

CHAPTER XII.

PERSUASION.

EARLY on the Tuesday morning Hester came down into the breakfast parlour at Puritan Grange, having with difficulty persuaded herself that she would stay the appointed hours in her mother's house. On the previous evening her mother had, she thought, been very hard on her, and she had determined to go. She would not stay even with her mother, if her mother insisted upon telling her that she was not her husband's wife. But during the night she was able to persuade herself to bear what had been already said,—to let it be as though it had been forgotten. Her mother was her mother. But she would bear no more. As to herself and her own conduct, her parents might say what they pleased to her. But of her husband she would endure to hear no evil word spoken. In this spirit she came down into the little parlour.

Mrs. Bolton was also up,—had been up and about for some time previous. She was a woman who never gave way to temptations of ease. A nasty dark morning at six o'clock, with just light enough to enable her to dress without a candle, with no

fire and no hot water, with her husband snoring while she went through her operations, was to her thinking the proper condition of things for this world. Not to be cold, not to be uncomfortable, not to strike her toes against the furniture because she could not quite see what she was about, would to her have been to be wicked. When her daughter came into the parlour, she had been about the house for more than an hour, and had had a conference both with the cook and with the gardener. The cook was of opinion that not a word should be said, or an unusual bolt drawn, or a thing removed till the Wednesday. "She can't carry down her big box herself, ma'am; and the likes of Miss Hester would never think of going without her things;—and then there's the baby." A look of agony came across the mother's face as she heard her daughter called Miss Hester;—but in truth the woman had used the name from old association, and not with any reference to her late young mistress's present position. "I should just tell her flat on Wednesday morning that she wasn't to stir out of this, but I wouldn't say nothing at all about any of it till then." The gardener winked and nodded his head, and promised to put a stake into the ground behind the little wicket-gate which would make the opening of it impossible. "But take my word for it, ma'am, she'll never try that. She'll be a deal too proud. She'll rampage at the-front door, and 'll despise

any escaping like." That was the gardener's idea, and the gardener had long known the young lady. By these arguments Mrs. Bolton was induced to postpone her prison arrangements till the morrow.

When she found her daughter in the small parlour she had settled much in her mind. During the early morning,—that is, till Mr. Bolton should have gone into Cambridge,—not a word should be said about the marriage. Then when they two would be alone together, another attempt should be made to persuade Hester to come and live at Chesterton till after the trial. But even in making that attempt no opinion should be expressed as to John Caldigate's wickedness, and no hint should be given as to the coming incarceration. "Did you bring baby down with you?" the grandmother asked. No; baby had been awake ever so long, and then had gone to sleep again, and the nurse was now with him to protect him from the sufferings incident to waking. "Your papa will be down soon, and then we will have breakfast," said Mrs. Bolton. After that there was silence between them for some time.

A bond of discord, if the phrase may be allowed, is often quite as strong as any bond coming from concord and agreement. There was to both these women a subject of such paramount importance to each that none other could furnish matter of natural conversation. The one was saying to herself ever and always, "He is my husband. Let the outside

world say what it may, he is my husband." But the other was as constantly denying to herself this assertion, and saying, "He is not her husband. Certainly he is not her husband." And as to the one the possession of that which she claimed was all the world, and as to the other the idea of the possession without true possession entailed upon her child pollution, crime, and ignominy, it was impossible but that the mind of each should be too full to admit of aught but forced expressions on other matters. It was in vain for them to attempt to talk of the garden, the house, the church, or of the old man's health. It was in vain even to attempt to talk of the baby. There are people who, however full their hearts may be, full of anger or full of joy, can keep the fulness in abeyance till a chosen time for exhibiting it shall come. But neither of these two was such a person. Every stiff plait in the elder woman's muslin and crape declared her conviction that John Caldigate was not legally married to her daughter. Every glance of Hester's eye, every motion made with her hands, every little shake of her head, declared her purpose of fighting for that one fact, whatever might be the odds against her.

When the banker came down to breakfast things were better for a little time. The pouring out of his tea mitigated somewhat the starchiness of his wife's severity, and Hester when cutting the loaf

for him could seem to take an interest in performing an old duty. He said not a word against Caldigate; and when he went out Hester, as had been her custom, accompanied him to the gate. "Of course you will be here when I come," he said.

"Oh yes; I do not go home till to-morrow." Then she parted from him, and spent the next hour or two up-stairs with her baby.

"May I come in?" said the mother, knocking at the door.

"Oh yes, mamma. Don't you think baby is very like his father?"

"I dare say. I do not know that I am good at tracing likenesses. He certainly is like you."

"So much more like his father!" said Hester.

After that there was a pause, and then the mother commenced her task in her most serious voice. "Hester, my child, you can understand that a duty may become so imperious that it must be performed."

"Yes," said Hester, pressing her lips close together. "I can understand that." There might be a duty very necessary for her to perform, though in the performance of it she should be driven to quarrel absolutely with her own mother.

"So it is with me. Whom do you think I love best in all the world?"

"Papa."

"I do love your father dearly, and I endeavour,

by God's grace, to do my duty by him, though, I fear, it is done imperfectly. But, my child, our hearts, I think, yearn more to those who are younger than ourselves than to our elders. We love best those whom we have cherished and protected, and whom we may perhaps still cherish and protect. When I try to tear my heart away from the things of this vile world, it clings to you—to you—to you!"

Of course this could not be borne without an embrace. "Oh, mamma!" Hester exclaimed, throwing herself on her knees before her mother's lap.

"If you suffer, must not I suffer? If you rejoice, would I not fain rejoice with you if I could? Did I not bring you into the world, my only one, and nursed you, and prayed for you, and watched you with all a mother's care as you grew up among the troubles of the world? Have you not known that my heart has been too soft towards you even for the due performance of my duties?"

"You have always been good to me, mamma."

"And am I altered now? Do you think that a mother's heart can be changed to her only child?"

"No, mamma."

"No, Hester. That, I think, is impossible. Though for the last twelvemonths I have not seen you day by day, though I have not prepared the food which you eat and the clothes which you wear,

as I used to do, you have been as constantly in my mind. You are still my child, my only child."

"Mamma, I know you love me."

"I so love you as to know that I sin in so loving aught that is human. And so loving you, must I not do my duty by you? When love and duty both compel me to speak, how shall I be silent?"

"You have said it, mamma," said Hester, slowly drawing herself up from off the ground.

"And is saying it once enough when, as I think, the very soul, the immortal soul, of her who is of all the dearest to me depends on what I may say; —may be saved, or, oh, perhaps lost for ever by the manner in which I may say it! How am I not to speak when such thoughts as these are heavy within me?"

"What is it you would say?" This Hester asked with a low hoarse voice and a stern look, as though she could not resist her mother's prayer for the privilege of speaking; but at the same time was resolutely prepared not to be turned a hair's-breadth by anything that might be said.

"Not a word about him."

"No, mamma; no. Unless you can tell me that you will love him as your son-in-law."

"Not a word about him," she repeated, in a harsher voice. She felt that that promise should have been enough, and that in the present circumstances she should not have been invited to love

the man she hated. "Your father and I wish you for the next few months to come and live with us."

"It is quite impossible," said Hester, standing very upright, with a face altogether unlike that she had worn when kneeling at her mother's knees.

"You should listen to me."

"Yes, I will listen."

"There will be a trial."

"Undoubtedly. John, at least, seems to think so. It is possible that these wicked people may give it up, or that they may have no money to go on; but I suppose there will be a trial."

"The woman has bound herself to prosecute him."

"Because she wants to get money. But we need not discuss that, mamma. John thinks that there will be a trial."

"Till that is over, will you not be better away from him? How will it be with you if it should be decided that he is not your husband?" Here Hester of course prepared herself for interruption, but her mother prayed for permission to continue. "Listen to me for one moment, Hester."

"Very well, mamma. Go on."

"How would it be with you in that case? You must be separated then? As that is possible, is it not right that you should obey the ordinances of God and man, and keep yourself apart till they who are in authority shall have spoken?"

"There are no such ordinances."

"There are indeed. If you were to ask all your friends, all the married women in Cambridgeshire, what would they say? Would they not all tell you that no woman should live with a man while there is a shadow of doubt? And as to the law of God, you know God's law, and can only defend yourself by your own certainty as to a matter respecting which all others are uncertain. You think yourself certain because such certainty is a way to yourself out of your present misery."

"It is for my child," she shouted; "and for him."

"As for your babe, your darling babe, whether he be yours in joy of heart or in agony of spirit, he is still yours. No one will rob you of him. If it be as we fear, would not I help you to love him, help you to care for him, help you to pray for him? If it were so, would I desert him or you because in your innocence you had been betrayed into misfortune? Do I not feel for your child? But when he grows up and is a man, and will have learned the facts of his early years, let him be able to tell himself that his mother though unfortunate was pure."

"I am pure," she said.

"My child, my own one, can I, your mother, think aught else of you? Do I not know your

heart? Do not I know the very thoughts within you?"

"I am pure. He has become my husband, and nothing can divide us. I never gave a thought to another man. I never had the faintest liking, as do other girls. When he came and told me that he had seen me and loved me, and would take me for his wife, I felt at once that I was all his,—his to do as he liked with me, his to nourish him, his to worship him, his to obey him, his to love him let father or mother or all the world say what they would to the contrary. Then we were married. Till he was my own, I never even pressed my lips upon his. But I became his wife by a bond that nothing shall break. You tell me of God's law. By God's law I am his wife, let the people say what they will. I have but two to think of."

"Yourself and him?" asked her mother.

"I have three to think of,—God, and him, and my child; and may God be good to me and them, as in this matter I will put myself away from myself altogether. It is for me to obey him, and I will submit myself to none other. If he bids me go, I will go; if he bids me stay here, I will stay. I have become his so entirely, that no judges—no judges can divide us. Judges! I know but one Judge, and He is there; and He has said that those whom He has joined together, man shall not put asunder.

Pure! pure! No one should praise herself, but as a woman I do know that I am pure."

Then the mother's heart yearned greatly towards her daughter; and yet she was no whit changed. She knew nothing of phrases of logic, but she felt that Hester had begged the whole question. Those whom God had joined together! True, true! If only one could know whether in this or the other case God had joined the couple. As Hester argued the matter, no woman should be taken from the man she had married, though he might have a dozen other wives all living. And she spoke of purity as though it were a virtue which could be created and consecrated simply by the action of her own heart, as though nothing outside,—no ceremony, no ordinance,—could affect it. The same argument would enable her to live with John Caldigate after he should come out of prison, even though, as would then be the case, another woman would have the legal right of calling herself Mrs. John Caldigate! On the previous day she had declared that if she could not be his wife, she would be his mistress. The mother knew what she meant,—that, let people call her by what name they might, she would still be her husband's wife in the eye of God. But she would not be so. And then she would not be pure. And, to Mrs. Bolton, the worst of it was that this cloudiness had come upon her daughter,—this incapacity to reason it out,—because the love of a human

being had become so strong within her bosom as to have superseded and choked the love of heavenly things. But how should she explain all this? "I am not asking you to drop his name."

"Drop his name! I will never drop it. I cannot drop it. It is mine. I could not make myself anything but Mrs. John Caldigate if I would. "And he," she said, taking the baby up from its cradle and pressing it to her bosom, "he shall be Daniel Caldigate to the day of his death. Do you think that I will take a step that shall look like robbing my child of his honest name,—that will seem to imply a doubt that he is not his own father's honest boy,—that he is not a fitting heir to the property which his forefathers have owned so long? Never! They may call me what name they will, but I will call myself John Caldigate's wife as long as I have a voice to make myself heard."

It was the same protest over and over again, and it was vain to answer. "You will not stay under your father's roof?"

"No; I have to live under my husband's roof." Then Mrs. Bolton left the room, apparently in anger. Though her heart within might be melting with ruth, still it was necessary that she should assume a look of anger. On the morrow she would have to show herself angry with a vengeance, if she should then still be determined to carry out her plan. And she thought that she was determined. What

had pity to do with it, or love, or moving heart-stirring words? Were not all these things temptation from the Evil One, if they were allowed to interfere with the strict line of hard duty? When she left the room, where the young mother was still standing with her baby in her arms, she doubted for some minutes,—perhaps for some half hour,—then she wrestled with those emanations from the Evil One,—with pity, with love, and suasive tenderness,—and at last overcame them. “I know I am pure,” the daughter had said. “I know I am right,” said the mother.”

But she spoke a word to her husband when he came home. “I cannot bend her; I cannot turn her, in the least.”

“She will not stay?”

“Not of her own accord.”

“You have told her?”

“Oh no; not till to-morrow.”

“She ought to stay, certainly,” said the father. There had been very little intercourse between the mother and daughter during the afternoon, and while the three were sitting together, nothing was said about the morrow. The evening would have seemed to be very sad and very silent, had they not all three been used to so many silent evenings in that room. Hester, during her wedding tour and the few weeks of her happiness at Folking, before the trouble had come, had felt a new life and almost an

ecstasy of joy in the thorough liveliness of her husband. But the days of her old home were not so long ago that its old manners should seem strange to her. She therefore sat out the hours patiently, stitching some baby's ornament, till her mother told her that the time for prayer had come. After worship her father called her out into the hall as he went up to his room. "Hester," he said, "it is not right that you should leave us to-morrow."

"I must, papa."

"I tell you that it is not right. You have a home in which everybody will respect you. For the present you should remain here."

"I cannot, papa. He told me to go back to-morrow. I would not disobey him now,—not now,—were it ever so." Then the old man paused as though he were going on with the argument, but finding that he had said all that he had to say, he slowly made his way upstairs.

"Good-night, mamma," said Hester, returning only to the door of the sitting-room.

"Good-night, my love." As the words were spoken they both felt that there was something wrong,—much that was wrong. "I do not think they will do that," said Hester to herself, as she went up the stairs to her chamber.