

CHAPTER XXI

Early on the day following Arthur's departure from Isleworth, Lady Bellamy received a note from George requesting her, if convenient, to come and see him that morning, as he had something rather important to talk to her about.

"John," she said to her husband at breakfast, "do you want the brougham this morning?"

"No. Why?"

"Because I am going over to Isleworth."

"Hadn't you better take the luggage-cart too, and your luggage in it, and live there altogether? It would save trouble, sending backwards and forwards," suggested her husband, with severe sarcasm.

Lady Bellamy cut the top off an egg with a single clean stroke--all her movements were decisive--before she answered.

"I thought," she said, "that we had done with that sort of nonsense some years ago; are you going to begin it again?"

"Yes, Lady Bellamy, I am. I am not going to stand being bullied and jeered at by that damned scoundrel Caresfoot any more. I am not going

to stand your eternal visits to him."

"You have stood them for twenty years; rather late in the day to object now, isn't it?" she remarked, coolly, beginning her egg.

"It is never too late to mend; it is not too late for you to stop quietly at home and do your duty by your husband."

"Most men would think that I had done my duty by him pretty well. Twenty years ago you were nobody, and had, comparatively speaking, nothing. Now you have a title and between three and four thousand a year. Who have you to thank for that? Certainly not yourself."

"Curse the title and the money! I had rather be a poor devil of an attorney with a large family, and five hundred a year to keep them on, than live the life I do between you and that vulgar beast Caresfoot. It's a dog's life, not a man's;" and poor Bellamy was so overcome at his real or imaginary wrongs that the tears actually rolled down his puffy little face.

His wife surveyed him with some amusement.

"I think," she said, "that you are a miserable creature."

"Perhaps I am, Anne; but I tell you what it is, even a miserable creature can be driven too far. It may perhaps be worth your while to

be a little careful."

She cast one swift look at him, a look not without apprehension in it, for there was a ring about his voice that she did not like, but his appearance was so ludicrously wretched that it reassured her. She finished her egg, and then, slowly driving the spoon through the shell, she said,

"Don't threaten, John; it is a bad habit, and shows an un-Christian state of mind; besides, it might force me to cr-r-rush you, in self-defence, you know;" and John and the egg-shell having finally collapsed together, Lady Bellamy ordered the brougham.

Having thus sufficiently scourged her husband, she departed in due course to visit her own taskmaster, little guessing what awaited her at his hands. After all, there is a deal of poetic justice in the world. Little Smith, fresh from his mother's apron-strings, is savagely beaten by the cock of the school, Jones, and to him Jones is an all-powerful, cruel devil, placed above all possibility of retribution. If, however, little Smith could see the omnipotent Jones being mentally ploughed and harrowed by his papa the clergyman, in celebration of the double event of his having missed a scholarship and taken too much sherry, it is probable that his wounded feelings would be greatly soothed. Nor does it stop there. Robinson, the squire of the parish, takes it out of the Reverend Jones, and speaks ill of him to the bishop, a Low Churchman, on the matter of vestments, and very

shortly afterwards Sir Buster Brown, the Chairman of the Quarter Sessions, expresses his opinion pretty freely of Robinson in his magisterial capacity, only in his turn to receive a most unexampled wiggling from Her Majesty's judge, Baron Muddlebone, for not showing him that respect he was accustomed to receive from the High Sheriff of the county. And even over the august person of the judge himself there hangs the fear of the only thing that he cannot commit for contempt, public opinion. Justice! why, the world is full of it, only it is mostly built upon a foundation of wrong.

Lady Bellamy found George sitting in the dining-room beside the safe that had so greatly interested her husband. It was open, and he was reading a selection from the bundle of letters which the reader may remember having seen in his hands before.

"How do, Anne?" he said, without rising. "You look very handsome this morning. I never saw a woman wear better."

She vouchsafed no reply to his greeting, but turned as pale as death.

"What!" she said, huskily, pointing with her finger to the letters in his hand, "what are you doing with those letters?"

"Bravo, Anne; quite tragic. What a Lady Macbeth you would make! Come quote, 'All the perfumes of Araby will not sweeten this little hand.

Oh, oh, oh!' Go on."

"What are you doing with those letters?"

"Have you never broken a dog by showing him the whip, Anne? I have got something to ask of you, and I wish to get you into a generous frame of mind first. Listen now, I am going to read you a few extracts from a past that is so vividly recorded here."

She sank into a chair, hid her face in her hands, and groaned. George, whose own features betrayed a certain nervousness, took a yellow sheet of paper, and began to read.

"Do you know how old I am to-day? Nineteen, and I have been married a year and a half. Ah! what a happy lass I was before I married; how they worshipped me in my old home! "Queen Anne," they always called me. Well, they are dead now, and pray God they sleep so sound that they can neither hear nor see. Yes, a year and a half--a year of happiness, half a year of hell; happiness whilst I did not know you, hell since I saw your face. What secret spring of wickedness did you touch in my heart? I never had a thought of wrong before you came. But when I first set eyes upon your face, I felt some strange change come over me: I recognized my evil destiny. How you discovered my fascination, how you led me on to evil, you best know. I am no coward, I do not wish to excuse myself, but sometimes I think that you have much to answer for, George. Hark, I hear my baby crying, my beautiful boy with his father's eyes. Do you know, I believe that the child has

grown afraid of me: it beats at me with its tiny hands. I think that my very dog dislikes me now. They know me as I am; Nature tells them; everybody knows me except _him_. He will come in presently from visiting his sick and poor, and kiss me and call me his sweet wife, and I shall act the living lie. Oh! God, I cannot bear it much longer----'

"There is more of the same sort," remarked George, coolly. "It affords a most interesting study of mental anatomy, but I have no time to read more of it. We will pass on to another."

Lady Bellamy did not move; she sat trembling a little, her face buried in her hands.

He took up a second letter and began to read a marked passage.

"The die is cast, I will come; I can no longer resist your influence; it grows stronger every day, and now it makes me a murderess, for the shock will kill him. And yet I am tired of the sameness and smallness of my life; my mind is too big to be cramped in such narrow fetters.'

"That extract is really very funny," said George, critically. "But don't look depressed, Anne, I am only going to trouble you with one more dated a year or so later. Listen.

"I have several times seen the man you sent me; he is a fool and

contemptible in appearance, and, worst of all, shows signs of falling in love with me; but, if you wish it, I will go through the marriage ceremony with him, poor little dupe! You will not marry me yourself, and I would do more than that to keep near you; indeed, I have no choice, I must keep near you. I went to the Zoological Gardens the other day and saw a rattlesnake fed upon a live rabbit; the poor thing had ample room to run away in, but could not, it was fascinated, and sat still and screamed. At last the snake struck it, and I thought that its eyes looked like yours. I am as helpless as that poor animal, and you are much more cruel than the snake. And yet my mind is infinitely stronger than your own in every way. I cannot understand it. What is the source of your power over me? But I am quite reckless now, so what does it matter? I will do anything that does not put me within reach of the law. You know that my husband is dead. I knew that he would die; he expired with my name upon his lips. The child, too, I hear, died in a fit of croup; the nurse had gone out, and there was no one to look after it. Upon my word, I may well be reckless, for there is no forgiveness for such as you and I. As for little B----, as I think I told you, I will lead him on and marry him: at any rate, I will make his fortune for him: I must devote myself to something, and ambition is more absorbing than anything else--at least, I shall rise to something great. Good-night; I don't know which aches most, my head or my heart.'

"Now that extract would be interesting reading to Bellamy, would it not?"

Here she suddenly sprang forward and snatched at the letter. But George was too quick for her; he flung it into the safe by his side, and swung the heavy lid to.

"No, no, my dear Anne, that property is too valuable to be parted with except for a consideration."

Her attempt frustrated, she dropped back into her chair.

"What are you torturing me for?" she asked, hoarsely. "Have you any object in dragging up the ghost of that dead past, or is it merely for amusement."

"Did I not tell you that I had a favour to ask of you, and wished to get you into a proper frame of mind first?"

"A favour. You mean that you have some wickedness in hand that you are too great a coward to execute yourself. Out with it; I know you too well to be shocked."

"Oh, very well. You saw Angela Caresfoot, Philip's daughter, here yesterday."

"Yes, I saw her."

"Very good. I mean to marry her, and you must manage it for me."

Lady Bellamy sat quite still, and made no answer.

"You will now," continued George, relieved to find that he had not provoked the outburst he had expected, "understand why I read you those extracts. I am thoroughly determined upon marrying that girl at whatever cost, and I see very clearly that I shall not be able to do so without your help. With your help, the matter will be easy; for no obstacle, except the death of the girl herself, can prevail against your iron determination and unbounded fertility of resource."

"And if I refuse?"

"I must have read those extracts to very little purpose for you to talk about refusing. If you refuse, the pangs of conscience will overcome me, and I shall feel obliged to place these letters, and more especially those referring to himself, in the hands of your husband. Of course it will, for my own sake, be unpleasant to me to have to do so, but I can easily travel for a year or two till the talk has blown over. For you it will be different. Bellamy has no cause to love you now; judge what he will feel when he knows all the truth. He will scarcely keep the story to himself, and, even were he to do so, it could easily be set about in other ways, and, in either case, you will be a ruined woman, and all that you have toiled and schemed for for twenty years will be snatched from you in an instant. If, on the other

hand, you do not refuse, and I cannot believe that you will, I will on my wedding-day burn these uncomfortable records before your eyes, or, if you prefer it, you shall burn them yourself."

"You have only seen this girl once; is it possible that you are in earnest in wishing to marry her?"

"Do you think that I should go through this scene by way of a joke? I never was so much in earnest in my life before. I am in love with her, I tell you, as much in love as though I had known her for years. What happened to you with reference to me has happened to me with reference to her, or something very like it, and marry her I must and will."

Lady Bellamy, as she heard these words, rose from her chair and flung herself on the ground before him, clasping his knees with her hands.

"Oh, George, George!" she cried, in a broken voice, "have some little pity; do not force me to do this unnatural thing. Is your heart a stone, or are you altogether a devil, that by such cruel threats you can drive me into becoming the instrument of my own shame? I know what I am, none better: but for whose sake did I become so? Surely, George, I have some claim on your compassion, if I have none on your love. Think again, George; and, if you will not give her up, choose some other means to compass this poor girl's ruin."

"Get up, Anne, and don't talk sentimental rubbish. Not but what," he

added, with a sneer, "it is rather amusing to hear you pitying your successful rival."

She sprang to her feet, all the softness and entreaty gone from her face, which was instead now spread with her darkest and most vindictive look.

"_I_ pity her!" she said. "I hate her. Look you, if I have to do this, my only consolation will be in knowing that what I do will drag my successor down below my own level. I suffer; she shall suffer more; I know you a fiend, she shall find a whole hell with you; she is purer and better than I have ever been; soon you shall make her worse than I have dreamt of being. Her purity shall be dishonoured, her love betrayed, her life reduced to such chaos that she shall cease to believe even in her God, and in return for these things I will give her--_you_. Your new plaything shall pass through my mill, George Caresfoot, before ever she comes to yours; and on her I will repay with interest all that I have suffered at your hands;" and, exhausted with the fierceness of her own invective and the violence of conflicting passions, she sank back into her chair.

"Bravo, Anne! quite in your old style. I daresay that the young lady will require a little moulding, and she could not be in better hands; but mind, no tricks--I am not going to be cheated out of my bride."

"You need not fear, George; I shall not murder her. I do not believe

in violence; it is the last resort of fools. If I did, you would not be alive now."

George laughed a little uneasily.

"Well, we are good friends again, so there is no need to talk of such things," he said. "The campaign will not be by any means an easy one-- there are many obstacles in the way, and I don't think that my intended has taken a particular fancy to me. You will have to work for your letters, Anne; but first of all take a day or two to think it over, and make a plan of the campaign. And now good-bye; I have got a bad headache, and am going to lie down."

She rose, and went without another word; but all necessity for setting about her shameful task was soon postponed by news that reached her the next morning, to the effect that George Caresfoot was seriously ill.