

#### 41. WORKSHOPS--AN INN--THE STREET

On an extensive plot of ground, lying somewhere between the Thames and the Kensington squares, stood the premises of Messrs. Nockett and Perch, builders and contractors. The yard with its workshops formed part of one of those frontier lines between mangy business and garnished domesticity that occur in what are called improving neighbourhoods. We are accustomed to regard increase as the chief feature in a great city's progress, its well-known signs greeting our eyes on every outskirt. Slush-ponds may be seen turning into basement-kitchens; a broad causeway of shattered earthenware smothers plots of budding gooseberry-bushes and vegetable trenches, foundations following so closely upon gardens that the householder may be expected to find cadaverous sprouts from overlooked potatoes rising through the chinks of his cellar floor. But the other great process, that of internal transmutation, is not less curious than this encroachment of grey upon green. Its first erections are often only the milk-teeth of a suburb, and as the district rises in dignity they are dislodged by those which are to endure. Slightness becomes supplanted by comparative solidity, commonness by novelty, lowness and irregularity by symmetry and height.

An observer of the precinct which has been named as an instance in point might have stood under a lamp-post and heard simultaneously the peal of the visitor's bell from the new terrace on the right hand, and the stroke of tools from the musty workshops on the left. Waggons laden with deals

came up on this side, and landaus came down on the other--the former to lumber heavily through the old-established contractors' gates, the latter to sweep fashionably into the square.

About twelve o'clock on the day following Lord Mountclere's exhibition of himself to Christopher in the jeweller's shop at Melchester, and almost at the identical time when the viscount was seen to come from the office for marriage-licences in the same place, a carriage drove nearly up to the gates of Messrs. Nockett and Co.'s yard. A gentleman stepped out and looked around. He was a man whose years would have been pronounced as five-and-forty by the friendly, fifty by the candid, fifty-two or three by the grim. He was as handsome a study in grey as could be seen in town, there being far more of the raven's plumage than of the gull's in the mixture as yet; and he had a glance of that practised sort which can measure people, weigh them, repress them, encourage them to sprout and blossom as a March sun encourages crocuses, ask them questions, give them answers--in short, a glance that could do as many things as an American cooking-stove or a multum-in-parvo pocket-knife. But, as with most men of the world, this was mere mechanism: his actual emotions were kept so far within his person that they were rarely heard or seen near his features.

On reading the builders' names over the gateway he entered the yard, and asked at the office if Solomon Chickerel was engaged on the premises. The clerk was going to be very attentive, but finding the visitor had come

only to speak to a workman, his tense attitude slackened a little, and he merely signified the foot of a Flemish ladder on the other side of the yard, saying, 'You will find him, sir, up there in the joiner's shop.'

When the man in the black coat reached the top he found himself at the end of a long apartment as large as a chapel and as low as a malt-room, across which ran parallel carpenters' benches to the number of twenty or more, a gangway being left at the side for access throughout. Behind every bench there stood a man or two, planing, fitting, or chiselling, as the case might be. The visitor paused for a moment, as if waiting for some cessation of their violent motions and uproar till he could make his errand known. He waited ten seconds, he waited twenty; but, beyond that a quick look had been thrown upon him by every pair of eyes, the muscular performances were in no way interrupted: every one seemed oblivious of his presence, and absolutely regardless of his wish. In truth, the texture of that salmon-coloured skin could be seen to be aristocratic without a microscope, and the exceptious artizan has an offhand way when contrasts are made painfully strong by an idler of this kind coming, gloved and brushed, into the very den where he is sweating and muddling in his shirt-sleeves.

The gentleman from the carriage then proceeded down the workshop, wading

up to his knees in a sea of shavings, and bruising his ankles against corners of board and sawn-off blocks, that lay hidden like reefs beneath.

At the ninth bench he made another venture.

'Sol Chickere!?' said the man addressed, as he touched his plane-iron upon the oilstone. 'He's one of them just behind.'

'Damn it all, can't one of you show me?' the visitor angrily observed, for he had been used to more attention than this. 'Here, point him out.' He handed the man a shilling.

'No trouble to do that,' said the workman; and he turned and signified Sol by a nod without moving from his place.

The stranger entered Sol's division, and, nailing him with his eye, said at once: 'I want to speak a few words with you in private. Is not a Mrs. Petherwin your sister?'

Sol started suspiciously. 'Has anything happened to her?' he at length said hurriedly.

'O no. It is on a business matter that I have called. You need not mind owning the relationship to me--the secret will be kept. I am the brother of one whom you may have heard of from her--Lord Mountclere.'

'I have not. But if you will wait a minute, sir--' He went to a little glazed box at the end of the shop, where the foreman was sitting, and, after speaking a few words to this person, Sol led Mountclere to the door, and down the ladder.

'I suppose we cannot very well talk here, after all?' said the gentleman, when they reached the yard, and found several men moving about therein.

'Perhaps we had better go to some room--the nearest inn will answer the purpose, won't it?'

'Excellently.'

'There's the "Green Bushes" over the way. They have a very nice private room upstairs.'

'Yes, that will do.' And passing out of the yard, the man with the glance entered the inn with Sol, where they were shown to the parlour as requested.

While the waiter was gone for some wine, which Mountclere ordered, the more ingenuous of the two resumed the conversation by saying, awkwardly: 'Yes, Mrs. Petherwin is my sister, as you supposed, sir; but on her account I do not let it be known.'

'Indeed,' said Mountclere. 'Well, I came to see you in order to speak of a matter which I thought you might know more about than I do, for it has taken me quite by surprise. My brother, Lord Mountclere, is, it seems, to be privately married to Mrs. Petherwin to-morrow.'

'Is that really the fact?' said Sol, becoming quite shaken. 'I had no thought that such a thing could be possible!'

'It is imminent.'

'Father has told me that she has lately got to know some nobleman; but I never supposed there could be any meaning in that.'

'You were altogether wrong,' said Mountclere, leaning back in his chair and looking at Sol steadily. 'Do you feel it to be a matter upon which you will congratulate her?'

'A very different thing!' said Sol vehemently. 'Though he is your brother, sir, I must say this, that I would rather she married the poorest man I know.'

'Why?'

'From what my father has told me of him, he is not--a more desirable brother-in-law to me than I shall be in all likelihood to him. What business has a man of that character to marry Berta, I should like to ask?'

'That's what I say,' returned Mountclere, revealing his satisfaction at Sol's estimate of his noble brother: it showed that he had calculated well in coming here. 'My brother is getting old, and he has lived

strangely: your sister is a highly respectable young lady.'

'And he is not respectable, you mean? I know he is not. I worked near Enckworth once.'

'I cannot say that,' returned Mountclere. Possibly a certain fraternal feeling repressed a direct assent: and yet this was the only representation which could be expected to prejudice the young man against the wedding, if he were such an one as the visitor supposed Sol to be--a man vulgar in sentiment and ambition, but pure in his anxiety for his sister's happiness. 'At any rate, we are agreed in thinking that this would be an unfortunate marriage for both,' added Mountclere.

'About both I don't know. It may be a good thing for him. When do you say it is to be, sir--to-morrow?'

'Yes.'

'I don't know what to do!' said Sol, walking up and down. 'If half what I have heard is true, I would lose a winter's work to prevent her marrying him. What does she want to go mixing in with people who despise her for? Now look here, Mr. Mountclere, since you have been and called me out to talk this over, it is only fair that you should tell me the exact truth about your brother. Is it a lie, or is it true, that he is not fit to be the husband of a decent woman?'

'That is a curious inquiry,' said Mountclere, whose manner and aspect, neutral as a winter landscape, had little in common with Sol's warm and unrestrained bearing. 'There are reasons why I think your sister will not be happy with him.'

'Then it is true what they say,' said Sol, bringing down his fist upon the table. 'I know your meaning well enough. What's to be done? If I could only see her this minute, she might be kept out of it.'

'You think your presence would influence your sister--if you could see her before the wedding?'

'I think it would. But who's to get at her?'

'I am going, so you had better come on with me--unless it would be best for your father to come.'

'Perhaps it might,' said the bewildered Sol. 'But he will not be able to get away; and it's no use for Dan to go. If anybody goes I must! If she has made up her mind nothing can be done by writing to her.'

'I leave at once to see Lord Mountclere,' the other continued. 'I feel that as my brother is evidently ignorant of the position of Mrs. Petherwin's family and connections, it is only fair in me, as his nearest relative, to make them clear to him before it is too late.'



'You mean that if he knew her friends were working-people he would not think of her as a wife? 'Tis a reasonable thought. But make your mind easy: she has told him. I make a great mistake if she has for a moment thought of concealing that from him.'

'She may not have deliberately done so. But--and I say this with no ill-feeling--it is a matter known to few, and she may have taken no steps to undeceive him. I hope to bring him to see the matter clearly.

Unfortunately the thing has been so secret and hurried that there is barely time. I knew nothing until this morning--never dreamt of such a preposterous occurrence.'

'Preposterous! If it should come to pass, she would play her part as his lady as well as any other woman, and better. I wish there was no more reason for fear on my side than there is on yours! Things have come to a sore head when she is not considered lady enough for such as he. But perhaps your meaning is, that if your brother were to have a son, you would lose your heir-presumptive title to the cor'net of Mountclere? Well, 'twould be rather hard for ye, now I come to think o't--upon my life, 'twould.'

'The suggestion is as delicate as the --- atmosphere of this vile room. But let your ignorance be your excuse, my man. It is hardly worth while for us to quarrel when we both have the same object in view: do you think so?'

'That's true--that's true. When do you start, sir?'

'We must leave almost at once,' said Mountclere, looking at his watch.

'If we cannot catch the two o'clock train, there is no getting there to-night--and to-morrow we could not possibly arrive before one.'

'I wish there was time for me to go and tidy myself a bit,' said Sol, anxiously looking down at his working clothes. 'I suppose you would not like me to go with you like this?'

'Confound the clothes! If you cannot start in five minutes, we shall not be able to go at all.'

'Very well, then--wait while I run across to the shop, then I am ready. How do we get to the station?'

'My carriage is at the corner waiting. When you come out I will meet you at the gates.'

Sol then hurried downstairs, and a minute or two later Mr. Mountclere followed, looking like a man bent on policy at any price. The carriage was brought round by the time that Sol reappeared from the yard. He entered and sat down beside Mountclere, not without a sense that he was spoiling good upholstery; the coachman then allowed the lash of his whip to alight with the force of a small fly upon the horses, which set them up in an angry trot. Sol rolled on beside his new acquaintance with the

shamefaced look of a man going to prison in a van, for pedestrians occasionally gazed at him, full of what seemed to himself to be ironical surprise.

'I am afraid I ought to have changed my clothes after all,' he said, writhing under a perception of the contrast between them. 'Not knowing anything about this, I ain't a bit prepared. If I had got even my second-best hat, it wouldn't be so bad.'

'It makes no difference,' said Mountclere inanimately.

'Or I might have brought my portmanteau, with some things.'

'It really is not important.'

On reaching the station they found there were yet a few minutes to spare, which Sol made use of in writing a note to his father, to explain what had occurred.