

## 29. ETHELBERTA'S DRESSING-ROOM--MR. DONCASTLE'S HOUSE

The dressing of Ethelberta for the dinner-party was an undertaking into which Picotee threw her whole skill as tirewoman. Her energies were brisker that day than they had been at any time since the Julians first made preparations for departure from town; for a letter had come to her from Faith, telling of their arrival at the old cathedral city, which was found to suit their inclinations and habits infinitely better than London; and that she would like Picotee to visit them there some day. Picotee felt, and so probably felt the writer of the letter, that such a visit would not be very practicable just now; but it was a pleasant idea, and for fastening dreams upon was better than nothing.

Such musings were encouraged also by Ethelberta's remarks as the dressing went on.

'We will have a change soon,' she said; 'we will go out of town for a few days. It will do good in many ways. I am getting so alarmed about the health of the children; their faces are becoming so white and thin and pinched that an old acquaintance would hardly know them; and they were so plump when they came. You are looking as pale as a ghost, and I daresay I am too. A week or two at Knollsea will see us right.'

'O, how charming!' said Picotee gladly.

Knollsea was a village on the coast, not very far from Melchester, the new home of Christopher; not very far, that is to say, in the eye of a sweetheart; but seeing that there was, as the crow flies, a stretch of thirty-five miles between the two places, and that more than one-third the distance was without a railway, an elderly gentleman might have considered their situations somewhat remote from each other.

'Why have you chosen Knollsea?' inquired Picotee.

'Because of aunt's letter from Rouen--have you seen it?'

'I did not read it through.'

'She wants us to get a copy of the register of her baptism; and she is not absolutely certain which of the parishes in and about Knollsea they were living in when she was born. Mother, being a year younger, cannot tell of course. First I thought of writing to the clergyman of each parish, but that would be troublesome, and might reveal the secret of my birth; but if we go down there for a few days, and take some lodgings, we shall be able to find out all about it at leisure. Gwendoline and Joey can attend to mother and the people downstairs, especially as father will look in every evening until he goes out of town, to see if they are getting on properly. It will be such a weight off my soul to slip away from acquaintances here.'

'Will it?'

'Yes. At the same time I ought not to speak so, for they have been very kind. I wish we could go to Rouen afterwards; aunt repeats her invitation as usual. However, there is time enough to think of that.'

Ethelberta was dressed at last, and, beholding the lonely look of poor Picotee when about to leave the room, she could not help having a sympathetic feeling that it was rather hard for her sister to be denied so small an enjoyment as a menial peep at a feast when she herself was to sit down to it as guest.

'If you still want to go and see the procession downstairs you may do so,' she said reluctantly; 'provided that you take care of your tongue when you come in contact with Menlove, and adhere to father's instructions as to how long you may stay. It may be in the highest degree unwise; but never mind, go.'

Then Ethelberta departed for the scene of action, just at the hour of the sun's lowest decline, when it was fading away, yellow and mild as candle-light, and when upper windows facing north-west reflected to persons in the street dissolving views of tawny cloud with brazen edges, the original picture of the same being hidden from sight by soiled walls and slaty slopes.

Before entering the presence of host and hostess, Ethelberta contrived to

exchange a few words with her father.

'In excellent time,' he whispered, full of paternal pride at the superb audacity of her situation here in relation to his. 'About half of them are come.'

'Mr. Neigh?'

'Not yet; he's coming.'

'Lord Mountclere?'

'Yes. He came absurdly early; ten minutes before anybody else, so that Mrs. D. could hardly get on her bracelets and things soon enough to scramble downstairs and receive him; and he's as nervous as a boy. Keep up your spirits, dear, and don't mind me.'

'I will, father. And let Picotee see me at dinner if you can. She is very anxious to look at me. She will be here directly.'

And Ethelberta, having been announced, joined the chamberful of assembled

guests, among whom for the present we lose sight of her.

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Meanwhile the evening outside the house was deepening in tone, and the lamps began to blink up. Her sister having departed, Picotee hastily arrayed herself in a little black jacket and chip hat, and tripped across the park to the same point. Chickereel had directed a maid-servant known as Jane to receive his humbler daughter and make her comfortable; and that friendly person, who spoke as if she had known Picotee five-and-twenty years, took her to the housekeeper's room, where the visitor deposited her jacket and hat, and rested awhile.

A quick-eyed, light-haired, slight-built woman came in when Jane had gone. 'Are you Miss Chickereel?' she said to Picotee.

'Yes,' said Picotee, guessing that this was Menlove, and fearing her a little.

'Jane tells me that you have come to visit your father, and would like to look at the company going to dinner. Well, they are not much to see, you know; but such as they are you are welcome to the sight of. Come along with me.'

'I think I would rather wait for father, if you will excuse me, please.'

'Your father is busy now; it is no use for you to think of saying anything to him.'

Picotee followed her guide up a back staircase to the height of several

flights, and then, crossing a landing, they descended to the upper part of the front stairs.

'Now look over the balustrade, and you will see them all in a minute,' said Mrs. Menlove. 'O, you need not be timid; you can look out as far as you like. We are all independent here; no slavery for us: it is not as it is in the country, where servants are considered to be of different blood and bone from their employers, and to have no eyes for anything but their work. Here they are coming.'

Picotee then had the pleasure of looking down upon a series of human crowns--some black, some white, some strangely built upon, some smooth and shining--descending the staircase in disordered column and great discomfort, their owners trying to talk, but breaking off in the midst of syllables to look to their footing. The young girl's eyes had not drooped over the handrail more than a few moments when she softly exclaimed, 'There she is, there she is! How lovely she looks, does she not?'

'Who?' said Mrs. Menlove.

Picotee recollected herself, and hastily drew in her impulses. 'My dear mistress,' she said blandly. 'That is she on Mr. Doncastle's arm. And look, who is that funny old man the elderly lady is helping downstairs?'

'He is our honoured guest, Lord Mountclere. Mrs. Doncastle will have him

all through the dinner, and after that he will devote himself to Mrs. Petherwin, your "dear mistress." He keeps looking towards her now, and no doubt thinks it a nuisance that she is not with him. Well, it is useless to stay here. Come a little further--we'll follow them.' Menlove began to lead the way downstairs, but Picotee held back.

'Won't they see us?' she said.

'No. And if they do, it doesn't matter. Mrs. Doncastle would not object in the least to the daughter of her respected head man being accidentally seen in the hall.'

They descended to the bottom and stood in the hall. 'O, there's father!' whispered Picotee, with childlike gladness, as Chickereel became visible to her by the door. The butler nodded to his daughter, and became again engrossed in his duties.

'I wish I could see her--my mistress--again,' said Picotee.

'You seem mightily concerned about your mistress,' said Menlove. 'Do you want to see if you have dressed her properly?'

'Yes, partly; and I like her, too. She is very kind to me.'

'You will have a chance of seeing her soon. When the door is nicely open you can look in for a moment. I must leave you now for a few minutes,

but I will come again.'

Menlove departed, and Picotee stood waiting. She wondered how Ethelberta was getting on, and whether she enjoyed herself as much as it seemed her duty to do in such a superbly hospitable place. Picotee then turned her attention to the hall, every article of furniture therein appearing worthy of scrutiny to her unaccustomed eyes. Here she walked and looked about for a long time till an excellent opportunity offered itself of seeing how affairs progressed in the dining-room.

Through the partly-opened door there became visible a sideboard which first attracted her attention by its richness. It was, indeed, a noticeable example of modern art-workmanship, in being exceptionally large, with curious ebony mouldings at different stages; and, while the heavy cupboard doors at the bottom were enriched with inlays of paler wood, other panels were decorated with tiles, as if the massive composition had been erected on the spot as part of the solid building. However, it was on a space higher up that Picotee's eyes and thoughts were fixed. In the great mirror above the middle ledge she could see reflected the upper part of the dining-room, and this suggested to her that she might see Ethelberta and the other guests reflected in the same way by standing on a chair, which, quick as thought, she did.

To Picotee's dazed young vision her beautiful sister appeared as the chief figure of a glorious pleasure-parliament of both sexes, surrounded by whole regiments of candles grouped here and there about the room. She



and her companions were seated before a large flowerbed, or small hanging garden, fixed at about the level of the elbow, the attention of all being concentrated rather upon the uninteresting margin of the bed, and upon each other, than on the beautiful natural objects growing in the middle, as it seemed to Picotee. In the ripple of conversation Ethelberta's clear voice could occasionally be heard, and her young sister could see that her eyes were bright, and her face beaming, as if divers social wants and looming penuriousness had never been within her experience. Mr.

Doncastle was quite absorbed in what she was saying. So was the queer old man whom Menlove had called Lord Mountclere.

'The dashing widow looks very well, does she not?' said a person at Picotee's elbow.

It was her conductor Menlove, now returned again, whom Picotee had quite forgotten.

'She will do some damage here to-night you will find,' continued Menlove.

'How long have you been with her?'

'O, a long time--I mean rather a short time,' stammered Picotee.

'I know her well enough. I was her maid once, or rather her mother-in-law's, but that was long before you knew her. I did not by any means find her so lovable as you seem to think her when I had to do with her at

close quarters. An awful flirt--awful. Don't you find her so?'

'I don't know.'

'If you don't yet you will know. But come down from your perch--the dining-room door will not be open again for some time--and I will show you about the rooms upstairs. This is a larger house than Mrs. Petherwin's, as you see. Just come and look at the drawing-rooms.'

Wishing much to get rid of Menlove, yet fearing to offend her, Picotee followed upstairs. Dinner was almost over by this time, and when they entered the front drawing-room a young man-servant and maid were there rekindling the lights.

'Now let's have a game of cat-and-mice,' said the maid-servant cheerily.

'There's plenty of time before they come up.'

'Agreed,' said Menlove promptly. 'You will play, will you not, Miss Chickerel?'

'No, indeed,' said Picotee, aghast.

'Never mind, then; you look on.'

Away then ran the housemaid and Menlove, and the young footman started at

their heels. Round the room, over the furniture, under the furniture, through the furniture, out of one window, along the balcony, in at another window, again round the room--so they glided with the swiftness of swallows and the noiselessness of ghosts.

Then the housemaid drew a jew's-harp from her pocket, and struck up a lively waltz sotto voce. The footman seized Menlove, who appeared nothing loth, and began spinning gently round the room with her, to the time of the fascinating measure

'Which fashion hails, from countesses to queens,  
And maids and valets dance behind the scenes.'

Picotee, who had been accustomed to unceiled country cottages all her life, wherein the scamper of a mouse is heard distinctly from floor to floor, exclaimed in a terrified whisper, at viewing all this, 'They'll hear you underneath, they'll hear you, and we shall all be ruined!'

'Not at all,' came from the cautious dancers. 'These are some of the best built houses in London--double floors, filled in with material that will deaden any row you like to make, and we make none. But come and have a turn yourself, Miss Chickere!'

The young man relinquished Menlove, and on the spur of the moment seized Picotee. Picotee flounced away from him in indignation, backing into a corner with ruffled feathers, like a pullet trying to appear a hen.

'How dare you touch me!' she said, with rounded eyes. 'I'll tell somebody downstairs of you, who'll soon see about it!'

'What a baby; she'll tell her father.'

'No I shan't; somebody you are all afraid of, that's who I'll tell.'

'Nonsense,' said Menlove; 'he meant no harm.'

Playtime was now getting short, and further antics being dangerous on that account, the performers retired again downstairs, Picotee of necessity following. Her nerves were screwed up to the highest pitch of uneasiness by the grotesque habits of these men and maids, who were quite unlike the country servants she had known, and resembled nothing so much

as pixies, elves, or gnomes, peeping up upon human beings from their shady haunts underground, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill--sometimes

doing heavy work, sometimes none; teasing and worrying with impish laughter half suppressed, and vanishing directly mortal eyes were bent on them. Separate and distinct from overt existence under the sun, this life could hardly be without its distinctive pleasures, all of them being more or less pervaded by thrills and titillations from games of hazard, and the perpetual risk of sensational surprises.

Long before this time Picotee had begun to be anxious to get home again,

but Menlove seemed particularly to desire her company, and pressed her to sit awhile, telling her young friend, by way of entertainment, of various extraordinary love adventures in which she had figured as heroine when travelling on the Continent. These stories had one and all a remarkable likeness in a certain point--Menlove was always unwilling to love the adorer, and the adorer was always unwilling to live afterwards on account of it.

'Ha-ha-ha!' in men's voices was heard from the distant dining-room as the two women went on talking.

'And then,' continued Menlove, 'there was that duel I was the cause of between the courier and the French valet. Dear me, what a trouble that was; yet I could do nothing to prevent it. This courier was a very handsome man--they are handsome sometimes.'

'Yes, they are. My aunt married one.'

'Did she? Where do they live?'

'They keep an hotel at Rouen,' murmured Picotee, in doubt whether this should have been told or not.

'Well, he used to follow me to the English Church every Sunday regularly, and I was so determined not to give my hand where my heart could never be, that I slipped out at the other door while he stood expecting me by

the one I entered. Here I met M. Pierre, when, as ill luck would have it, the other came round the corner, and seeing me talking to the valet, he challenged him at once.'

'Ha-ha-ha!' was heard again afar.

'Did they fight?' said Picotee.

'Yes, I believe they did. We left Nice the next day; but I heard some time after of a duel not many miles off, and although I could not get hold of the names, I make no doubt it was between those two gentlemen. I never knew which of them fell; poor fellow, whichever it was.'

'Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!' came from the dining-room.

'Whatever are those boozy men laughing at, I wonder?' said Menlove. 'They are always so noisy when the ladies have gone upstairs. Upon my soul, I'll run up and find out.'

'No, no, don't,' entreated Picotee, putting her hand on her entertainer's arm. 'It seems wrong; it is no concern of ours.'

'Wrong be hanged--anything on an impulse,' said Mrs. Menlove, skipping across the room and out of the door, which stood open, as did others in the house, the evening being sultry and oppressive.

Picotee waited in her seat until it occurred to her that she could escape the lady's-maid by going off into her father's pantry in her absence. But before this had been put into effect Menlove appeared again.

'Such fun as they are having up there,' she said. 'Somebody asked Mr. Neigh to tell a story which he had told at some previous time, but he was very reluctant to do so, and pretended he could not recollect it. Well, then, the other man--I could not distinguish him by his voice--began telling it, to prompt Mr. Neigh's memory; and, as far as I could understand, it was about some lady who thought Mr. Neigh was in love with her, and, to find whether he was worth accepting or not, she went with her maid at night to see his estate, and wandered about and got lost, and was frightened, and I don't know what besides. Then Mr. Neigh laughed too, and said he liked such common sense in a woman. No names were mentioned, but I fancy, from the awkwardness of Mr. Neigh at being compelled to tell it, that the lady is one of those in the drawing-room. I should like to know which it was.'

'I know--have heard something about it,' said Picotee, blushing with anger. 'It was nothing at all like that. I wonder Mr. Neigh had the audacity ever to talk of the matter, and to misrepresent it so greatly!'

'Tell all about it, do,' said Menlove.

'O no,' said Picotee. 'I promised not to say a word.'

'It is your mistress, I expect.'

'You may think what you like; but the lady is anything but a mistress of mine.'

The flighty Menlove pressed her to tell the whole story, but finding this useless the subject was changed. Presently her father came in, and, taking no notice of Menlove, told his daughter that she had been called for. Picotee very readily put on her things, and on going outside found Joey awaiting her. Mr. Chickereel followed closely, with sharp glances from the corner of his eye, and it was plain from Joey's nervous manner of lingering in the shadows of the area doorway instead of entering the house, that the butler had in some way set himself to prevent all communion between the fair lady's-maid and his son for that evening at least.

He watched Picotee and her brother off the premises, and the pair went on their way towards Exonbury Crescent, very few words passing between them.

Picotee's thoughts had turned to the proposed visit to Knollsea, and Joey was sulky under disappointment and the blank of thwarted purposes.