

30. ON THE HOUSETOP

'Picotee, are you asleep?' Ethelberta whispered softly at dawn the next morning, by the half-opened door of her sister's bedroom.

'No, I keep waking, it is so warm.'

'So do I. Suppose we get up and see the sun rise. The east is filling with flame.'

'Yes, I should like it,' said Picotee.

The restlessness which had brought Ethelberta hither in slippers and dressing-gown at such an early hour owed its origin to another cause than the warmth of the weather; but of that she did not speak as yet.

Picotee's room was an attic, with windows in the roof--a chamber dismal enough at all times, and very shadowy now. While Picotee was wrapping up, Ethelberta placed a chair under the window, and mounting upon this they stepped outside, and seated themselves within the parapet.

The air was as clear and fresh as on a mountain side; sparrows chattered, and birds of a species unsuspected at later hours could be heard singing in the park hard by, while here and there on ridges and flats a cat might be seen going calmly home from the devilries of the night to resume the amiabilities of the day.

'I am so sorry I was asleep when you reached home,' said Picotee. 'I was so anxious to tell you something I heard of, and to know what you did; but my eyes would shut, try as I might, and then I tried no longer. Did you see me at all, Berta?'

'Never once. I had an impression that you were there. I fancied you were from father's carefully vacuous look whenever I glanced at his face. But were you careful about what you said, and did you see Menlove? I felt all the time that I had done wrong in letting you come; the gratification to you was not worth the risk to me.'

'I saw her, and talked to her. But I am certain she suspected nothing. I enjoyed myself very much, and there was no risk at all.'

'I am glad it is no worse news. However, you must not go there again: upon that point I am determined.'

'It was a good thing I did go, all the same. I'll tell you why when you have told me what happened to you.'

'Nothing of importance happened to me.'

'I expect you got to know the lord you were to meet?'

'O yes--Lord Mountclere.'

'And it's dreadful how fond he is of you--quite ridiculously taken up with you--I saw that well enough. Such an old man, too; I wouldn't have him for the world!'

'Don't jump at conclusions so absurdly, Picotee. Why wouldn't you have him for the world?'

'Because he is old enough to be my grandfather, and yours too.'

'Indeed he is not; he is only middle-aged.'

'O Berta! Sixty-five at least.'

'He may or may not be that; and if he is, it is not old. He is so entertaining that one forgets all about age in connection with him.'

'He laughs like this--"Hee-hee-hee!"' Picotee introduced as much antiquity into her face as she could by screwing it up and suiting the action to the word.

'This very odd thing occurred,' said Ethelberta, to get Picotee off the track of Lord Mountclere's peculiarities, as it seemed. 'I was saying to Mr. Neigh that we were going to Knollsea for a time, feeling that he would not be likely to know anything about such an out-of-the-way place, when Lord Mountclere, who was near, said, "I shall be at Enckworth Court

in a few days, probably at the time you are at Knollsea. The Imperial Archaeological Association holds its meetings in that part of Wessex this season, and Corvsgate Castle, near Knollsea, is one of the places on our list." Then he hoped I should be able to attend. Did you ever hear anything so strange? Now, I should like to attend very much, not on Lord Mountclere's account, but because such gatherings are interesting, and I have never been to one; yet there is this to be considered, would it be right for me to go without a friend to such a place? Another point is, that we shall live in menagerie style at Knollsea for the sake of the children, and we must do it economically in case we accept Aunt Charlotte's invitation to Rouen; hence, if he or his friends find us out there it will be awkward for me. So the alternative is Knollsea or some other place for us.'

'Let it be Knollsea, now we have once settled it,' said Picotee anxiously. 'I have mentioned to Faith Julian that we shall be there.'

'Mentioned it already! You must have written instantly.'

'I had a few minutes to spare, and I thought I might as well write.'

'Very well; we will stick to Knollsea,' said Ethelberta, half in doubt.

'Yes--otherwise it will be difficult to see about aunt's baptismal certificate. We will hope nobody will take the trouble to pry into our household. . . . And now, Picotee, I want to ask you something--something very serious. How would you like me to marry Mr. Neigh?'

Ethelberta could not help laughing with a faint shyness as she asked the question under the searching east ray. 'He has asked me to marry him,' she continued, 'and I want to know what you would say to such an arrangement. I don't mean to imply that the event is certain to take place; but, as a mere supposition, what do you say to it, Picotee?' Ethelberta was far from putting this matter before Picotee for advice or opinion; but, like all people who have an innate dislike to hole-and-corner policy, she felt compelled to speak of it to some one.

'I should not like him for you at all,' said Picotee vehemently. 'I would rather you had Mr. Ladywell.'

'O, don't name him!'

'I wouldn't have Mr. Neigh at any price, nevertheless. It is about him that I was going to tell you.' Picotee proceeded to relate Menlove's account of the story of Ethelberta's escapade, which had been dragged from Neigh the previous evening by the friend to whom he had related it before he was so enamoured of Ethelberta as to regard that performance as a positive virtue in her. 'Nobody was told, or even suspected, who the lady of the anecdote was,' Picotee concluded; 'but I knew instantly, of course, and I think it very unfortunate that we ever went to that dreadful ghostly estate of his, Berta.'

Ethelberta's face heated with mortification. She had no fear that Neigh

had told names or other particulars which might lead to her identification by any friend of his, and she could make allowance for bursts of confidence; but there remained the awkward fact that he himself knew her to be the heroine of the episode. What annoyed her most was that Neigh could ever have looked upon her indiscretion as a humorous incident, which he certainly must have done at some time or other to account for his telling it. Had he been angry with her, or sneered at her for going, she could have forgiven him; but to see her manoeuvre in the light of a joke, to use it as illustrating his grim theory of womankind, and neither to like nor to dislike her the more for it from first to last, this was to treat her with a cynicism which was intolerable. That Neigh's use of the incident as a stock anecdote ceased long before he had decided to ask her to marry him she had no doubt, but it showed that his love for her was of that sort in which passion makes war upon judgment, and prevails in spite of will. Moreover, he might have been speaking ironically when he alluded to the act as a virtue in a woman, which seemed the more likely when she remembered his cool bearing towards her in the drawing-room. Possibly it was an antipathetic reaction, induced by the renewed recollection of her proceeding.

'I will never marry Mr. Neigh!' she said, with decision. 'That shall settle it. You need not think over any such contingency, Picotee. He is one of those horrid men who love with their eyes, the remainder part of him objecting all the time to the feeling; and even if his objections prove the weaker, and the man marries, his general nature conquers again

by the time the wedding trip is over, so that the woman is miserable at last, and had better not have had him at all.'

'That applies still more to Lord Mountclere, to my thinking. I never saw anything like the look of his eyes upon you.'

'O no, no--you understand nothing if you say that. But one thing be sure of, there is no marriage likely to take place between myself and Mr. Neigh. I have longed for a sound reason for disliking him, and now I have got it. Well, we will talk no more of this--let us think of the nice little pleasure we have in store--our stay at Knollsea. There we will be as free as the wind. And when we are down there, I can drive across to Corvsgate Castle if I wish to attend the Imperial Association meeting, and nobody will know where I came from. Knollsea is not more than five miles from the Castle, I think.'

Picotee was by this time beginning to yawn, and Ethelberta did not feel nearly so wakeful as she had felt half-an-hour earlier. Tall and swarthy columns of smoke were now soaring up from the kitchen chimneys around, spreading horizontally when at a great height, and forming a roof of haze which was turning the sun to a copper colour, and by degrees spoiling the sweetness of the new atmosphere that had rolled in from the country during the night, giving it the usual city smell. The resolve to make this rising the beginning of a long and busy day, which should set them beforehand with the rest of the world, weakened with their growing weariness, and an impulse to lie down just for a quarter of an hour

before dressing, ended in a sound sleep that did not relinquish its hold upon them till late in the forenoon.