



CHAPTER XV

HOW MR. JOHN BRIMBLECOMBE UNDERSTOOD THE NATURE OF AN OATH

The Kyng of Spayn is a foul paynim,
And lieveth on Mahound ;
And pity it were that lady fayre
Should marry a heathen hound.'

Kyng Estmere.

ABOUT six weeks after the duel, the miller at Stow had come up to the great house in much tribulation, to borrow the bloodhounds. Rose Salterne had vanished in the night, no man knew whither.

Sir Richard was in Bideford : but the old steward took on himself to send for the keepers, and down went the serving-men to the Mill with all the idle lads of the parish at their heels, thinking a maiden-hunt very good sport ; and of course taking a view of the case as favourable as possible to Rose.

They reviled the miller and his wife roundly for hard-hearted old heathens ; and had no doubt that they had driven the poor maid to throw herself over cliff, or drown herself in the sea ; while all the women of Stow, on the other hand, were of unanimous opinion that the hussy had 'gone off' with some bad fellow ; and that pride was sure to have a fall, and so forth.

The facts of the case were, that all Rose's trinkets were left behind, so that she had at least gone off honestly; and nothing seemed to be missing but some of her linen, which old Anthony the steward broadly hinted was likely to be found in other people's boxes. The only trace was a little footmark under her bedroom window. On that the blood-hound was laid (of course in leash), and after a premonitory whimper, lifted up his mighty voice, and started bell-mouthed through the garden gate, and up the lane, towing behind him the panting keeper, till they reached the downs above, and went straight away for Marsland-mouth, where the whole posse comitatus pulled up breathless at the door of Lucy Passmore.

Lucy, as perhaps I should have said before, was now a widow, and found her widowhood not altogether contrary to her interest. Her augury about her old man had been fulfilled; he had never returned since the night on which he put to sea with Eustace and the Jesuits.

Some natural tears she shed, but dried them soon—

as many of them, at least, as were not required for purposes of business; and then determined to prevent suspicion by a bold move; she started off to Stow, and told Lady Grenville a most pathetic tale; how her husband had gone out to pollock fishing, and never returned: but how she had heard horsemen gallop past her window in the dead of night, and was sure they must have been the Jesuits, and that they had carried off her old man by main force, and probably, after making use of his services, had killed and salted him down for provision on their voyage back to the Pope at Rome; after which she ended by entreating protection against those 'Popish skulkers up to Chapel,' who were sworn to do her a mischief; and by an appeal to Lady Grenville's sense of justice, as to whether the Queen ought not to allow her a pension, for having had her heart's love turned into a sainted martyr by the hands of idolatrous traitors.

Lady Grenville (who had a great opinion of Lucy's medical skill, and always sent for her if one of the children

had a 'housty,' *i.e.* sore throat) went forth and pleaded the case before Sir Richard with such effect, that Lucy was, on the whole, better off than ever for the next two or three years. But now—what had she to do with Rose's disappearance? and, indeed, where was she herself? Her door was fast; and round it her flock of goats stood, crying in vain for her to come and milk them; while from the down above, her donkeys, wandering at their own sweet will, answered the bay of the bloodhound with a burst of harmony.

'They'm laughing at us, keper, they neddies; sure enough, we'm lost our labour here.'

But the bloodhound, after working about the door a while, turned down the glen, and never stopped till he reached the margin of the sea.

'They'm taken water. Let's go back, and rout out the old witch's house.'

'Tis just like that old Lucy, to lock a poor maid into shame.'

And returning, they attacked the cottage, and by a general plebiscitum, ransacked the little dwelling, partly in indignation, and partly, if the truth be told, in the hope of plunder: but plunder there was none. Lucy had decamped with all her movable wealth, saving the huge black cat among the embers, who at the sight of the bloodhound vanished up the chimney (some said with a strong smell of brimstone), and being viewed outside, was chased into the woods, where she lived, I doubt not, many happy years, a scourge to all the rabbits of the glen.

The goats and donkeys were driven off up to Stow; and the mob returned, a little ashamed of themselves when their brief wrath was past; and a little afraid, too, of what Sir Richard might say.

He, when he returned, sold the donkeys and goats, and gave the money to the poor, promising to refund the same, if Lucy returned and gave herself up to justice. But Lucy did not return; and her cottage, from which the neighbours shrank as from a haunted place, remained as she had left it, and crumbled slowly down to four fern-covered walls, past

which the little stream went murmuring on from pool to pool—the only voice, for many a year to come, which broke the silence of that lonely glen.

A few days afterwards, Sir Richard, on his way from Bideford to Stow, looked in at Clovelly Court, and mentioned, with a 'by the bye,' news which made Will Cary leap from his seat almost to the ceiling. What it was we know already.

'And there is no clue?' asked old Cary; for his son was speechless.

'Only this; I hear that some fellow prowling about the cliffs that night saw a pinnacle running for Lundy.'

Will rose, and went hastily out of the room.

In half an hour, he and three or four armed servants were on board a trawling skiff, and away to Lundy. He did not return for three days, and then brought news: that an elderly man, seemingly a foreigner, had been lodging for some months past in a part of the ruined Moresco Castle, which was tenanted by one John Braund; that a few weeks since a younger man, a foreigner also, had joined him from on board a ship: the ship a *Flushing*, or *Easterling* of some sort. The ship came and went more than once; and the young man in her. A few days since, a lady and her maid, a stout woman, came with him up to the castle, and talked with the elder man a long while in secret; abode there all night; and then all three sailed in the morning. The fishermen on the beach had heard the young man call the other father. He was a very still man, much as a mass-priest might be. More they did not know, or did not choose to know.

Whereon old Cary and Sir Richard sent Will on a second trip with the parish constable of Hartland (in which huge parish, for its sins, is situate the Isle of Lundy, ten miles out at sea); who returned with the body of the hapless John Braund, farmer, fisherman, smuggler, etc.; which worthy, after much fruitless examination (wherein examine was afflicted with extreme deafness and loss of memory), departed to Exeter gaol, on a charge of 'harbouring priests, Jesuits, pigsies, and other suspect and traitorous persons.'

Poor John Braund, whose motive for entertaining the said ugly customers had probably been not treason, but a wife, seven children, and arrears of rent, did not thrive under the change from the pure air of Lundy to the pestiferous one of Exeter gaol, made infamous, but two years after (if I recollect right), by a 'black assizes,' nearly as fatal as that more notorious one at Oxford; for in it, 'whether by the stench of the prisoners, or by a stream of foul air,' judge, jury, counsel, and bystanders, numbering among them many members of the best families in Devon, sickened in court, and died miserably within a few days.

John Braund, then, took the gaol-fever in a week, and died raving in that noisome den: his secret, if he had one, perished with him, and nothing but vague suspicion was left as to Rose Salterne's fate. That she had gone off with the Spaniard, few doubted; but whither, and in what character? On that last subject, be sure, no mercy was shown to her by many a Bideford dame, who had hated the poor girl simply for her beauty; and by many a country lady, who had 'always expected that the girl would be brought to ruin by the absurd notice, beyond what her station had a right to, which was taken of her': while every young maiden aspired to fill the throne which Rose had abdicated. So that, on the whole, Bideford considered itself as going on as well without poor Rose as it had done with her, or even better. And though she lingered in some hearts still as a fair dream, the business and the bustle of each day soon swept that dream away, and her place knew her no more.

And Will Cary?

He was for a while like a man distracted. He heaped himself with all manner of superfluous reproaches, for having (as he said) first brought the Rose into disgrace, and then driven her into the arms of the Spaniard; while St. Leger, who was a sensible man enough, tried in vain to persuade him that the fault was not his at all: that the two must have been attached to each other long before the quarrel; that it must have ended so, sooner or later; that old Salterne's harshness, rather than Cary's wrath, had hastened the

catastrophe ; and finally, that the Rose and her fortunes were, now that she had eloped with a Spaniard, not worth troubling their heads about. Poor Will would not be so comforted. He wrote off to Frank at Whitehall, telling him the whole truth, calling himself all fools and villains, and entreating Frank's forgiveness ; to which he received an answer, in which Frank said that Will had no reason to accuse himself ; that these strange attachments were due to a synastria, or sympathy of the stars, which ruled the destinies of each person, to fight against which was to fight against the heavens themselves ; that he, as a brother of the Rose, was bound to believe, nay, to assert at the sword's point if need were, that the incomparable Rose of Torridge could make none but a worthy and virtuous choice ; and that to the man whom she had honoured by her affection was due on their part, Spaniard and Papist though he might be, all friendship, worship, and loyal faith for evermore.

And honest Will took it all for gospel, little dreaming what agony of despair, what fearful suspicions, what bitter prayers, this letter had cost to the gentle heart of Francis Leigh.

He showed the letter triumphantly to St. Leger ; and he was quite wise enough to gainsay no word of it, at least aloud ; but quite wise enough, also, to believe in secret that Frank looked on the matter in quite a different light : however, he contented himself with saying—

'The man is an angel as his mother is !' and there the matter dropped for a few days, till one came forward who had no mind to let it drop, and that was Jack Brimblecombe, now curate of Hartland town, and 'passing rich on forty pounds a year.'

'I hope no offence, Mr. William ; but when are you and the rest going after—after her?' The name stuck in his throat.

Cary was taken aback.

'What's that to thee, Catiline the blood-drinker?' asked he, trying to laugh it off.

'What? Don't laugh at me, sir, for it's no laughing

matter. I d'ank that night nought worse, I expect, than red wine. Whatever it was, we swore our oaths, Mr. Cary; and oaths are oaths, say I.'

'Of course, Jack, of course; but to go to look for her—and when we've found her, cut her lover's throat. Absurd, Jack, even if she were worth looking for, or his throat worth cutting. Tut, tut, tut—'

But Jack looked steadfastly in his face, and after some silence—

'How far is it to the Caraccas, then, sir?'

'What is that to thee, man?'

'Why, he was made governor thereof, I hear; so that would be the place to find her?'

'You don't mean to go thither to seek her?' shouted Cary, forcing a laugh.

'That depends on whether I can go, sir; but if I can scrape the money together, or get a berth on board some ship, why, God's will must be done.'

Will looked at him, to see if he had been drinking, or gone mad; but the little pigs' eyes were both sane and sober.

Will knew no answer. To laugh at the poor fellow was easy enough; to deny that he was right, that he was a hero and cavalier, outdoing romance itself in faithfulness, not so easy; and Cary, in the first impulse, wished him at the bottom of the bay for shaming him. Of course, his own plan of letting ill alone was the rational, prudent, irreproachable plan, and just what any gentleman in his senses would have done; but here was a vulgar, fat curate, out of his senses, determined not to let ill alone, but to do something, as Cary felt in his heart, of a far diviner stamp.

'Well,' said Jack, in his stupid steadfast way, 'it's a very bad look-out; but mother's pretty well off, if father dies, and the maidens are stout wenches enough, and will make tidy servants, please the Lord. And you'll see that they come to no harm, Mr. William, for old acquaintance sake, if I never come back.'

Cary was silent with amazement.

'And, Mr. William, you know me for an honest man, I

hope. Will you lend me a five pound, and take my books in pawn for them, just to help me out ?'

'Are you mad, or in a dream? You will never find her!'

'That's no reason why I shouldn't do my duty in looking for her, Mr. William.'

'But, my good fellow, even if you get to the Indies, you will be clapt into the Inquisition, and burnt alive, as sure as your name is Jack.'

'I know that,' said he in a doleful tone; 'and a sore struggle of the flesh I have had about it; for I am a great coward, Mr. William, a dirty coward, and always was, as you know: but maybe the Lord will take care of me, as He does of little children and drunken men; and if not, Mr. Will, I'd sooner burn, and have it over, than go on this way any longer, I would!' and Jack burst out blubbering.'

'What way, my dear old lad?' said Will, softened as he well might be.

'Why, not—not to know whether—whether—whether she's married to him or not—her that I looked up to as an angel of God, as pure as the light of day; and knew she was too good for a poor pot-head like me; and prayed for her every night, God knows, that she might marry a king, if there was one fit for her—and I not to know whether she's living in sin or not, Mr. William.—It's more than I can bear, and there's an end of it. And if she is married to him they keep no faith with heretics; they can dissolve the marriage, or make away with her into the Inquisition; burn her, Mr. Cary, as soon as burn me, the devils incarnate!'

Cary shuddered; the fact, true and palpable as it was, had never struck him before.

'Yes! or make her deny her God by torments, if she hasn't done it already for love to that—I know how love will make a body sell his soul, for I've been in love. Don't you laugh at me, Mr. Will, or I shall go mad!'

'God knows, I was never less inclined to laugh at you in my life, my brave old Jack.'

'Is it so, then? Bless you for that word!' and Jack held out his hand. 'But what will become of my soul, after

my oath, if I don't seek her out, j'ust to speak to her, to warn her, for God's sake, even if it did no good; just to set before her the Lord's curse on idolatry and Antichrist, and those who deny Him for the sake of any creature, though I can't think He would be hard on her,—for who could? But I must speak all the same. The Lord has laid the burden on me, and done it must be. God help me!

'Jack,' said Cary, 'if this is your duty, it is others.'

'No, sir, I don't say that; you're a layman, but I am a deacon, and the chaplain of you all, and sworn to seek out Christ's sheep scattered up and down this naughty world, and that innocent lamb first of all.'

'You have sheep at Hartland, Jack, already.'

'There's plenty better than I will tend them, when I am gone; and none that will tend her, because none love her like me, and they won't venture. Who will? It can't be expected, and no shame to them?'

'I wonder what Amyas Leigh would say to all this, if he were at home?'

'Say? He'd do. He isn't one for talking. He'd go through fire and water for her, you trust him, Will Cary; and call me an ass if he won't.'

'Will you wait, then, till he comes back, and ask him?'

'He may not be back for a year and more.'

'Hear reason, Jack. If you will wait like a rational and patient man, instead of rushing blindfold on your ruin, something may be done.'

'You think so?'

'I cannot promise; but——'

'But promise me one thing. Do you tell Mr. Frank what I say—or rather, I'll warrant, if I knew the truth, he has said the very same thing himself already.'

'You are out there, old man; for here is his own handwriting.'

Jack read the letter and sighed bitterly.

'Well, I did take him for another guess sort of fine gentleman. Still, if my duty isn't his, it's mine all the same. I judge no man; but I go, Mr. Cary.'

‘But go you shall not till Amyas returns. As I live, I will tell your father, Jack, unless you promise; and you dare not disobey him.’

‘I don’t know even that, for conscience sake,’ said Jack doubtfully.

‘At least, you stay and dine here, old fellow, and we will settle whether you are to break the fifth commandment or not over good brewed sack.’

Now a good dinner was (as we know) what Jack loved, and loved too oft in vain; so he submitted for the nonce, and Cary thought, ere he went, that he had talked him pretty well round. At least he went home, and was seen no more for a week.

But at the end of that time he returned, and said with a joyful voice—

‘I have settled all, Mr. Will. The parson of Welcombe will serve my church for two Sundays, and I am away for London town, to speak to Mr. Frank.’

‘To London? How wilt get there?’

‘On Shanks his mare,’ said Jack, pointing to his bandy legs. ‘But I expect I can get a lift on board of a coaster so far as Bristol, and it’s no way on to signify, I hear.’

Cary tried in vain to dissuade him; and then forced on him a small loan, with which away went Jack, and Cary heard no more of him for three weeks.

At last he walked into Clovelly Court again just before supper-time, thin and leg-weary, and sat himself down among the serving-men till Will appeared.

Will took him up above the salt, and made much of him (which indeed the honest fellow much needed), and after supper asked him in private how he had sped.

‘I have learnt a lesson, Mr. William. I’ve learnt that there is one on earth loves her better than I, if she had but had the wit to have taken him.’

‘But what says he of going to seek her?’

‘He says what I say, Go! and he says what you say, Wait.’

‘Go? Impossible! How can that agree with his letter?’

‘That’s no concern of mine. Of course, being nearer heaven than I am, he sees clearer what he should say and do than I can see for him. O Mr. Will, that’s not a man, he’s an angel of God ; but he’s dying, Mr. Will.’

‘Dying?’

‘Yes, faith, of love for her. I can see it in his eyes, and hear it in his voice ; but I am of tougher hide, and stiffer clay, and so you see I can’t die even if I tried. But I’ll obey my betters, and wait.’

And so Jack went home to his parish that very evening, weary as he was, in spite of all entreaties to pass the night at Clovelly. But he had left behind him thoughts in Cary’s mind, which gave their owner no rest by day or night, till the touch of a seeming accident made them all start suddenly into shape, as a touch of the freezing water covers it in an instant with crystals of ice.

He was lounging (so he told Amyas) one murky day on Bideford quay, when up came Mr. Salterne. Cary had shunned him of late, partly from delicacy, partly from dislike of his supposed hard-heartedness. But this time they happened to meet full ; and Cary could not pass without speaking to him.

‘Well, Mr. Salterne, and how goes on the shipping trade?’

‘Well enough, sir, if some of you young gentlemen would but follow Mr. Leigh’s example, and go forth to find us stay-at-homes new markets for our ware.’

‘What? you want to be rid of us, eh?’

‘I don’t know why I should, sir. We shan’t cross each other now, sir, whatever might have been once. But if I were you, I should be in the Indies about now, if I were not fighting the Queen’s battles nearer home.’

‘In the Indies? I should make but a poor hand of Drake’s trade.’ And so the conversation dropped ; but Cary did not forget the hint.

‘So, lad, to make an end of a long story,’ said he to Amyas ; ‘if you are minded to take the old man’s offer, so am I : and Westward-ho with you, come foul come fair.’

‘It will be but a wild-goose chase, Will.’

'If she is with him, we shall find her^d at La Guayra. If she is not, and the villain has cast her off down the wind, that will be only an additional reason for making an example of him.'

'And if neither of them is there, Will, the Plate-fleets will be ; so it will be our own shame if we come home empty-handed. But will your father let you run such a risk?'

'My father !' said Cary, laughing. 'He has just now so good hope of a long string of little Carys to fill my place, that he will be in no lack of an heir, come what will.'

'Little Carys?'

'I tell you truth. I think he must have had a sly sup of that fountain of perpetual youth, which our friend Don Guzman's grandfather went to seek in Florida ; for some twelvemonth since, he must needs marry a tenant's buxom daughter ; and Mistress Abishag Jewell has brought him one fat baby already. So I shall go back to Ireland, or with you : but somewhere. I can't abide the thing's squalling, any more than I can seeing Mistress Abishag sitting in my poor dear mother's place, and informing me every other day that she is come of an illustrious house, because she is (or is not) third cousin seven times removed to my father's old friend, Bishop Jewell of glorious memory. I had three-parts of a quarrel with the dear old man the other day ; for after one of her peacock-bouts, I couldn't for the life of me help saying, that as the Bishop had written an Apology for the people of England, my father had better conjure up his ghost to write an apology for him, and head it, "Why green heads should grow on grey shoulders."'

'You impudent villain ! And what did he say?'

'Laughed till he cried again, and told me if I did not like it I might leave it ; which is just what I intend to do. Only mind, if we go, we must needs take Jack Brimblecombe with us, or he will surely heave himself over Harty Point, and his ghost will haunt us to our dying day.'

'Jack shall go. None deserves it better.'

After which there was a long consultation on practical matters, and it was concluded that Amyas should go up to

London and sound Frank and his mother before any further steps were taken. The other brethren of the Rose were scattered far and wide, each at his post, and St. Leger had returned to his uncle, so that it would be unfair to them, as well as a considerable delay, to demand of them any fulfilment of their vow. And, as Amyas sagely remarked, 'Too many cooks spoil the broth, and half a dozen gentlemen aboard one ship are as bad as two kings of Brentford.'

With which maxim he departed next morning for London, leaving Yeo with Cary.

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