

CHAPTER XVI.

AGAIN AT FOLKING.

THUS Hester prevailed, and was taken back to the house of the man who had married her. By this time very much had been said about the matter publicly. It had been impossible to keep the question,—whether John Caldigate's recent marriage had been true or fraudulent,—out of the newspapers; and now the attempt that had been made to keep them apart by force gave an additional interest to the subject. There was an opinion, very general among elderly educated people, that Hester ought to have allowed herself to be detained at the Grange. "We do not mean to lean heavily on the unfortunate young lady," said the 'Isle-of-Ely-Church-Intelligencer;' "but we think that she would have better shown a becoming sense of her position had she submitted herself to her parents till the trial is over. Then the full sympathy of all classes would have been with her; and whether the law shall restore her to a beloved husband, or shall tell her that she has become the victim of a cruel seducer, she would have been supported by the approval and generous regard of all men." It was

thus for the most part that the elderly and the wise spoke and thought about it. Of course, they pitied her; but they believed all evil of Caldigate, declaring that he too was bound by a feeling of duty to restore the unfortunate one to her father and mother until the matter should have been set at rest by the decision of a jury.

But the people,—especially the people of Utterden and Netherden, and of Chesterton, and even of Cambridge,—were all on the side of Caldigate and Hester as a married couple. They liked the persistency with which he had claimed his wife, and applauded her to the echo for her love and firmness. Of course the scene at Puritan Grange had been much exaggerated. The two nights were prolonged to intervals varying from a week to a fortnight. During that time she was said always to have been at the window holding up her baby. And Mrs. Bolton was accused of cruelties which she certainly had not committed. Some details of the affair made their way into the metropolitan Press,—so that the expected trial became one of those causes célèbres by which the public is from time to time kept alive to the value and charm of newspapers.

During all this John Caldigate was specially careful not to seclude himself from public view, or to seem to be afraid of his fellow-creatures. He was constantly in Cambridge, generally riding thither

on horseback, and on such occasions was always to be seen in Trumpington Street and Trinity Street. Between him and the Boltons there was, by tacit consent, no intercourse whatever after the attempted imprisonment. He never showed himself at Robert Bolton's office, nor when they met in the street did they speak to each other. Indeed at this time no gentleman or lady held any intercourse with Caldigate, except his father and Mr. Bromley the clergyman. The Babingtons were strongly of opinion that he should have surrendered the care of his wife, and Aunt Polly went so far as to write to him when she first heard of the affair at Chesterton, recommending him very strongly to leave her at the Grange. Then there was an angry correspondence, ended at last by a request from Aunt Polly that there might be no further intercourse between Babington and Folking till after the trial.

Caldigate, though he bore all this with an assured face, with but little outward sign of inward misgiving, suffered much,—much even from the estrangement of those with whom he had hitherto been familiar. To be "cut" by any one was a pain to him. Not to be approved of, not to be courted, not to stand well in the eyes of those around him, was to him positive and immediate suffering. He was supported no doubt by the full confidence of his father, by the friendliness of the parson, and by the energetic assurances of partisans who were all

on his side,—such as Mr. Ralph Holt, the farmer. While Caldigate had been in Cambridge waiting for his wife's escape, Holt and one or two others were maturing a plan for breaking into Puritan Grange, and restoring the wife to her husband. All this supported him. Without it he could hardly have carried himself as he did. But with all this, still he was very wretched. "It is that so many people should think me guilty," he said to Mr. Bromley.

She bore it better—though, of course, now that she was safe at Folking, she had but little to do as to outward bearing. In the first place, no doubt as to his truth ever touched her for a moment,—and not much doubt as to the result of the trial. It was to her an assured fact that John Caldigate was her husband, and she could not realise the idea that, such being the fact, a jury should say that he was not. But let all that be as it might, they two were one; and to adhere to him in every word, in every thought, in every little action, was to her the only line of conduct possible. She heard what Mr. Bromley said, she knew what her father-in-law thought, she was aware of the enthusiasm on her side of the folk at Folking. It seemed to her that this opposition to her happiness was but a continuation of that which her mother had always made to her marriage. The Boltons were all against her. It was a terrible sorrow to her. But she knew how to bear it bravely. In the tenderness of her hus-

band, who at this time was very tender to her, she had her great consolation.

On the day of her return she had been very ill,—so ill that Caldigate and his father had been much frightened. During the journey home in the carriage, she had wept and laughed hysterically, now clutching her baby, and then embracing her husband. Before reaching Folking she had been so worn with fatigue that he had hardly been able to support her on the seat. But after rest for a day or two, she had rallied completely. And she herself had taken pleasure and great pride in the fact that through it all her baby had never really been ill. “He is a little man,” she said, boasting to the boy’s father, “and knows how to put up with troubles. And when his mamma was so bad, he didn’t peak and pine and cry, so as to break her heart. Did he, my own, own brave little man?” And she could boast of her own health too. “Thank God, I am strong, John. I can bear things which would break down other women. You shall never see me give way because I am a poor creature.” Certainly she had a right to boast that she was not a poor creature.

Caldigate no doubt was subject to troubles of which she knew nothing. It was quite clear to him that Mr. Seely, his own lawyer, did in truth believe that there had been some form of marriage between him and Euphemia Smith. The attorney had never

said so much,—had never accused him. It would probably have been opposed to all the proprieties in such a matter that any direct accusation should have been made against him by his own attorney. But he could understand from the man's manner that his mind was not free from a strong suspicion. Mr. Seely was eager enough as to the defence; but seemed to be eager as against opposing evidence rather than on the strength of evidence on his own side. He was not apparently desirous of making all the world know that such a marriage certainly never took place; but that, whether such a marriage had taken place or not, the jury ought not to trust the witnesses. He relied, not on the strength of his own client, but on the weakness of his client's adversaries. It might probably be capable of proof that Crinkett and Adamson and the woman had conspired together to get money from John Caldigate; and if so, then their evidence as to the marriage would be much weakened. And he showed himself not averse to any tricks of trade which might tend to get a verdict. Could it be proved that John Crinkett had been dishonest in his mining operations? Had Euphemia Smith allowed her name to be connected with that of any other man in Australia? What had been her antecedents? Was it not on the cards that Allan, the minister, had never undergone any ceremony of ordination? And, if not, might it not be shown that a marriage

service performed by him would be no marriage service at all? Could not the jury be made to think,—or at least some of the jury,—that out there, in that rough lawless wilderness, marriage ceremonies were very little understood? These were the wiles to which he seemed disposed to trust; whereas Caldigate was anxious that he should instruct some eloquent indignant advocate to declare boldly that no English gentleman could have been guilty of conduct so base, so dastardly, and so cruel! “You see, Mr. Caldigate,” the lawyer said on one occasion, “to make the best of it, our own hands are not quite clean. You did promise the other lady marriage.”

“No doubt. No doubt I was a fool; and I paid for my folly. I bought her off. Having fallen into the common scrape,—having been pleased by her prettinesses and clevernesses and women’s ways,—I did as so many other men have done. I got out of it as best I could without treachery and without dishonour. I bought her off. Had she refused to take my money, I should probably have married her,—and probably have blown my brains out afterwards. All that has to be acknowledged,—much to my shame. Most of us would have to blush if the worst of our actions were brought out before us in a court of law. But there was an end of it. Then they come over here and endeavour to enforce their demand for money by a threat.”

"That envelope is so unfortunate," said the lawyer.

"Most unfortunate."

"Perhaps we shall get some one before the day comes who will tell the jury that any marriage up at Ahalala must have been a farce."

All this was unsatisfactory, and became so more and more as the weeks went by. The confidential clerk whom the Boltons had sent out when the first threat reached them early in November,—the threat conveyed in that letter from the woman which Caldigate had shown to Robert Bolton,—returned about the end of March. The two brothers, Robert and William, decided upon sending him to Mr. Seely, so that any information obtained might be at Caldigate's command, to be used, if of any use, in his defence. But there was in truth very little of it. The clerk had been up to Nobble and Ahalala, and had found no one there who knew enough of the matter to give evidence about it. The population of mining districts in Australia is peculiarly a shifting population, so that the most of those who had known Caldigate and his mode of life there were gone. The old woman who kept Henniker's Hotel at Nobble had certainly heard that they were married; but then she had added that many people there called themselves man and wife from convenience. A woman would often like a respectable name where there was no parson near at hand to

entitle her to it. Then the parsons would be dilatory and troublesome and expensive, and a good many people were apt to think that they could do very well without ceremonies. She evidently would have done no good to either side as a witness. This clerk had found Ahalala almost deserted,—occupied chiefly by a few Chinese, who were contented to search for the specks of gold which more ambitious miners had allowed to slip through their fingers. The woman had certainly called herself Mrs. Caldigate, and had been called so by many. But she had afterwards been called Mrs. Crinkett, when she and Crinkett had combined their means with the view of buying the Polyeuka mine. She was described as an enterprising, greedy woman, upon whom the love of gold had had almost more than its customary effect. And she had for a while been noted and courted for her success, having been the only female miner who was supposed to have realised money in these parts. She had been known to the banks at Nobble, also even at Sydney; and had been supposed at one time to have been worth twenty or thirty thousand pounds. Then she had joined herself with Crinkett, and all their money had been supposed to vanish in the Polyeuka mine. No doubt there had been enough in that to create animosity of the most bitter kind against Caldigate. He in his search for gold had been uniformly successful,—was spoken of among the

Nobble miners as the one man who in gold-digging had never had a reverse. He had gone away just before the bad time came on Polycuka; and then had succeeded, after he had gone, in extracting from these late unfortunate partners of his every farthing that he had left them! There was ample cause for animosity.

Allan, the minister, who certainly had been at Ahalala, was as certainly dead. He had gone out from Scotland as a Presbyterian clergyman, and no doubt had ever been felt as to his being that which he called himself;—and a letter from him was produced, which had undoubtedly been written by himself. Robert Bolton had procured a photograph of the note which the woman produced as having been written by Allan to Caldigate. The handwriting did not appear to him to be the same, but an expert had given an opinion that they both might have been written by the same person. Of Dick Shand no tidings had been found. It was believed that he had gone from Queensland to some of the Islands, —probably to the Fijis; but he had sunk so low among men as to have left no trace behind him. In Australia no one cares to know whence a shepherd has come or whither he goes. A miner belongs to a higher class, and is more considered. The result of all which was, in the opinion of the Boltons, adverse to John Caldigate. And in discussing this with his client Mr. Seely acknowledged that nothing

had as yet come to light sufficient to shake the direct testimony of the woman, corroborated as it was by three persons, all of whom would swear that they had been present at the marriage.

“No doubt they endeavoured to get money from you,” said Mr. Seely; “and I may be well assured in my own mind that money was their sole object. But then it cannot be denied that their application to you for money had a sound basis,—one which, though you might fairly refuse to allow it, takes away from the application all idea of criminality. Crinkett has never asked for money as a bribe to hold his tongue. In a matter of trade between them and you, you were very successful; they were very unfortunate. A man asking for restitution in such circumstances will hardly be regarded as dishonest.”

It was to no purpose that Caldigate declared that he would willingly have remitted a portion of the money had he known the true circumstances. He had not done so, and now the accusation was made. The jury, feeling that the application had been justifiable, would probably keep the two things distinct. That was Mr. Seely's view; and thus, in these days, Caldigate gradually came to hate Mr. Seely. There was no comfort to be had from Mr. Seely.

Mr. Bromley was much more comfortable, though, unfortunately, in such a matter less to be trusted.

“As to the minister’s handwriting,” he said, “that will go for nothing. Even if he had written the note——”

“Which he didn’t,” said Caldigate.

“Exactly. But should it be believed to have been his, it would prove nothing. And as to the envelope, I cannot think that any jury would disturb the happiness of a family on such evidence as that. It all depends on the credibility of the people who swear that they were present; and I can only say that were I one of the jury, and were the case brought before me as I see it now, I certainly should not believe them. There is here one letter to you, declaring that if you will comply with her demands, she will not annoy you, and declaring also her purpose of marrying some one else. How can any juryman believe her after that?”

“Mr. Seely says that twelve men will not be less likely to think me a bigamist because she has expressed her readiness to commit bigamy; that, if alone, she would not have a leg to stand upon, but that she is amply corroborated; whereas I have not been able to find a single witness to support me. It seems to me that in this way any man might be made the victim of a conspiracy.”

Then Mr. Bromley said that all that would be too patent to a jury to have any doubt upon the matter. But John Caldigate himself, though he took great comfort in the society of the clergyman,

did in truth rely rather on the opinion of the lawyer.

The old squire never doubted his son for a moment, and in his intercourse with Hester showed her all the tenderness and trust of a loving parent. But he, too, manifestly feared the verdict of a jury. According to him, things in the world around him generally were very bad. What was to be expected from an ordinary jury such as Cambridgeshire would supply but prejudice, thick-headed stupidity, or at the best a strict obedience to the dictum of a judge. "It is a case," he said, "in which no jury about here will have sense enough to understand and weigh the facts. There will be on one side the evidence of four people, all swearing the same thing. It may be that one or more of them will break down under cross-examination, and that all will then be straight. But if not, the twelve men in a box will believe them because they are four, not understanding that in such a case four may conspire as easily as two or three. There will be the Judge, no doubt; but English judges are always favourable to convictions. The Judge begins with the idea that the man before him would hardly have been brought there had he not been guilty."

In all this, and very much more that he said both to Mr. Bromley and his son, he was expressing his contempt for the world around him rather than any opinion of his own on this particular matter.

"I often think," said he, "that we have to bear more from the stupidity than from the wickedness of the world."

It should be mentioned that about a week after Hester's escape from Chesterton there came to her a letter from her mother.

"DEAREST HESTER,—You do not think that I do not love you because I tried to protect you from what I believe to be sin and evil and temptation? You do not think that I am less your mother because I caused you suffering? If your eye offend you, pluck it out. Was I not plucking out my own eye when I caused pain to you? You ought to come back to me and your father. You ought to do so even now. But whether you come back or not, will you not remember that I am the mother who bore you, and have always loved you? And when further distress shall come upon you, will you not return to me?—Your unhappy but most loving Mother,

"MARY BOLTON."

In answer to this Hester, in a long letter, acknowledged her mother's love, and said that the memory of those two days at Chesterton should lessen neither her affection nor her filial duty; but, she went on to say that, in whatever distress might come upon her, she should turn to her husband for

comfort and support, whether he should be with her, whether he should be away from her. "But," she added, concluding her letter, "beyond my husband and my child, you and papa will always be the dearest to me."

CHAPTER XVII.

BOLLUM.

THERE was not much to enliven the house at Folking during these days. Caldigate would pass much of his time walking about the place, applying his mind as well as he could to the farm, and holding up his head among the tenants, with whom he was very popular. He had begun his reign over them with hands not only full but free. He had drained, and roofed, and put up gates, and repaired roads, and shown himself to be an active man, anxious to do good. And now in his trouble they were very true to him. But their sympathy could not ease the burden at heart. Though by his words and deeds among them he seemed to occupy himself fully, there was a certain amount of pretence in every effort that he made. He was always affecting a courage in which he felt himself to be deficient. Every smile was false. Every brave word spoken was an attempt at deceit. When alone in his walks,