

#### 45. KNOLLSEA--THE ROAD THENCE--ENCKWORTH

All eyes were directed to the church-gate, as the travellers descended the hill. No wedding carriages were there, no favours, no slatternly group of women brimming with interest, no aged pauper on two sticks, who comes because he has nothing else to do till dying time, no nameless female passing by on the other side with a laugh of indifference, no ringers taking off their coats as they vanish up a turret, no hobbledehoys on tiptoe outside the chancel windows--in short, none whatever of the customary accessories of a country wedding was anywhere visible.

'Thank God!' said Chickerel.

'Wait till you know he deserves it,' said Mountclere.

'Nothing's done yet between them.'

'It is not likely that anything is done at this time of day. But I have decided to go to the church first. You will probably go to your relative's house at once?'

Sol looked to his father for a reply.

'No, I too shall go to the church first, just to assure myself,' said

Chickerel. 'I shall then go on to Mrs Petherwin's.'

The carriage was stopped at the corner of a steep incline leading down to the edifice. Mountclere and Chickerel alighted and walked on towards the gates, Sol remaining in his place. Christopher was some way off, descending the hill on foot, having halted to leave his horse and trap at a small inn at the entrance to the village.

When Chickerel and Mountclere reached the churchyard gate they found it slightly open. The church-door beyond it was also open, but nobody was near the spot.

'We have arrived not a minute too soon, however,' said Mountclere.

'Preparations have apparently begun. It was to be an early wedding, no doubt.'

Entering the building, they looked around; it was quite empty. Chickerel turned towards the chancel, his eye being attracted by a red kneeling-cushion, placed at about the middle of the altar-railing, as if for early use. Mountclere strode to the vestry, somewhat at a loss how to proceed in his difficult task of unearthing his brother, obtaining a private interview with him, and then, by the introduction of Sol and Chickerel, causing a general convulsion.

'Ha! here's somebody,' he said, observing a man in the vestry. He advanced with the intention of asking where Lord Mountclere was to be

found. Chickereel came forward in the same direction.

'Are you the parish clerk?' said Mountclere to the man, who was dressed up in his best clothes.

'I hev the honour of that calling,' the man replied.

Two large books were lying before him on the vestry table, one of them being open. As the clerk spoke he looked slantingly on the page, as a person might do to discover if some writing were dry. Mountclere and Chickereel gazed on the same page. The book was the marriage-register.

'Too late!' said Chickereel.

There plainly enough stood the signatures of Lord Mountclere and Ethelberta. The viscount's was very black, and had not yet dried. Her strokes were firm, and comparatively thick for a woman's, though paled by juxtaposition with her husband's muddled characters. In the space for witnesses' names appeared in trembling lines as fine as silk the autograph of Picotee, the second name being that of a stranger, probably the clerk.

'Yes, yes--we are too late, it seems,' said Mountclere coolly. 'Who could have thought they'd marry at eight!'

Chickereel stood like a man baked hard and dry. Further than his first

two words he could say nothing.

'They must have set about it early, upon my soul,' Mountclere continued.

'When did the wedding take place?' he asked of the clerk sharply.

'It was over about five minutes before you came in,' replied that luminary pleasantly, as he played at an invisible game of pitch-and-toss with some half-sovereigns in his pocket. 'I received orders to have the church ready at five minutes to eight this morning, though I knew nothing about such a thing till bedtime last night. It was very private and plain, not that I should mind another such a one, sir;' and he secretly pitched and tossed again.

Meanwhile Sol had found himself too restless to sit waiting in the carriage for more than a minute after the other two had left it. He stepped out at the same instant that Christopher came past, and together they too went on to the church.

'Father, ought we not to go on at once to Ethelberta's, instead of waiting?' said Sol, on reaching the vestry, still in ignorance. "'Twas no use in coming here.'

'No use at all,' said Chickerel, as if he had straw in his throat. 'Look at this. I would almost sooner have had it that in leaving this church I came from her grave--well, no, perhaps not that, but I fear it is a bad thing.'

Sol then saw the names in the register, Christopher saw them, and the man closed the book. Christopher could not well command himself, and he retired.

'I knew it. I always said that pride would lead Berta to marry an unworthy man, and so it has!' said Sol bitterly. 'What shall we do now? I'll see her.'

'Do no such thing, young man,' said Mountclere. 'The best course is to leave matters alone. They are married. If you are wise, you will try to think the match a good one, and be content to let her keep her position without inconveniencing her by your intrusions or complaints. It is possible that the satisfaction of her ambition will help her to endure any few surprises to her propriety that may occur. She is a clever young woman, and has played her cards adroitly. I only hope she may never repent of the game! A-hem. Good morning.' Saying this, Mountclere slightly bowed to his relations, and marched out of the church with dignity; but it was told afterwards by the coachman, who had no love for Mountclere, that when he stepped into the fly, and was as he believed unobserved, he was quite overcome with fatuous rage, his lips frothing like a mug of hot ale.

'What an impertinent gentleman 'tis,' said Chickerel. 'As if we had tried for her to marry his brother!'

'He knows better than that,' said Sol. 'But he'll never believe that Berta didn't lay a trap for the old fellow. He thinks at this moment that Lord Mountclere has never been told of us and our belongings.'

'I wonder if she has deceived him in anything,' murmured Chickerel. 'I can hardly suppose it. But she is altogether beyond me. However, if she has misled him on any point she will suffer for it.'

'You need not fear that, father. It isn't her way of working. Why couldn't she have known that when a title is to be had for the asking, the owner must be a shocking one indeed?'

'The title is well enough. Any poor scrubs in our place must be fools not to think the match a very rare and astonishing honour, as far as the position goes. But that my brave girl will be miserable is a part of the honour I can't stomach so well. If he had been any other lord in the kingdom, we might have been merry indeed. I believe he will ruin her happiness--yes, I do--not by any personal snubbing or rough conduct, but by other things, causing her to be despised; and that is a thing she can't endure.'

'She's not to be despised without a deal of trouble--we must remember that. And if he insults her by introducing new favourites, as they say he did his first wife, I'll call upon him and ask his meaning, and take her away.'

'Nonsense--we shall never know what he does, or how she feels; she will never let out a word. However unhappy she may be, she will always deny it--that's the unfortunate part of such marriages.'

'An old chap like that ought to leave young women alone, damn him!'

The clerk came nearer. 'I am afraid I cannot allow bad words to be spoke in this sacred pile,' he said. 'As far as my personal self goes, I should have no objection to your cussing as much as you like, but as a official of the church my conscience won't allow it to be done.'

'Your conscience has allowed something to be done that cussing and swearing are godly worship to.'

'The prettiest maid is left out of harness, however,' said the clerk.

'The little witness was the chicken to my taste--Lord forgive me for saying it, and a man with a wife and family!'

Sol and his father turned to withdraw, and soon forgot the remark, but it was frequently recalled by Christopher.

'Do you think of trying to see Ethelberta before you leave?' said Sol.

'Certainly not,' said Chickereel. 'Mr. Mountclere's advice was good in that. The more we keep out of the way the more good we are doing her. I shall go back to Anglebury by the carrier, and get on at once to London.'

You will go with me, I suppose?'

'The carrier does not leave yet for an hour or two.'

'I shall walk on, and let him overtake me. If possible, I will get one glimpse of Enckworth Court, Berta's new home; there may be time, if I start at once.'

'I will walk with you,' said Sol.

'There is room for one with me,' said Christopher. 'I shall drive back early in the afternoon.'

'Thank you,' said Sol. 'I will endeavour to meet you at Corvsgate.'

Thus it was arranged. Chickereel could have wished to search for Picotee, and learn from her the details of this mysterious matter. But it was particularly painful to him to make himself busy after the event; and to appear suddenly and uselessly where he was plainly not wanted to appear would be an awkwardness which the pleasure of seeing either daughter could scarcely counterbalance. Hence he had resolved to return at once to town, and there await the news, together with the detailed directions as to his own future movements, carefully considered and laid down, which were sure to be given by the far-seeing Ethelberta.

Sol and his father walked on together, Chickereel to meet the carrier just



beyond Enckworth, Sol to wait for Christopher at Corvsgate. His wish to see, in company with his father, the outline of the seat to which Ethelberta had been advanced that day, was the triumph of youthful curiosity and interest over dogged objection. His father's wish was based on calmer reasons.

Christopher, lone and out of place, remained in the church yet a little longer. He desultorily walked round. Reaching the organ chamber, he looked at the instrument, and was surprised to find behind it a young man. Julian first thought him to be the organist; on second inspection, however, he proved to be a person Christopher had met before, under far different circumstances; it was our young friend Ladywell, looking as sick and sorry as a lily with a slug in its stalk.

The occasion, the place, and their own condition, made them kin. Christopher had despised Ladywell, Ladywell had disliked Christopher; but a third item neutralized the other two--it was their common lot.

Christopher just nodded, for they had only met on Ethelberta's stairs. Ladywell nodded more, and spoke. 'The church appears to be interesting,' he said.

'Yes. Such a tower is rare in England,' said Christopher.

They then dwelt on other features of the building, thence enlarging to the village, and then to the rocks and marine scenery, both avoiding the

malady they suffered from--the marriage of Ethelberta.

'The village streets are very picturesque, and the cliff scenery is good of its kind,' rejoined Ladywell. 'The rocks represent the feminine side of grandeur. Here they are white, with delicate tops. On the west coast they are higher, black, and with angular summits. Those represent grandeur in its masculine aspect. It is merely my own idea, and not very bright, perhaps.'

'It is very ingenious,' said Christopher, 'and perfectly true.'

Ladywell was pleased. 'I am here at present making sketches for my next subject--a winter sea. Otherwise I should not have--happened to be in the church.'

'You are acquainted with Mrs. Petherwin--I think you are Mr. Ladywell, who painted her portrait last season?'

'Yes,' said Ladywell, colouring.

'You may have heard her speak of Mr. Julian?'

'O yes,' said Ladywell, offering his hand. Then by degrees their tongues wound closer round the subject of their sadness, each tacitly owning to what he would not tell.

'I saw it,' said Ladywell heavily.

'Did she look troubled?'

'Not in the least--bright and fresh as a May morning. She has played me many a bitter trick, and poor Neigh too, a friend of mine. But I cannot help forgiving her. . . . I saw a carriage at the door, and strolled in. The ceremony was just proceeding, so I sat down here. Well, I have done with Knollsea. The place has no further interest for me now. I may own to you as a friend, that if she had not been living here I should have studied at some other coast--of course that's in confidence.'

'I understand, quite.'

'I only arrived in the neighbourhood two days ago, and did not set eyes upon her till this morning, she has kept so entirely indoors.'

Then the young men parted, and half-an-hour later the ingenuous Ladywell came from the visitors' inn by the shore, a man walking behind him with a quantity of artists' materials and appliances. He went on board the steamer, which this morning had performed the passage in safety. Ethelberta single having been the loadstone in the cliffs that had attracted Ladywell hither, Ethelberta married was the negative pole of the same, sending him away. And thus did a woman put an end to the only opportunity of distinction, on Art-exhibition walls, that ever offered itself to the tortuous ways, quaint alleys, and marbled bluffs of

Knollsea, as accessories in the picture of a winter sea.

Christopher's interest in the village was of the same evaporating nature. He looked upon the sea, and the great swell, and the waves sending up a sound like the huzzas of multitudes; but all the wild scene was irksome now. The ocean-bound steamers far away on the horizon inspired him with no curiosity as to their destination; the house Ethelberta had occupied was positively hateful; and he turned away to wait impatiently for the hour at which he had promised to drive on to meet Sol at Corvsgate.

Sol and Chickerel plodded along the road, in order to skirt Enckworth before the carrier came up. Reaching the top of a hill on their way, they paused to look down on a peaceful scene. It was a park and wood, glowing in all the matchless colours of late autumn, parapets and pediments peering out from a central position afar. At the bottom of the descent before them was a lodge, to which they now descended. The gate stood invitingly open. Exclusiveness was no part of the owner's instincts: one could see that at a glance. No appearance of a well-rolled garden-path attached to the park-drive; as is the case with many, betokening by the perfection of their surfaces their proprietor's deficiency in hospitality. The approach was like a turnpike road full of great ruts, clumsy mendings; bordered by trampled edges and incursions upon the grass at pleasure. Butchers and bakers drove as freely herein as peers and peeresses. Christening parties, wedding companies, and funeral trains passed along by the doors of the mansion without check or question. A wild untidiness in this particular has its recommendations;

for guarded grounds ever convey a suspicion that their owner is young to landed possessions, as religious earnestness implies newness of conversion, and conjugal tenderness recent marriage.

Half-an-hour being wanting as yet to Chickerel's time with the carrier, Sol and himself, like the rest of the world when at leisure, walked into the extensive stretch of grass and grove. It formed a park so large that not one of its owners had ever wished it larger, not one of its owner's rivals had ever failed to wish it smaller, and not one of its owner's satellites had ever seen it without praise. They somewhat avoided the roadway passing under the huge, misshapen, ragged trees, and through fern brakes, ruddy and crisp in their decay. On reaching a suitable eminence, the father and son stood still to look upon the many-chimneyed building, or rather conglomeration of buildings, to which these groves and glades formed a setting.

'We will just give a glance,' said Chickerel, 'and then go away. It don't seem well to me that Ethelberta should have this; it is too much. The sudden change will do her no good. I never believe in anything that comes in the shape of wonderful luck. As it comes, so it goes. Had she been brought home today to one of those tenant-farms instead of these woods and walls, I could have called it good fortune. What she should have done was glorify herself by glorifying her own line of life, not by forsaking that line for another. Better have been admired as a governess than shunned as a peeress, which is what she will be. But it is just the same everywhere in these days. Young men will rather wear a black coat

and starve than wear fustian and do well.'

'One man to want such a monstrous house as that! Well, 'tis a fine place. See, there's the carpenters' shops, the timber-yard, and everything, as if it were a little town. Perhaps Berta may hire me for a job now and then.'

'I always knew she would cut herself off from us. She marked for it from childhood, and she has finished the business thoroughly.'

'Well, it is no matter, father, for why should we want to trouble her? She may write, and I shall answer; but if she calls to see me, I shall not return the visit; and if she meets me with her husband or any of her new society about her, I shall behave as a stranger.'

'It will be best,' said Chickerel. 'Well, now I must move.'

However, by the sorcery of accident, before they had very far retraced their steps an open carriage became visible round a bend in the drive. Chickerel, with a servant's instinct, was for beating a retreat.

'No,' said Sol. 'Let us stand our ground. We have already been seen, and we do no harm.'

So they stood still on the edge of the drive, and the carriage drew near. It was a landau, and the sun shone in upon Lord Mountclere, with Lady

Mountclere sitting beside him, like Abishag beside King David.

Very blithe looked the viscount, for he rode upon a cherub to-day. She appeared fresh, rosy, and strong, but dubious; though if mien was anything, she was a viscountess twice over. Her dress was of a dove-coloured material, with a bonnet to match, a little tufted white feather resting on the top, like a truce-flag between the blood of noble and vassal. Upon the cool grey of her shoulders hung a few locks of hair, toned warm as fire by the sunshiny addition to its natural hue.

Chickerel instinctively took off his hat; Sol did the same.

For only a moment did Ethelberta seem uncertain how to act. But a solution to her difficulty was given by the face of her brother. There she saw plainly at one glance more than a dozen speeches would have told--for Sol's features thoroughly expressed his intention that to him she was to be a stranger. Her eyes flew to Chickerel, and he slightly shook his head. She understood them now. With a tear in her eye for her father, and a sigh in her bosom for Sol, she bowed in answer to their salute; her husband moved his hat and nodded, and the carriage rolled on. Lord Mountclere might possibly be making use of the fine morning in showing her the park and premises. Chickerel, with a moist eye, now went on with his son towards the highroad. When they reached the lodge, the lodge-keeper was walking in the sun, smoking his pipe. 'Good morning,' he said to Chickerel.

'Any rejoicings at the Court to-day?' the butler inquired.

'Quite the reverse. Not a soul there. 'Tisn't knowed anywhere at all. I had no idea of such a thing till he brought my lady here. Not going off, neither. They've come home like the commonest couple in the land, and not even the bells allowed to ring.'

They walked along the public road, and the carrier came in view.

'Father,' said Sol, 'I don't think I'll go further with you. She's gone into the house; and suppose she should run back without him to try to find us? It would be cruel to disappoint her. I'll bide about here for a quarter of an hour, in case she should. Mr. Julian won't have passed Corvsgate till I get there.'

'Well, one or two of her old ways may be left in her still, and it is not a bad thought. Then you will walk the rest of the distance if you don't meet Mr. Julian? I must be in London by the evening.'

'Any time to-night will do for me. I shall not begin work until to-morrow, so that the four o'clock train will answer my purpose.'

Thus they parted, and Sol strolled leisurely back. The road was quite deserted, and he lingered by the park fence.

'Sol!' said a bird-like voice; 'how did you come here?'



He looked up, and saw a figure peering down upon him from the top of the park wall, the ground on the inside being higher than the road. The speaker was to the expected Ethelberta what the moon is to the sun, a star to the moon. It was Picotee.

'Hullo, Picotee!' said Sol.

'There's a little gate a quarter of a mile further on,' said Picotee. 'We can meet there without your passing through the big lodge. I'll be there as soon as you.'

Sol ascended the hill, passed through the second gate, and turned back again, when he met Picotee coming forward under the trees. They walked together in this secluded spot.

'Berta says she wants to see you and father,' said Picotee breathlessly. 'You must come in and make yourselves comfortable. She had no idea you were here so secretly, and she didn't know what to do.'

'Father's gone,' said Sol.

'How vexed she will be! She thinks there is something the matter--that you are angry with her for not telling you earlier. But you will come in, Sol?'

'No, I can't come in,' said her brother.

'Why not? It is such a big house, you can't think. You need not come near the front apartments, if you think we shall be ashamed of you in your working clothes. How came you not to dress up a bit, Sol? Still, Berta won't mind it much. She says Lord Mountclere must take her as she is, or he is kindly welcome to leave her.'

'Ah, well! I might have had a word or two to say about that, but the time has gone by for it, worse luck. Perhaps it is best that I have said nothing, and she has had her way. No, I shan't come in, Picotee. Father is gone, and I am going too.'

'O Sol!'

'We are rather put out at her acting like this--father and I and all of us. She might have let us know about it beforehand, even if she is a lady and we what we always was. It wouldn't have let her down so terrible much to write a line. She might have learnt something that would have led her to take a different step.'

'But you will see poor Berta? She has done no harm. She was going to write long letters to all of you to-day, explaining her wedding, and how she is going to help us all on in the world.'

Sol paused irresolutely. 'No, I won't come in,' he said. 'It would

disgrace her, for one thing, dressed as I be; more than that, I don't want to come in. But I should like to see her, if she would like to see me; and I'll go up there to that little fir plantation, and walk up and down behind it for exactly half-an-hour. She can come out to me there.' Sol had pointed as he spoke to a knot of young trees that hooded a knoll a little way off.

'I'll go and tell her,' said Picotee.

'I suppose they will be off somewhere, and she is busy getting ready?'

'O no. They are not going to travel till next year. Ethelberta does not want to go anywhere; and Lord Mountclere cannot endure this changeable weather in any place but his own house.'

'Poor fellow!'

'Then you will wait for her by the firs? I'll tell her at once.'

Picotee left him, and Sol went across the glade.