

CHAPTER XV.

THE ESCAPE.

DURING the whole of that night Hester kept her position in the hall, holding her baby in her arms as long as the infant would sleep in that position, and then allowing the nurse to take it to its cradle up-stairs. And during the whole night also Mrs. Bolton remained with her daughter. Tea was brought to them, which each of them took, and after that neither spoke a word to the other till the morning. Before he went to bed, Mr. Bolton came down and made an effort for their joint comfort. "Hester," he said, "why should you not go to your room? You can do yourself no good by remaining there."

"No," she said, sullenly; "no; I will stay."

"You will only make yourself ill,—you and your mother."

"She can go. Though I should die, I will stay here."

Nor could he succeed better with his wife. "If she is obstinate, so must I be," said Mrs. Bolton. It was in vain that he endeavoured to prove to her that there could be no reason for such obstinacy,

that her daughter would not attempt to escape during the hours of the night without her baby.

"You would not do that," said the old man, turning to his daughter. But to this Hester would make no reply, and Mrs. Bolton simply declared her purpose of remaining. To her mind there was present an idea that she would, at any rate, endure as much actual suffering as her daughter. There they both sat, and in the morning they were objects pitiable to be seen.

Macbeth and Sancho have been equally eloquent in the praise of sleep. "Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care!" But sleep will knit up effectually no broken stitches unless it be enjoyed in bed. "Blessings on him who invented sleep," said Sancho. But the great inventor was he who discovered mattresses and sheets and blankets. These two unfortunates no doubt slept; but in the morning they were weary, comfortless, and exhausted. Towels and basins were brought to them, and then they prepared themselves to watch through another day. It seemed to be a trial between them, which could outwatch the other. The mother was, of course, much the older; but with poor Hester there was the baby to add to her troubles. Never was there a woman more determined to carry out her purpose than Mrs. Bolton, or one more determined to thwart the purpose of another than she who still called herself Hester Caldigate. In the

morning Mrs. Bolton implored her husband to go into Cambridge as usual; but he felt that he could not leave the house with such inmates. So he sat in his bedroom dozing wretchedly in his arm-chair.

Caldigate appeared before the house at nine o'clock, no further attempt having been made to exclude his entrance by the side gate, and asked to see Mr. Bolton. "Papa is up-stairs," said Hester through the window. But the old man would not come down to see his visitor, nor would he send any message. Then Caldigate declared his purpose of going at once to the mayor and demanding assistance from the police. He at any rate would return with the carriage as early as he could after his visit to the magistrates' office. He went to the mayor, and inflicted much trouble on that excellent officer, who, however, at last, with the assistance of his clerk,—and of Robert Bolton, whom he saw on the sly,—came to the decision that his own authority would not suffice for the breaking open of a man's house in order that his married daughter should be taken by violence from his custody. "No doubt," he said; "no doubt," when Caldigate pleaded that Mr. Bolton's daughter was, at any rate for the present, his own wife; and that a man's right to have his wife is undoubted. Those words "no doubt" were said very often; but no other words were said. Then the clerk expressed an opinion that the proper course would be for Mr. Caldigate

to go up to London and get an order from the Vice-Chancellor; which was, of course, tantamount to saying that his wife was to remain at Chesterton till after the trial,—unless she could effect her own escape.

But not on that account was he inclined to yield. He had felt from the first, as had she also, that she would make her way out of the house, or would not make it, as she might or might not have the courage to be persistent in demanding it. This, indeed, had been felt both by William and Robert Bolton when they had given their counsel. "She is a woman with a baby, and when in your house will be subject to your influences. She will be very angry at first, but will probably yield after a time to your instructions. She will at last give an unwilling assent to the course you propose. That is what may be expected. But if she should be firmer than we think, if there should be in her bosom a greater power of resistance than we expect, should she dash herself too violently against the cage,—then you must let her go." That was intended to be the gist of the advice given, though it perhaps was not so accurately expressed. It was in that way understood by the old man; but Mrs. Bolton would not so understand it. She had taken the matter in hand, and as she pressed her lips together she told herself that she intended to go through with it.

And so did Hester. But as this day went on,

Hester became at times almost hysterical in her efforts to communicate with her husband through the window, holding up her baby and throwing back her head, and was almost in convulsions in her efforts to get at him. He on the other side thundered at the door with the knocker, till that instrument had been unscrewed from within. But still he could knock with his stick and shout with his voice; while the people outside the iron gates stood looking on in a crowd. In the course of the day Robert Bolton endeavoured to get an order from the magistrates for the removal of Caldigate by the police. But the mayor would not assent either to that. Old Mr. Bolton was the owner of the house, and if there was a nuisance to be complained of, it was he that must complain. The mayor during these days was much tried. The steady married people of the borough,—the shopkeepers and their wives, the doctors and lawyers and clergymen,—were in favour of Mr. and Mrs. Bolton. It was held to be fitting that a poor lady in Hester's unfortunate position should be consigned to the care of her parents till the matter had been settled. But the people generally sympathised with the young husband and young wife, and were loud in denouncing the illegality of the banker's proceedings. And it was already rumoured that among the Undergraduates Caldigate's side was favoured. It was generally known that Crinkett and the woman had asked for money before

they had brought their accusation, and on that account sympathy ran with the Squire of Folking. The mayor, therefore, did not dare to give an order that Caldigate should be removed from off the premises at Puritan Grange, knowing that he was there in search of a wife who was only anxious to place herself in his custody.

But nothing was done all that day. About four in the afternoon, while Caldigate was still there, and at a moment in which poor Hester had been reduced by the continuance of her efforts to a state of hysterical prostration, the old man summoned his wife up-stairs. She, with a motion to the cook, who still guarded the stairs, obeyed the order, and for a moment left her watch.

"You must let her go," said the old man, with tremulous anxiety, beating with his fingers on his knees as he spoke. "You must let her go."

"No; no!"

"It will kill her."

"If I let her go, I shall kill her soul," said the determined woman. "Is not her soul more than her body?"

"They will say we—murdered her."

"Who will say it? And what would that be but the breath of a man? Does not our Father who is in heaven know that I would die to do her a service, if the service accorded with His will? Does He not know that I am cruel to her here in order

that she may be saved from eternal——” She was going to say, in the natural fervour of her speech, “from eternal cruelty to come,” but she checked herself. To have admitted that such a judgment could be worse than just, worse even than merciful, would be blasphemy to her. “Oh, He knows! He knows! And if He knows, what matters what men say that I have done to her.”

“I cannot have it go on like this,” said he, still whispering.

“She will be wearied out, and then we will take her to her bed.”

But Mr. Bolton succeeded in demanding that a telegram should be sent up to William requesting him to come down to the Grange as early as possible on the following morning. This was sent, and also a message to Robert Bolton in Cambridge, telling him that William had been summoned. During these two days he had not been seen at the Grange, though he knew much of what was being done there. Had he, however, been aware of all that his sister and step-mother were enduring, he would probably have appeared upon the scene. As it was, he had justified his absence by pleading to himself Mrs. Bolton's personal enmity, and the understanding which existed that he should not visit the house. Then, when it was dark, Caldigate with the carriage again returned to the town, where he slept as he had done on the previous night.

Again their food was brought to the two women in the hall, and again each of them swallowed a cup of tea as they prepared themselves for the work of the night.

In the hall there was a gas-stove, which was kept burning, and gave a faint glimmer, so that each could see the outline of the other. Light beyond that there was none. In the weary long hours of nights such as these, nights passed on the seats of railway carriages, or rougher nights, such as some of us remember, on the outside of coaches, or sitting by the side of the sick, sleep will come early and will early go. The weariness of the past day will produce some forgetfulness for an hour or two, and then come the slow, cold, sad hours through which the dawn has to be expected. Between two and three these unfortunates were both awake, the poor baby having been but lately carried back from its mother to its cradle. Then suddenly Mrs. Bolton heard rather than saw her daughter slip down from her chair on to the ground and stretch herself along upon the hard floor. "Hester," she said; but Hester did not answer. "Hester, are you hurt?" When there was still no answer, the mother got up, with limbs so stiff that she could hardly use them, and stood over her child. "Hester, speak to me."

"I will never speak to you more," said the daughter.

"My child, why will you not go to your comfortable wholesome bed?"

"I will not go; I will die here."

"The door shall not be locked. You shall have the key with you. I will do nothing to hurt you if you will go to your bed."

"I will not go; leave me alone. You cannot love me, mamma, or you would not treat me like this."

"Love you! Oh, my child! If you knew! If you could understand! Why am I doing this? Is it not because I feel it to be my duty? Will you let me take you to your bed?"

"No, never. I, too, can do my duty,—my duty to my husband. It is to remain here till I can get to him, even though I should die." Then she turned her poor limbs on the hard floor, and the mother covered her with a cloak and placed a cushion beneath her head. Then, after standing a while over her child, she returned to her chair, and did not move or speak again till the old cook came, with the first glimmer of the morning, to inquire how the night had been passed.

"I cannot allow this; I cannot allow this," said Mr. Bolton, when he shuffled down in his slippers. The old servant had been up to him and had warned him that such sufferings as these might have a tragic end,—too probably an end fatal to the infant. If the mother's strength should altogether fail her,

would it not go badly with the baby? So the cook had argued, who had been stern enough herself, anxious enough to secure "Miss Hester" from the wickedness of John Caldigate. But she was now cowed and frightened, and had acknowledged to herself that if "Miss Hester" would not give way, then she must be allowed to go forth, let the wickedness be what it might.

"There must be an end to this," said the old man.

"What end?" asked his wife. "Let her obey her parents."

"I will obey only my husband," said Hester.

"Of course there must be an end. Let her go to her bed, and, weary as I am, I will wait upon her as only a mother can wait upon her child. Have I not prayed for her through the watches of the night, that she might be delivered from this calamity, that she might be comforted by Him in her sorrow? What have I done these two last weary days but pray to the Lord God that He might be merciful to her?"

"Let me go," said Hester.

"I will not let you go," said the mother, rising from her seat. "I too can suffer. I too can endure. I will not be conquered by my own child." There spoke the human being. That was the utterance natural to the woman. "In this struggle, hard as it is, I will not be beat by one who has been subject

to my authority." In all those prayers,—and she had prayed,—there had been the prayer in her heart, if not in her words, that she might be saved from the humiliation of yielding.

Early in the day Caldigate was again in front of the house, and outside there was a close carriage with a pair of horses, standing at the gardener's little gate. And at the front gate, which was still chained, there was again the crowd. At about one both William and Robert Bolton came upon the scene, and were admitted by the gardener and cook through the kitchen-door into the house. They were close to Caldigate as they entered; but neither did they speak to him or he to them. At that moment Hester was standing with the baby at the window, and saw them. "Now I shall be allowed to go," she exclaimed. Mrs. Bolton was still seated with her back to the windows; but she had heard the steps on the gravel, and the opening of the kitchen-door; and she understood Hester's words, and was aware that her husband's sons were in the house.

They had agreed as to what should be done, and at once made their way up into the hall. "William, you will make them let me go. You will make them let me go," said Hester, rushing at once to the elder of the two, and holding out her baby as though for him to take. She was now in a state so excited, so nervous, so nearly hysterical, that she was hardly

able to control herself. "You will not let them kill me, William,—me and my baby." He kissed her and said a kind word or two, and then, inquiring after his father, passed on upstairs. Then Mrs. Bolton followed him, leaving Robert in the hall with Hester. "I know that you have turned against me," said Hester.

"Indeed no. I have never turned against you. I have thought that you would be better here than at Folking for the present."

"That is being against me. A woman should be with her husband. You told them to do this. And they have nearly killed me,—me and my baby."

In the meantime William Bolton upstairs was very decided in his opinion that they must at once allow Caldigate to take her back to Folking. She had, as he said, proved herself to be too strong for them. The experiment had been tried and had failed. No doubt it would be better,—so he thought,—that she should remain for the present at the Grange; so much better that a certain show of force had been justified. But as things were going, no further force would be justified. She had proved her power, and must be allowed to go. Mrs. Bolton, however, would not even yet acknowledge that she was beaten. In a few more hours, she thought, Hester would allow herself to be taken to her bed, and then all might be well. But she could not

stand against the combined force of her husband and his two sons; and so it was decided that the front door should be opened for the prisoner, and that the chains should be removed from the gate. "I should be afraid of the people," William Bolton said to his father.

It was not till this decision had been given that Mrs. Bolton felt that the struggle of the last three days had been too much for her. Now, at last, she threw herself upon her bed, weeping bitter tears, tears of a broken spirit, and there she lay prostrate with fatigue and misery. Nor would she go down to say a word of farewell. How could she say adieu to her daughter, leaving her house in such circumstances? "I will give her your love," said William Bolton.

"Say nothing to her. She does not care for my love, nor for the love of her Father in heaven. She cares only for that adulterer."

The door was opened from within, and the chains were taken away from the gate. "Oh, John,—oh my husband," she exclaimed, as she leaped down the steps into his arms, "never let me go again; not for a day,—not for an hour." Then her boxes were brought down, and the nurse came with the child, whom the mother at once took and placed in his father's arms. And the carriage was brought in, and the luggage was placed on it, and the nurse and the baby were seated. "I will go up to poor

mamma for one moment," she said. She did go to her mother's room, and throwing herself upon the wretched woman, wept over her and kissed her. But the mother, though in some sort she returned the caress, said not a word as her daughter left the room. And she went also to her father and asked his blessing. He muttered a word or two, blessing her, no doubt, with inarticulate words. He also had been thoroughly vanquished.

Then she got into the carriage, and was taken back to Folking lying in John Caldigate's arms.
