

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,

—and he was mostly alone,—his mind would fix itself on his great trouble, and on the crushing sorrow which might only too probably fall upon that loved one whom he had called his wife. Oh, with what regret now did he think of the good advice which the captain had given him on board the Goldfinder, and of the sententious, timid wisdom of Mrs. Callander! Had she,—his Hester, ever uttered to him one word of reproach,—had she ever shuddered in his sight when he had acknowledged that the now odious woman had in that distant land been in his own hearing called by his own name,—it would have been almost better. Her absolute faith added a sting to his sufferings.

Then, as he walked alone about the estate, he would endeavour to think whether there might not yet be some mode of escape,—whether something might not be done to prevent his having to stand in the dock and abide the uncertain verdict of a jury. With Mr. Seely he was discontented. Mr. Seely seemed to be opposed to any great effort,—would simply trust to the chance of snatching little advantages in the Court. He had money at command. If fifty thousand pounds, if double that sum,—would have freed him from this trouble, he thought that he could have raised it, and was sure that he would willingly pay it. Twenty thousand pounds two months since, when Crinkett appeared at the christening, would have sent these people away.

The same sum, no doubt, would send them away now. But then the arrangement might have been possible. But now,—how was it now? Could it still be done? Then the whole thing might have been hidden, buried in darkness. Now it was already in the mouths of all men. But still if these witnesses were made to disappear,—if this woman herself by whom the charge was made would take herself away—then the trial must be abandoned. There would be a whispering of evil,—or, too probably, the saying of evil without whispering. A terrible injury would have been inflicted upon her and his boy;—but the injury would be less than that which he now feared.

And there was present to him through all this a feeling that the money ought to be paid independently of the accusation brought against him. Had he known at first all that he knew now,—how he had taken their all from these people, and how they had failed absolutely in the last great venture they had made,—he would certainly have shared their loss with them. He would have done all that Crinkett had suggested to him when he and Crinkett were walking along the dike. Crinkett had said that on receiving twenty thousand pounds he would have gone back to Australia, and would have taken a wife with him! That offer had been quite intelligible, and if carried out would have put an end to all trouble. But he had mismanaged that interview.

He had been too proud,—too desirous not to seem to buy off a threatening enemy. Now, as the trouble pressed itself more closely upon him,—upon him and his Hester,—he would so willingly buy off his enemy if it were possible! “They ought to have the money,” he said to himself; “if only I could contrive that it should be paid to them.”

One day as he was entering the house by a side door, Darvell the gardener told him that there was a gentleman waiting to see him. The gentleman was very anxious to see him, and had begged to be allowed to sit down. Darvell, when asked whether the gentleman was a gentleman, expressed an affirmative opinion. He had been driven over from Cambridge in a hired gig, which was now standing in the yard, and was dressed, as Darvell expressed it, “quite accordingly and genteel.” So Caldigate passed into the house and found the man seated in the dining-room.

“Perhaps you will step into my study?” said Caldigate. Thus the two men were seated together in the little room which Caldigate used for his own purposes.

Caldigate, as he looked at the man, distrusted his gardener’s judgment. The coat and hat and gloves, even the whiskers and head of hair, might have belonged to a gentleman; but not, as he thought, the mouth or the eyes or the hands. And when the man began to speak there was a mixture of assur-

ance and intended complaisance, an affected familiarity and an attempt at ease, which made the master of the house quite sure that his guest was not all that Darvell had represented. The man soon told his story. His name was Bollum, Richard Bollum, and he had connections with Australia;—was largely concerned in Australian gold-mines. When Caldigate heard this, he looked round involuntarily to see whether the door was closed. “We’re tiled, of course,” said Bollum. Caldigate with a frown nodded his head, and Bollum went on. He hadn’t come there, he said, to speak of some recent troubles of which he had heard. He wasn’t the man to shove his nose into other people’s matters. It was nothing to him who was married to whom. Caldigate shivered, but sat and listened in silence. But Mr. Bollum had had dealings,—many dealings, with Timothy Crinkett. Indeed he was ready to say that Timothy Crinkett was his uncle. He was not particularly proud of his uncle, but nevertheless Timothy Crinkett was his uncle. Didn’t Mr. Caldigate think that something ought to be done for Timothy Crinkett?

“Yes, I do,” said Caldigate, finding himself compelled to say something at the moment, and feeling that he could say so much with positive truth.

Then Bollum continued his story, showing that he knew all the circumstances of Polyeuca. “It was hard on them, wasn’t it, Mr. Caldigate?”

"I think it was."

"Every rap they had among them, Mr. Caldigate! You left them as bare as the palm of my hand!"

"It was not my doing. I simply made him an offer, which every one at the time believed to be liberal."

"Just so. We grants all that. But still you got all their money;—old pals of yours too, as they say out there."

"It is a matter of most intense regret to me. 'As soon as I knew the circumstances, Mr. Bollum, I should have been most happy to have divided the loss with them——"

"That's it,—that's it. That's what'd be right between man and man," said Mr. Bollum, interrupting him.

"Had no other subject been introduced?"

"I know nothing about other subjects. I haven't come here to meddle with other subjects. I'm, as it were, a partner of Crinkett's. Any way, I am acting as his agent. I'm quite above board, Mr. Caldigate, and in what I say I mean to stick to my own business and not go beyond it. Twenty thousand pounds is what we ask,—so that we and you may share the loss. You agree to that?"

"I should have agreed to it two months since," said Caldigate, fearing that he might be caught in a trap,—anxious to do nothing mean, unfair, or

contrary to the law,—craving in his heart after the bold, upright conduct of a thoroughly honourable English gentleman, and yet desirous also to use, if it might be used, the instrumentality of this man.

“And why not now? You see,” said Bollum, becoming a little more confidential, “how difficult it is for me to speak. Things ain’t altered. You’ve got the money. They’ve lost the money. There isn’t any ill-will, Mr. Caldigate. As for Crinkett, he’s a rough diamond, of course. What am I to say about the lady?”

“I don’t see that you need say anything.”

“That’s just it. Of course she’s one of them. That’s all. If there is to be money, she’ll have her share. He’s an old fool, and perhaps they’ll make a match of it.” As he said this he winked. “At any rate they’ll be off to Australia together. And what I propose is this, Mr. Caldigate——” Then he paused.

“What do you propose?”

“Make the money payable in bills to their joint order at Sydney. They don’t want to be wasting any more time here. They’ll start at once. This is the 12th April, isn’t it? Tuesday the 12th?” Caldigate assented. “The old Goldfinder leaves Plymouth this day week.” From this he was sure that Bollum had heard all the story from Euphemia Smith herself, or he would not have talked of the “old” Goldfinder. “Let them have the bills handed

to them on board, and they'll go. Let me have the duplicates here. You can remit the money by July to your agents,—to take up the bills when due. Just let me be with you when the order is given to your banker in London, and everything will be done. It's as easy as a kiss."

Caldigate sat silent, turning it over in his own mind, trying to determine what would be best. Here was another opportunity. But it was one as to which he must come to a decision on the spur of the moment. He must deal with the man now or never. The twenty thousand pounds were nothing. Had there been no question about his wife, he would have paid the money, moved by that argument as to his "old pals,"—by the conviction that the result of his dealing with them had in truth been to leave them "as bare as the palm of his hand." They were welcome to the money; and if by giving the money he could save his Hester, how great a thing it would be! Was it not his duty to make the attempt? And yet there was in his bosom a strong aversion to have any secret dealing with such a man as this,—to have any secret dealing in such a matter. To buy off witnesses in order that his wife's name and his boy's legitimacy might be half,—only half,—established! For even though these people should be made absolutely to vanish, though the sea should swallow them, all that had been said would be known, and too probably believed for ever!

And then, too, he was afraid. If he did this thing alone, without counsel, would he not be putting himself into the hands of these wretches? Might he not be almost sure that when they had gotten his money they would turn upon him and demand more? Would not the payment of the money be evidence against him to any jury? Would it be possible to make judge or jury believe, to make even a friend believe, that in such an emergency he had paid away so large a sum of money because he had felt himself bound to do so by his conscience?

"Well, squire," said Bollum, "I think you see your way through it; don't you?"

"I don't regard the money in the least. They would be welcome to the money."

"That's a great point, anyway."

"But——"

"Ay; but! You're afraid they wouldn't go. You come down to Plymouth, and don't put the bills into their hands or mine till the vessel is under weigh, with them aboard. Then you and I will step into the boat, and be back ashore. When they know the money's been deposited at a bank in London, they'll trust you as far as that. The Goldfinder won't put back again when she's once off. Won't that make it square?"

"I was thinking of something else."

"Well, yes; there's that trial a-coming on; isn't there?"

"These people have conspired together to tell the basest lie."

"I know nothing about that, Mr. Caldigate. I haven't got so much as an opinion. People tell me that all the things look very strong on their side."

"Liars sometimes are successful."

"You can be quit of them,—and pay no more than what you say you kind of owes. I should have thought Crinkett might have asked forty thousand; but Crinkett, though he's rough,—I do own he's rough,—but he's honest after a fashion. Crinkett wants to rob no man; but he feels it hard when he's got the better of. Lies, or no lies, can you do better?"

"I should like to see my lawyer first," said Caldigate, almost panting in his anxiety.

"What lawyer? I hate lawyers."

"Mr. Seely. My case is in his hands, and I should have to tell him."

"Tell him when you come back from Plymouth, and hold your peace till that's done. No good can come of lawyers in such a matter as this. You might as well tell the town-crier. Why should he want to put bread out of his own mouth? And if there is a chance of hard words being said, why should he hear them? He'll work for his money, no doubt; but what odds is it to him whether your lady is to be called Mrs. Caldigate or Miss Bolton? He won't have to go to prison. His boy won't be!

—you know what.” This was terrible, but yet it was all so true! “I’ll tell you what it is, squire. We can’t make it lighter by talking about it all round. I used to do a bit of hunting once; and I never knew any good come of asking what there was the other side of the fence. You’ve got to have it, or you’ve got to leave it alone. That’s just where you are. Of course it isn’t nice.”

“I don’t mind the money.”

“Just so. But it isn’t nice for a swell like you to have to hand it over to such a one as Crinkett just as the ship’s starting, and then to bolt ashore along with me. The odds are, it is all talked about. Let’s own all that. But then it’s not nice to have to hear a woman swear that she’s your wife, when you’ve got another,—specially when she’s got three men as can swear the same. It ain’t nice for you to have me sitting here. I’m well aware of that. There’s the choice of evils. You know what that means. I’m a-putting it about as fair as a man can put anything. It’s a pity you didn’t stump up the money before. But it’s not altogether quite too late yet.”

“I’ll give you an answer to-morrow, Mr. Bollum.”

“I must be in town to-night.”

“I will be with you in London to-morrow if you will give me an address. All that you have said is true; but I cannot do this thing without thinking of it.”

"You'll come alone?"

"Yes,—alone."

"As a gentleman?"

"On my word as a gentleman I will come alone."

Then Bollum gave him an address,—not the place at which he resided, but a certain coffee-house in the City, at which he was accustomed to make appointments. "And don't you see any lawyer," said Bollum, shaking his finger. "You can't do any good that way. It stands to reason that no lawyer would let you pay twenty thousand pounds to get out of any scrape. He and you have different legs to stand upon." Then Mr. Bollum went away, and was driven back in his gig to the Cambridge Hotel.

As soon as the front door was closed Hester hurried down to her husband, whom she found still in the hall. He took her into his own room, and told her everything that had passed,—everything, as accurately as he could. "And remember," he said, "though I do not owe them money, that I feel bound by my conscience to refund them so much. I should do it, now I know the circumstances, if no charge had been brought against me."

"They have perjured themselves, and have been so wicked."

"Yes, they have been very wicked."

"Let them come and speak the truth, and then let them have the money."

"They will not do that, Hester."

"Prove them to be liars, and then give it to them."

"My own girl, I am thinking of you."

"And I of you. Shall it be said of you that you bought off those who had dared to say that your wife was not your wife? I would not do that. What if the people in the court should believe what they say?"

"It would be bad for you, then, dearest?"

"But I should still be your wife. And baby would still be your own, own honest boy. I am sometimes unhappy, but I am never afraid. Let the devil do his worst, but never speak him fair. I would scorn them till it is all over. Then, if money be due to them, let them have it." As she said this, she had drawn herself a little apart from him,—a little away from the arm which had been round her waist, and was looking him full in the face. Never before, even during the soft happiness of their bridal tour, had she seemed to him to be so handsome.

But her faith, her courage, and her beauty did not alter the circumstances of the case. Because she trusted him, he was not the less afraid of the jury who would have to decide, or of the judge, who, with stern eyes, would probably find himself compelled to tell the jury that the evidence against the prisoner was overwhelming. In choosing what might be best to be done on her account, he could

not allow himself to be guided by her spirit. The possibility that the whole gang of them might be made to vanish was present to his mind. Nor could he satisfy himself that in doing as had been proposed to him he would be speaking the devil fair. He would be paying money which he ought to pay, and would perhaps be securing his wife's happiness.

He had promised, at any rate, that he would see the man in London on the morrow, and that he would see him alone. But he had not promised not to speak on the subject to his attorney. Therefore, after much thought, he wrote to Mr. Seely to make an appointment for the next morning, and then told his wife that he would have to go to London on the following day.

"Not to buy those men off?" she said.

"Whatever is done will be done by the advice of my lawyer," he said, pcevishly. "You may be sure that I am anxious enough to do the best. When one has to trust to a lawyer, one is bound to trust to him." This seemed to be so true that Hester could say nothing against it.
