

CHAPTER X

The night of the dinner-party was a nearly sleepless one for Philip, although his father had so considerately regretted his wearied appearance, he could do nothing but walk, walk, walk, like some unquiet ghost, up and down his great, oak-panelled bedroom, till, about dawn, his legs gave way beneath him; and think, think, think, till his mind recoiled, confused and helpless, from the dead wall of its objects. And, out of all this walking and thinking, there emerged, after an hour of stupor, that it would be a misnomer to call sleep, two fixed results. The first of these was that he hated his father as a lost soul must hate its torturing demon, blindly, madly, impotently hated him; and the second, that he could no longer delay taking his wife into his confidence. Then he remembered the letter he had received from her on the previous morning. He got it, and saw that it bore no address, merely stating that she would be in London by midday on the first of May, that was on the morrow. Till then it was clear he must wait, and he was not sorry for the reprieve. His was not a pleasant story for a husband to have to tell.

Fortunately for Philip, there was an engagement of long standing for this day, the thirtieth of April, to go, in conjunction with other persons, to effect a valuation of the fallows, &c., of a large tenant who was going out at Michaelmas. This prevented any call being made upon him to go and see Maria Lee, as, after the events of the previous evening, it might have been expected he would. He started early on

this business, and did not return till late, so he saw nothing of his father that day.

On the morning of the first of May he breakfasted about half-past eight, and then, without seeing his father, drove to Roxham to catch a train that got him up to London about twenty minutes to twelve. As he steamed slowly into Paddington Station, another train steamed out, and had he been careful to examine the occupants of the first-class carriages as they passed him in a slow procession, he might have seen something that would have interested him; but he was, not unnaturally, too much occupied with his own thoughts to allow of the indulgence of an idle curiosity. On the arrival of his train, he took a cab and drove without delay to the house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and asked for Mrs. Roberts.

"She isn't back yet, sir," was Mrs. Jacobs' reply. "I got this note from her this morning to say that she would be here by twelve, but it's twenty past now, so I suppose that she has missed the train or changed her mind; but there will be another in at three, so perhaps you had best wait for that, sir."

Philip was put out by this contretemps, but at the same time he was relieved to find that he had a space to breathe in before the inevitable and dreadful moment of exposure and infamy, for he had grown afraid of his wife.

Three o'clock came in due course, but no Hilda. Philip was seriously disturbed; but there was now no train by which she could arrive that day, so he was forced to the conclusion that she had postponed her departure. There were now two things to be done, one to follow her down to where she was staying--for he had ascertained her address from Mrs. Jacobs; the other, to return home and come back on the morrow. For reasons which appeared to him imperative, but which need not be entered into here, he decided on the latter course; so leaving a note for his wife, he drove, in a very bad temper, back to Paddington in time to catch the five o'clock train to Roxham.

Let us now return to the Abbey House, where, whilst Philip was cooling his heels in Lincoln's Inn Fields, a rather curious scene was in progress.

At one o'clock, old Mr. Caresfoot, as was his rule, sat down to lunch, which, frugal as it was, so far as he was concerned, was yet served with some old-fashioned ceremony by a butler and a footman. Just as the meal was coming to an end, a fly, with some luggage on it, drove up to the hall-door. The footman went to open it.

"Simmons," said the squire, to the old butler, "look out and tell me who that is."

Simmons did as he was bid, and replied:

"I don't rightly know, squire; but it's a lady, and she be wonderful tall."

Just then the footman returned, and said that a lady, who would not give her name, wished to speak to him in private.

"Are you sure the lady did not mean Mr. Philip?"

"No, sir; she asked for Mr. Philip first, and when I told her that he was out, she asked for you, sir. I have shown her into the study."

"Humph! at any rate, she has come off a journey, and must be hungry. Set another place and ask her in here."

In another moment there was a rustle of a silk dress, and a lady, arrayed in a long cloak and with a thick veil on, was shown into the room. Mr. Caresfoot, rising with that courteous air for which he was remarkable, bowed and begged her to be seated, and then motioned to the servants to leave the room.

"Madam, I am told that you wish to speak to me; might I ask whom I have the honour of addressing?"

She, with a rapid motion, removed her hat and veil, and exposed her sternly beautiful face to his inquiring gaze.

"Do you not know me, Mr. Caresfoot?" she said, in her foreign accent.

"Surely, yes, you are the young lady who lived with Maria, Miss von Holtzhausen."

"That was my name; it is now Hilda Caresfoot. I am your son Philip's wife."

As this astounding news broke upon his ears, her hearer's face became a shifting study. Incredulity, wonder, fury, all swept across it, and then in a single second it seemed to freeze. Next moment he spoke with overpowering politeness.

"So, madam; then I have to congratulate myself on the possession of a very lovely daughter-in-law."

A silence ensued that they were both too moved to break; at last, the old man said, in an altered tone:

"We have much to talk of, and you must be tired. Take off your cloak, and eat whilst I think."

She obeyed him, and he saw that not only was she his son's wife, but that she must before long present the world with an heir to the name of Caresfoot. This made him think the more; but meanwhile he continued to attend to her wants. She ate little, but calmly.

"That woman has nerve," said he to himself.

Then he rang the bell, and bade Simmons wait till he had written a note.

"Send James to Roxham at once with this. Take this lady's things off the fly, and put them in the red bedroom. By the way, I am at home to nobody except Mr. Bellamy;" and then, turning to Hilda, "Now, if you will come into my study, we will continue our chat," and he offered her his arm. "Here we are secure from interruption," he said, with a ghost of a smile. "Take this chair. Now, forgive my impertinence, but I must ask you if I am to understand that you are my son's legal wife?"

She flushed a little as she answered:

"Sir, I am. I have been careful to bring the proof; here it is;" and she took from a little hand-bag a certified copy of the register of her marriage, and gave it to him. He examined it carefully through his gold eye-glass, and handed it back.

"Perfectly in order. Hum! some eight months since, I see. May I ask why I am now for the first time favoured with a sight of this interesting document--in short, why you come down, like an angel from the clouds, and reveal yourself at the present moment?"

"I have come," she answered, "because of these." And she handed him two letters. "I have come to ascertain if they are true; if my husband is a doubly perjured or a basely slandered man."

He read the two anonymous letters. With the contents of the first we are acquainted; the second merely told of the public announcement of Philip's engagement.

"Speak," she said, with desperate energy, the calm of her face breaking up like ice before a rush of waters. "You must know everything; tell me my fate!"

"Girl, these villanous letters are in every particular true. You have married in my son the biggest scoundrel in the county. I can only say that I grieve for you."

She listened in silence; then rising from her chair, said, with a gesture infinitely tragic in its simplicity:

"Then it is finished; before God and man I renounce him. Listen," she went on, turning to her father-in-law, "I loved your son, he won my heart; but, though he said he loved me, I suspected him of playing fast and loose with me, on the one hand, and with my friend, Maria Lee, on the other. So I determined to go away, and told him so. Then it was that he offered to marry me at once, if I would change my

purpose. I loved him, and I consented--yes, because I loved him so, I consented to even more. I agreed to keep the marriage secret from you. You see what it has led to. I, a Von Holtzhausen, and the last of my name, stand here a byword and a scorn; my story will be found amusing at every dinner-table in the country-side, and my shame will even cling to my unborn child. This is the return he has made me for my sacrifice of self-respect, and for consenting to marry him at all; to outrage my love and make me a public mockery."

"We have been accustomed," broke in the old squire, his pride somewhat nettled, "to consider our own a good family to marry into. You do not seem to share that view."

"Good; yes, there is plenty of your money for those who care for it; but, sir, as I told your son, it is not a _family_. He did me no honour in marrying me, though I was nothing but a German companion, with no dower but her beauty. I,"--and here she flung her head back with an air of ineffable pride--"did him the honour. My ancestors, sir, were princes, when his were plough-boys."

"Well, well," answered the old man, testily, "ten generations of country gentry, and the Lord only knows how many more of stout yeomen before them, is a good enough descent for us; but I like your pride, and I am glad that you spring from an ancient race. You have been shamefully treated, Hilda--is not your name Hilda?--but there are others, more free from blame than you are, who have been treated

worse."

"Ah, Maria! then she knows nothing?"

"Yes, there is Maria and myself. But never mind that. Philip will, I suppose, be back in a few hours--oh, yes! he will be back," and his eyes glinted unpleasantly, "and what shall you do then? what course do you intend to take?"

"I intend to claim my rights, to force him to acknowledge me here where he suffered his engagement to another woman to be proclaimed, and then I intend to leave him. He has killed my respect; I will not live with him again. I can earn my living in Germany. I have done with him; but, sir, do not you be hard upon him. It is a matter between me and him. Let him not suffer on my account."

"My dear, pray confine yourself to your own affairs, and leave me to settle mine. There shall be no harshness; nobody shall suffer more than they deserve. There, don't break down, go and rest, for there are painful scenes before you."

He rang the bell, and sent for the housekeeper. She came presently, a pleasant-looking woman of about thirty years of age, with a comely face and honest eyes.

"This lady, Pigott," said the old squire, addressing her, "is Mrs.

Philip Caresfoot, and you will be so kind as to treat her with all respect. Don't open your eyes, but attend to me. For the present, you had best put her in the red room, and attend to her yourself. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes, sir! I understand," Pigott replied, curtsying. "Will you be pleased to come along with me, ma'am?"

Hilda rose and took Pigott's arm. Excitement and fatigue had worn her out. Before she went, however, she turned, and with tears in her eyes thanked the old man for his kindness to a friendless woman.

The hard eyes grew kindly as he stooped and kissed the broad, white brow, and said in his stately way--

"My dear, as yet I have shown you nothing but the courtesy due to a lady. Should I live, I hope to bestow on you the affection I owe to a much-wronged daughter. Good-by."

And thus they parted, little knowing where they should meet again.

"A woman I respect--well, English or German, the blood will tell"--he said as soon as the door had closed. "Poor thing--poor Maria too. The scoundrel!--ah! there it is again;" and he pressed his hand to his heart. "This business has upset me, and no wonder."

The pang passed, and sitting down he wrote a letter that evidently embarrassed him considerably, and addressed it to Miss Lee. This he put in the post-box, and then, going to a secretaire, he unlocked it, and taking out a document he began to puzzle over it attentively.

Presently Simmons announced that Mr. Bellamy was waiting.

"Show him in at once," said the old man briskly.