

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

your friends. I think that Menlove is the kind of woman who will stick to her word, and the question for you to consider is, how can you best face out any report of the truth which she will spread, and contradict the lies that she will add to it? It appears to me to be a dreadful thing, and so it will probably appear to you. The worst part will be that your sisters and brothers are your servants, and that your father is actually engaged in the house where you dine. I am dreadful afraid that this will be considered a fine joke for gossips, and will cause no end of laughs in society at your expense. At any rate, should Menlove spread the report, it would absolutely prevent people from attending your lectures next season, for they would feel like dupes, and be angry with themselves, and you, and all of us.

'The only way out of the muddle that I can see for you is to put some scheme of marrying into effect as soon as possible, and before these things are known. Surely by this time, with all your opportunities, you have been able to strike up an acquaintance with some gentleman or other, so as to make a suitable match. You see, my dear Berta, marriage is a thing which, once carried out, fixes you more firm in a position than any personal brains can do; for as you stand at present, every loose tooth, and every combed-out hair, and every new wrinkle, and every sleepless night, is so much took away from your chance for the future, depending as it do upon your skill in charming. I know that you have had some good offers, so do listen to me, and warm up the best man of them again a bit, and get him to repeat his words before your roundness shrinks away, and 'tis too late.

'Mr. Ladywell has called here to see you; it was just after I had heard that this Menlove might do harm, so I thought I could do no better than send down word to him that you would much like to see him, and were wondering sadly why he had not called lately. I gave him your address at Rouen, that he might find you, if he chose, at once, and be got to propose, since he is better than nobody. I believe he said, directly Joey gave him the address, that he was going abroad, and my opinion is that he will come to you, because of the encouragement I gave him. If so, you must thank me for my foresight and care for you.

'I heave a sigh of relief sometimes at the thought that I, at any rate, found a husband before the present man-famine began. Don't refuse him this time, there's a dear, or, mark my words, you'll have cause to rue it--unless you have beforehand got engaged to somebody better than he. You will not if you have not already, for the exposure is sure to come soon.'

'O, this false position!--it is ruining your nature, my too thoughtful mother! But I will not accept any of them--I'll brazen it out!' said Ethelberta, throwing the letter wherever it chose to fly, and picking it up to read again. She stood and thought it all over. 'I must decide to do something!' was her sigh again; and, feeling an irresistible need of motion, she put on her things and went out to see what resolve the morning would bring.

No rain had fallen during the night, and the air was now quiet in a warm heavy fog, through which old cider-smells, reminding her of Wessex, occasionally came from narrow streets in the background. Ethelberta passed up the Rue Grand-Pont into the little dusky Rue Saint-Romain, behind the cathedral, being driven mechanically along by the fever and fret of her thoughts. She was about to enter the building by the transept door, when she saw Lord Mountclere coming towards her.

Ethelberta felt equal to him, or a dozen such, this morning. The looming spectres raised by her mother's information, the wearing sense of being over-weighted in the race, were driving her to a Hamlet-like fantasticism and defiance of augury; moreover, she was abroad.

'I am about to ascend to the parapets of the cathedral,' said she, in answer to a half inquiry.

'I should be delighted to accompany you,' he rejoined, in a manner as capable of explanation by his knowledge of her secret as was Ethelberta's manner by her sense of nearing the end of her maying. But whether this frequent glide into her company was meant as ephemeral flirtation, to fill the half-hours of his journey, or whether it meant a serious love-suit--which were the only alternatives that had occurred to her on the subject--did not trouble her now. 'I am bound to be civil to so great a lord,' she lightly thought, and expressing no objection to his presence, she passed with him through the outbuildings, containing Gothic lumber

from the shadowy pile above, and ascended the stone staircase. Emerging from its windings, they duly came to the long wooden ladder suspended in mid-air that led to the parapet of the tower. This being wide enough for two abreast, she could hardly do otherwise than wait a moment for the viscount, who up to this point had never faltered, and who amused her as they went by scraps of his experience in various countries, which, to do him justice, he told with vivacity and humour. Thus they reached the end of the flight, and entered behind a balustrade.

'The prospect will be very lovely from this point when the fog has blown off,' said Lord Mountclere faintly, for climbing and chattering at the same time had fairly taken away his breath. He leant against the masonry to rest himself. 'The air is clearing already; I fancy I saw a sunbeam or two.'

'It will be lovelier above,' said Ethelberta. 'Let us go to the platform at the base of the fleche, and wait for a view there.'

'With all my heart,' said her attentive companion.

They passed in at a door and up some more stone steps, which landed them finally in the upper chamber of the tower. Lord Mountclere sank on a beam, and asked smilingly if her ambition was not satisfied with this goal. 'I recollect going to the top some years ago,' he added, 'and it did not occur to me as being a thing worth doing a second time. And there was no fog then, either.'

'O,' said Ethelberta, 'it is one of the most splendid things a person can do! The fog is going fast, and everybody with the least artistic feeling in the direction of bird's-eye views makes the ascent every time of coming here.'

'Of course, of course,' said Lord Mountclere. 'And I am only too happy to go to any height with you.'

'Since you so kindly offer, we will go to the very top of the spire--up through the fog and into the sunshine,' said Ethelberta.

Lord Mountclere covered a grim misgiving by a gay smile, and away they went up a ladder admitting to the base of the huge iron framework above; then they entered upon the regular ascent of the cage, towards the hoped-for celestial blue, and among breezes which never descended so low as the town. The journey was enlivened with more breathless witticisms from Lord Mountclere, till she stepped ahead of him again; when he asked how many more steps there were.

She inquired of the man in the blue blouse who accompanied them. 'Fifty-five,' she returned to Lord Mountclere a moment later.

They went round, and round, and yet around.

'How many are there now?' Lord Mountclere demanded this time of the man.

'A hundred and ninety, Monsieur,' he said.

'But there were only fifty-five ever so long ago!'

'Two hundred and five, then,' said the man. 'Perhaps the mist prevented Mademoiselle hearing me distinctly?'

'Never mind: I would follow were there five thousand more, did Mademoiselle bid me!' said the exhausted nobleman gallantly, in English.

'Hush!' said Ethelberta, with displeasure.

'He doesn't understand a word,' said Lord Mountclere.

They paced the remainder of their spiral pathway in silence, and having at last reached the summit, Lord Mountclere sank down on one of the steps, panting out, 'Dear me, dear me!'

Ethelberta leaned and looked around, and said, 'How extraordinary this is. It is sky above, below, everywhere.'

He dragged himself together and stepped to her side. They formed as it were a little world to themselves, being completely ensphered by the fog, which here was dense as a sea of milk. Below was neither town, country, nor cathedral--simply whiteness, into which the iron legs of their

gigantic perch faded to nothing.

'We have lost our labour; there is no prospect for you, after all, Lord Mountclere,' said Ethelberta, turning her eyes upon him. He looked at her face as if there were, and she continued, 'Listen; I hear sounds from the town: people's voices, and carts, and dogs, and the noise of a railway-train. Shall we now descend, and own ourselves disappointed?'

'Whenever you choose.'

Before they had put their intention in practice there appeared to be reasons for waiting awhile. Out of the plain of fog beneath, a stone tooth seemed to be upheaving itself: then another showed forth. These were the summits of the St. Romain and the Butter Towers--at the western end of the building. As the fog stratum collapsed other summits manifested their presence further off--among them the two spires and lantern of St. Ouen's; when to the left the dome of St. Madeline's caught a first ray from the peering sun, under which its scaly surface glittered like a fish. Then the mist rolled off in earnest, and revealed far beneath them a whole city, its red, blue, and grey roofs forming a variegated pattern, small and subdued as that of a pavement in mosaic. Eastward in the spacious outlook lay the hill of St. Catherine, breaking intrusively into the large level valley of the Seine; south was the river which had been the parent of the mist, and the Ile Lacroix, gorgeous in scarlet, purple, and green. On the western horizon could be dimly discerned melancholy forests, and further to the right stood the hill and



rich groves of Boisguillaume.

Ethelberta having now done looking around, the descent was begun and continued without intermission till they came to the passage behind the parapet.

Ethelberta was about to step airily forward, when there reached her ear the voices of persons below. She recognized as one of them the slow unaccented tones of Neigh.

'Please wait a minute!' she said in a peremptory manner of confusion sufficient to attract Lord Mountclere's attention.

A recollection had sprung to her mind in a moment. She had half made an appointment with Neigh at her aunt's hotel for this very week, and here was he in Rouen to keep it. To meet him while indulging in this vagary with Lord Mountclere--which, now that the mood it had been engendered by was passing off, she somewhat regretted--would be the height of imprudence.

'I should like to go round to the other side of the parapet for a few moments,' she said, with decisive quickness. 'Come with me, Lord Mountclere.'

They went round to the other side. Here she kept the viscount and their suisse until she deemed it probable that Neigh had passed by, when she

returned with her companions and descended to the bottom. They emerged into the Rue Saint-Romain, whereupon a woman called from the opposite side of the way to their guide, stating that she had told the other English gentleman that the English lady had gone into the fleche.

Ethelberta turned and looked up. She could just discern Neigh's form upon the steps of the fleche above, ascending toilsomely in search of her.

'What English gentleman could that have been?' said Lord Mountclere, after paying the man. He spoke in a way which showed he had not overlooked her confusion. 'It seems that he must have been searching for us, or rather for you?'

'Only Mr. Neigh,' said Ethelberta. 'He told me he was coming here. I believe he is waiting for an interview with me.'

'H'm,' said Lord Mountclere.

'Business--only business,' said she.

'Shall I leave you? Perhaps the business is important--most important.'

'Unfortunately it is.'

'You must forgive me this once: I cannot help--will you give me

permission to make a difficult remark?' said Lord Mountclere, in an impatient voice.

'With pleasure.'

'Well, then, the business I meant was--an engagement to be married.'

Had it been possible for a woman to be perpetually on the alert she might now have supposed that Lord Mountclere knew all about her; a mechanical deference must have restrained such an illusion had he seen her in any other light than that of a distracting slave. But she answered quietly, 'So did I.'

'But how does he know--dear me, dear me! I beg pardon,' said the viscount.

She looked at him curiously, as if to imply that he was seriously out of his reckoning in respect of her if he supposed that he would be allowed to continue this little play at love-making as long as he chose, when she was offered the position of wife by a man so good as Neigh.

They stood in silence side by side till, much to her ease, Cornelia appeared at the corner waiting. At the last moment he said, in somewhat agitated tones, and with what appeared to be a renewal of the respect which had been imperceptibly dropped since they crossed the Channel, 'I was not aware of your engagement to Mr. Neigh. I fear I have been acting

mistakenly on that account.'

'There is no engagement as yet,' said she.

Lord Mountclere brightened like a child. 'Then may I have a few words in private--'

'Not now--not to-day,' said Ethelberta, with a certain irritation at she knew not what. 'Believe me, Lord Mountclere, you are mistaken in many things. I mean, you think more of me than you ought. A time will come when you will despise me for this day's work, and it is madness in you to go further.'

Lord Mountclere, knowing what he did know, may have imagined what she referred to; but Ethelberta was without the least proof that he had the key to her humour. 'Well, well, I'll be responsible for the madness,' he said. 'I know you to be--a famous woman, at all events; and that's enough. I would say more, but I cannot here. May I call upon you?'

'Not now.'

'When shall I?'

'If you must, let it be a month hence at my house in town,' she said indifferently, the Hamlet mood being still upon her. 'Yes, call upon us then, and I will tell you everything that may remain to be told, if you

should be inclined to listen. A rumour is afloat which will undeceive you in much, and depress me to death. And now I will walk back: pray excuse me.' She entered the street, and joined Cornelia.

Lord Mountclere paced irregularly along, turned the corner, and went towards his inn, nearing which his tread grew lighter, till he scarcely seemed to touch the ground. He became gleeful, and said to himself, nervously palming his hip with his left hand, as if previous to plunging it into hot water for some prize: 'Upon my life I've a good mind! Upon my life I have! . . . I must make a straightforward thing of it, and at once; or he will have her. But he shall not, and I will--hee-hee!'

The fascinated man, screaming inwardly with the excitement, glee, and agony of his position, entered the hotel, wrote a hasty note to Ethelberta and despatched it by hand, looked to his dress and appearance, ordered a carriage, and in a quarter of an hour was being driven towards the Hotel Beau Sejour, whither his note had preceded him.