CHAPTER LIX

The news of George Caresfoot's tragic death was soon common property, and following as it did so hard upon his marriage, which now was becoming known, and within a few hours of the destruction of his house by fire, it caused no little excitement. It cannot be said that the general feeling was one of very great regret; it was not. George Caresfoot had commanded deference as a rich man, but he certainly had not won affection. Still his fate excited general interest and sympathy, though some people were louder in their regrets over the death of such a plucky dog as Aleck, than over that of the man he killed, but then these had a personal dislike of George. When, however, it came to be rumoured that the dog had attacked George because George had struck the dog's mistress, general sympathy veered decidedly towards the dog. By-and-by, as some of the true facts of the case came out, namely, that Angela Caresfoot had gone mad, that her lover, who was supposed to be dead, had been seen in Rewtham on the evening of the wedding, that the news of Mr. Heigham's death had been concocted to bring about the marriage, and last, but not least, that the Isleworth estates had passed into the possession of Philip Caresfoot, public opinion grew very excited, and the dog Aleck was well spoken of.

When Sir John Bellamy stepped out on the platform at Roxham on his return from London that day, his practised eye saw at once that something unusual had occurred. A group of county magistrates

returning from quarter sessions were talking excitedly together whilst waiting for their train. He knew them all well, but at first they seemed inclined to let him pass without speaking to him. Presently, however, one of them turned, and spoke to him.

"Have you heard about this, Bellamy?"

"No; what?"

"George Caresfoot is dead; killed by a bulldog, or something. They say he was thrashing the girl he married yesterday, his cousin's daughter, with a whip, and the dog made for him, and they both fell into the water together and were drowned. The girl has gone mad."

"Good heavens, you don't say so!"

"Yes, I do, though; and I'll tell you what it is, Bellamy, they say that you and your wife went to Madeira and trumped up a story about her lover's death in order to take the girl in. I tell you this as an old friend."

"What? I certainly went to Madeira, and I saw young Heigham there, but I never trumped up any story about his death. I never mentioned him to Angela Caresfoot for two reasons, first, because I have not come across her, and secondly, because I understood that Philip Caresfoot did not wish it."

"Well, I am glad to hear it, for your sake; but I have just seen Fraser, and he tells me that Lady Bellamy told the girl of this young Heigham's death in his own presence, and, what is more, he showed me a letter they found in her dress purporting to have been written by him on his death-bed which your wife gave her."

"Of what Lady Bellamy has or has not said or done, I know nothing. I have no control over her actions."

"Well, I should advise you to look into the business, because it will all come out at the inquest," and they separated.

Sir John drove homewards, thoughtful, but by no means unhappy. The news of George's agonizing death was balm to him, he only regretted that he had not been there--somewhere well out of the way of the dog, up a tree, for instance--to see it.

As soon as he got home, he sent a message to Lady Bellamy to say he wished to speak to her. Then he seated himself at his writing-desk, and waited. Presently he heard his wife's firm step upon the stairs. He rubbed his dry hands, and smiled a half frightened, wicked little smile.

"At last," he said. "And now for revenge."

She entered the room, looking rather pale, but calm and commanding as ever.

"So you have come back," she said.

"Yes. Have you heard the news? _Your flame_, George Caresfoot, is dead."

"I knew that he was dead. How did he die?"

"Who told you he was dead?"

"No one, I knew it; I told him he would die last night, and I felt him die this morning. Did she kill him or did Arthur Heigham?"

"Neither, that bulldog flew at him and he fell into the lake."

"Oh, I suppose Angela set it on. I told him that she would win. You remember the picture falling in the study at Isleworth. It has been a true omen, you see."

"Angela is mad. The story is all over the country and travelling like wild-fire. The letter you forged has been found. Heigham was down here this morning and has gone again, and you, Lady Bellamy, are a disgraced and ruined woman."

She did not flinch a muscle.

"I know it, it is the result of pitting myself against that girl; but pray, Sir John, what are you? Was it not you who devised the scheme?"

"You are right, I did, to trap two fools. Anne, I have waited twenty years, but you have met your master at last."

Lady Bellamy made a slight exclamation and relapsed into silence.

"My plot has worked well. Already one of you is dead, and for you a fate is reserved that is worse than death. You are henceforth a penniless outcast, left at forty-two to the tender mercies of the wide world."

"Explain yourself a little."

"With pleasure. For years I have submitted to your contumely, longing to be revenged, waiting to be revenged. You thought me a fool, I know, and compared with you I am; but you do not understand what an amount of hatred even a fool is capable of. For twenty years, Lady Bellamy, I have hated you, you will never know how much, though perhaps what I am going to say may give you some idea. I very well knew what terms you were on with George Caresfoot, you never took any pains to hide them from me, you only hid the proofs. I soon discovered indeed that your marriage to me was nothing but a blind, that I was being used as a

screen forsooth. But your past I could never fathom. I don't look like a revengeful man, but for all that I have for years sought many ways to ruin you both, yet from one thing and another they all failed, till a blessed chance made that brute's blind passion the instrument of his own destruction, and put you into my hands. You little thought when you told me all that story, and begged my advice, how I was revelling in the sense that, proud woman as you are, it must have been an agony of humiliation for you to have to tell it. It was an instructive scene that, it assured me of what I suspected before that George Caresfoot must have you bound to him by some stronger ties than those of affection, that he must hold you in a grip of iron. It made me think, too, that if by any means I could acquire the same power, I too should be able to torture you."

For the first time Lady Bellamy looked up.

"Am I tiring you," he said, politely, "or shall I go on?"

"Go on."

"With your permission, I will ring for a glass of sherry--no, claret, the day is too hot for sherry," and he rang.

The claret was brought and he drank a glass, remarking with an affectation of coolness that it was a sound wine for a pound a dozen; then he proceeded.

"The first thing I have to call your attention to is this Arthur Heigham plot. At first it may appear that I am involved with you; I am not. There is not, now that George Caresfoot is dead, one tittle of evidence against me except your own, and who will believe _you?_ You are inculpated up to the eyes; you delivered the forged letter, I can prove that you cozened the ring out of Heigham, and you told Philip: there is no escape for you, and I have already taken an opportunity to renounce any responsibility for your acts. At the inquest I shall appear to give evidence against you, and then I shall abandon you to your fate."

"Is that all?"

"No, woman. _I have your letters!_"

She sprang up with a little scream and stood over him with dilated eyes. Sir John leaned back in his chair, rubbed his hands, and watched her tortured face with evident satisfaction.

"Yes, you may well scream," he said, "for I not only possess them, but I have read and re-read them. I know all your story, the name of the husband you deserted and of the child who died of your neglect. I have even sent an agent to identify the localities. Yes, you may well scream, for I have read them all, and really they are most instructive documents, and romantic enough for a novel; such fire, such passionate

invective, such wild despair. But, since I learnt how and why you married me, I will tell you what I have made up my mind to do. I am going after the inquest to turn you out of this house, and give you a pittance to live on so long as you remain here. I wish you to become a visible moral, a walking monument of disgrace in the neighbourhood you ruled. Should you attempt to escape me, the payment will be stopped; should you obtain employment, your character shall be exposed. At every turn you shall be struck down till you learn to kiss the hand that strikes you and beg for pity on your knees. My revenge, Anne, shall be to break your spirit."

"And are you not perhaps afraid that I may turn upon you? You know me to be a woman of strong will and many resources, some of which you do not even understand."

"No, I am not afraid, because I still have a reserve force; I still hold the letters that I stole two days ago; and, even should you murder me, I have left directions that will ensure your exposure."

A pause ensued.

"Have you nothing more to say?" he said, at last.

"Nothing."

"Supposing, Anne, that I were to tell you that I have been trying to

frighten you, and that if you were to go down on your knees before me now, and beg my forgiveness, I would forgive you--no, not forgive you, but let you off with easier terms--would you do it?"

"No, John, I would not. Once I went on my knees to a man, and I have not forgotten the lesson he taught me. Do your worst."

"Then you understand my terms, and accept them?"

"Understand them! yes. I understand that you are a little-minded man, and, like all little-minded men, cruel, and desirous of exacting the uttermost farthing in the way of revenge, forgetting that you owe everything to me. I do not wish to exculpate myself, mind you. Looking at the case from your point of view, and in your own petty way, I can almost sympathize with you. But as for accepting your terms--do you know me so little as to think that I could do so? Have you not learnt that I may break, but shall never bend? And, if I chose now to face the matter out, I should beat you, even now when you hold all the cards in your hand; but I am weary of it all, especially weary of you and your little ways, and I do not choose. You will injure me enough to make the great success I planned for us both impossible, and I am tired of everything except the success which crowns a struggle. Well, I have ways of escape you know nothing of. Do your worst; I am not afraid of you;" and she leaned back easily in her chair, and looked at him with wearied and indifferent eyes.

Little Sir John ground his teeth, and twisted his pippen-like face into a scowl that looked absurdly out of place on anything so jovial.

"Curse you," he said, "even now you dare to defy me. Do you know, you woman fiend, that at this moment I almost think I love you?"

"Of course I know it. If you did not love me, you would not take all this trouble to try to crush me. But this conversation is very long; shall we put an end to it?"

Sir John sat still a moment, thinking, and gazing at the splendid Sphinx-browed creature before him with a mixture of hatred and respect. Then he rose, and spoke.

"Anne, you are a wonderful woman! I cannot do it, I cannot utterly ruin you. You must be exposed--I could not help that, if I would--and we must separate, but I will be generous to you; I will allow you five hundred a year, and you shall live where you like. You shall not starve."

She laughed a little as she answered.

"I am starving now: it is long past luncheon time. As for your five hundred a year that you will give me out of the three or four thousand I have given you, I care nothing for it. I tell you I am tired of it all, and I never felt more superior to you than I do now in the moment

of your triumph. It wants a stronger hand than yours to humble me. I may be a bad woman, I daresay I am, but you will find, too late, that there are few in the world like me. For years you have shone with a reflected light; when the light goes out, you will go out too. Get back into your native mud, the mental slime out of which I picked you, contemptible creature that you are! and, when you have lost me, learn to measure the loss by the depths to which you will sink. I reject your offers. I mock at your threats, for they will recoil on your own head. I despise you, and I have done with you. John Bellamy, good-bye;" and, with a proud curtsey, she swept from the room.

That evening it was rumoured that Sir John Bellamy had separated from his wife, owing to circumstances which had come to his knowledge in connection with George Caresfoot's death.