

CHAPTER VII

Nothing occurred to interfere with the plan of action decided on by Hilda and Philip; no misadventure came to mock them, dashing the Tantalus cup of joy to earth before their eyes. On the contrary, within forty-eight hours of the conversation recorded in the last chapter, they were as completely and irrevocably man and wife, as a special licence and the curate of a city church, assisted by the clerk and the pew-opener, could make them.

Then followed a brief period of such delirium as turned the London lodgings, dingy and stuffy as they were in the height of the hot summer, into an earthly paradise, a garden of Eden, into which, alas! the serpent had no need to seek an entrance. But, as was natural, when the first glory of realized happiness was beginning to grow faint on their horizon, the young couple turned themselves to consider their position, and found in it, mutually and severally, many things that did not please them. For Philip, indeed, it was full of anxieties, for he had many complications to deal with. First there was his secret engagement to Maria Lee, of which, be it remembered, his wife was totally ignorant, and which was in itself a sufficiently awkward affair for a married man to have on his hands. Then there was the paramount need of keeping his marriage with Hilda as secret as the dead, to say nothing of the necessity of his living, for the most part, away from his wife. Indeed, his only consolation was that he had plenty of money on which to support her, inasmuch as his father had,

from the date of his leaving Oxford, made him an allowance of one thousand a year.

Hilda had begun to discover that she was not without her troubles. For one thing, her husband's fits of moodiness and fretful anxiety troubled her, and led her, possessed as she was with a more than ordinary share of womanly shrewdness, to suspect that he was hiding something from her. But what chiefly vexed her proud nature was the necessity of concealment, and all its attendant petty falsehoods and subterfuges. It was not pleasant for Hilda Caresfoot to have to pass as Mrs. Roberts, and to be careful not to show herself in public places in the daytime, where there was a possibility of her being seen by any one who might recognize in her striking figure the lady who had lived with Miss Lee in Marlshire. It was not pleasant to her to be obliged to reply to Maria Lee's affectionate letters, full as they were of entreaty for her return, by epistles that had to be forwarded to a country town in a remote district of Germany to be posted, and which were in themselves full of lies that, however white they might have seemed under all the circumstances, she felt in her conscience to be very black indeed. In short, there was in their union none of that sense of finality and of security that is, under ordinary circumstances, the distinguishing mark of marriage in this country; it partook rather of the nature of an illicit connection.

At the end of a fortnight of wedded bliss all these little things had begun to make themselves felt, and in truth they were but the

commencement of evils. For, one afternoon, Philip, for the first time since his wedding, tore himself away from his wife's side, and paid a visit to a club to which he had been recently elected. Here he found no less than three letters from his father, the first requesting his return, the second commanding it in exceptionally polite language, and the third--which, written in mingled anxiety and anger, had just arrived--coolly announcing his parent's intention, should he not hear of him by return, of setting detective officers to work to discover his whereabouts. From this letter it appeared, indeed, that his cousin George had already been despatched to London to look for him, and on reference to the hall porter he discovered that a gentleman answering to his description had already inquired for him several times.

Cursing his own folly in not having kept up some communication with his father, he made the best of his way back to his lodgings, to find Hilda waiting for him somewhat disconsolately.

"I am glad you have come back, love," she said, drawing him towards her till his dark curls mingled with her own fair locks, and kissing him upon the forehead. "I have missed you dreadfully. I don't understand how I can have lived all these years without you."

"I am afraid, dear, you will have to live without me for a while now; listen," and he read her the letters he had just received.

She listened attentively till he had finished.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, with some anxiety in her voice.

"Do? why of course I must go home at once."

"And what am I to do?"

"Well, I don't know; I suppose that you must stop here."

"That will be pleasant for me, will it not?"

"No, dear, it will be pleasant neither for you nor me; but what can I do? You know the man my father is to deal with; if I stop here in defiance to his wishes, especially as he has been anxious about me, there is no knowing what might not happen. Remember, Hilda, that we have to deal with George, whose whole life is devoted to secret endeavours to supplant me. If I were to give him such an opportunity as I should by stopping away now, I should deserve all I got, or rather all I did not get."

Hilda sighed and acquiesced; had she been a softer-minded woman she would have wept and relieved her feelings, but she was not soft-minded. And so, before the post went out, he wrote an affectionate letter to his father, expressing his sorrow at the latter's anxiety at at his own negligence in not having written to him, the fact of the matter being, he said, that he had been taken up with visiting some of

his Oxford friends, and had not till that afternoon been near his club to look for letters. He would, however, he added, return on the morrow, and make his apologies in person.

This letter he handed to his wife to read.

"Do you think that will do?" he asked, when she had finished.

"Oh, yes!" she replied, with a touch of her old sarcasm, "it is a masterpiece of falsehood."

Philip looked very angry, and fumed and fretted; but he made no reply, and on the following morning he departed to Bratham Abbey.

"Ah, Philip, Philip!" said his father, under the mellow influence of his fourth glass of port, on the night of his arrival. "I know well enough what kept you up in town. Well, well, I don't complain, young men will be young men; but don't let these affairs interfere with the business of life. Remember Maria Lee, my boy; you have serious interests in that direction, interests that must not be trifled with, interests that I have a right to expect you will not trifle with."

His son made no reply, but sipped his wine in silence, aching at his heart for his absent bride, and wondering what his father would say did he really know what had "kept him in town."

After this, matters went on smoothly enough for a month or more; since, fortunately for Philip, the great Maria Lee question, a question that the more he considered it the more thorny did it appear, was for the moment shelved by the absence of that young lady on a visit to her aunt in the Isle of Wight. Twice during that month he managed, on different pretexts, to get up to London and visit his wife, whom he found as patient as was possible under the circumstances, but anything but happy. Indeed, on the second occasion, she urged on him strongly the ignominy of her position, and even begged him to make a clean breast of it to his father, offering to undertake the task herself. He refused equally warmly, and some sharp words ensued to be, however, quickly followed by a reconciliation.

On his return from this second visit, Philip found a note signed "affectionately yours, Maria Lee," waiting for him, which announced that young lady's return, and begged him to come over to lunch on the following day.

He went--indeed, he had no alternative but to go; and again fortune favoured him in the person of a diffident young lady who was stopping with Maria, and who never left her side all that afternoon, much to the disgust of the latter and the relief of Philip. One thing, however, he was not spared, and that was the perusal of Hilda's last letter to her friend, written apparently from Germany, and giving a lively description of the writer's daily life and the state of her uncle's health, which, she said, precluded all possibility of her

return. Alas! he already knew its every line too well; for, as Hilda refused to undertake the task, he had but a week before drafted it himself. But Philip was growing hardened to deception, and found it possible to read it from end to end, and speculate upon its contents with Maria without blush or hesitation.

But he could not always expect to find Miss Lee in the custody of such an obtuse friend; and, needless to say, it became a matter of very serious importance to him to know how he should treat her. It occurred to him that his safest course might be to throw himself upon her generosity and make a clean breast of it; but when it came to the point he was too weak to thus expose his shameful conduct to the woman whose heart he had won, and to whom he was bound by every tie of honour that a gentleman holds sacred.

He thought of the scornful wonder with which she would listen to his tale, and preferred to take the risk of greater disaster in the future to the certainty of present shame. In the end, he contrived to establish a species of confidential intimacy with Maria, which, whilst it somewhat mystified the poor girl, was not without its charm, inasmuch as it tended to transform the every-day Philip into a hero of romance.

But in the main Maria was ill-suited to play heroine to her wooer's hero. Herself as open as the daylight, it was quite incomprehensible to her why their relationship should be kept such a dark and

mysterious secret, or why, if her lover gave her a kiss, it should be done with as many precautions as though he were about to commit a murder.

She was a very modest maiden, and in her heart believed it a wonderful thing that Philip should have fallen in love with her--a thing to be very proud of; and she felt it hard that she should be denied the gratification of openly acknowledging her lover, and showing him off to her friends, after the fashion that is so delightful to the female mind.

But, though this consciousness of the deprivation of a lawful joy set up a certain feeling of irritation in her mind, she did not allow it to override her entire trust in and love for Philip. Whatever he did was no doubt wise and right; but, for all that, on several occasions she took an opportunity to make him acquainted with her views of the matter, and to ask him questions that he found it increasingly difficult to answer.

In this way, by the exercise of ceaseless diplomacy, and with the assistance of a great deal of falsehood of the most artistic nature, Philip managed to tide over the next six months; but at the end of that time the position was very far from improved. Hilda was chafing more and more at the ignominy of her position; Maria was daily growing more and more impatient to have their engagement made public; and last, but by no means least, his father was almost daily at him on the

subject of Miss Lee, till at length he succeeded in wringing from him the confession that there existed some sort of understanding between Maria and himself.

Now, the old squire was a shrewd man of the world, and was not therefore slow to guess that what prevented this understanding from being openly acknowledged as an engagement was some entanglement on his son's part. Indeed, it had recently become clear to him that London had developed strange attractions for Philip. That this entanglement could be marriage was, however, an idea that never entered into his head; he had too good an opinion of his son's common-sense to believe it possible that he would deliberately jeopardize his inheritance by marrying without his permission. But Philip's reluctance and obstinacy annoyed him excessively. "Devil" Caresfoot was not a man accustomed to be thwarted; indeed, he had never been thwarted in his life, and he did not mean to be now. He had set his heart upon this marriage, and it would have to be a good reason that could turn him from his purpose.

Accordingly, having extracted the above information, he said no more to Philip, but proceeded to lay his own plans.

That very afternoon he commenced to put them into action. At three o'clock he ordered the carriage and pair, a vehicle that was rarely used, giving special directions that the coachman should see that his wig was properly curled. An ill-curled wig had before now been known

to produce a very bad effect upon Mr. Caresfoot's nerves, and also upon its wearer's future prospects in life.

At three precisely the heavy open carriage, swung upon C-springs and drawn by two huge greys, drew up in front of the hall-door, and the squire, who was as usual dressed in the old-fashioned knee-breeches, and carried in his hand his gold-headed cane, stepped solemnly into it, and seated himself exactly in the middle of the back seat, not leaning back, as is the fashion of our degenerate days, but holding himself bolt upright. Any more imposing sight than this old gentleman presented thus seated, and moving at a stately pace through the village street, it is impossible to conceive; but it so oppressed the very children that fear at the spectacle (which was an unwonted one, for the squire had not thus driven abroad in state for some years) overcame their curiosity, and at his approach they incontinently fled.

So soon as the carriage had passed through the drive-gates of the Abbey, the squire ordered the coachman to drive to Rewtham House, whither in due course he safely arrived.

He was ushered into the drawing-room, whilst a servant went in search of Miss Lee, whom she found walking in the garden.

"A gentleman to see you, miss."

"I am not at home. Who is it?"

"Mr. Caresfoot, miss!"

"Oh, why didn't you say so before?" and taking it for granted that Philip had paid her an unexpected visit, she started off for the house at a run.

"Why, Philip," she exclaimed, as she swung open the door, "this _is_ good of you, o--oh!" for at that moment Mr. Caresfoot senior appeared from behind the back of the door where he had been standing by the fireplace, and made his most imposing bow.

"That, my dear Maria, was the first time that I have heard myself called Philip for many a long year, and I fear that that was by accident; neither the name nor the blush were meant for me; now, where they?"

"I thought," replied Maria, who was still overwhelmed with confusion, "I thought that it was Philip, your son, you know; he has not been here for so long."

"With such a welcome waiting him, it is indeed wonderful that he can keep away;" and the old squire bowing again with such courtly grace as to drive what little self-possession remained to poor Maria after her flying entry entirely out of her head.

"And now, my dear," went on her visitor, fixing his piercing eyes upon her face, "with your permission, we will sit down and have a little talk together. Won't you take off your hat?"

Maria took off her hat as suggested, and sat down meekly, full under fire of the glowing eyes that had produced such curious effects upon subjects so dissimilar as the late Mrs. Caresfoot and Jim Brady. She could, however, think of nothing appropriate to say.

"My dear," the old gentleman continued presently, "the subject upon which I have taken upon myself to speak to you is one very nearly affecting your happiness and also of a delicate nature. My excuse for alluding to it must be that you are the child of my old friend--ah! we were great friends fifty years ago, my dear--and that I have myself a near interest in the matter. Do you understand me?"

"No, not quite."

"Well then, forgive an old man, who has no time to waste, if he comes to the point. I mean I have come to ask you, Maria, if any understanding or engagement exists between Philip and yourself?"

The eyes were full upon her now, and she felt that they were drawing her secret from her as a corkscrew does a cork. At last it came out with a pop.

"Yes, we are engaged."

"Thank you, my dear. How long have you been engaged?"

"About eight months."

"And why has the affair been kept so secret?"

"I don't know; Philip wished it. He told me not to tell any one. I suppose that I should not by rights have told you."

"Make yourself easy, my dear. Philip has already told me that there was an understanding between you; I only wanted to hear the confirmation of such good news from your own lips. Young men are great coxcombs, my dear, and apt to fancy things where ladies are concerned. I am rejoiced to hear that there is no mistake on his part."

"I am so glad that you are pleased," she said shyly.

"Pleased, my dear!" said the old gentleman, rising and walking up and down the room in his excitement, "pleased is not the word for it. I am more rejoiced than if some one had left me another estate. Look here, Maria, I had set my heart upon this thing coming to pass; I have thought of it for years. I loved your father, and you are like your father, girl; ay, I love you too, because you are a generous, honest woman, and will bring a good strain of blood into a family that wants

generosity--ay, and I sometimes think wants honesty too. And then your land runs into ours, and, as I can't buy it, I am glad that it should come in by marriage. I have always wanted to see the Abbey, Isleworth, and Rewtham estates in a ring fence before I died. Come and give me a kiss, my dear."

Maria did as she was bid.

"I will try to be a good daughter to you," she said, "if I marry Philip; but," and here her voice trembled a little, "I want to make you understand that, though this engagement exists, I have sometimes thought of late that perhaps he wanted to break it off, and----"

"Break it off?" almost shouted the old man, his eyes flashing. "Break it off; by God, the day he plays fast and loose with you, that day I leave the property to his cousin, George;--there, there, I frightened you, I beg your pardon, but in his own interest, Maria, I advise you to hold him fast to his word. To change the subject, your news has freshened me up so much that I mean to have a little company; will you come and dine with me next Thursday?"

"I shall be very glad, Mr. Caresfoot."

"Thank you; and perhaps till then you will not, unless he happens to ask you, mention the subject of our conversation to Philip. I want to have a talk with him first."

Maria assented, and the squire took his leave with the same magnificence of mien that had marked his arrival.