

28. ETHELBERTA'S--MR. CHICKEREL'S ROOM

The question of Neigh or no Neigh had reached a pitch of insistence which no longer permitted of dallying, even by a popular beauty. His character was becoming defined to Ethelberta as something very differently composed from that of her first imagining. She had set him down to be a man whose external in excitability owed nothing to self-repression, but stood as the natural surface of the mass within. Neigh's urban torpor, she said, might have been in the first instance produced by art, but, were it thus, it had gone so far as to permeate him. This had been disproved, first surprisingly, by his reported statement; wondrously, in the second place, by his call upon her and sudden proposal; thirdly, to a degree simply astounding, by what had occurred in the city that day. For Neigh, before the fervour had subsided which was produced in him by her look and general power while reading 'Paradise Lost,' found himself alone with her in a nook outside the church, and there had almost demanded her promise to be his wife. She had replied by asking for time, and idly offering him the petals of her rose, that had shed themselves in her hand. Neigh, in taking them, pressed her fingers more warmly than she thought she had given him warrant for, which offended her. It was certainly a very momentary affair, and when it was over seemed to surprise himself almost as much as it had vexed her; but it had reminded her of one truth which she was in danger of forgetting. The town gentleman was not half so far removed from Sol and Dan, and the hard-handed order in general, in his passions as in his philosophy. He still continued to be the male of his

species, and when the heart was hot with a dream Pall Mall had much the same aspect as Wessex.

Well, she had not accepted him yet; indeed, for the moment they were in a pet with one another. Yet that might soon be cleared off, and then recurred the perpetual question, would the advantage that might accrue to her people by her marriage be worth the sacrifice? One palliative feature must be remembered when we survey the matrimonial ponderings of the poetess and romancer. What she contemplated was not meanly to ensnare a husband just to provide incomes for her and her family, but to find some man she might respect, who would maintain her in such a stage of comfort as should, by setting her mind free from temporal anxiety, enable her to further organize her talent, and provide incomes for them herself. Plenty of saleable originality was left in her as yet, but it was getting crushed under the rubbish of her necessities.

She was not sure that Neigh would stand the test of her revelations. It would be possible to lead him to marry her without revealing anything--the events of the last few days had shown her that--yet Ethelberta's honesty shrank from the safe course of holding her tongue. It might be pleasant to many a modern gentleman to find himself allied with a lady, none of whose ancestors had ever pandered to a court, lost an army, taken a bribe, oppressed a community, or broken a bank; but the added disclosure that, in avoiding these stains, her kindred had worked and continued to work with their hands for bread, might lead such an one to consider that the novelty was dearly purchased.

Ethelberta was, upon the whole, dissatisfied with her progress thus far. She had planned many things and fulfilled few. Had her father been by this time provided for and made independent of the world, as she had thought he might be, not only would her course with regard to Neigh be quite clear, but the impending awkwardness of dining with her father behind her chair could not have occurred. True, that was a small matter beside her regret for his own sake that he was still in harness; and a mere change of occupation would be but a tribute to a fastidiousness which he did not himself share. She had frequently tried to think of a vocation for him that would have a more dignified sound, and be less dangerously close to her own path: the post of care-taker at some provincial library, country stationer, registrar of births and deaths, and many others had been discussed and dismissed in face of the unmanageable fact that her father was serenely happy and comfortable as a butler, looking with dread at any hint of change short of perfect retirement. Since, then, she could not offer him this retirement, what right had she to interfere with his mode of life at all? In no other social groove on earth would he thrive as he throve in his present one, to which he had been accustomed from boyhood, and where the remuneration was actually greater than in professions ten times as stately in name.

For the rest, too, Ethelberta had indulged in hopes, the high education of the younger ones being the chief of these darling wishes. Picotee wanted looking to badly enough. Sol and Dan required no material help;

they had quickly obtained good places of work under a Pimlico builder; for though the brothers scarcely showed as yet the light-fingered deftness of London artizans, the want was in a measure compensated by their painstaking, and employers are far from despising country hands who bring with them strength, industry, and a desire to please. But their sister had other lines laid down for them than those of level progress; to start them some day as masters instead of men was a long-cherished wish of Ethelberta's.

Thus she had quite enough machinery in her hands to keep decently going, even were she to marry a man who would take a kindly view of her peculiar situation, and afford her opportunities of strengthening her powers for her kindred's good. But what would be the result if, eighteen months hence--the date at which her occupation of the house in Exonbury Crescent came to an end--she were still a widow, with no accumulated capital, her platform talents grown homely and stunted through narrow living, and her tender vein of poesy completely dispersed by it? To calmly relinquish the struggle at that point would have been the act of a stoic, but not of a woman, particularly when she considered the children, the hopes of her mother for them, and her own condition--though this was least--under the ironical cheers which would greet a slip back into the mire.

It here becomes necessary to turn for a moment to Master Joey Chickerel, Ethelberta's troublesome page and brother. The face of this juvenile was that of a Graeco-Roman satyr to the furthest degree of completeness. Viewed in front, the outer line of his upper lip rose in a double arch

nearly to his little round nostrils, giving an expression of a jollity so delicious to himself as to compel a perpetual drawing in of his breath. During half-laugh his lips parted in the middle, and remained closed at the corners, which were small round pits like his nostrils, the same form being repeated as dimples a little further back upon his cheek. The opening for each eye formed a sparkling crescent, both upper and under lid having the convexity upwards.

But during some few days preceding the dinner-party at the Doncastles' all this changed. The luxuriant curves departed, a compressed lineality was to be observed everywhere, the pupils of his eyes seemed flattened, and the carriage of his head was limp and sideways. This was a feature so remarkable and new in him that Picotee noticed it, and was lifted from the melancholy current of her own affairs in contemplating his.

'Well, what's the matter?' said Picotee.

'O--nothing,' said Joey.

'Nothing? How can you say so?'

'The world's a holler mockery--that's what I say.'

'Yes, so it is, to some; but not to you,' said Picotee, sighing.

'Don't talk argument, Picotee. I only hope you'll never feel what I feel

now. If it wasn't for my duties here I know what I'd do; I'd 'list, that's what I'd do. But having my position to fill here as the only responsible man-servant in the house, I can't leave.'

'Has anybody been beating you?'

'Beating! Do I look like a person who gets beatings? No, it is a madness,' said Joey, putting his hand upon his chest. 'The case is, I am in love.'

'O Joey, a boy no bigger than you are!' said Picotee reprovingly. Her personal interest in the passion, however, provoked her to inquire, in the next breath, 'Who is it? Do tell, Joey.'

'No bigger than I! What hev bigness to do with it? That's just like your old-fashioned notions. Bigness is no more wanted in courting nowadays than in soldiering or smoking or any other duty of man. Husbands

is rare; and a promising courter who means business will fetch his price in these times, big or small, I assure ye. I might have been engaged a dozen times over as far as the bigness goes. You should see what a miserable little fellow my rival is afore you talk like that. Now you know I've got a rival, perhaps you'll own there must be something in it.'

'Yes, that seems like the real thing. But who is the young woman?'

'Well, I don't mind telling you, Picotee. It is Mrs. Doncastle's new maid. I called to see father last night, and had supper there; and you should have seen how lovely she were--eating sparrowgrass sideways, as if she were born to it. But, of course, there's a rival--there always is--I might have known that, and I will crush him!'

'But Mrs. Doncastle's new maid--if that was she I caught a glimpse of the other day--is ever so much older than you--a dozen years.'

'What's that to a man in love? Pooh--I wish you would leave me, Picotee; I wants to be alone.'

A short time after this Picotee was in the company of Ethelberta, and she took occasion to mention Joey's attachment. Ethelberta grew exceedingly angry directly she heard of it.

'What a fearful nuisance that boy is becoming,' she said. 'Does father know anything of this?'

'I think not,' said Picotee. 'O no, he cannot; he would not allow any such thing to go on; she is so much older than Joey.'

'I should think he wouldn't allow it! The fact is I must be more strict about this growing friendliness between you all and the Doncastle servants. There shall be absolutely no intimacy or visiting of any sort. When father wants to see any of you he must come here, unless there is a

most serious reason for your calling upon him. Some disclosure or reference to me otherwise than as your mistress, will certainly be made else, and then I am ruined. I will speak to father myself about Joey's absurd nonsense this evening. I am going to see him on another matter.' And Ethelberta sighed. 'I am to dine there on Thursday,' she added.

'To dine there, Berta? Well, that is a strange thing! Why, father will be close to you!'

'Yes,' said Ethelberta quietly.

'How I should like to see you sitting at a grand dinner-table, among lordly dishes and shining people, and father about the room unnoticed! Berta, I have never seen a dinner-party in my life, and father said that I should some day; he promised me long ago.'

'How will he be able to carry out that, my dear child?' said Ethelberta, drawing her sister gently to her side.

'Father says that for an hour and a half the guests are quite fixed in the dining-room, and as unlikely to move as if they were trees planted round the table. Do let me go and see you, Berta,' Picotee added coaxingly. 'I would give anything to see how you look in the midst of elegant people talking and laughing, and you my own sister all the time, and me looking on like puss-in-the-corner.'

Ethelberta could hardly resist the entreaty, in spite of her recent resolution.

'We will leave that to be considered when I come home to-night,' she said. 'I must hear what father says.'

After dark the same evening a woman, dressed in plain black and wearing a hood, went to the servants' entrance of Mr. Doncastle's house, and inquired for Mr. Chickerel. Ethelberta found him in a room by himself, and on entering she closed the door behind her, and unwrapped her face.

'Can you sit with me a few minutes, father?' she said.

'Yes, for a quarter of an hour or so,' said the butler. 'Has anything happened? I thought it might be Picotee.'

'No. All's well yet. But I thought it best to see you upon one or two matters which are harassing me a little just now. The first is, that stupid boy Joey has got entangled in some way with the lady's-maid at this house; a ridiculous affair it must be by all account, but it is too serious for me to treat lightly. She will worm everything out of him, and a pretty business it will be then.'

'God bless my soul! why, the woman is old enough to be his mother! I have never heard a sound of it till now. What do you propose to do?'

'I have hardly thought: I cannot tell at all. But we will consider that after I have done. The next thing is, I am to dine here Thursday--that is, to-morrow.'

'You going to dine here, are you?' said her father in surprise. 'Dear me, that's news. We have a dinner-party to-morrow, but I was not aware that you knew our people.'

'I have accepted the invitation,' said Ethelberta. 'But if you think I had better stay away, I will get out of it by some means. Heavens! what does that mean--will anybody come in?' she added, rapidly pulling up her hood and jumping from the seat as the loud tones of a bell clanged forth in startling proximity.

'O no--it is all safe,' said her father. 'It is the area door--nothing to do with me. About the dinner: I don't see why you may not come. Of course you will take no notice of me, nor shall I of you. It is to be rather a large party. Lord What's-his-name is coming, and several good people.'

'Yes; he is coming to meet me, it appears. But, father,' she said more softly and slowly, 'how wrong it will be for me to come so close to you, and never recognize you! I don't like it. I wish you could have given up service by this time; it would have been so much less painful for us all round. I thought we might have been able to manage it somehow.'

'Nonsense, nonsense,' said Mr. Chickereel crossly. 'There is not the least reason why I should give up. I want to save a little money first. If you don't like me as I am, you must keep away from me. Don't be uneasy about my comfort; I am right enough, thank God. I can mind myself for many a year yet.'

Ethelberta looked at him with tears in her eyes, but she did not speak. She never could help crying when she met her father here.

'I have been in service now for more than seven-and-thirty years,' her father went on. 'It is an honourable calling; and why should you maintain me because you can earn a few pounds by your gifts, and an old woman left you her house and a few sticks of furniture? If she had left you any money it would have been a different thing, but as you have to work for every penny you get, I cannot think of it. Suppose I should agree to come and live with you, and then you should be ill, or such like, and I no longer able to help myself? O no, I'll stick where I am, for here I am safe as to food and shelter at any rate. Surely, Ethelberta, it is only right that I, who ought to keep you all, should at least keep your mother and myself? As to our position, that we cannot help; and I don't mind that you are unable to own me.'

'I wish I could own you--all of you.'

'Well, you chose your course, my dear; and you must abide by it. Having put your hand to the plough, it will be foolish to turn back.'

'It would, I suppose. Yet I wish I could get a living by some simple humble occupation, and drop the name of Petherwin, and be Berta Chickereel

again, and live in a green cottage as we used to do when I was small. I am miserable to a pitiable degree sometimes, and sink into regrets that I ever fell into such a groove as this. I don't like covert deeds, such as coming here to-night, and many are necessary with me from time to time. There is something without which splendid energies are a drug; and that is a cold heart. There is another thing necessary to energy, too--the power of distinguishing your visions from your reasonable forecasts when looking into the future, so as to allow your energy to lay hold of the forecasts only. I begin to have a fear that mother is right when she implies that I undertook to carry out visions and all. But ten of us are so many to cope with. If God Almighty had only killed off three-quarters of us when we were little, a body might have done something for the rest; but as we are it is hopeless!

'There is no use in your going into high doctrine like that,' said Chickereel. 'As I said before, you chose your course. You have begun to fly high, and you had better keep there.'

'And to do that there is only one way--that is, to do it surely, so that I have some groundwork to enable me to keep up to the mark in my profession. That way is marriage.'

'Marriage? Who are you going to marry?'

'God knows. Perhaps Lord Mountclere. Stranger things have happened.'

'Yes, so they have; though not many wretcheder things. I would sooner see you in your grave, Ethelberta, than Lord Mountclere's wife, or the wife of anybody like him, great as the honour would be.'

'Of course that was only something to say; I don't know the man even.'

'I know his valet. However, marry who you may, I hope you'll be happy, my dear girl. You would be still more divided from us in that event; but when your mother and I are dead, it will make little difference.'

Ethelberta placed her hand upon his shoulder, and smiled cheerfully.

'Now, father, don't despond. All will be well, and we shall see no such misfortune as that for many a year. Leave all to me. I am a rare hand at contrivances.'

'You are indeed, Berta. It seems to me quite wonderful that we should be living so near together and nobody suspect the relationship, because of the precautions you have taken.'

'Yet the precautions were rather Lady Petherwin's than mine, as you know. Consider how she kept me abroad. My marriage being so secret made it easy to cut off all traces, unless anybody had made it a special business

to search for them. That people should suspect as yet would be by far the more wonderful thing of the two. But we must, for one thing, have no visiting between our girls and the servants here, or they soon will suspect.'

Ethelberta then laid down a few laws on the subject, and, explaining the other details of her visit, told her father soon that she must leave him.

He took her along the passage and into the area. They were standing at the bottom of the steps, saying a few parting words about Picotee's visit to see the dinner, when a female figure appeared by the railing above, slipped in at the gate, and flew down the steps past the father and daughter. At the moment of passing she whispered breathlessly to him, 'Is that you, Mr. Chickere!'

'Yes,' said the butler.

She tossed into his arms a quantity of wearing apparel, and adding, 'Please take them upstairs for me--I am late,' rushed into the house.

'Good heavens, what does that mean?' said Ethelberta, holding her father's arm in her uneasiness.

'That's the new lady's-maid, just come in from an evening walk--that young scamp's sweetheart, if what you tell me is true. I don't yet know what her character is, but she runs neck and neck with time closer than

any woman I ever met. She stays out at night like this till the last moment, and often throws off her dashing courting-clothes in this way, as she runs down the steps, to save a journey to the top of the house to her room before going to Mrs. Doncastle's, who is in fact at this minute waiting for her. Only look here.' Chickereel gathered up a hat decked with feathers and flowers, a parasol, and a light muslin train-skirt, out of the pocket of the latter tumbling some long golden tresses of hair.

'What an extraordinary woman,' said Ethelberta. 'A perfect Cinderella. The idea of Joey getting desperate about a woman like that; no doubt she has just come in from meeting him.'

'No doubt--a blockhead. That's his taste, is it! I'll soon see if I can't cure his taste if it inclines towards Mrs. Menlove.'

'Mrs. what?'

'Menlove; that's her name. She came about a fortnight ago.'

'And is that Menlove--what shall we do!' exclaimed Ethelberta. 'The idea of the boy singling out her--why it is ruin to him, to me, and to us all!'

She hastily explained to her father that Menlove had been Lady Petherwin's maid and her own at some time before the death of her mother-in-law, that she had only stayed with them through a three months' tour

because of her flightiness, and hence had learnt nothing of Ethelberta's history, and probably had never thought at all about it. But nevertheless they were as well acquainted as a lady and her maid well could be in the time. 'Like all such doubtful characters,' continued Ethelberta, 'she was one of the cleverest and lightest-handed women we ever had about us. When she first came, my hair was getting quite weak; but by brushing it every day in a peculiar manner, and treating it as only she knew how, she brought it into splendid condition.'

'Well, this is the devil to pay, upon my life!' said Mr. Chickereel, with a miserable gaze at the bundle of clothes and the general situation at the same time. 'Unfortunately for her friendship, I have snubbed her two or three times already, for I don't care about her manner. You know she has a way of trading on a man's sense of honour till it puts him into an awkward position. She is perfectly well aware that, whatever scrape I find her out in, I shall not have the conscience to report her, because I am a man, and she is a defenceless woman; and so she takes advantage of one's feeling by making me, or either of the menservants, her bottle-holder, as you see she has done now.'

'This is all simply dreadful,' said Ethelberta. 'Joey is shrewd and trustworthy; but in the hands of such a woman as that! I suppose she did not recognize me.'

'There was no chance of that in the dark.'

'Well, I cannot do anything in it,' said she. 'I cannot manage Joey at all.'

'I will see if I can,' said Mr. Chickereel. 'Courting at his age, indeed--what shall we hear next!'

Chickereel then accompanied his daughter along the street till an empty cab passed them, and putting her into it he returned to the house again.