

done at the joint expense of the two brothers without the knowledge of Hester's husband.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BABY'S SPONSORS.

"Is there anything wrong between you and Robert?" Hester asked this question of her husband, one morning in January, as he was sitting by the side of her sofa in their bedroom. The baby was in her arms, and at that moment there was a question as to the godfathers and godmother for the baby.

The letter from Mrs. Smith had arrived on the last day of October, nearly two months before the birth of the baby, and the telegrams refusing to send the money demanded had been despatched on the 1st November,—so that, at this time, Caldigate's mind was accustomed to the burden of the idea. From that day to this he had not often spoken of the matter to Robert Bolton,—nor indeed had there been much conversation between them on other matters. Robert had asked him two or three times whether he had received any reply by the wires. No such message had come; and of course he answered his brother-in-law's questions accordingly;—but he had answered them almost

with a look of offence. The attorney's manner and tone seemed to him to convey reproach; and he was determined that none of the Boltons should have the liberty to find fault with him. It had been suggested, some weeks since, before the baby was born, that an effort should be made to induce Mrs. Bolton to act as godmother. And, since that, among the names of many other relatives and friends, those of uncle Babington and Robert Bolton had been proposed. Hester had been particularly anxious that her brother should be asked, because,—as she so often said to her husband,—he had always been her firm friend in the matter of her marriage. But now, when the question was to be settled, John Caldigate shook his head.

"I was afraid there was something even before baby was born," said the wife.

"There is something, my pet."

"What is it, John? You do not mean to keep it secret from me?"

"I have not the slightest objection to your asking him to stand;—but I think it possible that he may refuse."

"Why should he refuse?"

"Because, as you say, there is something wrong between us. There have been applications for money about the Polyeuka mine. I would not trouble you about it while you were ill."

"Does he think you ought to give back the money?"

"No,—not that. We are quite agreed about the money. But another question has come up;—and though we are, I believe, agreed about that too, still there has been something a little uncomfortable."

"Would not baby make that all right?"

"I think if you were to ask your brother William it would be better."

"May I not know what it is now, John?"

"I have meant you to know always,—from the moment when it occurred,—when you should be well enough."

"I am well now."

"I hardly know; and yet I cannot bear to keep it secret from you."

There was something in his manner which made her feel at once that the subject to which he alluded was of the greatest importance. Whether weak or strong, of course she must be told now. Let the shock of the tidings be what it might, the doubt would be worse. She felt all that, and she knew that he would feel it. "I am quite strong," she said; "you must tell me now."

"Is baby asleep? Put him in the cradle."

"Is it so bad as that?"

"I do not say that it is bad at all. There is no-

thing bad in it,—except a lie. Let me put him in the cradle.”

Then he took the child very gently and deposited him, fast asleep, among the blankets. He had already assumed for himself the character of being a good male nurse; and she was always delighted when she saw the baby in his arms. Then he came and seated himself close to her on the sofa, and put his arm round her waist. “There is nothing bad—but a lie.”

“A lie may be so very bad!”

“Yes, indeed; and this lie is very bad. Do you remember my telling you—about a woman?”

“That Mrs. Smith;—the dancing woman?”

“Yes;—her.”

“Of course I remember.”

“She was one of those, it seems, who bought the Polyeuka mine.”

“Oh, indeed!”

“She, with Crinkett and others. Now they want their money back again.”

“But can they make you send it? And would it be very bad—to lose it?”

“They cannot make me send it. They have no claim to a single shilling. And if they could make me pay it, that would not be very bad.”

“What is it, then? You are afraid to tell me?”

“Yes, my darling,—afraid to speak to you of what is so wicked;—afraid to shock you, to disgust

you; but not afraid of any injury that can be done to you. No harm will come to you."

"But to you?"

"Nor to me;—none to you, or to me, or to baby there." As he said this she clutched his hand with hers. "No harm, dearest; and yet the thing is so abominable that I can hardly bring myself to wound your ears with it."

"You must tell now, John."

"Yes, I must tell you. I have thought about it much, and I know that it is better that you should be told." He had thought much about it, and had so resolved. But he had not quite known how difficult the telling would be. And now he was aware that he was adding to the horror she would feel by pausing and making much of the thing. And yet he could not tell it as though it were a light matter. If he could have declared it all at once,—at first, with a smile on his face, then expressing his disgust at the woman's falsehood,—it would have been better. "That woman has written me a letter in which she declares herself to be—my wife!"

"Your wife! John! Your wife?" These exclamations came from her almost with a shriek as she jumped up from his arms and for a moment stood before him.

"Come back to me," he said. Then again she seated herself. "You did not leave me then because you doubted me?"

"Oh no," she cried, throwing herself upon him and smothering him with kisses—"No, no! It was surprise at such horrid words,—not doubt, not doubt of you. I will never doubt you."

"It was because I was sure of you that I have ventured to tell you this."

"You may be sure of me," she said, sobbing violently the while. "You are sure of me; are you not? And now tell it me all. How did she say so? why did she say so? Is she coming to claim you? Tell me all. Oh, John, tell me everything."

"The why is soon told. Because she wants money. She had heard no doubt of my marriage and thought to frighten me out of money. I do not think she would do it herself. The man Crinkett has put her up to it."

"What does she say?"

"Just that,—and then she signs herself,—Euphemia Caldigate."

"Oh, John!"

"Now you know it all."

"May I not see the letter?"

"For what good? But you shall see it if you wish it. I have determined that nothing shall be kept back from you. In all that there may ever be to trouble us the best comfort will be in perfect confidence." He had already learned enough of her nature to be sure that in this way would he best

comfort her, and most certainly ensure her trust in himself.

"Oh yes," she cried. "If you will tell me all, I will never doubt you." Then she took the letter from his hand, and attempted to read it. But her excitement was so great that though the words were written very clearly, she could not bring her mind to understand them. "Treachery! Ruin! Married to you! What is it all? Do you read it to me;—every word of it." Then he did read it; every word of it. "She says that she will marry the other man. How can she marry him when she says that she is—your wife?"

"Just so, my pet. But you see what she says. It does not matter much to her whether it be true or false, so that she can get my money from me. But, Hester, I would fain be just even to her. No doubt she wrote the letter."

"Who else would have written it?"

"She wrote it. I know her hand. And these are her words,—because they are properly expressed. But it is all his doing,—the man's doing. He has got her in his power, and he is using her in this way."

"If you sent her money——?"

"Not a shilling;—not though she were starving; not now. A man who gives money under a threat is gone. If I were to send her money, everyone

would believe this tale that she tells. Your brother Robert would believe it."

"He knows it?"

"I took the letter to him instantly, but I made up my mind that I would not show it you till baby was born. You can understand that?" She only pressed closer to him as he said this. "I showed it to Robert, and, altogether we are not quite such friends since as we were before."

"You do not mean that he believes it?"

"No; no that. He does not believe it. If he did, I do not see how he and I could ever speak to each other again. I don't think he believes it at all. But I had to tell him the whole story, and that, perhaps, offended him." The "whole story" had not been told to Hester, nor did he think it necessary that it should be told. There was no reason why these details which Robert had elicited by his questions should be repeated to her,—the promise of marriage, the interference of the Wesleyan minister, the use made of his name,—of all this he said nothing. But she had now been told that which to her had been very dreadful, and she was not surprised that her brother should have been offended when he heard the same sad story. She, of course, had at once pardoned the old offence. A young wife when she is sure of her husband, will readily forgive all offences committed before marriage, and will almost be thankful for the confidence placed in her when offences are confessed.

But she could understand that a brother could not be thankful, and she would naturally exaggerate in her own mind the horror which he would feel at such a revelation. Then the husband endeavoured to lighten the effect of what he had said. "Offence, perhaps, is the wrong word. But he was stiff and masterful, if you know what I mean."

"You would not bear that, certainly, John?"

"No. I have to own that I do not love the assumption of authority,—except from you."

"You do not like it from anybody, John?"

"You would not wish me to submit myself to your brother?"

"No; but I think I might ask him to be baby's godfather."

"As you please; only you would be unhappy if he refused."

Then there came a little wail from the cradle and the baby was taken up, and for some minutes his little necessities occupied the mother to the exclusion even of that terrible letter. But when Caldigate was about to leave the room, she asked him another question. "Will she do anything more, John?"

"I can hardly say. I should think not."

"What does Robert think?"

"He has not told me. I sent an immediate refusal by the telegraph wires, and have heard nothing since."

"Is he—nervous about it?"

"I hardly know. It dwells in his mind, no doubt."

"Are you nervous?"

"It dwells in my mind. That is all."

"May I speak to him about it?"

"Why should you? What good would it do? I would rather you did not. Nevertheless, if you feel frightened, if you think that there is anything wrong, it will be natural that you should go to him for assistance. I will not forbid it." As he said this he stood back away from her. It was but by a foot or two, but still there was a sign of separation which instantly made itself palpable to her.

"Wrong, how wrong?" she said, following him and clinging to him. "You do not suppose that I would go to him because I think you wrong? Do you not know that whatever might come I should cling to you? What is he to me compared to you? No; I will never speak to him about it."

He returned her caress with fervour, and stroked her hair, and kissed her forehead. "My dearest! my own! my darling! But what I mean is that if some other man's opinion on this subject is necessary to your comfort, you may go to him."

"No other man's opinion shall be necessary to me about anything. I will not speak about it to Robert, or to anyone. But if more should come of it, you will tell me?"

"You shall know everything that comes. I have

never for a moment had the idea of keeping it back from you. But because of baby, and because baby had to be born, I delayed it." This was an excuse which, as the mother of her child, she could not but accept with thankfulness.

"I think I will ask him," she said that night, referring again to the vexed question of godfathers. Uncle Babington had some weeks since very generously offered his services, and, of course, they had been generously accepted. Among the baby's relations he was the man of highest standing in the world; and then this was a mark of absolute forgiveness in reference to the wrongs of poor Julia. And a long letter had been prepared to Mrs. Bolton, written by Hester's own hand, not without much trouble, in which the baby's grandmother was urged to take upon herself the duties of godmother. All this had been discussed in the family, so that the nature of the petition was well known to Mrs. Bolton for some time before she received it. Mrs. Daniel, who had consented to act in the event of a refusal from Puritan Grange, had more than once used her influence with her step-mother-in-law. But no hint had as yet come to Folking as to what the answer might be. It had also been suggested that Robert should be the other godfather,—the proposal having been made to Mrs. Robert. But there had come upon all the Boltons a feeling that Robert was indifferent,—or, perhaps, even unwilling to undertake

the task. And yet no one knew why. Mrs. Robert herself *did not know why.*

The reader, however, will know why, and will understand how it was that Mrs. Robert was in the dark. The attorney, though he was suspicious, though he was frightened, though he was, in truth, very angry with this new brother-in-law, through whose anti-nuptial delinquencies so much sorrow was threatened to the Bolton family, nevertheless kept the secret from all the Cambridge Boltons. It had been necessary to him to seek counsel with some one, but he had mentioned the matter only to his brother William. But he did not wish to add to the bond which now tied him to Folking. If this horror, this possible horror, should fall upon them;—if it should turn out that he had insisted on giving his sister in marriage to a man already married,—then,—then,—then——! Such possible future incidents were too terrible to be considered closely, but with such a possibility he would not add to the bonds. At Puritan Grange they would throw all the responsibility of what had been done upon him. This feeling was mingled with his love for his sister, —with the indignation he would not only feel but show if it should turn out that she had been wronged. “I will destroy him,—I will destroy him utterly,” he would sometimes say to himself as he thought of it.

And now the godfather question had to be de-

cided. "No," he said to his wife, "I don't care about such things. I won't do it. You write and tell her that I have prejudices, or scruples, or whatever you choose to call it."

"There is to be a little tarradiddle told, and I am to tell it?"

"I have prejudices and scruples."

"About the religion of the thing?" She knew,—as, of course, she was bound to know,—that he had at any rate a round dozen of god-children somewhere about the country. There were the young Williams, and the young Daniels, and her own nephews and nieces, with the parents of all of whom uncle Robert had been regarded as the very man for a godfather. The silversmith in Trumpington Street knew exactly the weight of the silver cup that was to be given to the boy or to a girl. The Bible and prayer-books were equally well regulated. Mrs. Robert could not but smile at the idea of religious scruples. "I wish I knew what it was that has come over you of late. I fancy you have quarrelled with John Caldigate."

"If you think that, then you can understand the reason."

"What is it about?"

"I have not quarrelled with him. It is possible that I may have to do so. But I do not mean to say what it is about." Then he smiled. "I don't want you to ask any more questions, but just to

write to Hester as kindly as you can, saying I don't mean to be godfather any more. It will be a good excuse in regard to all future babies." Mrs. Robert was a good wife and did as she was bid. She worded her refusal as cautiously as she could, and, —on that occasion,—asked her husband no further question.

The prayer that was addressed to the lady of Puritan Grange became the subject of much debate, of great consideration, and I may say also of lengthened prayer. To Mrs. Bolton this position of godmother implied much of the old sacred responsibility which was formerly attached to it, and which Robert Bolton, like other godfathers and godmothers of the day, had altogether ignored. She had been already partly brought round, nearly persuaded, in regard to the acceptance of John Caldigate as her son-in-law. It did not occur to her to do other than hate him. How was it possible that such a woman should do other than hate the man who had altogether got the better of her as to the very marrow of her life, the very apple of her eye? But she was alive to her duty towards her daughter; and when she was told that the man was honest in his dealings, well-to-do in the world, a professing Christian who was constant in his parish church, she did not know how to maintain her opinion, that in spite of all this, he was an unregenerate castaway. Therefore, although she was determined still to hate him,

she had almost made up her mind to enter his house. With these ideas she wrote a long letter to Hester, in which she promised to have herself taken out to Folking in order that she might be present as godmother at the baby's baptism. She would lunch at Folking, but must return to Chesterton before dinner. Even this was a great thing gained.

Then it was arranged that Daniel Bolton should stand as second godfather in place of his brother Robert.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGER IN CAMBRIDGE.

"I AM sorry you will not come out to us to-morrow." On the day before the christening, which was at last fixed for a certain Tuesday in the middle of February, John Caldigate went into Cambridge, and at once called upon the attorney at his office. This he did partly instigated by his own feelings, and partly in compliance with his wife's wishes. Before that letter had come he and his brother-in-law had been fast friends; and now, though for a day or two he had been angry with what he had thought to be unjustifiable interference, he regretted the loss of such a friend. More than three months had now passed since the letter had come, but his