

38. ENCKWORTH COURT

It was on a dull, stagnant, noiseless afternoon of autumn that Ethelberta first crossed the threshold of Enckworth Court. The daylight was so lowered by the impervious roof of cloud overhead that it scarcely reached further into Lord Mountclere's entrance-hall than to the splays of the windows, even but an hour or two after midday; and indoors the glitter of the fire reflected itself from the very panes, so inconsiderable were the opposing rays.

Enckworth Court, in its main part, had not been standing more than a hundred years. At that date the weakened portions of the original mediaeval structure were pulled down and cleared away, old jambs being carried off for rick-staddles, and the foliated timbers of the hall roof making themselves useful as fancy chairs in the summer-houses of rising inns. A new block of masonry was built up from the ground of such height and lordliness that the remnant of the old pile left standing became as a mere cup-bearer and culinary menial beside it. The rooms in this old fragment, which had in times past been considered sufficiently dignified for dining-hall, withdrawing-room, and so on, were now reckoned barely high enough for sculleries, servants' hall, and laundries, the whole of which were arranged therein.

The modern portion had been planned with such a total disregard of association, that the very rudeness of the contrast gave an interest to

the mass which it might have wanted had perfect harmony been attempted between the old nucleus and its adjuncts, a probable result if the enlargement had taken place later on in time. The issue was that the hooded windows, simple string-courses, and random masonry of the Gothic workman, stood elbow to elbow with the equal-spaced ashlar, architraves, and fasciae of the Classic addition, each telling its distinct tale as to stage of thought and domestic habit without any of those artifices of blending or restoration by which the seeker for history in stones will be utterly hoodwinked in time to come.

To the left of the door and vestibule which Ethelberta passed through rose the principal staircase, constructed of a freestone so milk-white and delicately moulded as to be easily conceived in the lamplight as of biscuit-ware. Who, unacquainted with the secrets of geometrical construction, could imagine that, hanging so airily there, to all appearance supported on nothing, were twenty or more tons dead weight of stone, that would have made a prison for an elephant if so arranged? The art which produced this illusion was questionable, but its success was undoubted. 'How lovely!' said Ethelberta, as she looked at the fairy ascent. 'His staircase alone is worth my hand!'

Passing along by the colonnade, which partly fenced the staircase from the visitor, the saloon was reached, an apartment forming a double cube. About the left-hand end of this were grouped the drawing-rooms and library; while on the right was the dining-hall, with billiard, smoking, and gun rooms in mysterious remoteness beyond.

Without attempting to trace an analogy between a man and his mansion, it may be stated that everything here, though so dignified and magnificent, was not conceived in quite the true and eternal spirit of art. It was a house in which Pugin would have torn his hair. Those massive blocks of red-veined marble lining the hall--emulating in their surface-glitter the Escalier de Marbre at Versailles--were cunning imitations in paint and plaster by workmen brought from afar for the purpose, at a prodigious expense, by the present viscount's father, and recently repaired and re-varnished. The dark green columns and pilasters corresponding were brick at the core. Nay, the external walls, apparently of massive and solid freestone, were only veneered with that material, being, like the pillars, of brick within.

To a stone mask worn by a brick face a story naturally appertained--one which has since done service in other quarters. When the vast addition had just been completed King George visited Enckworth. Its owner pointed out the features of its grand architectural attempt, and waited for commendation.

'Brick, brick, brick,' said the king.

The Georgian Lord Mountclere blushed faintly, albeit to his very poll, and said nothing more about his house that day. When the king was gone he sent frantically for the craftsmen recently dismissed, and soon the green lawns became again the colour of a Nine-Elms cement wharf. Thin

freestone slabs were affixed to the whole series of fronts by copper cramps and dowels, each one of substance sufficient to have furnished a poor boy's pocket with pennies for a month, till not a speck of the original surface remained, and the edifice shone in all the grandeur of massive masonry that was not massive at all. But who remembered this save the builder and his crew? and as long as nobody knew the truth, pretence looked just as well.

What was honest in Enckworth Court was that portion of the original edifice which still remained, now degraded to subservient uses. Where the untitled Mountclere of the White Rose faction had spread his knees over the brands, when the place was a castle and not a court, the still-room maid now simmered her preserves; and where Elizabethan mothers and daughters of that sturdy line had tapestried the love-scenes of Isaac and Jacob, boots and shoes were now cleaned and coals stowed away.

Lord Mountclere had so far recovered from the sprain as to be nominally quite well, under pressure of a wish to receive guests. The sprain had in one sense served him excellently. He had now a reason, apart from that of years, for walking with his stick, and took care to let the reason be frequently known. To-day he entertained a larger number of persons than had been assembled within his walls for a great length of time.

Until after dinner Ethelberta felt as if she were staying at an hotel.

Few of the people whom she had met at the meeting of the Imperial Association greeted her here. The viscount's brother was not present, but Sir Cyril Blandsbury and his wife were there, a lively pair of persons, entertaining as actors, and friendly as dogs. Beyond these all the faces and figures were new to her, though they were handsome and dashing enough to satisfy a court chronicler. Ethelberta, in a dress sloped about as high over the shoulder as would have drawn approval from Reynolds, and expostulation from Lely, thawed and thawed each friend who came near her, and sent him or her away smiling; yet she felt a little surprise. She had seldom visited at a country-house, and knew little of the ordinary composition of a group of visitors within its walls; but the present assemblage seemed to want much of that old-fashioned stability and quaint monumental dignity she had expected to find under this historical roof. Nobody of her entertainer's own rank appeared. Not a single clergyman was there. A tendency to talk Walpolean scandal about foreign courts was particularly manifest. And although tropical travellers, Indian officers and their wives, courteous exiles, and descendants of Irish kings, were infinitely more pleasant than Lord Mountclere's landed neighbours would probably have been, to such a cosmopolite as Ethelberta a calm Tory or old Whig company would have given a greater treat. They would have struck as gratefully upon her senses as sylvan scenery after crags and cliffs, or silence after the roar of a cataract.

It was evening, and all these personages at Enckworth Court were merry, snug, and warm within its walls. Dinner-time had passed, and everything

had gone on well, when Mrs. Tara O'Fanagan, who had a gold-clamped tooth, which shone every now and then, asked Ethelberta if she would amuse them by telling a story, since nobody present, except Lord Mountclere, had ever heard one from her lips.

Seeing that Ethelberta had been working at that art as a profession, it can hardly be said that the question was conceived with tact, though it was put with grace. Lord Mountclere evidently thought it objectionable, for he looked unhappy. To only one person in the brilliant room did the request appear as a timely accident, and that was to Ethelberta herself. Her honesty was always making war upon her manoeuvres, and shattering their delicate meshes, to her great inconvenience and delay. Thus there arose those devious impulses and tangential flights which spoil the works of every would-be schemer who instead of being wholly machine is half heart. One of these now was to show herself as she really was, not only to Lord Mountclere, but to his friends assembled, whom, in her ignorance, she respected more than they deserved, and so get rid of that self-reproach which had by this time reached a morbid pitch, through her over-sensitiveness to a situation in which a large majority of women and men would have seen no falseness.

Full of this curious intention, she quietly assented to the request, and laughingly bade them put themselves in listening order.

'An old story will suit us,' said the lady who had importuned her. 'We

have never heard one.'

'No; it shall be quite new,' she replied. 'One not yet made public; though it soon will be.'

The narrative began by introducing to their notice a girl of the poorest and meanest parentage, the daughter of a serving-man, and the fifth of ten children. She graphically recounted, as if they were her own, the strange dreams and ambitious longings of this child when young, her attempts to acquire education, partial failures, partial successes, and constant struggles; instancing how, on one of these occasions, the girl concealed herself under a bookcase of the library belonging to the mansion in which her father served as footman, and having taken with her there, like a young Fawkes, matches and a halfpenny candle, was going to sit up all night reading when the family had retired, until her father discovered and prevented her scheme. Then followed her experiences as nursery-governess, her evening lessons under self-selected masters, and her ultimate rise to a higher grade among the teaching sisterhood. Next came another epoch. To the mansion in which she was engaged returned a truant son, between whom and the heroine an attachment sprang up. The master of the house was an ambitious gentleman just knighted, who, perceiving the state of their hearts, harshly dismissed the homeless governess, and rated the son, the consequence being that the youthful pair resolved to marry secretly, and carried their resolution into effect. The runaway journey came next, and then a moving description of the death of the young husband, and the terror of the bride.

The guests began to look perplexed, and one or two exchanged whispers. This was not at all the kind of story that they had expected; it was quite different from her usual utterances, the nature of which they knew by report. Ethelberta kept her eye upon Lord Mountclere. Soon, to her amazement, there was that in his face which told her that he knew the story and its heroine quite well. When she delivered the sentence ending with the professedly fictitious words: 'I thus was reduced to great distress, and vainly cast about me for directions what to do,' Lord Mountclere's manner became so excited and anxious that it acted reciprocally upon Ethelberta; her voice trembled, she moved her lips but uttered nothing. To bring the story up to the date of that very evening had been her intent, but it was beyond her power. The spell was broken; she blushed with distress and turned away, for the folly of a disclosure here was but too apparent.

Though every one saw that she had broken down, none of them appeared to know the reason why, or to have the clue to her performance. Fortunately Lord Mountclere came to her aid.

'Let the first part end here,' he said, rising and approaching her. 'We have been well entertained so far. I could scarcely believe that the story I was listening to was utterly an invention, so vividly does Mrs. Petherwin bring the scenes before our eyes. She must now be exhausted; we will have the remainder to-morrow.'

They all agreed that this was well, and soon after fell into groups, and dispersed about the rooms. When everybody's attention was thus occupied Lord Mountclere whispered to Ethelberta tremulously, 'Don't tell more: you think too much of them: they are no better than you! Will you meet me in the little winter garden two minutes hence? Pass through that door, and along the glass passage.' He himself left the room by an opposite door.

She had not set three steps in the warm snug octagon of glass and plants when he appeared on the other side.

'You knew it all before!' she said, looking keenly at him. 'Who told you, and how long have you known it?'

'Before yesterday or last week,' said Lord Mountclere. 'Even before we met in France. Why are you so surprised?'

Ethelberta had been surprised, and very greatly, to find him, as it were, secreted in the very rear of her position. That nothing she could tell was new to him was a good deal to think of, but it was little beside the recollection that he had actually made his first declaration in the face of that knowledge of her which she had supposed so fatal to all her matrimonial ambitions.

'And now only one point remains to be settled,' he said, taking her hand. 'You promised at Rouen that at our next interview you would honour me

with a decisive reply--one to make me happy for ever.'

'But my father and friends?' said she.

'Are nothing to be concerned about. Modern developments have shaken up the classes like peas in a hopper. An annuity, and a comfortable cottage--'

'My brothers are workmen.'

'Manufacture is the single vocation in which a man's prospects may be said to be illimitable. Hee-hee!--they may buy me up before they die! And now what stands in the way? It would take fifty alliances with fifty families so little disreputable as yours, darling, to drag mine down.'

Ethelberta had anticipated the scene, and settled her course; what had to be said and done here was mere formality; yet she had been unable to go straight to the assent required. However, after these words of self-depreciation, which were let fall as much for her own future ease of conscience as for his present warning, she made no more ado.

'I shall think it a great honour to be your wife,' she said simply.