

CHAPTER III

Philip was not very fond of taking walks with his father, since he found that in nine cases out of ten they afforded opportunities for inculcation of facts of the driest description with reference to estate management, or to the narration by his parent of little histories of which his conduct upon some recent occasion would adorn the moral. On this particular occasion the prospect was particularly unpleasant, for his father would, he was well aware, overflow with awful politeness, indeed, after the scene of the morning, it could not be otherwise. Oh, how much rather would he have spent that lovely afternoon with Maria Lee! Dear Maria, he would go and see her again the very next day.

When he arrived, some ten minutes after time in the antler-hung hall of the Abbey House, he found his father standing, watch in hand, exactly under the big clock, as though he was determined to make a note by double entry of every passing second.

"When I asked you to walk with me this afternoon, Philip, I, if my memory does not deceive me, was careful to say that I had no wish to interfere with any prior engagement. I was aware how little interest, compared to your cousin George, you take in the estate, and I had no wish to impose an uncongenial task. But, as you kindly volunteered to accompany me, I regret that you did not find it convenient to be punctual to the time you fixed. I have now waited for you for

seventeen minutes, and let me tell you that at my time of life I cannot afford to lose seventeen minutes. May I ask what has delayed you?"

This long speech had given Philip the opportunity of recovering the breath that he had lost in running home. He replied promptly--

"I have been lunching with Miss Lee."

"Oh, indeed, then I no longer wonder that you kept me waiting, and I must say that in this particular I commend your taste. Miss Lee is a young lady of good family, good manners, and good means. If her estate went with this property it would complete as pretty a five thousand acres of mixed soil as there is in the county. Those are beautiful old meadows of hers, beautiful. Perhaps----" but here the old man checked himself.

On leaving the house they had passed together down a walk called the tunnel walk, on account of the arching boughs of the lime-trees that interlaced themselves overhead. At the end of this avenue, and on the borders of the lake, there stood an enormous but still growing oak, known as Caresfoot's Staff. It was the old squire's favourite tree, and the best topped piece of timber for many miles round.

"I wonder," said Philip, by way of making a little pleasant conversation, "why that tree was called Caresfoot's Staff."

"Your ignorance astonishes me, Philip, but I suppose that there are some people who can live for years in a place and yet imbibe nothing of its traditions. Perhaps you know that the monks were driven out of these ruins by Henry VIII. Well, on the spot where that tree now stands there grew a still greater oak, a giant tree, its trunk measured sixteen loads of timber; which had, as tradition said, been planted by the first prior of the Abbey when England was still Saxon. The night the monks left a great gale raged over England. It was in October, when the trees were full of leaf, and its fiercest gust tore the great oak from its rothold, and flung it into the lake. Look! do you see that rise in the sand, there, by the edge of the deep pool, in the eight foot water? That is there it is supposed to lie. Well, the whole country-side said that it was a sign that the monks had gone for ever from Bratham Abbey, and the country-side was right. But when your ancestor, old yeoman Caresfoot, bought this place and came to live here, in a year when there was a great black frost that set the waters of the lake like one of the new-fangled roads, he asked his neighbours, ay, and his labouring folk, to come and dine with him and drink to the success of his purchase. It was a proud day for him, and when dinner was done and they were all mellow with strong ale, he bade them step down to the borders of the lake, as he would have them be witness to a ceremony. When they reached the spot they saw a curious sight, for there on a strong dray, and dragged by Farmer Caresfoot's six best horses, was an oak of fifty years' growth coming across the ice, earth, roots and all.

"On that spot where it now stands there had been a great hole, ten feet deep by fourteen feet square, dug to receive it, and into that hole Caresfoot Staff was tilted and levered off the dray. And when it had been planted, and the frozen earth well trodden in, your grandfather in the ninth degree brought his guests back to the old banqueting-hall, and made a speech which, as it was the first and last he ever made, was long remembered in the country-side. It was, put into modern English, something like this:

"Neighbours,--Prior's Oak has gone into the water, and folks said that it was for a sign that the monks would never come back to Bratham, and that it was the Lord's wind that put it there. And, neighbours, as ye know, the broad Bratham lands and the fat marshes down by the brook passed by king's grant to a man that knew not clay from loam, or layer from pasturage, and from him they passed by the Lord's will to me, as I have asked you here to-day to celebrate. And now, neighbours, I have a mind, and though it seem to you but a childish thing, yet I have a mind, and have set myself to fulfil it. When I was yet a little lad, and drove the swine out to feed on the hill yonder, when the acorns had fallen, afore Farmer Gyrtton's father had gracious leave from the feoffees to put up the fence that doth now so sorely vex us, I found one day a great acorn, as big as a dow's egg, and of a rich and wondrous brown, and this acorn I bore home and planted in kind earth in the corner of my dad's garden, thinking that it would grow, and that one day I would hew its growth and use it for

a staff. Now that was fifty long years ago, lads, and there where grew Prior's Oak, there, neighbours, I have set my Staff to-day. The monks have told us how in Israel every man planted his fig and his vine. For the fig I know not rightly what that is; but for the vine, I will plant no creeping, clinging vine, but a hearty English oak, that, if they do but give it good room to breathe in, and save their heirloom from the axe, shall cast shade and grow acorns, and burst into leaf in the spring and grow naked in the winter, when ten generations of our children, and our children's children, shall have mixed their dust with ours yonder in the graveyard. And now, neighbours, I have talked too long, though I am better at doing than talking; but ye will even forgive me, for I will not talk to you again, though on this the great day of my life I was minded to speak. But I will bid you every man pledge a health to the Caresfoot's Staff, and ask a prayer that, so long as it shall push its leaves, so long may the race of my loins be here to sit beneath its shade, and even mayhap when the corn is ripe and the moon is up, and their hearts grow soft towards the past, to talk with kinsman or with sweetheart of the old man who struck it in this kindly soil."

The old squire's face grew tender as he told this legend of the forgotten dead, and Philip's young imagination summoned up the strange old-world scene of the crowd of rustics gathered in the snow and frost round this very tree.

"Philip," said his father, suddenly, "you will hold the yeoman's Staff

one day; be like it of an oaken English heart, and you will defy wind and weather as it has done, and as your forbears have done. Come, we must go on."

"By the way, Philip," he continued, after a while, "you will remember what I said to you this morning--I hope that you will remember it, though I spoke in anger--never try to deceive me again, or you will regret it. And now I have something to say to you. I wish you to go to college and receive an education that will fit you to hold the position you must in the course of Nature one day fill in the county. The Oxford term begins in a few days, and you have for some years been entered at Magdalen College. I do not expect you to be a scholar, but I do expect you to brush off your rough ways and your local ideas, and to learn to become such a person both in your conduct and your mind as a gentleman of your station should be."

"Is George to go to college too?"

"No; I have spoken to him on the subject, and he does not wish it. He says very wisely that, with his small prospects, he would rather spend the time in learning how to earn his living. So he is going to be articled to the Roxham lawyers, Foster and Son, or rather Foster and Bellamy, for young Bellamy, who is a lawyer by profession, came here this morning, not to speak about you, but on a message from the firm to say that he is now a junior partner, and that they will be very happy to take George as an articled clerk. He is a hard-working,

shrewd young man, and it will be a great advantage to George to have his advice and example before him."

Philip assented, and went on in silence, reflecting on the curious change in his immediate prospects that this walk had brought to light. He was much rejoiced at the prospect of losing sight of George for a while, and was sufficiently intelligent to appreciate the advantages, social and mental, that the University would offer him; but it struck him that there were two things which he did not like about the scheme. The first of these was, that whilst he was pursuing his academical studies, George would practically be left on the spot--for Roxham was only six miles off--to put in motion any schemes he might have devised; and Philip was sure that he had devised schemes. And the second, that Oxford was a long way from Maria Lee. However, he kept his objections to himself. In due course they reached the buildings they had set out to examine, and the old squire, having settled what was to be done, and what was to be left undone, with characteristic promptitude and shrewdness, they turned homewards.

In passing through the shrubberies, on their way back to the house, they suddenly came upon a stolid-looking lad of about fifteen, emerging from a side-walk with a nest full of young blackbirds in his hand. Now, if there was one thing in this world more calculated than another to rouse the most objectionable traits of the old squire's character into rapid action, it was the discovery of boys, and more especially bird-nesting boys, in his plantations. In the first place,

he hated trespassers; and in the second, it was one of his simple pleasures to walk in the early morning and listen to the singing of the birds that swarmed around. Accordingly, at the obnoxious sight he stopped suddenly, and, drawing himself up to his full height, addressed the trembling youth in his sweetest voice.

"Your name is, I believe--Brady--Jim Brady--correct me if I am wrong--and you have come here, you--you--young--villain--to steal my birds."

The frightened boy walked slowly backwards, followed by the old man with his fiery eyes fixed upon his face, till at last concussion against the trunk of a great tree prevented further retreat. Here he stood for about thirty seconds, writhing under the glance that seemed to pierce him through and through, till at last he could stand it no longer, but flung himself on the ground, roaring:

"Oh! don't ee, squire; don't ee now look at me with that 'ere eye. Take and thrash me, squire, but don't ee fix me so! I hayn't had no more nor twenty this year, and a nest of spinxes, and Tom Smith he's had fifty-two and a young owl. Oh! oh!"

Enraged beyond measure at this last piece of information, Mr. Caresfoot took his victim at his word, and, ceasing his ocular experiments, laid into the less honourable portion of his form with the gold-headed malacca cane in a way that astonished the prostrate Jim, though he was afterwards heard to declare that the squire's cane

"warn't not nothing compared with the squire's eye, which wore a hot coal, it wore, and frizzled your innards as sich."

When Jim Brady had departed, never to return again, and the old man had recovered his usual suavity of manner, he remarked to his son:

"There is some curious property in the human eye; a property that is, I believe, very much developed in my own. Did you observe the effect of my glance upon that boy? I was trying an experiment on him. I remember it was always the same with your poor mother. She could never bear me to look at her."

Philip made no reply, but he thought that, if she had been the object of experiments of that nature, it was not very wonderful.

Shortly after their return home he received a note from Miss Lee. It ran thus:

"My dear Philip,

"What _do_ you think? Just after you had gone away, I got by the mid-day post, which Jones (the butcher) brought from Roxham, several letters, amongst them one from Grumps and one from Uncle Tom. Grumps has shown a cause. Why? 'It' said she was not an improper person; but, for all that, she is so angry with Uncle Tom

that she will not come back, but has accepted an offer to go to Canada as companion to a lady; so farewell Grumps.

"Now for Uncle Tom. 'It' suggested that I should live with some of my relations till I came of age, and pay them four hundred a year, which I think a good deal. I am sure it can't cost four hundred a year to feed me, though I have such an appetite. I had no idea they were all so fond of me before; they all want me to come and live with them, except Aunt Chambers, who, you know, lives in Jersey. Uncle Tom says in his letter that he shall be glad if his daughters can have the advantage of my example, and of studying my polished manners (just fancy my polished manners; and I know, because little Tom, who is a brick, told me, that only last year he heard his father tell Emily--that's the eldest--that I was a dowdy, snub-nosed, ill-mannered miss, but that she must keep in with me and flatter me up). No, I will not live with Uncle Tom, and I will tell 'it' so. If I must leave my home, I will go to Aunt Chambers at Jersey. Jersey is a beautiful place for flowers, and one learns French there without the trouble of learning it; and I like Aunt Chambers, and she has no children, and nothing but the memory of a dear departed. But I don't like leaving home, and feel very much inclined to cry. Hang the Court of Chancery, and Uncle Tom and his interference too!--there. I suppose you can't find time to come over to-morrow morning to see me off? Good-bye, dear Philip,

"Your affectionate friend,

"Maria Lee."

Philip did manage to find time next morning, and came back looking very disconsolate.