

CHAPTER XVIII

"I must apologize for having brought Aleck, my dog, you know, with me," began Arthur Heigham; "but the fact was, that at the very last moment the man I was going to leave him with had to go away, and I had no time to find another place before the train left. I thought that, if you objected to dogs, he could easily be sent somewhere into the village. He is very good-tempered, though appearances are against him."

"Oh! he will be all right, I daresay," said George, rather sulkily; for, with the exception of Snarleyow, in whose fiendish temper he found something refreshing and congenial, he liked no dogs. "But you must be careful, or Snarleyow, my dog, will give him a hammering. Here, good dog, good dog," and he attempted to pat Aleck on the head, but the animal growled savagely, and avoided him.

"I never knew him do that before," ejaculated Arthur, in confusion, and heartily wishing Aleck somewhere else. "I suppose he has taken a dislike to you. Dogs do sometimes, you know."

Next second it struck him that this was one of those things that had better have been left unsaid, and he grew more uncomfortable than ever. But at this very moment the situation was rendered intensely lively by the approach of the redoubtable Snarleyow himself, who, having snapped at the horse's heels all the way to the stables, had on

his return to the front of the house spotted Aleck from afar. He was now advancing on tiptoe in full order of battle, his wicked-looking teeth gleaming, and his coat and tail standing out like an angry bear's.

Arthur, already sufficiently put out about the dog question, thought it best to take no notice; and even when he distinctly heard George quietly "sah" on his dog as he passed him, he contented himself with giving Aleck a kick by way of a warning to behave himself, and entered into some desultory conversation with Philip. But presently a series of growls behind him announced that an encounter was imminent. Looking round, he perceived that Snarleyow was standing over the bull-dog, of which he was more than twice the size, and holding on to the skin of his neck with his long teeth; whilst George was looking on with scarcely suppressed amusement.

"I think, Mr. Caresfoot, that you had better call your dog off," said Arthur, good-temperedly. "Mine is a peaceable animal, but he is an awkward customer when he does fight."

"Oh! better let them settle it; they will be much better friends afterwards. Hold him, Snarleyow."

Thus encouraged, the big dog seized the other, and fairly lifted him off the ground, shaking him violently--a proceeding that had the effect of thoroughly rousing Aleck's temper. And then began a most

Homeric combat. At first the bull-dog was dreadfully mauled; his antagonist's size, weight, and length of leg and jaw, to say nothing of the thick coat by which he was protected, all telling against him. But he took his punishment very quietly, never so much as uttering a growl, in strange contrast to the big dog's vociferous style of doing business. And at last patience was rewarded by his enemy's fore-paw finding its way into Aleck's powerful jaw, and remaining there till Snarleyow's attentions to the back of his neck forced him to shift his hold. From that time forward the sheep-dog had to fight on three legs, which he found demoralizing. But still he had the advantage, and it was not until any other dog of Aleck's size would have retreated half killed that the bull-dog's superior courage and stamina began to tell. Quite heedless of his injuries, and the blood that poured into his eyes, he slowly but surely drove the great sheep-dog, who by this time would have been glad to stop, back into an angle of the wall, and then suddenly pinned him by the throat. Down went Snarleyow on the top of the bull-dog, and rolled right over him, but when he staggered to his legs again, his throat was still in its cruel grip.

"Take your dog off!" shouted George, seeing that affairs had taken a turn he very little expected.

"I fear that is impossible," replied Arthur, politely, but looking anything but polite.

"If you don't get it off, I will shoot it."

"You will do nothing of the sort, Mr. Caresfoot; you set the dog on, and you must take the consequences. Ah! the affair is finished."

As he spoke, the choking Snarleyow, whose black tongue was protruding from his jaws, gave one last convulsive struggle, and ceased to breathe. Satisfied with this result, Aleck let go, and having sniffed contemptuously at his dead antagonist, returned to his master's side, and, sitting quietly down, began to lick such of his numerous wounds as he could reach.

George, when he realized that his favourite was dead, turned upon his guest in a perfect fury. His face looked like a devil's. But Arthur, acting with wonderful self-possession for so young a man, stopped him.

"Remember, Mr. Caresfoot, before you say anything that you may regret, that neither I nor my dog is to blame for what has happened. I am exceedingly sorry that your dog should have been killed, but it is your own fault. I am afraid, however, that, after what has happened, I shall be as unwelcome here as Aleck; so, if you will kindly order the cart for me again, I will move on. Our business can no doubt be finished off by letter."

George made no reply: it was evident that he could not trust himself to speak, but, turning sullenly on his heel, walked towards the house.

"Wait a bit, Mr. Heigham," said Philip, who had been watching the whole scene with secret delight. "You are perfectly in the right. I will go and try to bring my cousin to his senses. I am very thankful to your dog for killing that accursed brute."

He was away for about ten minutes, during which Arthur took Aleck to a fountain there was in the centre of a grass plot in front of the house, and washed his many wounds, none of which, however, were, thanks to the looseness of his hide, very serious. Just as he had finished that operation, a gardener arrived with a wheelbarrow to fetch away the deceased Snarleyow.

"Lord, sir," he said to Arthur, "I am glad to have the job of tucking up this here brute. He bit my missus last week, and killed a whole clutch of early ducks. I seed the row through the bushes. That 'ere dog of yours, sir, he did fight in proper style; I should like to have a dog like he."

Just then the re-arrival of Philip put a stop to the conversation. Drawing Arthur aside, he told him that George begged to apologize for what had occurred, and hoped that he would not think of going away.

"But," added Philip, with a little laugh, "I don't pretend that he has taken a fancy to you, and, if I were you, I should cut my visit short."

"That is exactly my view of the case. I will leave to-morrow evening."

Philip made no further remarks for a few moments. He was evidently thinking. Presently he said,

"I see you have a fishing-rod amongst your things; if you find the time hang heavy on your hands to-morrow, or wish to keep out of the way, you had better come over to Bratham Lake and fish. There are some very large carp and perch there, and pike too, for the matter of that, but they are out of season."

Arthur thanked him, and said that he should probably come, and, having received instructions as to the road, they parted, Arthur to go and shut up Aleck in an outhouse pointed out to him by his friend the gardener, and thence to dress for a dinner that he looked forward to with dread, and Philip to make his way home. As he passed up through the little flower-garden at the Abbey House, he came across his daughter, picking the blight from her shooting rose-trees.

"Angela," he said, "I am sorry if I offended your prejudices this afternoon. Don't let us say anything more about it; but I want you to come and pay a formal call with me at Isleworth to-morrow. It will only be civil that you should do so."

"I never paid a call in my life," she answered, doubtfully, "and I don't want to call on my cousin George."

"Oh! very well," and he began to move on. She stopped him.

"I will go, if you like."

"At three o'clock, then. Oh! by the way, don't be surprised if you see a young gentleman fishing here to-morrow."

Angela reflected to herself that she had never yet seen a young gentleman to speak to in her life, and then asked, with undisguised interest, who he was.

"Well, he is a sort of connection of your own, through the Prestons, who are cousins of ours, if any of them are left. His mother was a Preston, and his name is Arthur Preston Heigham. George told me something about him just now, and, on thinking it over, I remember the whole story. He is an orphan, and George's ward."

"What is he like?" asked Angela, ingenuously.

"Really I don't know; rather tall, I think--a gentlemanly fellow. It really is a relief to speak to a gentleman again. There has been a nice disturbance at Isleworth," and then he told his daughter the history of the great dog fight.

"I should think Mr. Heigham was perfectly in the right, and I should

like to see his dog," was her comment on the occurrence.

As Arthur dressed himself for dinner that evening he came to the conclusion that he disliked his host more than any man he ever saw, and, to say the truth, he descended into the dining-room with considerable misgivings. Just as he entered, the opposite door opened, and Sir John Bellamy was announced. On seeing him, George emerged from the sulky silence into which he was plunged, and advanced to meet him.

"Hullo, Bellamy! I must congratulate you upon your accession to rank."

"Thank you, Caresfoot, thank you," replied Mr. Bellamy, who, with the exception that he had grown a size larger, and boasted a bald patch on the top of his head that gave him something of a appearance of a jolly little monk, looked very much the same as when we last saw him as a newly married man.

"A kind Providence," he went on, rubbing his dry hands, and glancing nervously under the chairs, "has put this honour into my hands."

"A Providence in petticoats, you mean," broke in George.

"Possibly, my dear Caresfoot; but I do not see him. Is it possible that he is lurking yonder, behind the sofa?"

"Who on earth do you mean?"

"I mean that exceedingly fine dog of yours, Snarleyow. Snarleyow, where are you? Excuse me for taking precautions, but last time he put his head under my chair and bit me severely, as I dare say you remember."

Arthur groaned at hearing the subject thus brought forward.

"Mr. Heigham's dog killed Snarleyow this afternoon," said George, in a savage voice.

At this intelligence, Sir John's face became wreathed in smiles.

"I am deeply delighted--I mean grieved--to hear it. Poor Snarleyow! he was a charming dog; and to think that such a fate should have overtaken him, when it was only last week that he did the same kind office for Anne's spaniel. Poor Snarleyow! you should really have him stuffed. But, my dear Caresfoot, you have not yet introduced me to the hero of the evening, Mr. Heigham. Mr. Heigham, I am delighted to make your acquaintance," and he shook hands with Arthur with gentle enthusiasm, as though he were the last scion of a race that he had known and loved for generations.

Presently dinner was announced, and the three sat down at a small

round table in the centre of the big dining-room, on which was placed a shaded lamp. It was not a cheerful dinner. George, having said grace, relapsed into moody silence, eating and drinking with gusto but in moderation, and savouring every sup of wine and morsel of food as though he regretted its departure. He was not free from gluttony, but he was a judicious glutton. For his part, Arthur found a certain fascination in watching his guardian's red head as he bobbed up and down opposite to him, and speculating on the thickness of each individual hair that contributed to give it such a spiky effect. What had his mother been like, he wondered, that she had started him in life with such an entirely detestable countenance? Meanwhile he was replying in monosyllables to Sir John's gentle babblings, till at last even that gentleman's flow of conversation ran dry, and Arthur was left free to contemplate the head in solemn silence. As soon as the cloth had been cleared away, George suggested that they had better get to work. Arthur assented, and Sir John, smiling with much sweetness, remarked profoundly that business was one of the ills of life, and must be attended to.

"At any rate, it is an ill that has agreed uncommonly well with you," growled George, as, rising from the table, he went to a solid iron safe that stood in the corner of the room, and, unlocking it with a small key that he took from his pocket, extracted a bundle of documents.

"That is an excellent deed-box of yours, Caresfoot," said Sir John

carelessly.

"Yes; that lock would not be very easy to pick. It is made on my own design."

"But don't you find that small parcels such as private letters are apt to get lost in it? It is so big."

"Oh! no; there is a separate compartment for them. Now, Mr. Heigham." And then, with the able and benign assistance of Sir John, he proceeded to utterly confuse and mystify Arthur, till stocks, preference-shares, consols, and mortgages were all whirling in his bewildered brain. Having satisfactorily reduced him to this condition, he suddenly sprang upon him the proposal he had in view with reference to the Jotley mortgage, pointing out to him that it was an excellent investment, and strongly advising him, "as a friend," to leave the money upon the land. Arthur hesitated a little, more from natural caution than anything he could urge to the contrary, and George, noticing it, said,

"It is only right that, before you come to any decision, you should see the map of the estate, and a copy of the deed. I have both in the next room, if you care to come and look at them."

Arthur assented, and they went off together; Sir John, whose eyes appeared to be a little heavy under the influence of the port,

presuming that he was not wanted. But, no sooner had the door closed, than the worthy knight proved himself very wide-awake. Indeed, he commenced a singular course of action. Advancing on tiptoe to the safe in the corner of the room, he closely inspected it through his eyeglass. Then he cautiously tried the lid of an artfully contrived subdivision.

"Um!" he muttered, half aloud, "that's where they are; I wish I had ten minutes."

Next he returned swiftly to the table, and, taking a piece of the soft bread which he was eating instead of biscuit with his wine, he rapidly kneaded it into dough, and, going to the safe, divided the material into two portions. One portion he carefully pressed upon the keyhole of the subdivision, and then, extracting the key of the safe itself, took a very fair impress of its wards on the other. This done, he carefully put the pieces of dough in his breast-pocket in such a way that they were not likely to be crushed, and, with a smile of satisfaction, returned to his chair, helped himself to a glass of port, and dozed off.

"Hullo, Bellamy, gone to sleep! Wake up, man. We have settled this business about the mortgage. Will you write to Mr. Borley, and convey Mr. Heigham's decision? And perhaps"--addressing Arthur--"you will do the same on your own account."

"Certainly I will write, Caresfoot; and now I think that I must be off. Her ladyship does not like having to sit up for me."

George laughed in a peculiarly insulting way.

"I don't think she would care much, Bellamy, if you stayed away all night. But look here, tell her I want to see her to-morrow; don't forget."

Sir John bit his knightly lip, but answered, smiling, that he would remember, and begging George not to ring, as his trap was at the hall-door, and the servant waiting, he bade an affectionate good-night to Arthur, to whom he expressed a hope that they would soon meet again, and let himself out of the room. But, as soon as the door was closed, he went through another performance exceedingly inappropriate in a knight. Turning round, his smug face red with anger, he pirouetted on his toes, and shook his fist violently in the direction of the door.

"You scoundrel!" he said between his teeth, "you have made a fool of me for twenty years, and I have been obliged to grin and bear it; but I will be even with you yet, and her too, more especially her."

So soon as Sir John had left, Arthur told his host that, if the morning was fine, he proposed to go and fish in Bratham Lake, and that he also proposed to take his departure by the last train on the following evening. To these propositions George offered no objection--

indeed, they were distinctly agreeable to him, as lessening the time he would be forced to spend in the society of a guest he cordially detested, for such was the feeling that he had conceived towards Arthur.

Then they parted for the night; but, before he left the room, George went to lock up the safe that was still open in the corner. Struck by some thought, he unlocked the separate compartment with a key that hung on his watch-chain, and extracted therefrom a thick and neatly folded packet of letters. Drawing out one or two, he glanced through them and replaced them.

"Oh! Lady Anne, Lady Anne," he said to himself as he closed the case, "you are up in the world now, and you aspire to rule the county society, and have both the wealth and the wit to do it; but you must not kick over the traces, or I shall be forced to suppress you, Lady Anne, though you are the wife of a Brummagem knight, and I think that it is time you had a little reminder. You are growing a touch too independent."