

37. KNOLLSEA--AN ORNAMENTAL VILLA

Her energies collected and fermented anew by the results of the vigil, Ethelberta left town for Knollsea, where she joined Picotee the same evening. Picotee produced a letter, which had been addressed to her sister at their London residence, but was not received by her there, Mrs. Chickereel having forwarded it to Knollsea the day before Ethelberta arrived in town.

The crinkled writing, in character like the coast-line of Tierra del Fuego, was becoming familiar by this time. While reading the note she informed Picotee, between a quick breath and a rustle of frills, that it was from Lord Mountclere, who wrote on the subject of calling to see her, suggesting a day in the following week. 'Now, Picotee,' she continued, 'we shall have to receive him, and make the most of him, for I have altered my plans since I was last in Knollsea.'

'Altered them again? What are you going to be now--not a poor person after all?'

'Indeed not. And so I turn and turn. Can you imagine what Lord Mountclere is coming for? But don't say what you think. Before I reply to this letter we must go into new lodgings, to give them as our address. The first business to-morrow morning will be to look for the gayest house we can find; and Captain Flower and this little cabin of his must be

things we have never known.'

The next day after breakfast they accordingly sallied forth.

Knollsea had recently begun to attract notice in the world. It had this year undergone visitation from a score of professional gentlemen and their wives, a minor canon, three marine painters, seven young ladies with books in their hands, and nine-and-thirty babies. Hence a few lodging-houses, of a dash and pretentiousness far beyond the mark of the old cottages which formed the original substance of the village, had been erected to meet the wants of such as these. To a building of this class Ethelberta now bent her steps, and the crush of the season having departed in the persons of three-quarters of the above-named visitors, who went away by a coach, a van, and a couple of wagonettes one morning, she found no difficulty in arranging for a red and yellow streaked villa, which was so bright and glowing that the sun seemed to be shining upon it even on a cloudy day, and the ruddiest native looked pale when standing by its walls. It was not without regret that she renounced the sailor's pretty cottage for this porticoed and balconied dwelling; but her lines were laid down clearly at last, and thither she removed forthwith.

From this brand-new house did Ethelberta pen the letter fixing the time at which she would be pleased to see Lord Mountclere.

When the hour drew nigh enormous force of will was required to keep her perturbation down. She had not distinctly told Picotee of the object of

the viscount's visit, but Picotee guessed nearly enough. Ethelberta was upon the whole better pleased that the initiative had again come from him than if the first step in the new campaign had been her sending the explanatory letter, as intended and promised. She had thought almost directly after the interview at Rouen that to enlighten him by writing a confession in cold blood, according to her first intention, would be little less awkward for her in the method of telling than in the facts to be told.

So the last hair was arranged and the last fold adjusted, and she sat down to await a new page of her history. Picotee sat with her, under orders to go into the next room when Lord Mountclere should call; and Ethelberta determined to waste no time, directly he began to make advances, in clearing up the phenomena of her existence to him; to the end that no fact which, in the event of his taking her to wife, could be used against her as an example of concealment, might remain unrelated. The collapse of his attachment under the test might, however, form the grand climax of such a play as this.

The day was rather cold for the season, and Ethelberta sat by a fire; but the windows were open, and Picotee was amusing herself on the balcony outside. The hour struck: Ethelberta fancied she could hear the wheels of a carriage creeping up the steep ascent which led to the drive before the door.

'Is it he?' she said quickly.

'No,' said Picotee, whose indifference contrasted strangely with the restlessness of her who was usually the coolest. 'It is a man shaking down apples in the garden over the wall.'

They lingered on till some three or four minutes had gone by. 'Surely that's a carriage?' said Ethelberta, then.

'I think it is,' said Picotee outside, stretching her neck forward as far as she could. 'No, it is the men on the beach dragging up their boats; they expect wind to-night.'

'How wearisome! Picotee, you may as well come inside; if he means to call he will; but he ought to be here by this time.'

It was only once more, and that some time later that she again said
'Listen!'

'That's not the noise of a carriage; it is the fizz of a rocket. The coastguardsmen are practising the life-apparatus to-day, to be ready for the autumn wrecks.'

'Ah!' said Ethelberta, her face clearing up. Hers had not been a sweetheart's impatience, but her mood had intensified during these minutes of suspense to a harassing mistrust of her man-compelling power, which was, if that were possible, more gloomy than disappointed love. 'I

know now where he is. That operation with the cradle-apparatus is very interesting, and he is stopping to see it. . . . But I shall not wait indoors much longer, whatever he may be stopping to see. It is very unaccountable, and vexing, after moving into this new house too. We were much more comfortable in the old one. In keeping any previous appointment in which I have been concerned he has been ridiculously early.'

'Shall I run round?' said Picotee, 'and if he is not watching them we will go out.'

'Very well,' said her sister.

The time of Picotee's absence seemed an age. Ethelberta heard the roar of another rocket, and still Picotee did not return. 'What can the girl be thinking of?' she mused. . . . 'What a half-and-half policy mine has been! Thinking of marrying for position, and yet not making it my rigid plan to secure the man the first moment that he made his offer. So I lose the comfort of having a soul above worldliness, and my compensation for not having it likewise!' A minute or two more and in came Picotee.

'What has kept you so long--and how excited you look,' said Ethelberta.

'I thought I would stay a little while, as I had never seen a rocket-apparatus,' said Picotee, faintly and strangely.

'But is he there?' asked her sister impatiently.

'Yes--he was. He's gone now!'

'Lord Mountclere?'

'No. There is no old man there at all. Mr Julian was there.'

A little 'Ah!' came from Ethelberta, like a note from a storm-bird at night. She turned round and went into the back room. 'Is Mr. Julian going to call here?' she inquired, coming forward again.

'No--he's gone by the steamboat. He was only passing through on his way to Sandbourne, where he is gone to settle a small business relating to his father's affairs. He was not in Knollsea ten minutes, owing to something which detained him on the way.'

'Did he inquire for me?'

'No. And only think, Ethelberta--such a remarkable thing has happened, though I nearly forgot to tell you. He says that coming along the road he was overtaken by a carriage, and when it had just passed him one of the horses shied, pushed the other down a slope, and overturned the carriage. One wheel came off and trundled to the bottom of the hill by itself. Christopher of course ran up, and helped out of the carriage an old gentleman--now do you know what's likely?'

'It was Lord Mountclere. I am glad that's the cause,' said Ethelberta involuntarily.

'I imagined you would suppose it to be Lord Mountclere. But Mr. Julian did not know the gentleman, and said nothing about who he might be.'

'Did he describe him?'

'Not much--just a little.'

'Well?'

'He said he was a sly old dog apparently, to hear how he swore in whispers. This affair is what made Mr. Julian so late that he had no time to call here. Lord Mountclere's ankle--if it was Lord Mountclere--was badly sprained. But the servants were not injured beyond a scratch on the coachman's face. Then they got another carriage and drove at once back again. It must be he, or else why is he not come? It is a pity, too, that Mr. Julian was hindered by this, so that there was no opportunity for him to bide a bit in Knollsea.'

Ethelberta was not disposed to believe that Christopher would have called, had time favoured him to the utmost. Between himself and her there was that kind of division which is more insurmountable than enmity; for estrangements produced by good judgment will last when those of

feeling break down in smiles. Not the lovers who part in passion, but the lovers who part in friendship, are those who most frequently part for ever.

'Did you tell Mr. Julian that the injured gentleman was possibly Lord Mountclere, and that he was coming here?' said Ethelberta.

'I made no remark at all--I did not think of him till afterwards.'

The inquiry was hardly necessary, for Picotee's words would dry away like a brook in the sands when she held conversation with Christopher.

As they had anticipated, the sufferer was no other than their intending visitor. Next morning there was a note explaining the accident, and expressing its writer's suffering from the cruel delay as greater than that from the swollen ankle, which was progressing favourably.

Nothing further was heard of Lord Mountclere for more than a week, when she received another letter, which put an end to her season of relaxation, and once more braced her to the contest. This epistle was very courteously written, and in point of correctness, propriety, and gravity, might have come from the quill of a bishop. Herein the old nobleman gave a further description of the accident, but the main business of the communication was to ask her if, since he was not as yet very active, she would come to Enckworth Court and delight himself and a small group of friends who were visiting there.

She pondered over the letter as she walked by the shore that day, and after some hesitation decided to go.