

36. THE HOUSE IN TOWN

Returning by way of Knollsea, where she remained a week or two, Ethelberta appeared one evening at the end of September before her house in Exonbury Crescent, accompanied by a pair of cabs with the children and luggage; but Picotee was left at Knollsea, for reasons which Ethelberta explained when the family assembled in conclave. Her father was there, and began telling her of a surprising change in Menlove--an unasked-for concession to their cause, and a vow of secrecy which he could not account for, unless any friend of Ethelberta's had bribed her.

'O no--that cannot be,' said she. Any influence of Lord Mountclere to that effect was the last thing that could enter her thoughts. 'However, what Menlove does makes little difference to me now.' And she proceeded to state that she had almost come to a decision which would entirely alter their way of living.

'I hope it will not be of the sort your last decision was,' said her mother.

'No; quite the reverse. I shall not live here in state any longer. We will let the house throughout as lodgings, while it is ours; and you and the girls must manage it. I will retire from the scene altogether, and stay for the winter at Knollsea with Picotee. I want to consider my plans for next year, and I would rather be away from town. Picotee is

left there, and I return in two days with the books and papers I require.'

'What are your plans to be?'

'I am going to be a schoolmistress--I think I am.'

'A schoolmistress?'

'Yes. And Picotee returns to the same occupation, which she ought never to have forsaken. We are going to study arithmetic and geography until Christmas; then I shall send her adrift to finish her term as pupil-teacher, while I go into a training-school. By the time I have to give up this house I shall just have got a little country school.'

'But,' said her mother, aghast, 'why not write more poems and sell 'em?'

'Why not be a governess as you were?' said her father.

'Why not go on with your tales at Mayfair Hall?' said Gwendoline.

'I'll answer as well as I can. I have decided to give up romancing because I cannot think of any more that pleases me. I have been trying at Knollsea for a fortnight, and it is no use. I will never be a governess again: I would rather be a servant. If I am a schoolmistress I shall be entirely free from all contact with the great, which is what I

desire, for I hate them, and am getting almost as revolutionary as Sol. Father, I cannot endure this kind of existence any longer; I sleep at night as if I had committed a murder: I start up and see processions of people, audiences, battalions of lovers obtained under false pretences--all denouncing me with the finger of ridicule. Mother's suggestion about my marrying I followed out as far as dogged resolution would carry me, but during my journey here I have broken down; for I don't want to marry a second time among people who would regard me as an upstart or intruder. I am sick of ambition. My only longing now is to fly from society altogether, and go to any hovel on earth where I could be at peace.'

'What--has anybody been insulting you?' said Mrs. Chickerel.

'Yes; or rather I sometimes think he may have: that is, if a proposal of marriage is only removed from being a proposal of a very different kind by an accident.'

'A proposal of marriage can never be an insult,' her mother returned.

'I think otherwise,' said Ethelberta.

'So do I,' said her father.

'Unless the man was beneath you, and I don't suppose he was that,' added

Mrs. Chickereel.

'You are quite right; he was not that. But we will not talk of this branch of the subject. By far the most serious concern with me is that I ought to do some good by marriage, or by heroic performance of some kind; while going back to give the rudiments of education to remote hamleteers will do none of you any good whatever.'

'Never you mind us,' said her father; 'mind yourself.'

'I shall hardly be minding myself either, in your opinion, by doing that,' said Ethelberta dryly. 'But it will be more tolerable than what I am doing now. Georgina, and Myrtle, and Emmeline, and Joey will not get the education I intended for them; but that must go, I suppose.'

'How full of vagaries you are,' said her mother. 'Why won't it do to continue as you are? No sooner have I learnt up your schemes, and got enough used to 'em to see something in 'em, than you must needs bewilder me again by starting some fresh one, so that my mind gets no rest at all.'

Ethelberta too keenly felt the justice of this remark, querulous as it was, to care to defend herself. It was hopeless to attempt to explain to her mother that the oscillations of her mind might arise as naturally from the perfection of its balance, like those of a logan-stone, as from inherent lightness; and such an explanation, however comforting to its

subject, was little better than none to simple hearts who only could look to tangible outcrops.

'Really, Ethelberta,' remonstrated her mother, 'this is very odd. Making yourself miserable in trying to get a position on our account is one thing, and not necessary; but I think it ridiculous to rush into the other extreme, and go wilfully down in the scale. You may just as well exercise your wits in trying to swim as in trying to sink.'

'Yes; that's what I think,' said her father. 'But of course Berta knows best.'

'I think so too,' said Gwendoline.

'And so do I,' said Cornelia. 'If I had once moved about in large circles like Ethelberta, I wouldn't go down and be a schoolmistress--not I.'

'I own it is foolish--suppose it is,' said Ethelberta wearily, and with a readiness of misgiving that showed how recent and hasty was the scheme.

'Perhaps you are right, mother; anything rather than retreat. I wonder if you are right! Well, I will think again of it to-night. Do not let us speak more about it now.'

She did think of it that night, very long and painfully. The arguments of her relatives seemed ponderous as opposed to her own inconsequent

longing for escape from galling trammels. If she had stood alone, the sentiment that she had begun to build but was not able to finish, by whomsoever it might have been entertained, would have had few terrors; but that the opinion should be held by her nearest of kin, to cause them pain for life, was a grievous thing. The more she thought of it, the less easy seemed the justification of her desire for obscurity. From regarding it as a high instinct she passed into a humour that gave that desire the appearance of a whim. But could she really set in train events, which, if not abortive, would take her to the altar with Viscount Mountclere?

In one determination she never faltered; to commit her sin thoroughly if she committed it at all. Her relatives believed her choice to lie between Neigh and Ladywell alone. But once having decided to pass over Christopher, whom she had loved, there could be no pausing for Ladywell because she liked him, or for Neigh in that she was influenced by him. They were both too near her level to be trusted to bear the shock of receiving her from her father's hands. But it was possible that though her genesis might tinge with vulgarity a commoner's household, susceptible of such depreciation, it might show as a picturesque contrast in the family circle of a peer. Hence it was just as well to go to the end of her logic, where reasons for tergiversation would be most pronounced. This thought of the viscount, however, was a secret for her own breast alone.

Nearly the whole of that night she sat weighing--first, the question

itself of marrying Lord Mountclere; and, at other times, whether, for safety, she might marry him without previously revealing family particulars hitherto held necessary to be revealed--a piece of conduct she had once felt to be indefensible. The ingenious Ethelberta, much more prone than the majority of women to theorize on conduct, felt the need of some soothing defence of the actions involved in any ambiguous course before finally committing herself to it.

She took down a well-known treatise on Utilitarianism which she had perused once before, and to which she had given her adherence ere any instance had arisen wherein she might wish to take it as a guide. Here she desultorily searched for argument, and found it; but the application of her author's philosophy to the marriage question was an operation of her own, as unjustifiable as it was likely in the circumstances.

'The ultimate end,' she read, 'with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people) is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality. . . . This being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality.'

It was an open question, so far, whether her own happiness should or should not be preferred to that of others. But that her personal interests were not to be considered as paramount appeared further on:--

'The happiness which forms the standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.'

As to whose happiness was meant by that of 'other people,' 'all concerned,' and so on, her luminous moralist soon enlightened her:--

'The occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale--in other words, to be a public benefactor--are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to.'

And that these few persons should be those endeared to her by every domestic tie no argument was needed to prove. That their happiness would be in proportion to her own well-doing, and power to remove their risks of indigence, required no proving either to her now.

By a sorry but unconscious misapplication of sound and wide reasoning did the active mind of Ethelberta thus find itself a solace. At about the midnight hour she felt more fortified on the expediency of marriage with Lord Mountclere than she had done at all since musing on it. In respect of the second query, whether or not, in that event, to conceal from Lord

Mountclere the circumstances of her position till it should be too late for him to object to them, she found her conscience inconveniently in the way of her theory, and the oracle before her afforded no hint. 'Ah--it is a point for a casuist!' she said.

An old treatise on Casuistry lay on the top shelf. She opened it--more from curiosity than from guidance this time, it must be observed--at a chapter bearing on her own problem, 'The disciplina arcani, or, the doctrine of reserve.'

Here she read that there were plenty of apparent instances of this in Scripture, and that it was formed into a recognized system in the early Church. With reference to direct acts of deception, it was argued that since there were confessedly cases where killing is no murder, might there not be cases where lying is no sin? It could not be right--or, indeed, anything but most absurd--to say in effect that no doubt circumstances would occur where every sound man would tell a lie, and would be a brute or a fool if he did not, and to say at the same time that it is quite indefensible in principle. Duty was the key to conduct then, and if in such cases duties appeared to clash they would be found not to do so on examination. The lesser duty would yield to the greater, and therefore ceased to be a duty.

This author she found to be not so tolerable; he distracted her. She put him aside and gave over reading, having decided on this second point, that she would, at any hazard, represent the truth to Lord Mountclere

before listening to another word from him. 'Well, at last I have done,' she said, 'and am ready for my role.'

In looking back upon her past as she retired to rest, Ethelberta could almost doubt herself to be the identical woman with her who had entered on a romantic career a few short years ago. For that doubt she had good reason. She had begun as a poet of the Satanic school in a sweetened form; she was ending as a pseudo-utilitarian. Was there ever such a transmutation effected before by the action of a hard environment? It was not without a qualm of regret that she discerned how the last infirmity of a noble mind had at length nearly departed from her. She wondered if her early notes had had the genuine ring in them, or whether a poet who could be thrust by realities to a distance beyond recognition as such was a true poet at all. Yet Ethelberta's gradient had been regular: emotional poetry, light verse, romance as an object, romance as a means, thoughts of marriage as an aid to her pursuits, a vow to marry for the good of her family; in other words, from soft and playful Romanticism to distorted Benthamism. Was the moral incline upward or down?