

35. THE HOTEL (continued), AND THE QUAY IN FRONT

Ethelberta, having arrived there some time earlier, had gone straight to her aunt, whom she found sitting behind a large ledger in the office, making up the accounts with her husband, a well-framed reflective man with a grey beard. M. Moulin bustled, waited for her remarks and replies, and made much of her in a general way, when Ethelberta said, what she had wanted to say instantly, 'Has a gentleman called Mr. Neigh been here?'

'O yes--I think it is Neigh--there's a card upstairs,' replied her aunt. 'I told him you were alone at the cathedral, and I believe he walked that way. Besides that one, another has come for you--a Mr. Ladywell, and he is waiting.'

'Not for me?'

'Yes, indeed. I thought he seemed so anxious, under a sort of assumed calmness, that I recommended him to remain till you came in.'

'Goodness, aunt; why did you?' Ethelberta said, and thought how much her mother's sister resembled her mother in doings of that sort.

'I thought he had some good reason for seeing you. Are these men intruders, then?'

'O no--a woman who attempts a public career must expect to be treated as public property: what would be an intrusion on a domiciled gentlewoman is a tribute to me. You cannot have celebrity and sex-privilege both.' Thus Ethelberta laughed off the awkward conjuncture, inwardly deploring the unconscionable maternal meddling which had led to this, though not resentfully, for she had too much staunchness of heart to decry a parent's misdirected zeal. Had the clanship feeling been universally as strong as in the Chickereel family, the fable of the well-bonded fagot might have remained unwritten.

Ladywell had sent her a letter about getting his picture of herself engraved for an illustrated paper, and she had not replied, considering that she had nothing to do with the matter, her form and feature having been given in the painting as no portrait at all, but as those of an ideal. To see him now would be vexatious; and yet it was chilly and formal to an ungenerous degree to keep aloof from him, sitting lonely in the same house. 'A few weeks hence,' she thought, 'when Menlove's disclosures make me ridiculous, he may slight me as a lackey's girl, an upstart, an adventuress, and hardly return my bow in the street. Then I may wish I had given him no personal cause for additional bitterness.' So, putting off the fine lady, Ethelberta thought she would see Ladywell at once.

Ladywell was unaffectedly glad to meet her; so glad, that Ethelberta wished heartily, for his sake, there could be warm friendship between

herself and him, as well as all her lovers, without that insistent courtship-and-marriage question, which sent them all scattering like leaves in a pestilent blast, at enmity with one another. She was less pleased when she found that Ladywell, after saying all there was to say about his painting, gently signified that he had been misinformed, as he believed, concerning her future intentions, which had led to his absenting himself entirely from her; the remark being of course, a natural product of her mother's injudicious message to him.

She cut him short with terse candour. 'Yes,' she said, 'a false report is in circulation. I am not yet engaged to be married to any one, if that is your meaning.'

Ladywell looked cheerful at this frank answer, and said tentatively, 'Am I forgotten?'

'No; you are exactly as you always were in my mind.'

'Then I have been cruelly deceived. I was guided too much by appearances, and they were very delusive. I am beyond measure glad I came here to-day. I called at your house and learnt that you were here; and as I was going out of town, in any indefinite direction, I settled then to come this way. What a happy idea it was! To think of you now--and I may be permitted to--'

'Assuredly you may not. How many times I have told you that!'

'But I do not wish for any formal engagement,' said Ladywell quickly, fearing she might commit herself to some expression of positive denial, which he could never surmount. 'I'll wait--I'll wait any length of time. Remember, you have never absolutely forbidden my--friendship. Will you delay your answer till some time hence, when you have thoroughly considered; since I fear it may be a hasty one now?'

'Yes, indeed; it may be hasty.'

'You will delay it?'

'Yes.'

'When shall it be?'

'Say a month hence. I suggest that, because by that time you will have found an answer in your own mind: strange things may happen before then.

"She shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them; then shall she say, I will go and return to my first"--however, that's no matter.'

'What--did you--?' Ladywell began, altogether bewildered by this.

'It is a passage in Hosea which came to my mind, as possibly applicable to myself some day,' she answered. 'It was mere impulse.'

'Ha-ha!--a jest--one of your romances broken loose. There is no law for impulse: that is why I am here.'

Thus fancifully they conversed till the interview concluded. Getting her to promise that she would see him again, Ladywell retired to a sitting-room on the same landing, in which he had been writing letters before she came up. Immediately upon this her aunt, who began to suspect that something peculiar was in the wind, came to tell her that Mr. Neigh had been inquiring for her again.

'Send him in,' said Ethelberta.

Neigh's footsteps approached, and the well-known figure entered. Ethelberta received him smilingly, for she was getting so used to awkward juxtapositions that she treated them quite as a natural situation. She merely hoped that Ladywell would not hear them talking through the partition.

Neigh scarcely said anything as a beginning: she knew his errand perfectly; and unaccountable as it was to her, the strange and unceremonious relationship between them, that had originated in the peculiar conditions of their first close meeting, was continued now as usual.

'Have you been able to bestow a thought on the question between us? I

hope so,' said Neigh.

'It is no use,' said Ethelberta. 'Wait a month, and you will not require an answer. You will not mind speaking low, because of a person in the next room?'

'Not at all.--Why will that be?'

'I might say; but let us speak of something else.'

'I don't see how we can,' said Neigh brusquely. 'I had no other reason on earth for calling here. I wished to get the matter settled, and I could not be satisfied without seeing you. I hate writing on matters of this sort. In fact I can't do it, and that's why I am here.'

He was still speaking when an attendant entered with a note.

'Will you excuse me one moment?' said Ethelberta, stepping to the window and opening the missive. It contained these words only, in a scrawl so full of deformities that she could hardly piece its meaning together:--

'I must see you again to-day unless you absolutely deny yourself to me, which I shall take as a refusal to meet me any more. I will arrive, punctually, five minutes after you receive this note. Do pray be alone if you can, and eternally gratify,--Yours,

'MOUNTCLERE.'

'If anything has happened I shall be pleased to wait,' said Neigh, seeing her concern when she had closed the note.

'O no, it is nothing,' said Ethelberta precipitately. 'Yet I think I will ask you to wait,' she added, not liking to dismiss Neigh in a hurry; for she was not insensible to his perseverance in seeking her over all these miles of sea and land; and secondly, she feared that if he were to leave on the instant he might run into the arms of Lord Mountclere and Ladywell.

'I shall be only too happy to stay till you are at leisure,' said Neigh, in the unimpassioned delivery he used whether his meaning were a trite compliment or the expression of his most earnest feeling.

'I may be rather a long time,' said Ethelberta dubiously.

'My time is yours.'

Ethelberta left the room and hurried to her aunt, exclaiming, 'O, Aunt Charlotte, I hope you have rooms enough to spare for my visitors, for they are like the fox, the goose, and the corn, in the riddle; I cannot leave them together, and I can only be with one at a time. I want the nicest drawing-room you have for an interview of a bare two minutes with an old gentleman. I am so sorry this has happened, but it is not

altogether my fault! I only arranged to see one of them; but the other was sent to me by mother, in a mistake, and the third met with me on my journey: that's the explanation. There's the oldest of them just come.'

She looked through the glass partition, and under the arch of the court-gate, as the wheels of the viscount's carriage were heard outside.

Ethelberta ascended to a room on the first floor, Lord Mountclere was shown up, and the door closed upon them.

At this time Neigh was very comfortably lounging in an arm-chair in Ethelberta's room on the second floor. This was a pleasant enough way of passing the minutes with such a tender interview in prospect; and as he leant he looked with languid and luxurious interest through the open casement at the spars and rigging of some luggers on the Seine, the pillars of the suspension bridge, and the scenery of the Faubourg St. Sever on the other side of the river. How languid his interest might ultimately have become there is no knowing; but there soon arose upon his ear the accents of Ethelberta in low distinctness from somewhere outside the room.

'Yes; the scene is pleasant to-day,' she said. 'I like a view over a river.'

'I should think the steamboats are objectionable when they stop here,' said another person.



Neigh's face closed in to an aspect of perplexity. 'Surely that cannot be Lord Mountclere?' he muttered.

Had he been certain that Ethelberta was only talking to a stranger, Neigh would probably have felt their conversation to be no business of his, much as he might have been surprised to find her giving audience to another man at such a place. But his impression that the voice was that of his acquaintance, Lord Mountclere, coupled with doubts as to its possibility, was enough to lead him to rise from the chair and put his head out of the window.

Upon a balcony beneath him were the speakers, as he had suspected--Ethelberta and the viscount.

Looking right and left, he saw projecting from the next window the head of his friend Ladywell, gazing right and left likewise, apparently just drawn out by the same voice which had attracted himself.

'What--you, Neigh!--how strange,' came from Ladywell's lips before he had time to recollect that great coolness existed between himself and Neigh on Ethelberta's account, which had led to the reduction of their intimacy to the most attenuated of nods and good-mornings ever since the Harlequin-rose incident at Cripplegate.

'Yes; it is rather strange,' said Neigh, with saturnine evenness. 'Still a fellow must be somewhere.'

Each then looked over his window-sill downwards, upon the speakers who had attracted them thither.

Lord Mountclere uttered something in a low tone which did not reach the young men; to which Ethelberta replied, 'As I have said, Lord Mountclere, I cannot give you an answer now. I must consider what to do with Mr. Neigh and Mr. Ladywell. It is too sudden for me to decide at once. I could not do so until I have got home to England, when I will write you a letter, stating frankly my affairs and those of my relatives. I shall not consider that you have addressed me on the subject of marriage until, having received my letter, you--'

'Repeat my proposal,' said Lord Mountclere.

'Yes.'

'My dear Mrs. Petherwin, it is as good as repeated! But I have no right to assume anything you don't wish me to assume, and I will wait. How long is it that I am to suffer in this uncertainty?'

'A month. By that time I shall have grown weary of my other two suitors.'

'A month! Really inflexible?'

Ethelberta had returned inside the window, and her answer was inaudible. Ladywell and Neigh looked up, and their eyes met. Both had been reluctant to remain where they stood, but they were too fascinated to instantly retire. Neigh moved now, and Ladywell did the same. Each saw that the face of his companion was flushed.

'Come in and see me,' said Ladywell quickly, before quite withdrawing his head. 'I am staying in this room.'

'I will,' said Neigh; and taking his hat he left Ethelberta's apartment forthwith.

On entering the quarters of his friend he found him seated at a table whereon writing materials were strewn. They shook hands in silence, but the meaning in their looks was enough.

'Just let me write a note, Ladywell, and I'm your man,' said Neigh then, with the freedom of an old acquaintance.

'I was going to do the same thing,' said Ladywell.

Neigh then sat down, and for a minute or two nothing was to be heard but the scratching of a pair of pens, ending on the one side with a more boisterous scratch, as the writer shaped 'Eustace Ladywell,' and on the other with slow firmness in the characters 'Alfred Neigh.'

'There's for you, my fair one,' said Neigh, closing and directing his letter.

'Yours is for Mrs. Petherwin? So is mine,' said Ladywell, grasping the bell-pull. 'Shall I direct it to be put on her table with this one?'

'Thanks.' And the two letters went off to Ethelberta's sitting-room, which she had vacated to receive Lord Mountclere in an empty one beneath. Neigh's letter was simply a pleading of a sudden call away which prevented his waiting till she should return; Ladywell's, though stating the same reason for leaving, was more of an upbraiding nature, and might almost have told its reader, were she to take the trouble to guess, that he knew of the business of Lord Mountclere with her to-day.

'Now, let us get out of this place,' said Neigh. He proceeded at once down the stairs, followed by Ladywell, who--settling his account at the bureau without calling for a bill, and directing his portmanteau to be sent to the Right-bank railway station--went with Neigh into the street.

They had not walked fifty yards up the quay when two British workmen, in holiday costume, who had just turned the corner of the Rue Jeanne d'Arc, approached them. Seeing him to be an Englishman, one of the two addressed Neigh, saying, 'Can you tell us the way, sir, to the Hotel Bold Soldier?'

Neigh pointed out the place he had just come from to the tall young men,

and continued his walk with Ladywell.

Ladywell was the first to break silence. 'I have been considerably misled, Neigh,' he said; 'and I imagine from what has just happened that you have been misled too.'

'Just a little,' said Neigh, bringing abstracted lines of meditation into his face. 'But it was my own fault: for I ought to have known that these stage and platform women have what they are pleased to call Bohemianism so thoroughly engrained with their natures that they are no more constant to usage in their sentiments than they are in their way of living. Good Lord, to think she has caught old Mountclere! She is sure to have him if she does not dally with him so long that he gets cool again.'

'A beautiful creature like her to think of marrying such an infatuated idiot as he!'

'He can give her a title as well as younger men. It will not be the first time that such matches have been made.'

'I can't believe it,' said Ladywell vehemently. 'She has too much poetry in her--too much good sense; her nature is the essence of all that's romantic. I can't help saying it, though she has treated me cruelly.'

'She has good looks, certainly. I'll own to that. As for her romance and good-feeling, that I leave to you. I think she has treated you no

more cruelly, as you call it, than she has me, come to that.'

'She told me she would give me an answer in a month,' said Ladywell emotionally.

'So she told me,' said Neigh.

'And so she told him,' said Ladywell.

'And I have no doubt she will keep her word to him in her usual precise manner.'

'But see what she implied to me! I distinctly understood from her that the answer would be favourable.'

'So did I.'

'So does he.'

'And he is sure to be the one who gets it, since only one of us can.

Well, I wouldn't marry her for love, money, nor--'

'Offspring.'

'Exactly: I would not. "I'll give you an answer in a month"--to all three of us! For God's sake let's sit down here and have something to

drink.'

They drew up a couple of chairs to one of the tables of a wine-shop close by, and shouted to the waiter with the vigour of persons going to the dogs. Here, behind the horizontal-headed trees that dotted this part of the quay, they sat over their bottles denouncing womankind till the sun got low down upon the river, and the houses on the further side began to be toned by a blue mist. At last they rose from their seats and departed, Neigh to dine and consider his route, and Ladywell to take the train for Dieppe.

While these incidents had been in progress the two workmen had found their way into the hotel where Ethelberta was staying. Passing through the entrance, they stood at gaze in the court, much perplexed as to the door to be made for; the difficulty was solved by the appearance of Cornelia, who in expectation of them had been for the last half-hour leaning over the sill of her bed-room window, which looked into the interior, amusing herself by watching the movements to and fro in the court beneath.

After conversing awhile in undertones as if they had no real right there at all, Cornelia told them she would call their sister, if an old gentleman who had been to see her were gone again. Cornelia then ran away, and Sol and Dan stood aloof, till they had seen the old gentleman alluded to go to the door and drive off, shortly after which Ethelberta ran down to meet them.

'Whatever have you got as your luggage?' she said, after hearing a few words about their journey, and looking at a curious object like a huge extended accordion with bellows of gorgeous-patterned carpeting.

'Well, I thought to myself,' said Sol, 'tis a terrible bother about carrying our things. So what did I do but turn to and make a carpet-bag that would hold all mine and Dan's too. This, you see, Berta, is a deal top and bottom out of three-quarter stuff, stained and varnished. Well, then you see I've got carpet sides tacked on with these brass nails, which make it look very handsome; and so when my bag is empty 'twill shut up and be only a couple of boards under yer arm, and when 'tis open it will hold a'most anything you like to put in it. That portmantle didn't cost more than three half-crowns altogether, and ten pound wouldn't ha' got anything so strong from a portmantle maker, would it, Dan?'

'Well, no.'

'And then you see, Berta,' Sol continued in the same earnest tone, and further exhibiting the article, 'I've made this trap-door in the top with hinges and padlock complete, so that--'

'I am afraid it is tiring you after your journey to explain all this to me,' said Ethelberta gently, noticing that a few Gallic smilers were gathering round. 'Aunt has found a nice room for you at the top of the staircase in that corner--"Escalier D" you'll see painted at the



bottom--and when you have been up come across to me at number thirty-four

on this side, and we'll talk about everything.'

'Look here, Sol,' said Dan, who had left his brother and gone on to the stairs. 'What a rum staircase--the treads all in little blocks, and painted chocolate, as I am alive!'

'I am afraid I shall not be able to go on to Paris with you, after all,' Ethelberta continued to Sol. 'Something has just happened which makes it desirable for me to return at once to England. But I will write a list of all you are to see, and where you are to go, so that it will make little difference, I hope.'

Ten minutes before this time Ethelberta had been frankly and earnestly asked by Lord Mountclere to become his bride; not only so, but he pressed her to consent to have the ceremony performed before they returned to England. Ethelberta had unquestionably been much surprised; and, barring

the fact that the viscount was somewhat ancient in comparison with herself, the temptation to close with his offer was strong, and would have been felt as such by any woman in the position of Ethelberta, now a little reckless by stress of circumstances, and tinged with a bitterness of spirit against herself and the world generally. But she was experienced enough to know what heaviness might result from a hasty marriage, entered into with a mind full of concealments and suppressions which, if told, were likely to stop the marriage altogether; and after

trying to bring herself to speak of her family and situation to Lord Mountclere as he stood, a certain caution triumphed, and she concluded that it would be better to postpone her reply till she could consider which of two courses it would be advisable to adopt; to write and explain to him, or to explain nothing and refuse him. The third course, to explain nothing and hasten the wedding, she rejected without hesitation. With a pervading sense of her own obligations in forming this compact it did not occur to her to ask if Lord Mountclere might not have duties of explanation equally with herself, though bearing rather on the moral than the social aspects of the case.

Her resolution not to go on to Paris was formed simply because Lord Mountclere himself was proceeding in that direction, which might lead to other unseemly rencounters with him had she, too, persevered in her journey. She accordingly gave Sol and Dan directions for their guidance to Paris and back, starting herself with Cornelia the next day to return again to Knollsea, and to decide finally and for ever what to do in the vexed question at present agitating her.

Never before in her life had she treated marriage in such a terribly cool and cynical spirit as she had done that day; she was almost frightened at herself in thinking of it. How far any known system of ethics might excuse her on the score of those curious pressures which had been brought to bear upon her life, or whether it could excuse her at all, she had no spirit to inquire. English society appeared a gloomy concretion enough to abide in as she contemplated it on this journey home; yet, since its

gloominess was less an essential quality than an accident of her point of view, that point of view she had determined to change.

There lay open to her two directions in which to move. She might annex herself to the easy-going high by wedding an old nobleman, or she might join for good and all the easy-going low, by plunging back to the level of her family, giving up all her ambitions for them, settling as the wife of a provincial music-master named Julian, with a little shop of fiddles and flutes, a couple of old pianos, a few sheets of stale music pinned to a string, and a narrow back parlour, wherein she would wait for the phenomenon of a customer. And each of these divergent grooves had its fascinations, till she reflected with regard to the first that, even though she were a legal and indisputable Lady Mountclere, she might be despised by my lord's circle, and left lone and lorn. The intermediate path of accepting Neigh or Ladywell had no more attractions for her taste than the fact of disappointing them had qualms for her conscience; and how few these were may be inferred from her opinion, true or false, that two words about the spigot on her escutcheon would sweep her lovers' affections to the antipodes. She had now and then imagined that her previous intermarriage with the Petherwin family might efface much besides her surname, but experience proved that the having been wife for a few weeks to a minor who died in his father's lifetime, did not weave such a tissue of glory about her course as would resist a speedy undoing by startling confessions on her station before her marriage, and her environments now.

