

CHAPTER VIII

That evening his father astonished Philip by telling him that he intended to give a dinner-party on that day week.

"You see, Philip," he said, with a grim smile, "I have only got a year or so at the most before me, and I wish to see a little of my neighbours before I go. I have not had much society of late years. I mean to do the thing well while I am about it, and ask everybody in the neighbourhood. How many can dine with comfort in the old banqueting-hall, do you suppose?"

"About five-and-forty, I should think."

"Five-and-forty! I remember that we sat down sixty to dinner when I came of age, but then we were a little crowded; so we will limit the number to fifty."

"Are you going to have fifty people to dinner?" asked Philip aghast.

"Certainly; I shall ask you to come and help me to write the invitations presently. I have prepared a list; and will you kindly send over to Bell at Roxham. I wish to speak to him, he must bring his men over to do up the old hall a bit; and, by the way, write to Gunter's and order a man-cook to be here on Tuesday, and to bring with him materials for the best dinner for fifty people that he can supply.

I will see after the wine myself; we will finish off that wonderful port my grandfather laid down. Now, bustle about, my lad, we have no time to lose; we must get all the notes out to-day."

Philip started to execute his orders, pretty well convinced in his own mind that his father was taking leave of his senses. Who ever heard of a dinner being given to fifty people before, especially in a house where such rare entertainments had always been of a traditionally select and solemn nature? The expense, too, reflected Philip, would be large; a man of his father's age had, in his opinion, no right to make such ducks-and-drakes of money that was so near to belonging to somebody else. But one thing was clear: his father had set his mind upon it, and when once that was the case to try to thwart him was more than Philip dared.

When the notes of invitation arrived at their respective destinations, great was the excitement in the neighbourhood of Bratham Abbey. Curiosity was rampant on the point, and the refusals were few and far between.

At length the eventful evening arrived, and with it the expected guests, among whom the old squire, in his dress of a past generation--resplendent in diamond buckles, frilled shirt-front, and silk stockings--was, with his snow-white hair and stately bearing, himself by far the most striking figure.

Standing near the door of the large drawing-room, he received his guests as they arrived with an air that would have done credit to an ambassador; but when Miss Lee entered, Philip noticed with a prophetic shudder that, in lieu of the accustomed bow, he gave her a kiss. He also noticed, for he was an observant man, that the gathered company was pervaded by a curious air of expectation. They were nearly all of them people who had been neighbours of the Caresfoot family for years --in many instances for generations--and as intimate with its members as the high-stomached stiffness of English country-life will allow. They therefore were well acquainted with the family history and peculiarities; but it was clear from their faces that their knowledge was of no help to them now, and that they were totally in the dark as to why they were all gathered together in this unwonted fashion.

At length, to the relief of all, the last of the chosen fifty guests put in an appearance, and dinner was announced. Everybody made his way to his allotted partner, and awaited the signal to move forward, when a fresh piquancy was added to the proceedings by an unexpected incident--in which Maria Lee played a principal part. Maria was sitting in a corner of the drawing-room, wondering if Philip was going to take her in to dinner, and why he had not been to see her lately, when suddenly she became aware that all the room was looking at her, and on raising her eyes she perceived the cause. For there, close upon her, and advancing with majestic step and outstretched arm, was old Mr. Caresfoot, possessed by the evident intention of taking her down in the full face of all the married ladies and people of title

present. She prayed that the floor might open and swallow her; indeed, of the two, she would have preferred that way of going down to dinner. But it did not, so there was no alternative left to her but to accept the proffered arm, and to pass, with as much dignity as she could muster in such a trying moment, in front of the intensely interested company--from which she could hear an involuntary murmur of surprise--through the wide-flung doors, down the great oak staircase loaded with exotics, thence along a passage carpeted with crimson cloth, and through double doors of oak that were flung open at their approach, into the banqueting-hall. On its threshold not only she, but almost every member of the company who passed in behind them, uttered an exclamation of surprise; and indeed the sight before them amply justified it.

The hall was a chamber of noble proportions, sixty feet in length by thirty wide. It was very lofty, and the dark chestnut beams of the beautiful arched roof were thrown into strong relief by the light of many candles. The walls were panelled to the roof with oak that had become almost black in the course of centuries, here and there relieved by portraits and shining suits of armour.

Down the centre of the room ran a long wide table, whereon, and on a huge sideboard, was spread the whole of the Caresfoot plate, which, catching the light of the suspended candles, threw it back in dazzling gleams till the beholder was positively bewildered with the brilliancy of the sight.

"Oh, how beautiful!" said Maria, in astonishment.

"Yes," answered the old gentleman as he took his seat at the head of the table, placing Maria on his right, "the plate is very fine, it has taken two hundred years to get together; but my father did more in that way than all of us put together, he spent ten thousand pounds on plate during his lifetime; that gold service on the sideboard belonged to him. I have only spent two. Mind, my love," he added in a low voice, "when it comes into your keeping that it is preserved intact; but I don't recommend you to add to it, there is too much already for a simple country gentleman's family."

Maria blushed and was silent.

The dinner, which was served on a most magnificent scale, wore itself away, as all big county-dinners do, in bursts of sedate but not profoundly interesting conversation. Indeed, had it not been for the novelty of the sight, Maria would have been rather bored, the squire's stately compliments notwithstanding. As it was, she felt inclined to envy the party at the other end, amongst whom, looking down the long vista of sparkling glass and silver, she could now and again catch sight of Philip's face beaming with animation, and even in the pauses of conversation hear the echo of his distant laughter.

"What good spirits he is in!" she thought to herself.

And, indeed, Philip was, or appeared to be, in excellent spirits. His handsome face, that of late had been so gloomy, was lit up with laughter, and he contrived by his witty talk to keep those round him in continual merriment.

"Philip seems very happy, doesn't he," said George, *sotto voce* to Mrs. Bellamy, who was sitting next to him.

"You must be a very bad judge of the face as an index to the mind if you think that he is happy. I have been watching him all dinner, and I draw a very different conclusion."

"Why, look how he is laughing."

"Have you never seen a man laugh to hide his misery; never mind his lips, watch his eyes: they are dilated with fear, see how he keeps glancing towards his father and Miss Lee. There, did you see him start? Believe me he is not happy, and unless I am mistaken he will be even less so before the night is over. We are not all asked here for nothing."

"I hope not, I hope not; if so we shall have to act upon our information, eh! But, to change the subject, you look lovely to-night."

"Of course I do, I am lovely; I wish I could return the compliment, but conscientiously I can't. Did you ever see such plate? look at that centre-piece."

"It is wonderful," said George. "I never saw it at all out before. I wonder," he added, with a sigh, "if I shall ever have the fingering of it."

"Yes," she said, with a strange look of her large eyes, "if you continue to be guided by me, you shall. I tell you so, and I never make mistakes. Hush, something is going to happen. What is it?"

The dinner had come to an end, and in accordance with the old-fashioned custom the cloth had been removed, leaving bare an ancient table of polished oak nearly forty feet in length, and composed of slabs of timber a good two inches thick.

When the wine had been handed round, the old squire motioned to the servants to leave the room, and then, having first whispered something in the ear of Miss Lee that caused her to turn very red, he slowly rose to his feet in the midst of a dead silence.

"Look at your cousin's face," whispered Mrs. Bellamy. George looked; it was ghastly pale, and the black eyes were gleaming like polished jet against white paper.

"Friends and neighbours, amongst whom or amongst whose fathers I have lived for so many years," began the speaker, whose voice, soft as it was, filled the great hall with ease, "it was, if tradition does not lie, in this very room and at this very table that the only Caresfoot who ever made an after-dinner speech of his own accord, delivered himself of his burden. That man was my ancestor in the eighth degree, old yeoman Caresfoot, and the occasion of his speech was to him a very important one, being the day on which he planted Caresfoot's Staff, the great oak by the water yonder, to mark the founding of a house of country gentry. Some centuries have elapsed since my forefather stood where I stand, most like with his hand upon this board as mine is now, and addressed a company not so fine or so well dressed, but perhaps--I mean no disrespect--on the whole, as good at heart as that before me now. Yes, the sapling oak has grown into the biggest tree in the country-side 'twixt then and now. It seems, therefore, to be fit that on what is to me as great a day as the planting of that oak was to my yeoman forefather, that I, like him, should gather my ancient friends and neighbours round me under the same ancient roof that I may, like him, make them the partakers of my joy.

"None of you sitting at this board to-day can look upon the old man who now asks your attention, without realizing what he himself has already learned: namely, that his day is over. Now, life is hard to quit. When a man grows old, the terrors of the unknown land loom just as large and terrible as they did to his youthful imagination, larger perhaps. But it is a fact that must be faced, a hard, inevitable fact.

And age, realizing this, looks round it for consolations, and finds only two: first, that as its interests and affections here fade and fall away, in just that same proportion do they grow and gather there upon the further shore; and secondly that, after Nature's eternal fashion, the youth and vigour of a new generation is waiting to replace the worn-out decrepitude of that which sinks into oblivion. My life is done, it cannot be long before the churchyard claims its own, but I live again in my son; and take such cold comfort as I may from that idea of family, and of long-continued and assured succession, that has so largely helped to make this country what she is.

"But you will wonder what can be the particular purpose for which I have bidden you here to-night. Be assured that it was not to ask you to listen to gloomy sermons on the, to others, not very interesting fact of my approaching end, but rather for a joyful and a definite reason. One wish I have long had, it is--that before I go, I may see my son's child, the little Caresfoot that is to fill my place in future years, prattling about my knees. But this I shall never see. What I have to announce to you, however, is the first step towards it, my son's engagement to Miss Lee, the young lady on my right."

"Look at his face," whispered Mrs. Bellamy to her neighbour, during the murmur of applause that followed this announcement. "Look quick."

Philip had put his hands down upon his chair as though to raise

himself up, and an expression of such mingled rage and terror swept across his features as, once seen, could not easily be forgotten. But so quickly did it pass that perhaps Mrs. Bellamy, who was watching, was the only one in all that company to observe it. In another moment he was smiling and bowing his acknowledgements to whispered and telegraphed congratulations.

"You all know Miss Lee," went on the old squire, "as you knew her father and mother before her; she is a sound shoot from an honest stock, a girl after my own heart, a girl that I love, and that all who come under her influence will love, and this engagement is to me the most joyful news that I have heard for many a year. May God, ay, and man too, so deal with my son as he deals with Maria Lee!

"And now I have done; I have already kept you too long. With your consent, we will have no more speeches, no returning of thanks; we will spare Philip his blushes. But before I sit down I will bid you all farewell, for I am in my eighty-third year, and I feel that I shall never see very many of your faces again. I wish that I had been a better neighbour to you all, as there are many other things I wish, now that it is too late to fulfil them; but I still hope that some of you will now and again find a kind thought for the old man whom among yourselves you talk of as 'Devil Caresfoot.' Believe me, my friends, there is truth in the old proverb: the devil is not always as black as he is painted. I give you my toast, my son Philip and his affianced wife, Maria Lee."

The whole company rose, actuated by a common impulse, and drank the health standing; and such was the pathos of the old squire's speech, that there were eyes among those present that were not free from tears. Then the ladies retired, amongst them poor Maria, who was naturally upset at the unexpected, and, in some ways, unwelcome notoriety thus given to herself.

In the drawing-room, she was so overwhelmed with congratulations, that at last, feeling that she could not face a fresh edition from the male portion of the gathering, she ordered her carriage, and quietly slipped away home, to think over matters at her leisure.

Philip, too, came in for his share of honours down below, and acknowledged them as best he might, for he had not the moral courage to repudiate the position. He felt that his father had forced his hand completely, and that there was nothing to be done, and sank into the outward calmness of despair. But if his companions could have seen the whirlpool of hatred, terror, and fury that raged within his breast as he sat and chatted, and sipped his great-grandfather's port, they would have been justifiably astonished.

At length the banquet, for it was nothing less, came to an end, and, having bowed their farewell to the last departing guest, the old man and his son were left alone together in the deserted drawing-room. Philip was seated by a table, his face buried in his hand, whilst his

father was standing by the dying fire, tapping his eye-glass nervously on the mantelpiece. It was he who broke the somewhat ominous silence.

"Well, Philip, how did you like my speech?"

Thus addressed, the son lifted his face from his hand; it was white as a sheet.

"By what authority," he asked in a harsh whisper, "did you announce me as engaged to Miss Lee?"

"By my own, Philip. I had it from both your lips that you were engaged. I did not choose that it should remain a secret any longer."

"You had no right to make that speech. I will not marry Miss Lee; understand once and for all, I will not marry her."

In speaking thus, Philip had nerved himself to bear one of those dreadful outbursts of fury that had earned his father his title; but, to his astonishment, none such came. The steely eyes glinted a little as he answered in his most polite manner, and that was all.

"Your position, Philip, then is that you are engaged, very publicly engaged, to a girl whom you have no intention of marrying--a very disgraceful position; mine is that I have, with every possible solemnity, announced a marriage that will not come off--a very

ridiculous position. Very good, my dear Philip; please yourself. I cannot force you into a disgraceful marriage. But you must not suppose that you can thus thwart me with impunity. Allow me to show you the alternative. I see you are tired, but I shall not detain you long. Take that easy-chair. This house and the land round it, also the plate, which is very valuable, but cannot be sold--by the way, see that it is safely locked up before you go to bed--are strictly entailed, and must, of course belong to you. The value of the entailed land is about 1000 pounds a year, or a little less in bad times; of the unentailed, a clear 4000 pounds; of my personal property about 900 pounds. Should you persist in your refusal to marry Miss Lee, or should the marriage in any way fall through, except from circumstances entirely beyond your control, I must, to use your own admirably emphatic language, ask you to 'understand, once and for all,' that, where your name appears in my will with reference to the unentailed and personal property, it will be erased, and that of your cousin George substituted. Please yourself, Philip, please yourself; it is a matter of entire indifference to me. I am very fond of George, and shall be glad to do him a good turn if you force me to it, though it is a pity to split up the property. But probably you will like to take a week to consider whether you prefer to stick to the girl you have got hold of up in town there--oh, yes! I know there is some one--and abandon the property, or marry Miss Lee and retain the property--a very pretty problem for an amorous young man to consider. There, I won't keep you up any longer. Good night, Philip, good night. Just see to the plate, will you? Remember, you have a personal interest in

that; I can't leave it away."

Philip rose without a word and left the room, but when he was gone it was his father's turn to hide his face in his hands.

"Oh, God!" he groaned aloud, "to think that all my plans should come to such an end as this; to think that I am as powerless to prevent their collapse as a child is to support a falling tree; that the only power left me is the power of vengeance--vengeance on my own son. I have lived too long, and the dregs of life are bitter."