

CHAPTER X.

HESTER IS LURED BACK.

ON the Monday morning, Mr. William Bolton, the barrister, who had much to his own inconvenience remained at Cambridge for the purpose of carrying out the scheme which he had proposed, went over to Folking in a fly. He had never been at the place before, and was personally less well acquainted with the family into which his sister had married than any other Bolton. Had everything been pleasant, nothing could have been more natural than such a visit, but as things were very far from pleasant Hester was much surprised when he was shown into her room. It had been known to Robert Bolton that Caldigate now came every day into Cambridge to see either his lawyer or his father, and that therefore he would certainly not be found at home about the middle of the day. It was henceforth to be a law with all the Boltons, at any rate till after the trial, that they would not speak to, or if possible see, John Caldigate. Not without very strong cause would William Bolton have entered his house, but that strong cause existed.

"Oh, William! I am so glad to see you," said Hester, rushing into her brother's arms.

"I too am glad to see you, Hester, though the time is so sad to us all."

"Yes; yes. It is sad;—oh, so sad! Is it not terrible that there should be people so wicked, and that they should be able to cause so much trouble to innocent persons."

"With all my heart I feel for you," said the brother, caressing his young sister.

With quickest instinct she immediately perceived that a slight emphasis given to the word "you" implied the singular number. She drew herself back a little, still feeling, however, that no offence had as yet been committed against which she could express her indignation. But it was necessary that a protest should be made at once. "I am so sorry that my husband is not here to welcome you. He has gone into Cambridge to fetch his father. Poor Mr. Caldigate is so troubled by all this that he prefers now to come and stay with us."

"Ah, indeed; I dare say it will be better that the father and the son should be together."

"Father and son, or even mother and daughter, are not like husbands and wives, are they?"

"No; they are not," said the barrister, not quite knowing how to answer so very self-evident a proposition, but understanding accurately the line of thought which had rendered the poor creature to reassert at every moment the bond by which she would fain be bound to the father of her child.

"But Mr. Caldigate is so good,—so good and gentle to me and baby, that I am delighted that he should be here with John. You know of all this."

"Yes, I know, of course."

"And will feel all that John has to suffer."

"It is very bad, very bad for everybody concerned. By his own showing his conduct——"

"William," said she, "let this be settled in one word. I will not hear a syllable against my husband from you or any one else. I am delighted to see you,—I cannot tell you how delighted. Oh, if papa would come,—or mamma! Dear, dear mamma! You don't suppose but what I love you all!"

"I am sure you do."

"But not from papa or mamma even will I hear a word against him. Would Fanny,"—Fanny was the barrister's wife—"let her people come and say things behind your back?"

"I hope not."

"Then, believe that I can be as stout as Fanny. But we need not quarrel. You will come and see baby, and have some lunch. I am afraid they will not be here till three or four, but they will be so glad to see you if you will wait."

He would not wait, of course; but he allowed himself to be taken away to see baby, and did eat his lunch. Then he brought forward the purport of

his mission. "Your mother is most anxious to see you, Hester. You will go and visit her?"

"Oh, yes," said Hester, unaware of any danger. "But I wish she would come to me."

"My dear girl, as things are at present that is impossible. You can understand as much as that. There must be a trial."

"I suppose so."

"And till that has been held your mother would be wrong to come here. I express no judgment against any one."

"I should have thought mamma would have been the first to support me,—me and baby," she said sobbing.

"Certainly. If you were homeless——"

"But I am not. My husband gives me a house to live in, and I want none other."

"What I wish to explain is that if you were in want of anything——"

"I am in want of nothing—but sympathy."

"You have it from me and from all of us. But pray, listen for a moment. She cannot come to you till the trial be over. I am sure, Mr. Caldigate would understand that."

"He comes to me," she said, alluding to her father-in-law, and not choosing to understand that her brother should have called her husband "Mr. Caldigate."

"But there can be no reason why you should not go to Chesterton."

"Just to see mamma?"

"For a day or two," he replied, blushing inwardly at his own lie. "Could you go to-morrow?"

"Oh no;—not to stay. Of course I must ask my husband. I'm sure he'll let me go if I ask it, but not to-morrow. Why to-morrow?"

"Only that your mother longs to see you." He had been specially instigated to induce her to come as soon as possible. "You may imagine how anxious she is."

"Poor mamma! Yes;—I know she suffers. I know mamma's feelings. Mamma and I must, must, must quarrel if we talk about this. Of course I will go to see her. But will you tell her this,—that if she cannot speak of my husband with affection and respect it will be better that—she should not mention him at all. I will not submit to a word even from her."

When he took his departure it was settled that she should, with her husband's permission, go over to Chesterton for a couple of nights in the course of the next week; but that she could not fix the day till she had seen him. Then, when he was taking his departure and kissing her once again, she whispered a word to him. "Try and be charitable, William. I sometimes think that at Chesterton we hardly knew what charity meant."

That evening the proposed visit to Chesterton was discussed at Folking. The old man had very strongly taken up his son's side, and was of opinion that the Boltons were not only uncharitable, but perversely ill-conditioned in the view which they took. To his thinking, Crinkett, Adamson, and the woman were greedy, fraudulent scoundrels, who had brought forward this charge solely with the view of extorting money. He declared that the very fact that they had begun by asking for money should have barred their evidence before any magistrates. The oaths of the four "scoundrels" were, according to him, worth nothing. The scrap of paper purporting to be a copy of the marriage certificate, and the clergyman's pretended letter were mere forgeries, having about them no evidence or probability of truth. Any one could have written them. As to that envelope addressed to Mrs. Caldigate, with the Sydney postmark, he had his own theory. He thought but little of the intercourse which his son acknowledged with the woman, but was of opinion that his son "had been an ass" in writing those words. But a man does not marry a woman by simply writing his own name with the word mistress prefixed to it on an envelope. Any other woman might have adduced the envelope as evidence of his marriage with her! It was, he said, monstrous that any one should give credence to such bundles of lies. Therefore his words were

gospel, and his wishes were laws to Hester. She clung round him, and hovered over him, and patted him like a very daughter, insisting that he should nurse the baby, and talking of him to her husband as though he were manifestly the wisest man in Cambridgeshire. She forgot even that little flaw in his religious belief. To her thinking at the present moment, a man who would believe that her baby was the honest son of an honest father and mother had almost religion enough for all purposes.

"Quite right that you should go," said the old man.

"I think so," said the husband, "though I am afraid they will trouble her."

"The only question is whether they will let her come back."

"What!" exclaimed Hester.

"Whether they won't keep you when they've got you."

"I won't be kept. I will come back. You don't suppose I'd let them talk me over?"

"No, my dear; I don't think they'll be able to do that. But there are such things as bolts and bars."

"Impossible!" said his son.

"Do you mean that they'll send me to prison?" asked Hester.

"No; they can't do that. They wouldn't take you in at the county jail, but they might make a

prison of Puritan Grange. I don't say they will, but they might try it."

"I should get out, of course."

"I daresay you would; but there might be trouble."

"Papa would not allow that," said Hester. "Papa understands better than that. I've a right to go where I like, just as anybody else;—that is, if John tells me." The matter was discussed at some length, but John Caldigate was of opinion that no such attempt as the old man had suggested was probable,—or even possible. The idea that in these days any one should be kept a prisoner in a private house,—any one over whom no one in that house possessed legitimate authority,—seemed to him to be monstrous. That a husband should lock up his wife might be possible, or a father his unmarried and dependent daughter; but that any one should venture to lock up another man's wife was, he declared, out of the question. Mr. Caldigate again said that he should not be surprised if it were attempted; but acknowledged that the attempt could hardly be successful.

As Hester was anxious to make the visit, it was arranged that she should go. It was not that she expected much pleasure even in seeing her mother;—but that it was expedient at such a time to maintain what fellowship might still be possible with her own family. The trial would of course liberate them

from all their trouble; and then, when the trial should be over, it would be very sad if an entire rupture between herself and her parents should have been created. She would be true to her husband; as true as a part must be to the whole, as the heart must be to the brain. They two were, and ever would be, one. But if her mother could be spared to her, if she could be saved from a lasting quarrel with her mother, it would be so much to her! Tears came into the eyes even of the old man as he assented; and her husband swore to her that for her sake he would forgive every injury from anyone bearing the name of Bolton when all this should be over.

A day was therefore fixed, and a note was written, and on the last day of February she and her baby and her nurse were taken over to Puritan Grange. In the meantime telegrams at a very great cost had been flying backwards and forwards between Cambridge and Sydney. William and Robert Bolton had determined among them that, at whatever expense to the family, the truth must be ascertained; and to this the old banker had assented. So far they were right no doubt. If the daughter and sister was not in truth a wife,—if by grossest, by most cruel ill-usage she had been lured to a ruin for which there could be no remedy in this world,—it would be better that the fact should be known at once, so that her life might be pure though it could

never again be bright. But it was strange that, with all these Boltons, there was a desire, an anxiety, to prove the man's guilt rather than his innocence. Mrs. Bolton had always regarded him as a guilty man,—though guilty of she knew not what. She had always predicted misery from a marriage so distasteful to her; and her husband, though he had been brought to oppose her and to sanction the marriage, had, from the moment in which the sanction was given, been induced by her influence to reject it. Robert Bolton, when the charge was first made, when the letter from the woman was first shown to him, had become aware that he had made a mistake in allowing this trouble to come upon the family, and then, as from point to point, the evidence had been opened out to him, he had gradually convinced himself that the son-in-law and brother-in-law, whom he had, as it were, forced into the family, was a bigamist. There was present to them all an intense desire to prove the man's guilt, which was startling to all around who heard anything of the matter. Up to this time the Bolton telegrams and the Caldigate telegrams had elicited two facts,—that Allan the Wesleyan minister had gone to the Fiji Islands and had there died, and that they at Nobble who had last known Dick Shand's address, now knew it no longer. Caldigate had himself gone to Pollington, and had there ascertained that no tidings had been received from

Dick by any of the Shand family for the last twelve months. It had been decided that the trial must be postponed at any rate till the summer assizes, which would be held in Cambridge about the last week in August; and it was thought by some that even then the case would not be ready. There was, no doubt, an opinion prevalent in Cambridge that the unfortunate young mother should be taken home to her own family till the matter should be decided; and among the ladies of the town John Caldigate himself was blamed severely for not allowing her to place herself under her father's protection; but the ladies of the town generally were not probably well acquainted with the disposition and temper of the young wife herself.

Things were in this condition when Hester and her baby went to her father's house. Though that suspicion as to some intended durance which Mr. Caldigate had expressed was not credited by her, still, as she was driven up to the house, the idea was in her mind. She looked at the door and she looked at the window, and she could not conceive it possible that such a thing should be attempted. She thought of her own knowledge of the house; how, if it were necessary, she could escape from the back of the garden into the little field running down to the river, and how she could cross the ferry. Of course she knew every outlet and inlet about the place, and was sure that confinement would be im-

possible. But she did not think of her bonnet nor of her boots, nor of the horror which it would be to her should she be driven to wander forth into the town, and to seek a conveyance back to Folking in the public streets.

She went on a Monday with an understanding that she was to remain there till Wednesday. Mrs. Bolton almost wished that a shorter visit had been arranged in order that she might at once commence her hostile operations without any intermediate and hypocritical pretences. She had planned her campaign thoroughly in her own mind, and had taken the cook into her confidence, the cook being the oldest and most religious servant in the house. When the day of departure should have come the cook was to lock the doors, and the gardener was to close the little gate at the bottom of the garden; and the bonnet and other things were to be removed, and then the mother would declare her purpose. But in the meantime allusions to that intended return to Folking must be accepted, and listened to with false assent. It was very grievous, but so it was arranged. As soon as Hester was in the house the mother felt how much better it would have been to declare to her daughter at once that she was a prisoner;—but it was then too late to alter their proposed plans.

It very nearly came to pass that Hester left her mother on the morning of her arrival. They had

both determined to be cautious, reticent, and forbearing, but the difference between them was so vital that reticence was impossible. At first there was a profusion of natural tears, and a profusion of embraces. Each clung to the other for a while as though some feeling might be satisfied by mere contact; and then the woe of the thing, the woe of it, was acknowledged on both sides! They could agree that the wickedness of the wicked was very wicked. Wherever might lie the sin of fraud and falsehood, the unmerited misfortunes of poor Hester were palpable enough. They could weep together over the wrongs inflicted on that darling baby. But by degrees it was impossible to abstain from alluding to the cause of their sorrow;—and such allusion became absolutely necessary when an attempt was made to persuade Hester to remain at her old home with her own consent. This was done by her father on the evening of her arrival, in compliance with the plan that had been arranged. “No, papa, no; I cannot do that,” she said, with a tone of angry determination.

“It is your duty, Hester. All your friends will tell you so.”

“My duty is to my husband,” she said, “and in such a matter I can allow myself to listen to no other friend.” She was so firm and fixed in this that he did not even dare to go on with his expostulation.

But afterwards, when they were upstairs together, Mrs. Bolton spoke out more at length and with more energy. "Mamma, it is of no use," said Hester.

"It ought to be of use. Do you know the position in which you are?"

"Very well. I am my husband's wife."

"If it be so, well. But if it be not so, and if you remain with him while there is a doubt upon the matter, then you are his mistress."

"If I am not his wife, then I will be his mistress," said Hester, standing up and looking as she spoke much as her mother would look in her most determined moments.

"My child!"

"What is the use of all this, mamma? Nothing shall make me leave him. Others may be ashamed of me; but because of this I shall never be ashamed of myself. You are ashamed of me!"

"If you could mean what you said just now I should be ashamed of you."

"I do mean it. Though the juries and the judges should say that he was not my husband, though all the judges in England should say it, I would not believe them. They may put him in prison and so divide us; but they never shall divide my bone from his bone, and my flesh from his flesh. As you are ashamed of me, I had better go back to-morrow."

Then Mrs. Bolton determined that early in the morning she would look to the bolts and bars; but

when the morning came matters had softened themselves a little.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BABINGTON WEDDING.

“It is your duty,—especially your duty,—to separate them.” This was said by Mr. Smirkie, the vicar of Plum-cum-Pippin to Mr. Bromley, the rector of Utterden, and the words were spoken in the park at Babington where the two clergymen were taking a walk together. Mr. Smirkie’s first wife had been a Miss Bromley, a sister of the clergyman at Utterden, and as Julia Babington was anxious to take to her bosom all her future husband’s past belongings, Mr. Bromley had been invited to Babington. It might be that Aunt Polly was at this time well inclined to exercise her hospitality in this direction by a feeling that Mr. Bromley would be able to talk to them about this terrible affair. Mr. Bromley was intimate with John Caldigate, and of course would know all about it. There was naturally in Aunt Polly’s heart a certain amount of self-congratulation at the way in which things were going. Mr. Smirkie, no doubt, had had a former wife, but no one would call him a bigamist. In what a condition might her poor Julia have been but for that interposition of