very depressing, almost appalling to the two lone young women, and they quickly retraced their footsteps. The pleasant lake, the purl of the weir, the rudimentary lawns, shrubberies, and avenue, had changed their character quite. Ethelberta fancied at that moment that she could not have married Neigh, even had she loved him, so horrid did his belongings appear to be. But for many other reasons she had been gradually feeling within this hour that she would not go out of her way at a beck from a man whose interest was so unimpassioned.

Thinking no more of him as a possible husband she ceased to be afraid to make inquiries about the peculiarities of his possessions. In the high-road they came on a local man, resting from wheeling a wheelbarrow, and Ethelberta asked him, with the air of a countrywoman, who owned the estate across the road.

'The man owning that is one of the name of Neigh,' said the native, wiping his face. ''Tis a family that have made a very large fortune by the knacker business and tanning, though they be only sleeping partners in it now, and live like lords. Mr. Neigh was going to pull down the old huts here, and improve the place and build a mansion--in short, he went so far as to have the grounds planted, and the roads marked out, and the fish-pond made, and the place christened Farnfield Park; but he did no more. "I shall never have a wife," he said, "so why should I want a house to put her in?" He's a terrible hater of women, I hear, particularly the lower class.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes, and since then he has let half the land to the Honourable Mr. Mountclere, a brother of Lord Mountclere's. Mr. Mountclere wanted the spot for a kennel, and as the land is too poor and sandy for cropping, Mr. Neigh let him have it. 'Tis his hounds that you hear howling.'

They passed on. 'Berta, why did we come down here?' said Picotee.

'To see the nakedness of the land. It was a whim only, and as it will end in nothing, it is not worth while for me to make further explanation.'

It was with a curious sense of renunciation that Ethelberta went homeward. Neigh was handsome, grim-natured, rather wicked, and an

indifferentist; and these attractions interested her as a woman. But the news of this evening suggested to Ethelberta that herself and Neigh were too nearly cattle of one colour for a confession on the matter of lineage to be well received by him; and without confidence of every sort on the nature of her situation, she was determined to contract no union at all. The sympathy of unlikeness might lead the scion of some family, hollow and fungous with antiquity, and as yet unmarked by a mesalliance, to be won over by her story; but the antipathy of resemblance would be ineradicable.