

bitter hour. To him the effort made was even more difficult than to her;—as was right;—for she at any rate had been blameless. Then the Boltons went away, as had been arranged, and also Uncle Babington, while the men still remained.

“If you don’t mind, squire, I’ll take a turn with you,” said Crinkett at last; “while Jack can sit anywhere about the place.

“Certainly,” said Caldigate. And so they took their hats and went off, and Jack Adamson was left “sitting anywhere” about the place.

## CHAPTER VII.

### TOM CRINKETT AT FOLKING.

CALDIGATE thought that he had better take his companion where there would be the least chance of encountering many eyes. He went therefore through the garden into the farmyard, and along the road leading back to the dike, and then he walked backwards and forwards between the ferry, over the Wash, and the termination of the private way by which they had come. The spot was not attractive, as far as rural prettiness was concerned. They had, on one hand or the other as they turned, the long, straight, deep dike which had been cut at right angles to the Middle Wash; and around, the

fields were flat, plashy, and heavy-looking with the mud of February. But Crinkett for a while did not cease to admire everything. "And them are all yourn?" he said, pointing to a crowd of corn-stacks standing in the haggard.

"Yes, they're mine. I wish they were not."

"What do you mean by that?"

"As prices are at present, a man doesn't make much by growing corn and keeping it to this time of the year."

"And where them chimneys is—is that yourn?" This he said pointing along the straight line of the road to Farmer Holt's homestead, which showed itself on the other side of the Wash.

"It belongs to the estate," said Caldigate.

"By jingo! And how I remember your a-coming and talking to me across the gate at Polyeuka Hall!"

"I remember it very well."

"I didn't know as you were an estated gent in those days."

"I had spent a lot of money when I was young, and the estate, as you call it, was not large enough to bear the loss. So I had to go out and work, and get back what I had squandered."

"And you did it?"

"Yes, I did it."

"My word, yes! What a lot of money you took out of the colony, Caldigate!"

"I'm not going to praise myself, but I worked hard for it, and when I got it I didn't run riot."

"Not with drink."

"Nor in any other way. I kept my money."

"Well;—I don't know as you was very much more of a Joseph than anybody else." Then Crinkett laughed most disagreeably; and Caldigate, turning over various ideas rapidly in his mind, thought that a good deed would be done if a man so void of feeling could be drowned beneath the waters of the black deep dike which was slowly creeping along by their side. "Any way you was lucky,—infernally lucky."

"You did not do badly yourself. When I first reached Nobble you had the name of more money than I ever made."

"Who's got it now? Eh, Caldigate! who's got my money now?"

"It would take a clever man to tell that."

"It don't take much cleverness for me to tell who has got more of it nor anybody else, and it don't take much cleverness for me to tell that I ain't got none of it left myself;—none of it, Caldigate. Not a d—— hundred pounds!" This he said with terrible energy.

"I'm sorry it's so bad as that with you, Crinkett."

"Yes;—you is sorry, I daresay. You've acted sorry in all you said and done since I got taken in

last by that — mine;—haven't you? Well;—I have got just a few hundreds; what I could scrape together to bring me and a few others as might be wanted over to England. There's Jack Adamson with me and — just two more. They may be wanted, squire."

The attack now was being commenced, and how was he to repel it, or to answer it? Only on one ground had he received from Robert Bolton a decided opinion. Under no circumstances was he to give money to these persons. Were he to be guilty of that weakness he would have delivered himself over into their hands. And not only did he put implicit trust in the sagacity of Robert Bolton, but he himself knew enough of the world's opinion on such a matter to be aware that a man who has allowed himself to be frightened out of money is supposed to have acknowledged some terrible delinquency. He had been very clear in his mind when that letter came from Euphemia Smith that he would not now make any rebate. Till that attack had come, it might have been open to him to be generous;—but not now. And yet when this man spoke of his own loss, and reminded him of his wealth;—when Crinkett threw it in his teeth that by a happy chance he had feathered his nest with the spoils taken from the wretched man himself,—then he wished that it was in his power to give back something.

"Is that said as a threat?" he asked, looking round on his companion, and resolving that he would be brave.

"That's as you take it, squire. We don't want to threaten nothing."

"Because if you do, you'd better go, and do what you have to do away from here."

"Don't you be so rough now with an old pal. You won't do no good by being rough. I wasn't rough to you when you came to Polyeuka Hall without very much in your pocket." This was untrue, for Crinkett had been rough, and Caldigate's pockets had been full of money; but there could be no good got by contradicting him on small trifles. "I was a good mate to you then. You wouldn't even have got your finger into the 'Old Stick-in-the-Mud,' nor yet into Polyeuka, but for me. I was the making of your fortin, Caldigate. I was."

"My fortune, such as it is, was made by my own industry."

"Industry be blowed! I don't know that you were so much better than anybody else. Wasn't I industrious? Wasn't I thinking of it morning, noon, and night, and nothing else? You was smart. I do allow that, Caldigate. You was very smart."

"Did you ever know me dishonest?"

"Pooh! what's honesty? There's nothing so smart as honesty. Whatever you got, you got a

sure hold of. That's what you mean by honesty. You was clever enough to take care as you had really got it. Now about this Polyeuka business, I'll tell you how it is. I and Jack Adamson and another,"—as he alluded to the "other" he winked,—"we believed in Polyeuka; we did. D—— the cussed hole! Well;—when you was gone we thought we'd try it. It was not easy to get the money as you wanted, but we got it. One of the banks down at Sydney went shares, but took all the plant as security. Then the cussed place ran out the moment the money was paid. It was just as though fortin had done it a purpose. If you don't believe what I'm a-saying, I've got the documents to show you."

Caldigate did believe what the man said. It was a matter as to which he had, in the way of business, received intelligence of his own from the colony, and he was aware that he had been singularly lucky as to the circumstances and time of the sale. But there had been nothing "smart" about it. Those in the colony who understood the matter thought at the time that he was making a sacrifice of his own interests by the terms proposed. He had thought so himself, but had been willing to make it in order that he might rid himself of further trouble. He had believed that the machinery and plant attached to the mine had been nearly worth the money, and he had been quite certain that Crinkett

himself, when making the bargain, had considered himself to be in luck's way. But such property, as he well knew, was, by its nature, precarious, and liable to sudden changes. He had been fortunate, and the purchasers had been the reverse. Of that he had no doubt, though probably the man had exaggerated his own misfortune. When he had been given to understand how bad had been the fate of these old companions of his in the matter, with the feelings of a liberal gentleman he was anxious to share with them the loss. Had Crinkett come to him, explaining all that he now explained, without any interference from Euphemia Smith, he would have been anxious to do much. But now;—how could he do anything now? "I do not at all disbelieve what you tell me about the mine," he said.

"And yet you won't do anything for us? You ain't above taking all our money and seeing us starve; and that when you have got everything round you here like an estated gentleman, as you are?"

There was a touch of eloquence in this, a soundness of expostulation which moved him much. He could afford to give back half the price he had received for the mine and yet be a well-to-do man. He paid over to his father the rents from Folking, but he had the house and home-farm for nothing. And the sum which he had received for Polyeuka

by no means represented all his savings. He did not like to think that he had denuded this man who had been his partner of everything in order that he himself might be unnecessarily rich. It was not pleasant to him to think that the fatness of his opulence had been extracted from Jack Adamson and from—Euphemia Smith. When the application for return of the money had been first made to him from Australia, he hadn't known what he knew now. There had been no eloquence then,—no expostulation. Now he thoroughly wished that he was able to make restitution. "A threat has been used to me," he muttered, almost anxious to explain to the man his exact position.

"A threat! I ain't threatened nothing. But I tell you there will be threats and worse than threats. Fair means first and foul means afterwards! That's about it, Caldigate."

If he could have got this man to say that there was no threat, to be simply piteous, he thought that he might even yet have suggested some compromise. But that was impossible when he was told that worse than threats were in store for him. He was silent for some moments, thinking whether it would not be better for him to rush into that matter of Euphemia Smith himself. But up to this time he had no absolute knowledge that Crinkett was aware of the letter which had been written. No doubt that in speaking of "another" as being joined with him-



self and Adamson he had intended that Euphemia Smith should be understood. But till her name had been mentioned, he could not bring himself to mention it. He could not bring himself to betray the fear which would become evident if he spoke of the woman.

"I think you had better go to my lawyer," he said.

"We don't want no lawyering. The plunder is yours, no doubt. Whether you'll have so much law on your side in other matters,—that's the question." Crinkett did not in the least understand the state of his companion's mind. To Crinkett it appeared that Caldigate was simply anxious to save his money.

"I do not know that I can say anything else to you just at present. The bargain was a fair bargain, and you have no ground for any claim. You come to me with some mysterious threat——"

"You understand," said Crinkett.

"I care nothing for your threats. I can only bid you go and do your worst."

"That's what we intend."

"That you should have lost money by me is a great sorrow to me."

"You look sorry, squire."

"But after what you have said, I can make you

no offer. If you will go to my brother-in-law, Mr. Robert Bolton——”

“That’s the lady’s brother?”

“My wife’s brother.”

“I know all about it, Caldigate. I won’t go to him at all. What’s he to us? It ain’t likely that I am going to ask him for money to hold our tongues. Not a bit of it. You’ve had sixty thousand pounds out of that mine. The bank found twenty and took all the plant. There’s forty gone. Will you share the loss? Give us twenty and we’ll be off back to Australia by the first ship. And I’ll take a wife back with me. You understand? I’ll take a wife back with me. Then we shall be all square all round.”

With what delight would he have given the twenty thousand pounds, had he dared! Had there been no question about the woman, he would have given the money to satisfy his own conscience as to the injury he had involuntarily done to his old partners. But he could not do it now. He could make no suggestion towards doing it. To do so would be to own to all the Boltons that Mrs. Euphemia Smith was his wife. And were he to do so, how could he make himself secure that the man and the woman would go back to Australia and trouble him no more? All experience forbid him to hope for such a result. And then the payment of the money would be one of many damning pieces of evidence against

him. They had now got back for the second time to the spot at which the way up to the house at Folking turned off from the dike. Here he paused and spoke what were intended to be his last words. "I have nothing more to say, Crinkett. I will not promise anything myself. A threatened man should never give way. You know that yourself. But if you will go to my brother-in-law I will get him to see you."

"D—— your brother-in-law. He ain't your brother-in-law, no more than I am."

Now the sword had been drawn and the battle had been declared. "After that," said Caldigate, walking on in front, "I shall decline to speak to you any further." He went back through the farm-yard at a quick pace, while Crinkett kept up with him, but still a few steps behind. In the front of the house they found Jack Adamson, who, in obedience to his friend's suggestion, had been sitting anywhere about the place.

"I'm blowed if he don't mean to stick to every lump he's robbed us of!" said Crinkett, in a loud voice.

"He do, do he? Then we know what we've got to be after."

"I've come across some of 'em precious mean," continued Crinkett; "but a meaner skunk nor this estated gent, who is a justice of the peace and a squire and all that, I never did come across, and I

don't suppose I never shall." And then they stood looking at him, jeering at him. And the gardener, who was then in the front of the house, heard it all.

"Darvell," said the squire, "open the gate for these gentlemen." Darvell of course knew that they had been brought from the church to the house, and had been invited in to the christening breakfast.

"If I were Darvell I wouldn't take wages from such a skunk as you," said Crinkett. "A man as has robbed his partners of every shilling, and has married a young lady when he has got another wife living out in the colony. At least she was out in the colony. She ain't there now, Darvell. She's somewhere else now. That's what your master is, Darvell. You'll have to look out for a place, because your master'll be in quod before long. How much is it they gets for bigamy, Jack? Three years at the treadmill;—that's about it. But I pities the young lady and the poor little bastard."

What was he to do? A sense of what was fitting for his wife rather than for himself forbade him to fly at the man and take him by the throat. And now, of course, the wretched story would be told through all Cambridgeshire. Nothing could prevent that now. "Darvell," he said, as he turned towards the hall steps, "you must see these men

off the premises. The less you say to them the better."

"We'll only just tell him all about it as we goes along comfortable," said Adamson. Darvell, who was a good sort of man in his way,—slow rather than stupid, weighted with the ordinary respect which a servant has for his master,—had heard it all, but showed no particular anxiety to hear more. He accompanied the men down to the Causeway, hardly opening his mouth to them, while they were loud in denouncing the meanness of the man who had deserted a wife in Australia, and had then betrayed a young lady here in England.

"What were they talking about?" said his wife to him when they were alone. "I heard their voices even here."

"They were threatening me;—threatening me and you."

"About that woman?"

"Yes; about that woman. Not that they have dared yet to mention her name,—but it was about that woman."

"And she?"

"I've heard nothing from her since that letter. I do not know that she is in England, but I suppose that she is with them."

"Does it make you unhappy, John?"

"Very unhappy."

"Does it frighten you?"

"Yes. It makes me fear that you for a while will be made miserable,—you whom I had thought that I could protect from all sorrow and from all care! O my darling! of course it frightens me; but it is for you."

"What will they do first, John?"

"They have already said words before the man there which will of course be spread about the country."

"What words?"

Then he paused, but after pausing he spoke very plainly. "They said that you were not my wife."

"But I am."

"Indeed you are."

"Tell me all truly. Though I were not, I would still be true to you."

"But, Hester,—Hester, you are. Do not speak as though that were possible."

"I know that you love me. I am sure of that. Nothing should ever make me leave you;—nothing. You are all the world to me now. Whatever you may have done I will be true to you. Only tell me everything."

"I think I have," he said, hoarsely. Then he remembered that he had told much to Robert Bolton which she had not heard. "I did tell her that I would marry her."

"You did."

"Yes, I did."

"Is not that a marriage in some countries?"

"I think nowhere,—certainly not there. And the people, hearing of it all, used to call her by my name."

"O John!—will not that be against us!"

"It will be against me,—in the minds of persons like your mother."

"I will care nothing for that. I know that you have repented, and are sorry. I know that you love me now."

"I have always loved you since the first moment that I saw you."

"Never for a moment believe that I will believe them. Let them do what they will, I will be your wife. Nothing shall take me away from you. But it is sad, is it not; on that the very day that poor baby has been christened?" Then they sat and wept together, and tried to comfort each other. But nothing could comfort him. He was almost prostrated at the prospect of his coming misery,—and of hers.

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