

## CHAPTER II

It is difficult to imagine any study that would prove more fascinating in itself or more instructive in its issues, than the examination of the leading characteristics of individual families as displayed through a series of generations. But it is a subject that from its very nature is more or less unapproachable, since it is but little that we know even of our immediate ancestors. Occasionally in glancing at the cracking squares of canvas, many of which cannot even boast a name, but which alone remain to speak of the real and active life, the joys and griefs, the sins and virtues that centred in the originals of those hard daubs and of ourselves, we may light upon a face that about six generations since was the counterpart of the little boy upon our shoulder, or the daughter standing at our side. In the same way, too, partly through tradition and partly by other means, we are sometimes able to trace in ourselves and in our children the strong development of characteristics that distinguished the race centuries ago.

If local tradition and such records of their individual lives as remained are worthy of any faith, it is beyond a doubt that the Caresfoots of Bratham Abbey had handed down their own hard and peculiar cast of character from father to son unaffected in the main by the continual introduction of alien blood on the side of the mother.

The history of the Caresfoot family had nothing remarkable about it.

They had been yeomen at Bratham from time immemorial, perhaps ever since the village had become a geographical fact; but it was on the dissolution of the monasteries that they first became of any importance in the county. Bratham Abbey, which had shared the common fate, was granted by Henry VIII. to a certain courtier, Sir Charles Varry by name. For two years the owner never came near his new possession, but one day he appeared in the village, and riding to the house of Farmer Caresfoot, which was its most respectable tenement, he begged him to show him the Abbey house and the lands attached. It was a dark November afternoon, and by the time the farmer and his wearied guest had crossed the soaked lands and reached the great grey house, the damps and shadows of the night had begun to curtain it and to render its appearance, forsaken as it was, inexpressibly dreary and lonesome.

"Damp here, my friend, is it not?" said Sir Charles with a shudder, looking towards the lake, into which the rain was splashing.

"You are right, it be."

"And lonely too, now that the old monks have gone."

"Ay, but they do say that the house be mostly full of the spirits of the dead," and the yeoman sank his voice to an awed whisper.

Sir Charles crossed himself and muttered, "I can well believe it," and

then, addressing his companion--

"You do not know of any man who would buy an abbey with all its rights and franchises, do you, friend?"

"Not rightly, sir; the land be so poor it hath no heart in it; it doth scarce repay the tillage, and what the house is you may see. The curse of the monks is on it. But still, sir, if you have a mind to be rid of the place, I have a little laid by and a natural love for the land, having been bred on it, and taken the colour of my mind and my stubby growth therefrom, and I will give you--" and this astutest of all the Caresfoots whispered a very small sum into Sir Charles' ear.

"Your price is very small, good friend, it doth almost vanish into nothing; and methinks the land that reared you cannot be so unkind as you would have me think. The monks did not love bad land, but yet, if thou hast it in the gold, I will take it; it will pay off a debt or two, and I care not for the burden of the land."

And so Farmer Caresfoot became the lawful owner of Bratham Abbey with its two advowsons, its royal franchises of treasure-trove and deodand, and more than a thousand acres of the best land in Marlishire.

The same astuteness that had enabled this wise progenitor to acquire the estate enabled his descendants to stick tightly to it, and though, like other families, they had at times met with reverses, they never

lost their grip of the Abbey property. During the course of the first half of the nineteenth century the land increased largely in value, and its acreage was considerably added to by the father of the present owner, a man of frugal mind, but with the family mania for the collection of all sorts of plate strongly developed. But it was Philip's father, "Devil Caresfoot," who had, during his fifty years' tenure of the property, raised the family to its present opulent condition, firstly, by a strict attention to business and the large accumulations resulting from his practice of always living upon half his income, and secondly, by his marriage late in middle life with Miss Bland, the heiress of the neighbouring Isleworth estates, that stretched over some two thousand acres of land.

This lady, who was Philip's mother, did not live long to enjoy her wealth and station. Her husband never spoke a rough word to her, and yet it is no exaggeration to say that she died of fear of him. The marriage had been one of convenience, not of affection; indeed poor Anna Bland had secretly admired the curate at Isleworth, and hated Mr. Caresfoot and his glittering eye. But she married him for all that, to feel that till she died that glance was always playing round her like a rapier in the hands of a skilled fencer. And very soon she did die, Mr. Caresfoot receiving her last words and wishes with the same exquisite and unmoved politeness that he had extended to every remark she had made to him in the course of their married life. Having satisfactorily eyed Mrs. Caresfoot off into a better world, her husband gave up all idea of further matrimonial ventures, and set

himself to heap up riches. But a little before his wife's death, and just after his son's birth, an event had occurred in the family that had disturbed him not a little.

His father had left two sons, himself and a brother, many years his junior. Now this brother was very dear to Mr. Caresfoot; his affection for him was the one weak point in his armour; nor was it rendered any the less sincere, but rather the more touching, by the fact that its object was little better than half-witted. It is therefore easy to imagine his distress and anger when he heard that a woman who had till shortly before been kitchen-maid at the Abbey House, and was now living in the village, had been confined of a son which she fixed upon his brother, whose wife she declared herself to be. Investigation only brought out the truth of the story; his weak-minded brother had been entrapped into a glaring *\_mesalliance\_*.

But Mr. Caresfoot proved himself equal to the occasion. So soon as his "sister-in-law," as it pleased him to call her sardonically, had sufficiently recovered, he called upon her. What took place at the visit never transpired, but next day Mrs. E. Caresfoot left her native place never to return, the child remaining with the father, or rather with the uncle. That boy was George. At the time when this story opens both his parents were dead: his father from illness resulting from entire failure of brain power, the mother from drink.

Whether it was that he considered the circumstance of the lad's birth

entitled him to peculiar consideration, or that he transferred to him the affection he bore his father, the result was that his nephew was quite as dear if not even dearer to Mr. Caresfoot than his own son. Not, however, that he allowed his preference to be apparent, save in the negative way that he was blind to faults in George that he was sufficiently quick to note in Philip. To observers this partiality seemed the more strange when they thought upon Philip's bonny face and form, and then noted how the weak-brained father and coarse-blooded mother had left their mark in George's thick lips, small, restless eyes, pallid complexion, and loose-jointed form.

When Philip shook off his cousin's grasp and vanished towards the lake, he did so with bitter wrath and hatred in his heart, for he saw but too clearly that he had deeply injured himself in his father's estimation, and, what was more, he felt that so much as he had sunk his side of the balance, by so much he had raised up that of George. He was inculpated; a Bellamy came upon the scene to save George, and, what was worse, an untruthful Bellamy; he was the aggressor, and George the meek in spirit with the soft answer that turneth away wrath. It was intolerable; he hated his father, he hated George. There was no justice in the world, and he had not wit to play rogue with such a one as his cousin. Appearances were always against him; he hated everybody.

And then he began to think that there was in the very next parish somebody whom he did not hate, but who, on the contrary, interested

him, and was always ready to listen to his troubles, and he also became aware of the fact that whilst his mind had been thinking his legs had been walking, and that he was very near the abode of that person--almost at its gates, in short. He paused and looked at his watch; it had stopped at half-past eleven, the one blow that George had succeeded in planting upon him having landed on it, to the great detriment of both the watch and the striker's knuckles; but the sun told him that it was about half-past twelve, not too early to call. So he opened the gate, and, advancing up an avenue of old beeches to a square, red-brick house of the time of Queen Anne, boldly rang the bell.

Was Miss Lee at home? Yes, Miss Lee was in the greenhouse; perhaps Mr. Philip would step into the garden, which Mr. Philip did accordingly.

"How do you do, Philip? I'm delighted to see you; you've just come in time to help in the slaughter."

"Slaughter, slaughter of what--a pig?"

"No, green fly. I'm going to kill thousands."

"You cruel girl."

"I daresay it is cruel, but I don't care. Grumps always said that I had no heart, and, so far as green fly are concerned, Grumps was

certainly right. Now, just look at this lily. It is an auratum. I gave three-and-six (out of my own money) for that bulb last autumn, and now the bloom is not worth twopence, all through green fly. If I were a man I declare I should swear. Please swear for me, Philip. Go outside and do it, so that I mayn't have it on my conscience. But now for vengeance. Oh, I say, I forgot, you know, I suppose. I ought to be looking very sorry----"

"Why, what's the matter? Any one dead?"

"Oh, no, so much better than that. \_It's got Grumps.\_"

"Got her, what has got her? What is 'it'?"

"Why, Chancery, of course. I always call Chancery 'it.' I wouldn't take its name in vain for worlds. I am too much afraid. I might be made to 'show a cause why,' and then be locked up for contempt, which frequently happens after you have tried to 'show a cause.' That is what has happened to Grumps. She is now showing a cause; shortly she will be locked up. When she comes out, if she ever does come out, I think that she will avoid wards in Chancery in future; she will have too much sympathy with them, and too much practical experience of their position."

"But what on earth do you mean, Maria? What has happened to Miss Gregson?" (\_anglice\_ Grumps).



"Well, you remember one of my guardians, or rather his wife, got 'it' to appoint her my chaperon, but my other guardian wanted to appoint somebody else, and after taking eighteen months to do it, he has moved the court to show that Grumps is not a 'fit and proper person.' The idea of calling Grumps improper. She nearly fainted at it, and swore that, whether she lived through it or whether she didn't, she would never come within a mile of me or any other ward if she could help it, not even the ward of an hospital. I told her to be careful, or she would be 'committing contempt,' which frightened her so that she hardly spoke again till she left yesterday. Poor Grumps! I expect she is on bread and water now; but if she makes herself half as disagreeable to the Vice-Chancellor as she did to me, I don't believe that they will keep her long. She'll wear the gaolers out; she will wear the walls out; she will wear 'it' down to the bone; and then they will let her loose upon the world again. Why, there is the bell for lunch, and not a single green fly the less! Never mind, I will do for them to-morrow. How it would add to her sufferings in her lonely cell if she could see us going to a tete-a-tete lunch. Come on, Philip, come quick, or the cutlets will get cold, and I hate cold cutlets." And off she tripped, followed by the laughing Philip, who, by the way, was now looking quite handsome again.

Maria Lee was not very pretty at her then age--just eighteen--but she was a perfect specimen of a young English country girl; fresh as a rose, and sound as a bell, and endowed besides with a quick wit and a

ready sympathy. She was essentially one of that class of Englishwomen who make the English upper middle class what it is--one of the finest and soundest in the world. Philip, following her into the house, thought that she was charming; nor, being a Caresfoot, and therefore having a considerable eye to the main chance, did the fact of her being the heiress to fifteen hundred a year in land detract from her charms.

The cutlets were excellent, and Maria ate three, and was very comical about the departed Grumps; indeed, anybody not acquainted with the circumstances would have gathered that that excellent lady was to be shortly put to the question. Philip was not quite so merry; he was oppressed both by recollections of what had happened and apprehensions of what might happen.

"What is the matter, Philip?" she asked, when they had left the table to sit under the trees on the lawn. "I can see that something is the matter. Tell me all about it, Philip."

And Philip told her what had happened that morning, laying bare all his heart-aches, and not even concealing his evil deeds. When he had done, she pondered awhile, tapping her little foot upon the turf.

"Philip," she said at last, in quite a changed voice, "I do not think that you are being well treated. I do not think that your cousin means kindly by you, but--but I do not think that you have behaved rightly

either. I don't like that about the ten pounds; and I think that you should not have touched George; he is not so strong as you. Please try to do as your father--dear me, I am sure I don't wonder that you are afraid of him; I am--tells you, and regain his affection, and make it up with George; and, if you get into any more troubles, come and tell me about them before you do anything foolish; for though, according to Grumps, I am silly enough, two heads are better than one."

The tears stood in the lad's brown eyes as he listened to her. He gulped them down, however, and said--

"You are awfully kind to me; you are the only friend I have. Sometimes I think that you are an angel."

"Nonsense, Philip. If 'it' heard you talk like that, you would join Grumps. Don't let me hear any more such stuff," but, though she spoke sharply, somehow she did not look displeased.

"I must be off," he said at length. "I promised to go with my father to see a new building on Reynold's farm. I have only twenty minutes to get home;" and rising they went into the house through a French window opening on to the lawn.

In the dining-room he turned, and, after a moment's hesitation, stuttered out--

"Maria, don't be angry with me, but may I give you a kiss?"

She blushed vividly.

"How dare you suggest such a thing?--but--but as Grumps has gone, and there is no new Grumps to refer to, and therefore I can only consult my own wishes, perhaps if you really wish to, Philip, why, Philip, you may."

And he did.

When he was gone she leant her head against the cold marble mantelpiece.

"I do love him," she murmured, "yes, that I do."