

CHAPTER XX. STALLBRIDGE-LE-CARTHEW.

Long before I was awake, the shyster had disappeared, leaving his bill unpaid. I did not need to inquire where he was gone, I knew too well, I knew there was nothing left me but to follow; and about ten in the morning, set forth in a gig for Stallbridge-le-Carthew.

The road, for the first quarter of the way, deserts the valley of the river, and crosses the summit of a chalk-down, grazed over by flocks of sheep and haunted by innumerable larks. It was a pleasant but a vacant scene, arousing but not holding the attention; and my mind returned to the violent passage of the night before. My thought of the man I was pursuing had been greatly changed. I conceived of him, somewhere in front of me, upon his dangerous errand, not to be turned aside, not to be stopped, by either fear or reason. I had called him a ferret; I conceived him now as a mad dog. Methought he would run, not walk; methought, as he ran, that he would bark and froth at the lips; methought, if the great wall of China were to rise across his path, he would attack it with his nails.

Presently the road left the down, returned by a precipitous descent into the valley of the Stall, and ran thenceforward among enclosed fields and under the continuous shade of trees. I was told we had now entered on the Carthew property. By and by, a battlemented wall appeared on the left hand, and a little after I had my first glimpse of the mansion. It

stood in a hollow of a bosky park, crowded to a degree that surprised and even displeased me, with huge timber and dense shrubberies of laurel and rhododendron. Even from this low station and the thronging neighbourhood of the trees, the pile rose conspicuous like a cathedral. Behind, as we continued to skirt the park wall, I began to make out a straggling town of offices which became conjoined to the rear with those of the home farm. On the left was an ornamental water sailed in by many swans. On the right extended a flower garden, laid in the old manner, and at this season of the year, as brilliant as stained glass. The front of the house presented a facade of more than sixty windows, surmounted by a formal pediment and raised upon a terrace. A wide avenue, part in gravel, part in turf, and bordered by triple alleys, ran to the great double gateways. It was impossible to look without surprise on a place that had been prepared through so many generations, had cost so many tons of minted gold, and was maintained in order by so great a company of emulous servants. And yet of these there was no sign but the perfection of their work. The whole domain was drawn to the line and weeded like the front plot of some suburban amateur; and I looked in vain for any belated gardener, and listened in vain for any sounds of labour. Some lowing of cattle and much calling of birds alone disturbed the stillness, and even the little hamlet, which clustered at the gates, appeared to hold its breath in awe of its great neighbour, like a troop of children who should have strayed into a king's anteroom.

The Carthew Arms, the small but very comfortable inn, was a mere appendage and outpost of the family whose name it bore. Engraved

portraits of by-gone Carthews adorned the walls; Fielding Carthew, Recorder of the city of London; Major-General John Carthew in uniform, commanding some military operations; the Right Honourable Bailley Carthew, Member of Parliament for Stallbridge, standing by a table and brandishing a document; Singleton Carthew, Esquire, represented in the foreground of a herd of cattle--doubtless at the desire of his tenantry, who had made him a compliment of this work of art; and the Venerable Archdeacon Carthew, D.D., LL.D., A.M., laying his hand on the head of a little child in a manner highly frigid and ridiculous. So far as my memory serves me, there were no other pictures in this exclusive hostelry; and I was not surprised to learn that the landlord was an ex-butler, the landlady an ex-lady's-maid, from the great house; and that the bar-parlour was a sort of perquisite of former servants.

To an American, the sense of the domination of this family over so considerable a tract of earth was even oppressive; and as I considered their simple annals, gathered from the legends of the engravings, surprise began to mingle with my disgust. "Mr. Recorder" doubtless occupies an honourable post; but I thought that, in the course of so many generations, one Carthew might have clambered higher. The soldier had stuck at Major-General; the churchman bloomed unremarked in an archidiaconate; and though the Right Honourable Bailley seemed to have sneaked into the privy council, I have still to learn what he did when he had got there. Such vast means, so long a start, and such a modest standard of achievement, struck in me a strong sense of the dulness of that race.

I found that to come to the hamlet and not visit the Hall, would be regarded as a slight. To feed the swans, to see the peacocks and the Raphaels--for these commonplace people actually possessed two Raphaels--to risk life and limb among a famous breed of cattle called the Carthew Chillinghams, and to do homage to the sire (still living) of Donibristle, a renowned winner of the oaks: these, it seemed, were the inevitable stations of the pilgrimage. I was not so foolish as to resist, for I might have need before I was done of general good-will; and two pieces of news fell in which changed my resignation to alacrity. It appeared in the first place, that Mr. Norris was from home "travelling "; in the second, that a visitor had been before me and already made the tour of the Carthew curiosities. I thought I knew who this must be; I was anxious to learn what he had done and seen; and fortune so far favoured me that the under-gardener singled out to be my guide had already performed the same function for my predecessor.

"Yes, sir," he said, "an American gentleman right enough. At least, I don't think he was quite a gentleman, but a very civil person."

The person, it seems, had been civil enough to be delighted with the Carthew Chillinghams, to perform the whole pilgrimage with rising admiration, and to have almost prostrated himself before the shrine of Donibristle's sire.

"He told me, sir," continued the gratified under-gardener, "that he had

often read of the 'stately 'omes of England,' but ours was the first he had the chance to see. When he came to the 'ead of the long alley, he fetched his breath. 'This is indeed a lordly domain!' he cries. And it was natural he should be interested in the place, for it seems Mr. Carthew had been kind to him in the States. In fact, he seemed a grateful kind of person, and wonderful taken up with flowers."

I heard this story with amazement. The phrases quoted told their own tale; they were plainly from the shyster's mint. A few hours back I had seen him a mere bedlamite and fit for a strait-waistcoat; he was penniless in a strange country; it was highly probable he had gone without breakfast; the absence of Norris must have been a crushing blow; the man (by all reason) should have been despairing. And now I heard of him, clothed and in his right mind, deliberate, insinuating, admiring vistas, smelling flowers, and talking like a book. The strength of character implied amazed and daunted me.

"This is curious," I said to the under-gardener. "I have had the pleasure of some acquaintance with Mr. Carthew myself; and I believe none of our western friends ever were in England. Who can this person be? He couldn't--no, that's impossible, he could never have had the impudence. His name was not Bellairs?"

"I didn't 'ear the name, sir. Do you know anything against him?" cried my guide.

"Well," said I, "he is certainly not the person Carthew would like to have here in his absence."

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed the gardener. "He was so pleasant spoken, too; I thought he was some form of a schoolmaster. Perhaps, sir, you wouldn't mind going right up to Mr. Denman? I recommended him to Mr. Denman, when he had done the grounds. Mr. Denman is our butler, sir," he added.

The proposal was welcome, particularly as affording me a graceful retreat from the neighbourhood of the Carthew Chillinghams; and, giving up our projected circuit, we took a short cut through the shrubbery and across the bowling green to the back quarters of the Hall.

The bowling green was surrounded by a great hedge of yew, and entered by an archway in the quick. As we were issuing from this passage, my conductor arrested me.

"The Honourable Lady Ann Carthew," he said, in an august whisper. And looking over his shoulder, I was aware of an old lady with a stick, hobbling somewhat briskly along the garden path. She must have been extremely handsome in her youth; and even the limp with which she walked could not deprive her of an unusual and almost menacing dignity of bearing. Melancholy was impressed besides on every feature, and her eyes, as she looked straight before her, seemed to contemplate misfortune.

"She seems sad," said I, when she had hobbled past and we had resumed our walk.

"She enjoy rather poor spirits, sir," responded the under-gardener.

"Mr. Carthew--the old gentleman, I mean--died less than a year ago; Lord Tillibody, her ladyship's brother, two months after; and then there was the sad business about the young gentleman. Killed in the 'unting-field, sir; and her ladyship's favourite. The present Mr. Norris has never been so equally."

"So I have understood," said I, persistently, and (I think) gracefully pursuing my inquiries and fortifying my position as a family friend.

"Dear, dear, how sad! And has this change--poor Carthew's return, and all--has this not mended matters?"

"Well, no, sir, not a sign of it," was the reply. "Worse, we think, than ever."

"Dear, dear!" said I again.

"When Mr. Norris arrived, she DID seem glad to see him," he pursued; "and we were all pleased, I'm sure; for no one knows the young gentleman but what likes him. Ah, sir, it didn't last long! That very night they had a talk, and fell out or something; her ladyship took on most painful; it was like old days, but worse. And the next morning Mr.

Norris was off again upon his travels. 'Denman,' he said to Mr. Denman, 'Denman, I'll never come back,' he said, and shook him by the 'and. I wouldn't be saying all this to a stranger, sir," added my informant, overcome with a sudden fear lest he had gone too far.

He had indeed told me much, and much that was unsuspected by himself. On that stormy night of his return, Carthew had told his story; the old lady had more upon her mind than mere bereavements; and among the mental pictures on which she looked, as she walked staring down the path, was one of Midway Island and the Flying Scud.

Mr. Denman heard my inquiries with discomposure, but informed me the shyster was already gone.

"Gone?" cried I. "Then what can he have come for? One thing I can tell you, it was not to see the house."

"I don't see it could have been anything else," replied the butler.

"You may depend upon it it was," said I. "And whatever it was, he has got it. By the way, where is Mr. Carthew at present? I was sorry to find he was from home."

"He is engaged in travelling, sir," replied the butler, dryly.

"Ah, bravo!" cried I. "I laid a trap for you there, Mr. Denman. Now I need not ask you; I am sure you did not tell this prying stranger."

"To be sure not, sir," said the butler.

I went through the form of "shaking him by the 'and"--like Mr. Norris--not, however, with genuine enthusiasm. For I had failed ingloriously to get the address for myself; and I felt a sure conviction that Bellairs had done better, or he had still been here and still cultivating Mr. Denman.

I had escaped the grounds and the cattle; I could not escape the house. A lady with silver hair, a slender silver voice, and a stream of insignificant information not to be diverted, led me through the picture gallery, the music-room, the great dining-room, the long drawing-room, the Indian room, the theatre, and every corner (as I thought) of that interminable mansion. There was but one place reserved; the garden-room, whither Lady Ann had now retired. I paused a moment on the outside of the door, and smiled to myself. The situation was indeed strange, and these thin boards divided the secret of the Flying Scud.

All the while, as I went to and fro, I was considering the visit and departure of Bellairs. That he had got the address, I was quite certain: that he had not got it by direct questioning, I was convinced; some ingenuity, some lucky accident, had served him. A similar chance, an equal ingenuity, was required; or I was left helpless, the ferret must

run down his prey, the great oaks fall, the Raphaels be scattered, the house let to some stockbroker suddenly made rich, and the name which now filled the mouths of five or six parishes dwindle to a memory. Strange that such great matters, so old a mansion, a family so ancient and so dull, should come to depend for perpetuity upon the intelligence, the discretion, and the cunning of a Latin-Quarter student! What Bellairs had done, I must do likewise. Chance or ingenuity, ingenuity or chance--so I continued to ring the changes as I walked down the avenue, casting back occasional glances at the red brick facade and the twinkling windows of the house. How was I to command chance? where was I to find the ingenuity?

These reflections brought me to the door of the inn. And here, pursuant to my policy of keeping well with all men, I immediately smoothed my brow, and accepted (being the only guest in the house) an invitation to dine with the family in the bar-parlour. I sat down accordingly with Mr. Higgs the ex-butler, Mrs. Higgs the ex-lady's-maid, and Miss Agnes Higgs their frowsy-headed little girl, the least promising and (as the event showed) the most useful of the lot. The talk ran endlessly on the great house and the great family; the roast beef, the Yorkshire pudding, the jam-roll, and the cheddar cheese came and went, and still the stream flowed on; near four generations of Carthews were touched upon without eliciting one point of interest; and we had killed Mr. Henry in "the 'unting-field," with a vast elaboration of painful circumstance, and buried him in the midst of a whole sorrowing county, before I could so

much as manage to bring upon the stage my intimate friend, Mr. Norris. At the name, the ex-butler grew diplomatic, and the ex-lady's-maid tender. He was the only person of the whole featureless series who seemed to have accomplished anything worth mention; and his achievements, poor dog, seemed to have been confined to going to the devil and leaving some regrets. He had been the image of the Right Honourable Bailley, one of the lights of that dim house, and a career of distinction had been predicted of him in consequence almost from the cradle. But before he was out of long clothes, the cloven foot began to show; he proved to be no Carthew, developed a taste for low pleasures and bad company, went birdnesting with a stable-boy before he was eleven, and when he was near twenty, and might have been expected to display at least some rudiments of the family gravity, rambled the country over with a knapsack, making sketches and keeping company in wayside inns. He had no pride about him, I was told; he would sit down with any man; and it was somewhat woundingly implied that I was indebted to this peculiarity for my own acquaintance with the hero. Unhappily, Mr. Norris was not only eccentric, he was fast. His debts were still remembered at the University; still more, it appeared, the highly humorous circumstances attending his expulsion. "He was always fond of his jest," commented Mrs. Higgs.

"That he were!" observed her lord.

But it was after he went into the diplomatic service that the real trouble began.

"It seems, sir, that he went the pace extraordinary," said the ex-butler, with a solemn gusto.

"His debts were somethink awful," said the lady's-maid. "And as nice a young gentleman all the time as you would wish to see!"

"When word came to Mr. Carthew's ears, the turn up was 'orrible," continued Mr. Higgs. "I remember it as if it was yesterday. The bell was rung after her la'ship was gone, which I answered it myself, supposing it were the coffee. There was Mr. Carthew on his feet. 'Iggs,' he says, pointing with his stick, for he had a turn of the gout, 'order the dog-cart instantly for this son of mine which has disgraced hissself.' Mr. Norris say nothink: he sit there with his 'ead down, making belief to be looking at a walnut. You might have bowled me over with a straw," said Mr. Higgs.

"Had he done anything very bad?" I asked.

"Not he, Mr. Dodsley!" cried the lady--it was so she had conceived my name. "He never did anythink to all really wrong in his poor life. The 'ole affair was a disgrace. It was all rank favouritising."

"Mrs. 'Iggs! Mrs. 'Iggs!" cried the butler warningly.

"Well, what do I care?" retorted the lady, shaking her ringlets. "You

know it was yourself, Mr. 'Iggs, and so did every member of the staff."

While I was getting these facts and opinions, I by no means neglected the child. She was not attractive; but fortunately she had reached the corrupt age of seven, when half a crown appears about as large as a saucer and is fully as rare as the dodo. For a shilling down, sixpence in her money-box, and an American gold dollar which I happened to find in my pocket, I bought the creature soul and body. She declared her intention to accompany me to the ends of the earth; and had to be chidden by her sire for drawing comparisons between myself and her uncle William, highly damaging to the latter.

Dinner was scarce done, the cloth was not yet removed, when Miss Agnes must needs climb into my lap with her stamp album, a relic of the generosity of Uncle William. There are few things I despise more than old stamps, unless perhaps it be crests; for cattle (from the Carthew Chillinghams down to the old gate-keeper's milk-cow in the lane) contempt is far from being my first sentiment. But it seemed I was doomed to pass that day in viewing curiosities, and smothering a yawn, I devoted myself once more to tread the well-known round. I fancy Uncle William must have begun the collection himself and tired of it, for the book (to my surprise) was quite respectably filled. There were the varying shades of the English penny, Russians with the coloured heart, old undecipherable Thurn-und-Taxis, obsolete triangular Cape of Good Hopes, Swan Rivers with the Swan, and Guianas with the sailing ship. Upon all these I looked with the eyes of a fish and the spirit of a

sheep; I think indeed I was at times asleep; and it was probably in one of these moments that I capsized the album, and there fell from the end of it, upon the floor, a considerable number of what I believe to be called "exchanges."

Here, against all probability, my chance had come to me; for as I gallantly picked them up, I was struck with the disproportionate amount of five-sous French stamps. Some one, I reasoned, must write very regularly from France to the neighbourhood of Stallbridge-le-Carthew. Could it be Norris? On one stamp I made out an initial C; upon a second I got as far as CH; beyond which point, the postmark used was in every instance undecipherable. CH, when you consider that about a quarter of the towns in France begin with "chateau," was an insufficient clue; and I promptly annexed the plainest of the collection in order to consult the post-office.

The wretched infant took me in the fact. "Naughty man, to 'teal my 'tamp!" she cried; and when I would have brazened it off with a denial, recovered and displayed the stolen article.

My position was now highly false; and I believe it was in mere pity that Mrs. Higgs came to my rescue with a welcome proposition. If the gentleman was really interested in stamps, she said, probably supposing me a monomaniac on the point, he should see Mr. Denman's album. Mr. Denman had been collecting forty years, and his collection was said to be worth a mint of money. "Agnes," she went on, "if you were a kind

little girl, you would run over to the 'All, tell Mr. Denman there's a connoisseur in the 'ouse, and ask him if one of the young gentlemen might bring the album down."

"I should like to see his exchanges too," I cried, rising to the occasion. "I may have some of mine in my pocket-book and we might trade."

Half an hour later Mr. Denman arrived himself with a most unconscionable volume under his arm. "Ah, sir," he cried, "when I 'eard you was a collector, I dropped all. It's a saying of mine, Mr. Dodsley, that collecting stamps makes all collectors kin. It's a bond, sir; it creates a bond."

Upon the truth of this, I cannot say; but there is no doubt that the attempt to pass yourself off for a collector falsely creates a precarious situation.

"Ah, here's the second issue!" I would say, after consulting the legend at the side. "The pink--no, I mean the mauve--yes, that's the beauty of this lot. Though of course, as you say," I would hasten to add, "this yellow on the thin paper is more rare."

Indeed I must certainly have been detected, had I not plied Mr. Denman in self-defence with his favourite liquor--a port so excellent that it could never have ripened in the cellar of the Carthew Arms, but must

have been transported, under cloud of night, from the neighbouring vaults of the great house. At each threat of exposure, and in particular whenever I was directly challenged for an opinion, I made haste to fill the butler's glass, and by the time we had got to the exchanges, he was in a condition in which no stamp collector need be seriously feared. God forbid I should hint that he was drunk; he seemed incapable of the necessary liveliness; but the man's eyes were set, and so long as he was suffered to talk without interruption, he seemed careless of my heeding him.

In Mr. Denman's exchanges, as in those of little Agnes, the same peculiarity was to be remarked, an undue preponderance of that despicably common stamp, the French twenty-five centimes. And here joining them in stealthy review, I found the C and the CH; then something of an A just following; and then a terminal Y. Here was also the whole name spelt out to me; it seemed familiar, too; and yet for some time I could not bridge the imperfection. Then I came upon another stamp, in which an L was legible before the Y, and in a moment the word leaped up complete. Chailly, that was the name; Chailly-en-Biere, the post town of Barbizon--ah, there was the very place for any man to hide himself--there was the very place for Mr. Norris, who had rambled over England making sketches--the very place for Goddedaal, who had left a palette-knife on board the Flying Scud. Singular, indeed, that while I was drifting over England with the shyster, the man we were in quest of awaited me at my own ultimate destination.

Whether Mr. Denman had shown his album to Bellairs, whether, indeed, Bellairs could have caught (as I did) this hint from an obliterated postmark, I shall never know, and it mattered not. We were equal now; my task at Stallbridge-le-Carthew was accomplished; my interest in postage-stamps died shamelessly away; the astonished Denman was bowed out; and ordering the horse to be put in, I plunged into the study of the time-table.