

CHAPTER XI

It was some minutes past seven that evening when the lawyer left, and he had not been gone a quarter of an hour before a hired gig drove up to the door containing Philip, who had got back from town in the worst of bad tempers, and, as no conveyance was waiting for him, had been forced to post over from Roxham. Apparently his father had been expecting his arrival, for the moment the servant opened the door he appeared from his study, and addressed him in a tone that was as near to being jovial as he ever went.

"Hallo, Philip, back again, are you? Been up to town, I suppose, and driven over in the 'George' gig? That's lucky; I wanted to speak to you. Come in here, there's a good fellow, I want to speak to you."

"Why is he so infernally genial?" reflected Philip. "Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes;" then aloud, "All right, father; but if it is all the same to you, I should like to get some dinner first."

"Dinner! why, I have had none yet; I have been too busy. I shall not keep you long; we will dine together presently."

Philip was surprised, and glanced at him suspiciously. His habits were extremely regular; why had he had no dinner?

Meanwhile his father led the way into the study, muttering below his

breath--

"One more chance--his last chance."

A wood fire was burning brightly on the hearth, for the evening was chilly, and some sherry and glasses stood upon the table.

"Take a glass of wine, Philip; I am going to have one; it is a good thing to begin a conversation on. What says the Psalmist: 'Wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make him a cheerful countenance'--a cheerful countenance! Ho, ho! my old limbs are tired; I am going to sit down--going to sit down."

He seated himself in a well-worn leather arm-chair by the side of the fire so that his back was towards the dying daylight. But the brightness of the flames threw the clear-cut features into strong relief against the gloom, and by it Philip could see that the withered cheeks were flushed. Somehow the whole strongly defined scene made him feel uncanny and restless.

"Cold for the first of May, isn't it, lad? The world is very cold at eighty-two. Eighty-two, a great age, yet it seems but the other day that I used to sit in this very chair and dandle you upon my knee, and make this repeater strike for you. And yet that is twenty years since, and I have lived through four twenties and two years. A great age, a cold world!"

"Ain't you well?" asked his son, brusquely, but not unkindly.

"Well; ah, yes! thank you, Philip, I never felt better, my memory is so good, I can see things I have forgotten seventy years or more. Dear, dear, it was behind that bookcase in a hole in the board that I used to hide my flint and steel which I used for making little fires at the foot of Caresfoot's Staff. There is a mark on the bark now. I was mischievous as a little lad, and thought that the old tree would make a fine blaze. I was audacious, too, and delighted to hide the things in my father's study under the very nose of authority. Ay, and other memories come upon me as I think. It was here upon this very table that they stood my mother's coffin. I was standing where you are now when I wrenched open the half-fastened shell to kiss her once more before they screwed her down for ever. I wonder would you do as much for me? I loved my mother, and that was fifty years ago. I wonder shall we meet again? That was on the first of May, a long-gone first of May. They threw branches of blackthorn bloom upon her coffin. Odd, very odd! But business, lad, business--what was it? Ah! I know," and his manner changed in a second and became hard and stern. "About Maria, have you come to a decision?"

Philip moved restlessly on his chair, poked the logs to a brighter blaze, and threw on a handful of pine chips from a basket by his side before he answered. Then he said--

"No, I have not."

"Your reluctance is very strange, Philip, I cannot understand it. I suppose that you are not already married, are you, Philip?"

There was a lurid calm about the old man's face as he asked this question that was very dreadful in its intensity. Under the shadow of his thick black eyebrows, gleams of light glinted and flickered in the expanded pupils, as before the outburst of a tempest the forked lightning flickers in the belly of the cloud. His voice too was constrained and harsh.

Owing to the position of his father's head, Philip could not see this play of feature, but he heard the voice and thought that it meant mischief. He had but a second to decide between confession and the lie that leaped to his lips. An inward conviction told him that his father was not long for this world, was it worth while to face his anger when matters might yet be kept dark till the end? The tone of the voice--ah! how he mistook its meaning--deceived him. It was not, he thought, possible that his father could know anything. Had he possessed a little more knowledge of the world, he might have judged differently.

"Married, no, indeed; what put that idea into your head?" And he laughed outright.

Presently he became aware that his father had risen and was

approaching towards him. Another moment and a hand of iron was laid upon his shoulder, the awful eyes blazed into his face and seemed to pierce him through and through, and a voice that he could not have recognized hissed into his ear--

"You unutterable liar, you everlasting hound, your wife is at this moment in this house."

Philip sprang up with an exclamation of rage and cursed Hilda aloud.

"No," went on his father, standing before him, his tall frame swaying backwards and forwards with excitement; "no, do not curse her, she, like your other poor dupe, is an honest woman; on yourself be the damnation, you living fraud, you outcast from all honour, who have brought shame and reproach upon our honest name, on you be it; may every curse attend you, and may remorse torture you. Listen: you lied to me, you lied to your wife, trebly did you lie to the unfortunate girl you have deceived; but, if you will not speak it, for once hear the truth, and remember that you have to deal with one so relentless, that fools, mistaking justice for oppression, call him 'devil.' I, 'Devil Caresfoot,' tell you that I will disinherit you of every stick, stone, and stiver that the law allows me, and start you in the enjoyment of the rest with my bitterest curse. This I will do now whilst I am alive; when I am dead, by Heaven, I will haunt you if I can."

Here he stopped for want of breath, and stood for a moment in the full light of the cheery blaze, one hand raised above his head as though to strike, and, presenting with his glittering eyes and working features, so terrible a spectacle of rage that his son recoiled involuntarily before him.

But fury begets fury as love begets love, and in another second Philip felt his own wicked temper boil up within him. He clenched his teeth and stood firm.

"Do your worst," he said; "I hate you; I wish to God that you were dead."

Hardly had these dreadful words left his lips when a change came over the old man's face; it seemed to stiffen, and putting one hand to his heart he staggered back into his chair, pointing and making signs as he fell towards a little cupboard in the angle of the wall. His son at once guessed what had happened; his father had got one of the attacks of the heart to which he was subject, and was motioning to him to bring the medicine which he had before shown him, and which alone could save him in these seizures. Actuated by a common impulse of humanity, Philip for the moment forgot their quarrel, and stepped with all speed to fetch it. As it happened, there stood beneath this cupboard a table, and on this table lay the document which his father had been reading that afternoon before the arrival of Mr. Bellamy. It was his will, and, as is usual in the case of such deeds, the date was

endorsed upon the back. All this Philip saw at a single glance, and he also saw that the will was dated some years back, and therefore one under which he would inherit, doubtless the same that his father had some months before offered to show him.

It flashed through his mind that his father had got it out in order to burn it; and this idea was followed by another that for a moment stilled his heart.

"_If he should die now he cannot destroy it!_ If he does not take the medicine he _will_ die."

Thought flies fast in moments of emergency. Philip, too, was a man of determined mind where his own interests were concerned, and his blood

was heated and his reason blinded by fury and terror. He was not long in settling on his course of action. Taking the bottle from the cupboard, he poured out its contents into one of the wine-glasses that stood upon the table, and coming up to his father with it addressed him. He knew that these attacks, although they were of a nature to cause intense pain, did not rob the sufferer of his senses. The old man, though he lay before him gasping with agony, was quite in a condition to understand him.

"Listen to me," he said, in a slow, distinct voice. "Just now you said that you would disinherit me. This medicine will save your life, and

if I let it fall you will die, and there is no more in the house.

Swear before God that you will not carry out your threat, and I will give it to you. Lift up your hand to show me that you swear."

Silence followed, only broken by the gasps of the dying man.

"If you will not swear, I will pour it out before your eyes."

Again there was silence; but this time the old man made an effort to rise and ring the bell.

His son threw him roughly back.

"For the last time," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "will you swear?"

A struggle passed over his father's face, now nearly black with pain; and presently from the distended lips, that did not seem to move, there burst a single word--destined to echo for ever in his son's ears--

"_Murderer!_"

It was his last. He sank back, groaned, and died; and at the same moment the flame from the pine-chips flickered itself away, and of a sudden the room grew nearly dark. Philip stood for awhile aghast at his own handiwork, and watched the dull light glance on the dead white

of his father's brow. He was benumbed by terror at what he had done, and in that awful second of realization would have given his own life to have it undone.

Presently, however, the instinct of self-preservation came to his aid. He lit a candle, and taking some of the medicine in the glass, smeared it over the dead man's chin and coat, and then broke the glass on the floor by his side--thus making it appear that he had died whilst attempting to swallow the medicine.

Next he raised a loud outcry, and violently rang the bell. In a minute the room was full of startled servants, one of whom was instantly despatched for Mr. Caley, the doctor. Meanwhile, after a vain attempt to restore animation, the study-table was cleared and the corpse laid on it, as its mother's had been on that day fifty years before.

Then came a dreadful hush, and the shadow of death came down upon the house and brooded over it. The men-servants moved to and fro with muffled feet, and the women wept, for in a way they had all loved the imperious old man, and the last change had come very suddenly.

Philip's brain burned; he was consumed by the desire of action.

Suddenly he bethought him of his wife upstairs: after what he had just passed through, no scene with her could disturb him--it would, he even felt, be welcome. He went up to the room where she was, and entered.

It was evident that she had been told of what had happened, as both she and Pigott, who was undressing her--for she was wearied out--were

weeping. She did not appear surprised at his appearance; the shock of the old man's death extinguished all surprise. It was he who broke the silence.

"He is dead," he said.

"Yes, I have heard."

"If you are at liberty for a few minutes, I wish to talk to you," he said savagely.

"I, too," she answered, "have something to say, but I am too weary and upset to say it now. I will see you to-morrow."

He turned and went without answering, and Pigott noticed that no kiss or word of endearment passed between them, and that the tone of their words was cold.

Soon after Philip got downstairs the doctor came. Philip met him in the hall and accompanied him into the study, where the body was. He made a rapid examination, more as a matter of form than anything else, for his first glance had told him that life was extinct.

"Quite dead," he said sorrowfully; "my old friend gone at last. One of a fine sort too; a just man for all his temper. They called him 'devil,' and he was fierce when he was younger, but if I never meet a

worse devil than he was I shall do well. He was very kind to me once--
very. How did he go?--in pain, I fear."

"We were talking together, when suddenly he was seized with the
attack. I got the medicine as quick as I could and tried to get it
down his throat, but he could not swallow, and in the hurry the glass
was knocked by a jerk of his head right out of my hands. Next second
he was dead."

"Very quick--quicker than I should have expected. Did he say
anything?"

"No."

Now, just as Philip delivered himself of this last lie, a curious
incident happened, or rather an incident that is apt to seem curious
to a person who has just told a lie. The corpse distinctly moved its
right hand--the same that had been clasped over the old man's head as
he denounced his son.

"Good God!" said Philip, turning pale as death, "what's that?" and
even the doctor started a little, and cast a keen look at the dead
face.

"Nothing," he said. "I have seen that happen before where there has
been considerable tension of the muscles before death; it is only

their final slackening, that is all. Come, will you ring the bell?

They had better come and take it upstairs."

This sad task had just been performed, and Mr. Caley was about to take his leave, when Pigott came down and whispered something into his ear that evidently caused him the most lively astonishment. Drawing Philip aside, he said--

"The housekeeper asks me to come up and see 'Mrs. Philip Caresfoot,' whom she thinks is going to be confined. Does she mean your wife?"

"Yes," answered Philip sullenly, "she does. It is a long story, and I am too upset to tell it you now. It will soon be all over the country I suppose."

The old doctor whistled, but judged it advisable not to put any more questions, when suddenly an idea seemed to strike him.

"You said you were talking to your father when the fit took him; was it about your marriage?"

"Yes."

"When did he first know of it?"

"To-day, I believe."

"Ah, thank you;" and he followed Pigott upstairs.

That night, exactly at twelve o'clock, another little lamp floated out on the waters of life: Angela was born.