

33. THE ENGLISH CHANNEL--NORMANDY

On Monday morning the little steamer Speedwell made her appearance round

the promontory by Knollsea Bay, to take in passengers for the transit to Cherbourg. Breezes the freshest that could blow without verging on keenness flew over the quivering deeps and shallows; and the sunbeams pierced every detail of barrow, path and rabbit-run upon the lofty convexity of down and waste which shut in Knollsea from the world to the west.

They left the pier at eight o'clock, taking at first a short easterly course to avoid a sinister ledge of limestones jutting from the water like crocodile's teeth, which first obtained notoriety in English history through being the spot whereon a formidable Danish fleet went to pieces a thousand years ago. At the moment that the Speedwell turned to enter upon the direct course, a schooner-yacht, whose sheets gleamed like bridal satin, loosed from a remoter part of the bay; continuing to bear off, she cut across the steamer's wake, and took a course almost due southerly, which was precisely that of the Speedwell. The wind was very favourable for the yacht, blowing a few points from north in a steady pressure on her quarter, and, having been built with every modern appliance that shipwrights could offer, the schooner found no difficulty in getting abreast, and even ahead, of the steamer, as soon as she had escaped the shelter of the hills.

The more or less parallel courses of the vessels continued for some time without causing any remark among the people on board the Speedwell. At length one noticed the fact, and another; and then it became the general topic of conversation in the group upon the bridge, where Ethelberta, her hair getting frizzed and her cheeks carnationed by the wind, sat upon a camp-stool looking towards the prow.

'She is bound for Guernsey,' said one. 'In half-an-hour she will put about for a more westerly course, you'll see.'

'She is not for Guernsey or anywhere that way,' said an acquaintance, looking through his glass. 'If she is out for anything more than a morning cruise, she is bound for our port. I should not wonder if she is crossing to get stocked, as most of them do, to save the duty on her wine and provisions.'

'Do you know whose yacht it is?'

'I do not.'

Ethelberta looked at the light leaning figure of the pretty schooner, which seemed to skate along upon her bilge and make white shavings of all the sea that touched her. She at first imagined that this might be the yacht Neigh had arrived in at the end of the previous week, for she knew that he came as one of a yachting party, and she had noticed no other

boat of that sort in the bay since his arrival. But as all his party had gone ashore and not yet returned, she was surprised to see the supposed vessel here. To add to her perplexity, she could not be positive, now that it came to a real nautical query, whether the craft of Neigh's friends had one mast or two, for she had caught but a fragmentary view of the topsail over the apple-trees.

'Is that the yacht which has been lying at Knollsea for the last few days?' she inquired of the master of the Speedwell, as soon as she had an opportunity.

The master warmed beneath his copper-coloured rind. 'O no, miss; that one you saw was a cutter--a smaller boat altogether,' he replied. 'Built on the sliding-keel principle, you understand, miss--and red below her water-line, if you noticed. This is Lord Mountclere's yacht--the Fawn. You might have seen her re'ching in round Old-Harry Rock this morning afore we started.'

'Lord Mountclere's?'

'Yes--a nobleman of this neighbourhood. But he don't do so much at yachting as he used to in his younger days. I believe he's aboard this morning, however.'

Ethelberta now became more absorbed than ever in their ocean comrade, and

watched its motions continually. The schooner was considerably in advance of them by this time, and seemed to be getting by degrees out of their course. She wondered if Lord Mountclere could be really going to Cherbourg: if so, why had he said nothing about the trip to her when she spoke of her own approaching voyage thither? The yacht changed its character in her eyes; losing the indefinite interest of the unknown, it acquired the charm of a riddle on motives, of which the alternatives were, had Lord Mountclere's journey anything to do with her own, or had it not? Common probability pointed to the latter supposition; but the time of starting, the course of the yacht, and recollections of Lord Mountclere's homage, suggested the more extraordinary possibility.

She went across to Cornelia. 'The man who handed us on board--didn't I see him speaking to you this morning?' she said.

'O yes,' said Cornelia. 'He asked if my mistress was the popular Mrs. Petherwin?'

'And you told him, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'What made you do that, Cornelia?'

'I thought I might: I couldn't help it. When I went through the toll-gate, such a gentlemanly-looking man asked me if he should help me to

carry the things to the end of the pier; and as we went on together he said he supposed me to be Mrs. Petherwin's maid. I said, "Yes." The two men met afterwards, so there would ha' been no good in my denying it to one of 'em.'

'Who was this gentlemanly person?'

'I asked the other man that, and he told me one of Lord Mountclere's upper servants. I knew then there was no harm in having been civil to him. He is well-mannered, and talks splendid language.'

'That yacht you see on our right hand is Lord Mountclere's property. If I do not mistake, we shall have her closer by-and-by, and you may meet your gentlemanly friend again. Be careful how you talk to him.'

Ethelberta sat down, thought of the meeting at Corvsgate Castle, of the dinner-party at Mr. Doncastle's, of the strange position she had there been in, and then of her father. She suddenly reproached herself for thoughtlessness; for in her pocket lay a letter from him, which she had taken from the postman that morning at the moment of coming from the door, and in the hurry of embarking had forgotten ever since. Opening it quickly, she read:--

'MY DEAR ETHELBERTA,--Your letter reached me yesterday, and I called round at Exonbury Crescent in the afternoon, as you wished. Everything is going on right there, and you have no occasion to be anxious about

them. I do not leave town for another week or two, and by the time I am gone Sol and Dan will have returned from Paris, if your mother and Gwendoline want any help: so that you need not hurry back on their account.

'I have something else to tell you, which is not quite so satisfactory, and it is this that makes me write at once; but do not be alarmed. It began in this way. A few nights after the dinner-party here I was determined to find out if there was any truth in what you had been told about that boy, and having seen Menlove go out as usual after dark, I followed her. Sure enough, when she had got into the park, up came master Joe, smoking a cigar. As soon as they had met I went towards them, and Menlove, seeing somebody draw nigh, began to edge off, when the blockhead said, "Never mind, my love, it is only the old man." Being very provoked with both of them, though she was really the most to blame, I gave him some smart cuts across the shoulders with my cane, and told him to go home, which he did with a flea in his ear, the rascal. I believe I have cured his courting tricks for some little time.

'Well, Menlove then walked by me, quite cool, as if she were merely a lady passing by chance at the time, which provoked me still more, knowing the whole truth of it, and I could not help turning upon her and saying, "You, madam, ought to be served the same way." She replied in very haughty words, and I walked away, saying that I had something better to do than argue with a woman of her character at

that hour of the evening. This so set her up that she followed me home, marched into my pantry, and told me that if I had been more careful about my manners in calling her a bad character, it might have been better both for me and my stuck-up daughter--a daw in eagle's plumes--and so on. Now it seems that she must have coaxed something out of Joey about you--for what lad in the world could be a match for a woman of her experience and arts! I hope she will do you no serious damage; but I tell you the whole state of affairs exactly as they are, that you may form your own opinions. After all, there is no real disgrace, for none of us have ever done wrong, but have worked honestly for a living. However, I will let you know if anything serious really happens.'

This was all that her father said on the matter, the letter concluding with messages to the children and directions from their mother with regard to their clothes.

Ethelberta felt very distinctly that she was in a strait; the old impression that, unless her position were secured soon, it never would be secured, returned with great force. A doubt whether it was worth securing would have been very strong ere this, had not others besides herself been concerned in her fortunes. She looked up from her letter, and beheld the pertinacious yacht; it led her up to a conviction that therein lay a means and an opportunity.

Nothing further of importance occurred in crossing. Ethelberta's head

ached after a while, and Cornelia's healthy cheeks of red were found to have diminished their colour to the size of a wafer and the quality of a stain. The Speedwell entered the breakwater at Cherbourg to find the schooner already in the roadstead; and by the time the steamer was brought up Ethelberta could see the men on board the yacht clewing up and making things snug in a way from which she inferred that they were not going to leave the harbour again that day. With the aspect of a fair galleon that could easily out-manoeuve her persevering buccaneer, Ethelberta passed alongside. Could it be possible that Lord Mountclere had on her account fixed this day for his visit across the Channel?

'Well, I would rather be haunted by him than by Mr. Neigh,' she said; and began laying her plans so as to guard against inconvenient surprises.

The next morning Ethelberta was at the railway station, taking tickets for herself and Cornelia, when she saw an old yet sly and somewhat merry-faced Englishman a little way off. He was attended by a younger man, who appeared to be his valet.

'I will exchange one of these tickets,' she said to the clerk, and having done so she went to Cornelia to inform her that it would after all be advisable for them to travel separate, adding, 'Lord Mountclere is in the station, and I think he is going on by our train. Remember, you are my maid again now. Is not that the gentlemanly man who assisted you yesterday?' She signified the valet as she spoke.

'It is,' said Cornelia.

When the passengers were taking their seats, and Ethelberta was thinking whether she might not after all enter a second-class with Cornelia instead of sitting solitary in a first because of an old man's proximity, she heard a shuffling at her elbow, and the next moment found that he was overtly observing her as if he had not done so in secret at all. She at once gave him an unsurprised gesture of recognition. 'I saw you some time ago; what a singular coincidence,' she said.

'A charming one,' said Lord Mountclere, smiling a half-minute smile, and making as if he would take his hat off and would not quite. 'Perhaps we must not call it coincidence entirely,' he continued; 'my journey, which I have contemplated for some time, was not fixed this week altogether without a thought of your presence on the road--hee-hee! Do you go far to-day?'

'As far as Caen,' said Ethelberta.

'Ah! That's the end of my day's journey, too,' said Lord Mountclere. They parted and took their respective places, Lord Mountclere choosing a compartment next to the one Ethelberta was entering, and not, as she had expected, attempting to join her.

Now she had instantly fancied when the viscount was speaking that there were signs of some departure from his former respectful manner towards

her; and an enigma lay in that. At their earlier meetings he had never ventured upon a distinct coupling of himself and herself as he had done in his broad compliment to-day--if compliment it could be called. She was not sure that he did not exceed his license in telling her deliberately that he had meant to hover near her in a private journey which she was taking without reference to him. She did not object to the act, but to the avowal of the act; and, being as sensitive as a barometer on signs affecting her social condition, it darted upon Ethelberta for one little moment that he might possibly have heard a word or two about her being nothing more nor less than one of a tribe of thralls; hence his freedom of manner. Certainly a plain remark of that sort was exactly what a susceptible peer might be supposed to say to a pretty woman of far inferior degree. A rapid redness filled her face at the thought that he might have smiled upon her as upon a domestic whom he was disposed to chuck under the chin. 'But no,' she said. 'He would never have taken the trouble to follow and meet with me had he learnt to think me other than a lady. It is extremity of devotion--that's all.'

It was not Ethelberta's inexperience, but that her conception of self precluded such an association of ideas, which led her to dismiss the surmise that his attendance could be inspired by a motive beyond that of paying her legitimate attentions as a co-ordinate with him and his in the social field. Even if he only meant flirtation, she read it as of that sort from which courtship with an eye to matrimony differs only in degree. Hence, she thought, his interest in her was not likely, under the ordinary influences of caste feeling, to continue longer than while

he was kept in ignorance of her consanguinity with a stock proscribed. She sighed at the anticipated close of her full-feathered towering when her ties and bonds should be uncovered. She might have seen matters in a different light, and sighed more. But in the stir of the moment it escaped her thought that ignorance of her position, and a consequent regard for her as a woman of good standing, would have prevented his indulgence in any course which was open to the construction of being disrespectful.

Valognes, Carentan, Isigny, Bayeux, were passed, and the train drew up at Caen. Ethelberta's intention had been to stay here for one night, but having learnt from Lord Mountclere, as previously described, that this was his destination, she decided to go on. On turning towards the carriage after a few minutes of promenading at the Caen station, she was surprised to perceive that Lord Mountclere, who had alighted as if to leave, was still there.

They spoke again to each other. 'I find I have to go further,' he suddenly said, when she had chatted with him a little time. And beckoning to the man who was attending to his baggage, he directed the things to be again placed in the train.

Time passed, and they changed at the next junction. When Ethelberta entered a carriage on the branch line to take her seat for the remainder of the journey, there sat the viscount in the same division. He explained that he was going to Rouen.

Ethelberta came to a quick resolution. Her audacity, like that of a child getting nearer and nearer a parent's side, became wonderfully vigorous as she approached her destination; and though there were three good hours of travel to Rouen as yet, the heavier part of the journey was past. At her aunt's would be a safe refuge, play what pranks she might, and there she would to-morrow meet those bravest of defenders Sol and Dan, to whom she had sent as much money as she could conveniently spare towards their expenses, with directions that they were to come by the most economical route, and meet her at the house of her aunt, Madame Moulin, previous to their educational trip to Paris, their own contribution being the value of the week's work they would have to lose. Thus backed up by Sol and Dan, her aunt, and Cornelia, Ethelberta felt quite the reverse of a lonely female persecuted by a wicked lord in a foreign country. 'He shall pay for his weaknesses, whatever they mean,' she thought; 'and what they mean I will find out at once.'

'I am going to Paris,' she said.

'You cannot to-night, I think.'

'To-morrow, I mean.'

'I should like to go on to-morrow. Perhaps I may. So that there is a chance of our meeting again.'

'Yes; but I do not leave Rouen till the afternoon. I first shall go to the cathedral, and drive round the city.'

Lord Mountclere smiled pleasantly. There seemed a sort of encouragement in her words. Ethelberta's thoughts, however, had flown at that moment to the approaching situation at her aunt's hotel: it would be extremely embarrassing if he should go there.

'Where do you stay, Lord Mountclere?' she said.

Thus directly asked, he could not but commit himself to the name of the hotel he had been accustomed to patronize, which was one in the upper part of the city.

'Mine is not that one,' said Ethelberta frigidly.

No further remark was made under this head, and they conversed for the remainder of the daylight on scenery and other topics, Lord Mountclere's air of festivity lending him all the qualities of an agreeable companion.

But notwithstanding her resolve, Ethelberta failed, for that day at least, to make her mind clear upon Lord Mountclere's intentions. To that end she would have liked first to know what were the exact limits set by society to conduct under present conditions, if society had ever set any at all, which was open to question: since experience had long ago taught her that much more freedom actually prevails in the communion of the sexes than is put on paper as etiquette, or admitted in so many words as

correct behaviour. In short, everything turned upon whether he had learnt of her position when off the platform at Mayfair Hall.

Wearied with these surmises, and the day's travel, she closed her eyes. And then her enamoured companion more widely opened his, and traced the beautiful features opposite him. The arch of the brows--like a slur in music--the droop of the lashes, the meeting of the lips, and the sweet rotundity of the chin--one by one, and all together, they were adored, till his heart was like a retort full of spirits of wine.

It was a warm evening, and when they arrived at their journey's end distant thunder rolled behind heavy and opaque clouds. Ethelberta bade adieu to her attentive satellite, called to Cornelia, and entered a cab; but before they reached the inn the thunder had increased. Then a cloud cracked into flame behind the iron spire of the cathedral, showing in relief its black ribs and stanchions, as if they were the bars of a blazing cresset held on high.

'Ah, we will clamber up there to-morrow,' said Ethelberta.

A wondrous stillness pervaded the streets of the city after this, though it was not late; and their arrival at M. Moulin's door was quite an event for the quay. No rain came, as they had expected, and by the time they halted the western sky had cleared, so that the newly-lit lamps on the quay, and the evening glow shining over the river, inwove their harmonious rays as the warp and woof of one lustrous tissue. Before they

had alighted there appeared from the archway Madame Moulin in person, followed by the servants of the hotel in a manner signifying that they did not receive a visitor once a fortnight, though at that moment the clatter of sixty knives, forks, and tongues was audible through an open window from the adjoining dining-room, to the great interest of a group of idlers outside. Ethelberta had not seen her aunt since she last passed through the town with Lady Petherwin, who then told her that this landlady was the only respectable relative she seemed to have in the world.

Aunt Charlotte's face was an English outline filled in with French shades under the eyes, on the brows, and round the mouth, by the natural effect of years; she resembled the British hostess as little as well could be, no point in her causing the slightest suggestion of drops taken for the stomach's sake. Telling the two young women she would gladly have met them at the station had she known the hour of their arrival, she kissed them both without much apparent notice of a difference in their conditions; indeed, seeming rather to incline to Cornelia, whose country face and homely style of clothing may have been more to her mind than Ethelberta's finished travelling-dress, a class of article to which she appeared to be well accustomed. Her husband was at this time at the head of the table-d'hote, and mentioning the fact as an excuse for his non-appearance, she accompanied them upstairs.

After the strain of keeping up smiles with Lord Mountclere, the rattle and shaking, and the general excitements of the chase across the water

and along the rail, a face in which she saw a dim reflex of her mother's was soothing in the extreme, and Ethelberta went up to the staircase with a feeling of expansive thankfulness. Cornelia paused to admire the clean court and the small caged birds sleeping on their perches, the boxes of veronica in bloom, of oleander, and of tamarisk, which freshened the air of the court and lent a romance to the lamplight, the cooks in their paper caps and white blouses appearing at odd moments from an Avernus behind; while the prompt 'v'la!' of teetotums in mob caps, spinning down the staircase in answer to the periodic clang of bells, filled her with wonder, and pricked her conscience with thoughts of how seldom such transcendent nimbleness was attempted by herself in a part so nearly similar.

34. THE HOTEL BEAU SEJOUR AND SPOTS NEAR IT

The next day, much to Ethelberta's surprise, there was a letter for her in her mother's up-hill hand. She neglected all the rest of its contents for the following engrossing sentences:--

'Menlove has wormed everything out of poor Joey, we find, and your father is much upset about it. She had another quarrel with him, and then declared she would expose you and us to Mrs. Doncastle and all