

## CHAPTER IX.

## THE CONCLAVE AT PURITAN GRANGE.

JOHN CALDIGATE was committed, and liberated on bail. This occurred in Cambridge on the Wednesday after the christening; and before the Saturday night following all the Boltons were thoroughly convinced that this wretched man, who had taken from them their daughter and their sister, was a bigamist, and that poor Hester, though a mother, was not a wife. The evidence against him, already named, was very strong, but they had been put in possession of other, and as they thought more damning evidence than any to which he had alluded in telling his version of the story to Robert Bolton. The woman had produced, and had shown to Robert Bolton, the envelope of a letter addressed in John Caldigate's handwriting to "Mrs. Caldigate, Ahalala, Nobble," which letter had been dated inside from Sydney, and which envelope bore the Sydney post-mark. Caldigate's handwriting was peculiar, and the attorney declared that he could himself swear to it. The letter itself she also produced, but it told less than the envelope. It began as such a letter might begin, "Dearest Feemy," and ended "Yours, ever

and always, J. C." As she herself had pointed out, a man such as Caldigate does not usually call his wife by that most cherished name in writing to her. The letter itself referred almost altogether to money matters, though perhaps hardly to such as a man generally discusses with his wife. Certain phrases seemed to imply a distinct action. She had better sell these shares or those if she could for a certain price,—and such like. But she explained, that they both when they married had been possessed of mining shares, represented by scrip which passed from hand to hand readily, and that each still retained his or her own property. But among the various small documents which she had treasured up for use, should they be needed for some possible occasion such as this, was a note, which had not, indeed, been posted, but which purported to have been written by the minister, Allan, to Caldigate himself, offering to perform the marriage at Ahalala, but advising him to have the ceremony performed at some more settled place, where an established church community with a permanent church or chapel admitted the proper custody of registers. Nothing could be more sensible, or written in a better spirit than this letter, though the language was not that of an educated man. This letter, Caldigate had, she said, showed to her, and she had retained it. Then she brought forward two handkerchiefs which she herself had marked with her new

name, Euphemia Caldigate, and the date of the year. This had been done, she declared, immediately after her marriage, and the handkerchiefs seemed by their appearance to justify the assertion. Caldigate had admitted a promise, admitted that he had lived with the woman, admitted that she had passed by his name, admitted that there had been a conversation with the clergyman in regard to his marriage. And now there were three others, besides the woman herself, who were ready to swear,—who had sworn,—that they had witnessed the ceremony!

A clerk had been sent out early in November by Robert and William Bolton to make inquiry in the colony, and he could not well return before the end of March. And, if the accused man should ask for delay, it would hardly be possible to refuse the request, as it might be necessary for his defence that he, too, should get evidence from the colony. The next assizes would be in April, and it would hardly be possible that the trial should take place so soon. And if not there would be a delay of three or four months more. Even that might hardly suffice should a plea be made on Caldigate's behalf that prolonged inquiry was indispensable. A thousand allegations might be made, as to the characters of these witnesses,—characters which doubtless were open to criticism; as to the probability of forgery; as to the necessity of producing Allan, the clergy-

man; as to Mrs. Smith's former position,—whether or no she was in truth a widow when she was living at Ahalala. Richard Shand had been at Ahalala, and must have known the truth. Caldigate might well declare that Richard Shand's presence was essential to his defence. There would and must be delay.

But what, in the meantime, would be the condition of Hester,—Hester Bolton, as they feared that they would be bound in duty to call her,—of Hester and her infant? The thing was so full of real tragedy,—the true human nature of them all was so strongly affected, that for a time family jealousies and hatred had to give way. To father and mother and to the brothers, and to the brother's wife, it was equally a catastrophe, terrible, limitless, like an earthquake, or the falling upon them of some ruined tower. One thing was clear to them all,—that she and her child must be taken away from Folking. Her continued residence there would be a continuation of the horror. The man was not her husband. Not one of them was inspired by a feeling of mercy to allege that, in spite of all that they had heard, he still might be her husband. Even Mrs. Robert, who had been most in favour of the Caldigate marriage, did not doubt for an instant. The man had been a gambler at home on racecourses, and then had become a gambler at the gold mines in the colony. His life then, by his own admission, had

been disreputable. Who does not know that vices which may be treated with tenderness, almost with complaisance, while they are kept in the background, became monstrous, prodigious, awe-inspiring when they are made public. A gentleman shall casually let slip some profane word, and even some friendly parson standing by will think but little of it; but let the profane word, through some unfortunate accident, find its way into the newspapers, and the gentleman will be held to have disgraced himself almost for ever. Had nothing been said of a marriage between Caldigate and Mrs. Smith, little would have been thought by Robert Bolton, little perhaps by Robert Bolton's father, little even by Robert Bolton's wife of the unfortunate alliance which he had admitted. But now, everything was added to make a pile of wickedness as big as a mountain.

From the conclave which was held on Saturday at Puritan Grange to decide what should be done, it was impossible to exclude Mrs. Bolton. She was the young mother's mother, and how should she be excluded? From the first moment in which something of the truth had reached her ears, it had become impossible to silence her or to exclude her. To her all those former faults would have been black as vice itself, even though there had been no question of a former marriage. Outside active sins, to which it may be presumed no temptation allured

herself, were abominable to her. Evil thoughts, hardness of heart, suspicions, unforgivingness, hatred, being too impalpable for denunciation in the Decalogue but lying nearer to the hearts of most men than murder, theft, adultery, and perjury, were not equally abhorrent to her. She had therefore allowed herself to believe all evil of this man, and from the very first had set him down in her heart as a hopeless sinner. The others had opposed her,—because the man had money. In the midst of her shipwreck, in the midst of her misery, through all her maternal agony, there was a certain triumph to her in this. She had been right,—right from first to last, right in everything. Her poor old husband was crushed by the feeling that they had, among them, allowed this miscreant to take their darling away from them,—that he himself had assented; but she had not assented; she was not crushed. Before Monday night all Cambridge had heard something of the story, and then it had been impossible to keep her in the dark. And now, when the conclave met, of course she was one. The old man was there, and Robert Bolton, and William the barrister, who had come down from London to give his advice, and both Mr. and Mrs. Daniel. Mrs. Daniel, of all the females of the family, was the readiest to endure the severity of the step-mother, and she was now giving what comfort she could by her attendance at the Grange.

"Of course she should come home," said the barrister. Up to this moment no one had seen Hester since the evil tidings had been made known; but a messenger had been sent out to Folking with a long letter from her mother, in which the poor nameless one had been implored to come back with her baby to her old home till this matter had been settled. The writer had endeavoured to avoid the saying of hard things against the sinner; but her feelings had been made very clear. "Your father and brothers and all of us think that you should come away from him while this is pending. Nay; we do not hesitate to say that it is your bounden duty to leave him."

"I will never, never leave my dearest, dearest husband. If they were to put my husband into gaol I would sit at the door till they had let him out." That, repeated over and over again, had been the purport of her reply. And that word "husband," she used in almost every line, having only too clearly observed that her mother had not used it at all. "Dearest mother," she said, ending her letter, "I love you as I have always done. But when I became his wife, I swore to love him best. I did not know then how strong my love could be. I have hardly known till now, when he is troubled, of what devotion I was capable. I will not leave him for a moment,—unless I have to do so at his telling."

Such being her determination, and so great her obstinacy, it was quite clear that they could not by soft words or persuasive letters bring her to their way of thinking. She would not submit to their authority, but would claim that as a married woman she owed obedience only to her husband. And it would certainly not be within their power to make her believe that she was not Caldigate's wife. They believed it. They felt that they knew the facts. To them any continuation of the alliance between their poor girl and the false traitor was abominable. They would have hung the man without a moment's thought of mercy had it been possible. There was nothing they would not have done to rescue their Hester from his power. But how was she to be rescued till the dilatory law should have claimed its victim? "Can't she be made to come away by the police?" asked the mother.

The barrister shook his head. "Couldn't the magistrates give an order?" asked the father. Mr. Bolton had been a magistrate himself,—was one still indeed, although for some years he had not sat upon the bench,—but he had no very clear idea of a magistrate's power. The barrister again shook his head. "You seem to think that something of the kind could be done," he said, turning to Robert. When he wanted advice he would always turn to Robert, especially in the presence of the barrister, intending to show that he thought the lower branch



of the profession to be at any rate more accurate than the higher.

"I said something about an order from the Vice-Chancellor. But I fear we should not succeed in getting it." The barrister again shook his head.

"Do you mean to say that nothing can be done?" exclaimed Mrs. Bolton, rising up from her seat; "that no steps can be taken?"

"If she were once here, perhaps you could—prevent her return," whispered the barrister.

"Persuade her not to go back," suggested Mrs. Daniel.

"Well;—that might come after a time. But I think you would have the feeling of the community with you if you succeeded;—well, not violence, you understand."

"No; not violence," said the father.

"I could be violent with him," said Mrs. Bolton.

"Just do not let her leave the house," continued the barrister. "Of course it would be disagreeable."

"I should not mind that," said Mrs. Bolton. "In doing my duty I could bear anything. To separate her from him I could undergo any trouble."

"But he would have the power to fetch her?" asked the father, doubtfully.

"No doubt;—by law he would have such power. But the magistrates would be very loth to assist him. The feeling of the community, as I said, would

be in your favour. She would be cowed, and when once she was away from him he would probably feel averse to increase our enmity by taking strong measures for her recovery." Mrs. Bolton seemed to declare by her face that it would be quite impossible for him to increase her enmity.

"But we can't lock her up," said the old man.

"Practically you can. Take her bonnet away,—or whatever she came in. Don't let there be a vehicle to carry her back. Let the keys be turned if it be necessary. The servants must know of course what you are doing; but they will probably be on your side. I don't mean to say that if she be resolute to escape at any cost you can prevent her. But probably she will not be resolute like that. It requires a deal of resolution for a young woman to show herself in the streets alone in so wretched a plight as hers. It depends on her disposition."

"She is very determined," said Hester's mother.

"And you can be equally so." To this assertion Mrs. Bolton assented with a little nod. "You can only try it. It is one of those cases in which unfortunately publicity cannot be avoided. We have to do the best we can for her, poor dear, according to our conscience. I should induce her to come on a visit to her mother, and then I should, if possible, detain her."

It was thus that William Bolton gave his advice; and as Robert Bolton assented, it was determined

that this should be the line of action. Nor can it be said that they were either cruel or unloving in their projected scheme. Believing as they did that the man was not her husband, it must be admitted that it was their duty to take her away from him if possible. But it was not probable that Hester herself would look upon their care of her in the same light. She would beat herself against the bars of the cage; and even should she be prevented from escaping by the motives and reasons which William Bolton had suggested, she would not the less regard her father and mother as wicked tyrants. The mother understood that very well. And she, though she was hard to all the world besides, had never been hard to her girl. No tenderest female bosom that ever panted at injustice done to her offspring was more full than hers of pity, love, and desire. To save her Hester from sin and suffering she would willingly lay down her life. And she knew that in carrying out the scheme that had been proposed she must appear to her girl to be an enemy,—to be the bitterest of all enemies! I have seen a mother force open the convulsively closed jaws of her child in order that some agonising torture might be applied,—which, though agonising, would tend to save her sick infant's life. She did it though the child shrank from her as from some torturing fiend. This mother resolved that she would do the same,—though her child, too, should learn to hate her.

William Bolton undertook to go out to Folking and give the invitation by which she was to be allured to come to Puritan Grange,—only for a day and night if longer absence was objectionable; only for a morning visit, if no more could be achieved. It was all treachery and falsehood;—a doing of certain evil that possible good might come from it. “She will hate me for ever, but yet it ought to be done,” said William Bolton; who was a good man, an excellent husband and father, and regarded in his own profession as an honourable trustworthy man.

“She will never stay,” the old man said to his wife, when the others had gone and they two were left together.

“I don’t know.”

“I am sure she will never stay.”

“I will try.”

Mrs. Robert said the same thing when the scheme was explained to her. “Do you think anybody could keep me a prisoner against my will—unless they locked me up in a cell? Do you think I would not scream?”

The husband endeavoured to explain that the screaming might depend on the causes which had produced the coercion. “I think you would scream, and scream till you were let loose, if the person locking you up had nothing to justify him. But if

you felt that the world would be all against you, then you would not scream and would not be let out."

Mrs. Robert, however, seemed to think that no one could keep her in any house against her own will without positive bolts, bars, and chains.

In the meantime much had been settled out at Folking, or had been settled at Cambridge, so that the details were known at Folking. Mr. Seely had taken up the case, and had of course gone into it with much more minuteness than Robert Bolton had done. Caldigate owned to the writing of the envelope, and to the writing of the letter, but declared that that letter had not been sent in that envelope. He had written the envelope in some foolish joke while at Ahalala,—he remembered doing it well; but he was quite sure that it had never passed through the Sydney post-office. The letter itself had been written from Sydney. He remembered writing that also, and he remembered posting it at Sydney in an envelope addressed to Mrs. Smith. When Mr. Seely assured him that he himself had seen the post-office stamp of Sydney on the cover, Caldigate declared that it must have been passed through the post-office for fraudulent purposes after it had left his hands. "Then," said Mr. Seely, "the fraud must have been meditated and prepared three years ago,—which is hardly probable."

As to the letter from the clergyman, Allan, of which Mr. Seely had procured a copy, Caldgate declared that it had certainly never been addressed to him. He had never received any letter from Mr. Allan,—had never seen the man's handwriting. He was quite sure that if he were in New South Wales he could get a dozen people to swear that there had never been such a marriage at Ahalala. He did name many people, especially Dick Shand. Then Mr. Seely proposed to send out an agent to the colony, who should take the depositions of such witnesses as he could find, and who should if possible bring Dick Shand back with him. And, at whatever cost, search should be made for Mr. Allan; and Mr. Allan should, if found, be brought to England, if money could bring him. If Mr. Allan could not be found, some document written by him might perhaps be obtained with reference to his handwriting. But, through it all, Mr. Seely did believe that there had been some marriage ceremony between his client and Mrs. Euphemia Smith.

All this, down to the smallest detail, was told to Hester,—Hester Bolton or Hester Caldgate, whichever she might be. And there was no word uttered by the man she claimed as her husband which she did not believe as though it were gospel.