

42. THE DONCASTLES' RESIDENCE, AND OUTSIDE THE SAME

Mrs. Doncastle's dressing-bell had rung, but Menlove, the lady's maid, having at the same time received a letter by the evening post, paused to read it before replying to the summons:--

'ENCKWORTH COURT, Wednesday.

DARLING LOUISA,--I can assure you that I am no more likely than yourself to form another attachment, as you will perceive by what follows. Before we left town I thought that to be able to see you occasionally was sufficient for happiness, but down in this lonely place the case is different. In short, my dear, I ask you to consent to a union with me as soon as you possibly can. Your prettiness has won my eyes and lips completely, sweet, and I lie awake at night to think of the golden curls you allowed to escape from their confinement on those nice times of private clothes, when we walked in the park and slipped the bonds of service, which you were never born to any more than I. . . .

'Had not my own feelings been so strong, I should have told you at the first dash of my pen that what I expected is coming to pass at last--the old dog is going to be privately married to Mrs. P. Yes, indeed, and the wedding is coming off to-morrow, secret as the grave. All her friends will doubtless leave service on account of it. What

he does now makes little difference to me, of course, as I had already given warning, but I shall stick to him like a Briton in spite of it. He has to-day made me a present, and a further five pounds for yourself, expecting you to hold your tongue on every matter connected with Mrs. P.'s friends, and to say nothing to any of them about this marriage until it is over. His lordship impressed this upon me very strong, and familiar as a brother, and of course we obey his instructions to the letter; for I need hardly say that unless he keeps his promise to help me in setting up the shop, our nuptials cannot be consumed. His help depends upon our obedience, as you are aware. . . .'

This, and much more, was from her very last lover, Lord Mountclere's valet, who had been taken in hand directly she had convinced herself of Joey's hopeless youthfulness. The missive sent Mrs. Menlove's spirits soaring like spring larks; she flew upstairs in answer to the bell with a joyful, triumphant look, which the illuminated figure of Mrs. Doncastle in her dressing-room could not quite repress. One could almost forgive Menlove her arts when so modest a result brought such vast content.

Mrs. Doncastle seemed inclined to make no remark during the dressing, and at last Menlove could repress herself no longer.

'I should like to name something to you, m'm.'

'Yes.'

'I shall be wishing to leave soon, if it is convenient.'

'Very well, Menlove,' answered Mrs. Doncastle, as she serenely surveyed her right eyebrow in the glass. 'Am I to take this as a formal notice?'

'If you please; but I could stay a week or two beyond the month if suitable. I am going to be married--that's what it is, m'm.'

'O! I am glad to hear it, though I am sorry to lose you.'

'It is Lord Mountclere's valet--Mr. Tipman--m'm.'

'Indeed.'

Menlove went on building up Mrs. Doncastle's hair awhile in silence.

'I suppose you heard the other news that arrived in town to-day, m'm?' she said again. 'Lord Mountclere is going to be married to-morrow.'

'To-morrow? Are you quite sure?'

'O yes, m'm. Mr. Tipman has just told me so in his letter. He is going to be married to Mrs. Petherwin. It is to be quite a private wedding.'

Mrs. Doncastle made no remark, and she remained in the same still

position as before; but a countenance expressing transcendent surprise was reflected to Menlove by the glass.

At this sight Menlove's tongue so burned to go further, and unfold the lady's relations with the butler downstairs, that she would have lost a month's wages to be at liberty to do it. The disclosure was almost too magnificent to be repressed. To deny herself so exquisite an indulgence required an effort which nothing on earth could have sustained save the one thing that did sustain it--the knowledge that upon her silence hung the most enormous desideratum in the world, her own marriage. She said no more, and Mrs. Doncastle went away.

It was an ordinary family dinner that day, but their nephew Neigh happened to be present. Just as they were sitting down Mrs. Doncastle said to her husband: 'Why have you not told me of the wedding to-morrow?--or don't you know anything about it?'

'Wedding?' said Mr. Doncastle.

'Lord Mountclere is to be married to Mrs. Petherwin quite privately.'

'Good God!' said some person.

Mr. Doncastle did not speak the words; they were not spoken by Neigh: they seemed to float over the room and round the walls, as if originating in some spiritualistic source. Yet Mrs. Doncastle, remembering the

symptoms of attachment between Ethelberta and her nephew which had appeared during the summer, looked towards Neigh instantly, as if she thought the words must have come from him after all; but Neigh's face was perfectly calm; he, together with her husband, was sitting with his eyes fixed in the direction of the sideboard; and turning to the same spot she beheld Chickerel standing pale as death, his lips being parted as if he did not know where he was.

'Did you speak?' said Mrs. Doncastle, looking with astonishment at the butler.

'Chickerel, what's the matter--are you ill?' said Mr. Doncastle simultaneously. 'Was it you who said that?'

'I did, sir,' said Chickerel in a husky voice, scarcely above a whisper.

'I could not help it.'

'Why?'

'She is my daughter, and it shall be known at once!'

'Who is your daughter?'

He paused a few moments nervously. 'Mrs. Petherwin,' he said.

Upon this announcement Neigh looked at poor Chickerel as if he saw

through him into the wall. Mrs. Doncastle uttered a faint exclamation and leant back in her chair: the bare possibility of the truth of Chickereel's claims to such paternity shook her to pieces when she viewed her intimacies with Ethelberta during the past season--the court she had paid her, the arrangements she had entered into to please her; above all, the dinner-party which she had contrived and carried out solely to gratify Lord Mountclere and bring him into personal communication with the general favourite; thus making herself probably the chief though unconscious instrument in promoting a match by which her butler was to become father-in-law to a peer she delighted to honour. The crowd of perceptions almost took away her life; she closed her eyes in a white shiver.

'Do you mean to say that the lady who sat here at dinner at the same time that Lord Mountclere was present, is your daughter?' asked Doncastle.

'Yes, sir,' said Chickereel respectfully.

'How did she come to be your daughter?'

'I-- Well, she is my daughter, sir.'

'Did you educate her?'

'Not altogether, sir. She was a very clever child. Lady Petherwin took a deal of trouble about her education. They were both left widows about

the same time: the son died, then the father. My daughter was only seventeen then. But though she's older now, her marriage with Lord Mountclere means misery. He ought to marry another woman.'

'It is very extraordinary,' Mr. Doncastle murmured. 'If you are ill you had better go and rest yourself, Chickereel. Send in Thomas.'

Chickereel, who seemed to be much disturbed, then very gladly left the room, and dinner proceeded. But such was the peculiarity of the case, that, though there was in it neither murder, robbery, illness, accident, fire, or any other of the tragic and legitimate shakers of human nerves, two of the three who were gathered there sat through the meal without the least consciousness of what viands had composed it. Impressiveness depends as much upon propinquity as upon magnitude; and to have honoured

unawares the daughter of the vilest Antipodean miscreant and murderer would have been less discomfiting to Mrs. Doncastle than it was to make the same blunder with the daughter of a respectable servant who happened to live in her own house. To Neigh the announcement was as the catastrophe of a story already begun, rather than as an isolated wonder. Ethelberta's words had prepared him for something, though the nature of that thing was unknown.

'Chickereel ought not to have kept us in ignorance of this--of course he ought not!' said Mrs. Doncastle, as soon as they were left alone.

'I don't see why not,' replied Mr. Doncastle, who took the matter very coolly, as was his custom.

'Then she herself should have let it be known.'

'Nor does that follow. You didn't tell Mrs. Petherwin that your grandfather narrowly escaped hanging for shooting his rival in a duel.'

'Of course not. There was no reason why I should give extraneous information.'

'Nor was there any reason why she should. As for Chickerel, he doubtless felt how unbecoming it would be to make personal remarks upon one of your guests--Ha-ha-ha! Well, well--Ha-ha-ha-ha!'

'I know this,' said Mrs. Doncastle, in great anger, 'that if my father had been in the room, I should not have let the fact pass unnoticed, and treated him like a stranger!'

'Would you have had her introduce Chickerel to us all round? My dear Margaret, it was a complicated position for a woman.'

'Then she ought not to have come!'

'There may be something in that, though she was dining out at other

houses as good as ours. Well, I should have done just as she did, for the joke of the thing. Ha-ha-ha!--it is very good--very. It was a case in which the appetite for a jest would overpower the sting of conscience in any well-constituted being--that, my dear, I must maintain.'

'I say she should not have come!' answered Mrs. Doncastle firmly. 'Of course I shall dismiss Chickerel.'

'Of course you will do no such thing. I have never had a butler in the house before who suited me so well. It is a great credit to the man to have such a daughter, and I am not sure that we do not derive some lustre of a humble kind from his presence in the house. But, seriously, I wonder at your short-sightedness, when you know the troubles we have had through getting new men from nobody knows where.'

Neigh, perceiving that the breeze in the atmosphere might ultimately intensify to a palpable black squall, seemed to think it would be well to take leave of his uncle and aunt as soon as he conveniently could; nevertheless, he was much less discomposed by the situation than by the active cause which had led to it. When Mrs. Doncastle arose, her husband said he was going to speak to Chickerel for a minute or two, and Neigh followed his aunt upstairs.

Presently Doncastle joined them. 'I have been talking to Chickerel,' he said. 'It is a very curious affair--this marriage of his daughter and Lord Mountclere. The whole situation is the most astounding I have ever

met with. The man is quite ill about the news. He has shown me a letter which has just reached him from his son on the same subject. Lord Mountclere's brother and this young man have actually gone off together to try to prevent the wedding, and Chickereel has asked to be allowed to go himself, if he can get soon enough to the station to catch the night mail. Of course he may go if he wishes.'

'What a funny thing!' said the lady, with a wretchedly factitious smile. 'The times have taken a strange turn when the angry parent of the comedy, who goes post-haste to prevent the undutiful daughter's rash marriage, is a gentleman from below stairs, and the unworthy lover a peer of the realm!'

Neigh spoke for almost the first time. 'I don't blame Chickereel in objecting to Lord Mountclere. I should object to him myself if I had a daughter. I never liked him.'

'Why?' said Mrs. Doncastle, lifting her eyelids as if the act were a heavy task.

'For reasons which don't generally appear.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Doncastle, in a low tone. 'Still, we must not believe all we hear.'

'Is Chickereel going?' said Neigh.

'He leaves in five or ten minutes,' said Doncastle.

After a few further words Neigh mentioned that he was unable to stay longer that evening, and left them. When he had reached the outside of the door he walked a little way up the pavement and back again, as if reluctant to lose sight of the street, finally standing under a lamp-post whence he could command a view of Mr. Doncastle's front. Presently a man came out in a great-coat and with a small bag in his hand; Neigh at once recognizing the person as Chickerel, went up to him.

'Mr. Doncastle tells me you are going on a sudden journey. At what time does your train leave?' Neigh asked.

'I go by the ten o'clock, sir: I hope it is a third-class,' said Chickerel; 'though I am afraid it may not be.'

'It is as much as you will do to get to the station,' said Neigh, turning the face of his watch to the light. 'Here, come into my cab--I am driving that way.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Chickerel.

Neigh called a cab at the first opportunity, and they entered and drove along together. Neither spoke during the journey. When they were driving up to the station entrance Neigh looked again to see the hour.

'You have not a minute to lose,' he said, in repressed anxiety. 'And your journey will be expensive: instead of walking from Anglebury to Knollsea, you had better drive--above all, don't lose time. Never mind what class the train is. Take this from me, since the emergency is great.' He handed something to Chickerel folded up small.

The butler took it without inquiry, and stepped out hastily.

'I sincerely hope she-- Well, good-night, Chickerel,' continued Neigh, ending his words abruptly. The cab containing him drove again towards the station-gates, leaving Chickerel standing on the kerb.

He passed through the booking-office, and looked at the paper Neigh had put into his hand. It was a five-pound note.

Chickerel mused on the circumstance as he took his ticket and got into the train.