

"God forbid!"

"But is that wise? You may be a free woman now, not free merely in the sense of his absence, but for altogether, by his death."

"It is best," she said, "to let sleeping dogs lie. Besides, in what direction could I look for news? He disappeared utterly, leaving not the smallest trace. And it is seven years ago."

"It is some comfort," said Bream, "that the scoundrel committed his greatest villainy just at that moment, and when he thought he was shifting a burden from his shoulders was, in reality, robbing himself of a fortune."

She made no answer to his remark. They had reached the end of a long shaded alley. They turned, and she held out her hand.

"Then—we are friends again, Mr. Bream?"

"We were never anything else," he answered, as he took the proffered hand. "I have never thought of you all the time but with respect and pity. I am glad, gladder than I can tell you, that the need for pity is past, and that you are happy at last."

"Yes," she said, looking wistfully down at the summer snow of acacia leaves with which the path was strewn, "I suppose I am as happy as one has a right to expect to be in this world. But that is enough of me and my affairs. Tell me of yourself. What have you been doing all this long time?"

"Really," he said, "I have nothing to tell. Coming here has been the only event in my life since we last met."

"Well," she said, "I suppose men are like nations—and those are happiest that have no history."

"We all have histories," he said, "of one sort or another. Mine is finished—for the present, at least."

She remembered the words later, though they had little enough meaning for her at the moment. Her other guests came in sight, Mr. Herbert and Sir George Venebles strolling side by side, the latter with Dora perched upon his shoulder, like a tropical bird, busy in weaving wild flowers about his hat.

"There," said Sir George, depositing her on the ground, "you've had a long ride, and I want to talk to Bream. He and I are old friends, you know."

"But I haven't finished the hat," said Dora, pouting, "and I was making it so pretty."

"Very well. There's the hat. Work your sweet will upon it," he continued, taking the curate's arm, and drawing him apart from Mrs. Dartmouth and Mr. Herbert. "Have you any engagement to-night?"

"Nothing that I know of, unless Mr. Herbert should want me."

"Then come over to the Lodge and dine with me, there's a good fellow, and stay till morning. Why on earth you wanted to go and stick yourself into that hole in the village, when you might have come and put up with me, is more than I can understand."

"It is nearer my work, for one thing," said Bream. "I want to get to know my parishioners, and to be within easy call of the vicar, until I have learned the routine of the place. But I'll come over to-night and dine with you."

"Good!" said Sir George, clapping him on the shoulder, "I'll get Mrs. Dartmouth to lend you a horse, and send it back in the morning by a groom. It will be like old times having you about me again, old fellow. I'm very solitary, all alone in that great rambling place since the old man died."

"Solitude," said the curate, "is not an incurable disorder, I should think, for a man with ten thousand a year, and one of the best estates and oldest names in the country."

Sir George made no answer, but flicked at his boot with his riding-whip in an absent-minded fashion.

"You seem to have been getting on very well with Mrs. Dartmouth," he said abruptly. "What do you think of her?"

"She seems a very pleasant, amiable woman," answered Bream, rather constrainedly. "She

bought this place from you, she tells me," he continued, merely for the sake of saying something to continue the conversation.

"Yes," said Sir George. "I sold her the place. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Very pretty."

Their talk languished after this, though they were old and close friends, who had not met for seven years. Bream's mind was busy with the matter of his recent talk with Mrs. Dartmouth, and Sir George walked beside him in a moody silence, slapping his boot at intervals.

"It is time we were going," he said at last, referring to his watch. They turned and rejoined Mrs. Dartmouth.

"Bream is going over to the Lodge to dine with me, sir, if you have no objection," said Sir George to the vicar.

"By no means," said Mr. Herbert. "Our work for the day is over. You will meet me at the school to-morrow morning at eleven, Bream?"

"I am mounted," said Sir George, "and Bream is not. I wonder, Mrs. Dartmouth, if you would lend him a horse until the morning? You could ride him back yourself, Bream."

"I will lend him Jerrica," said Mrs. Dartmouth. "Barbara!" she called across the lawn to the servant, who was clearing away the table under the chestnut tree, "Get Jerrica saddled for Mr. Bream."

They strolled back across the lawn, Dora chatting to Sir George as she added the finishing touches to the decorations of his hat, and getting absent-minded monosyllables in reply.

"There," she said, "now it's lovely. Stoop down and I'll put it on for you."

He stooped, obedient to the small tyrant, and, when she had put on the hat, took her up in his arms and kissed her. His sombre face contrasted oddly with the festive appearance of his headgear.

"What makes you look so solemn?" she asked him.

"Do I look solemn?" he asked in return.

"Oh, dreadful!" said Dora. "I can guess," she added, "shall I? It's because mamma was talking such a long time to the new gentleman, Mr. Bream, instead of to you. I saw you watching them."

Sir George blushed a fiery red, and shot a quick glance at the others to see if they showed signs of having noticed the wisdom of this precocious infant.

"Little girls shouldn't talk nonsense," he said, severely.

"I'm not little," said Dora, "I'm almost grown up. I'm eight. If you call me little again I'll take the flowers out of your hat."

This dread threat brought them to the house. Sir George was glad of the obscurity in the wide hall, which hid his still blushing face, and he lingered there talking a little at random, till Jerrica and his own horse were announced as waiting. Then he gave Dora a final kiss, and shook hands with Mrs. Dartmouth and the vicar.

"You surely are not going to ride home with those flowers in your hat," said the hostess.

"Till I get out of sight of the house," he answered. "It pleases Dora."

She laughed and turned to the curate.

"Dora and I always take tea at five o'clock," she said, "and we shall always be glad to see you."

He thanked her, and rode away with the Baronet. The road was solitary, and they had gone a mile or more before Sir George untwined Dora's garland. Even then he rode on with it in his hand for some distance, and it was with an audible sigh that he let it fall from his fingers to the dust.

CHAPTER VII.

SIR GEORGE.

The two friends rode side by side, in silence for the most part, until they came to Crouchford Lodge, a venerable pile of building, of which the central and oldest portion was Elizabethan, and the two wings of the date of the first Charles and the second George respectively.

It stood on a little eminence (quite a hill it seemed amid the flat Essex meadows) and com-

manded a goodly view of the broad acres which owned Sir George as master.

Dinner that evening was as dull a business as if the two companions, instead of being bosom friends who had not met for years, had been long since bored to death by each other's society, and could find nothing to say. Bream, who had by this time got over his amazement at recognizing his old Westminster parishioner in Mrs. Dartmouth, made several attempts to lead his companion into conversation, but with little avail. Sir George was up for a minute, only to fall back into his uneasy reserve. At last, when coffee had been served, and they were left alone with their cigars, the curate roundly challenged his friend as to the reason of his melancholy.

"I may as well tell you," said Venebles. "One gets a sort of relief sometimes by talking freely. But not here. Let's get out of doors into the fresh air."

They passed out together in the growing moonlight, and the baronet, at first with an obvious effort, but increasing ease as he continued, loosened himself to his old friend.

"You asked me just now," he said, "why I went abroad the year before last and stayed away two months ago. I'll tell you. It was because I had asked Mrs. Dartmouth to be my wife, and she had refused, and I thought that change of scene and occupation might help me to forget her."

"She refused you," repeated Bream.

"Yes."

"Did she give any reason for the refusal?"

"I asked her for a reason. She begged me to let the question go unanswered, but assured me that the reason was sufficient."

"Who is Mrs. Dartmouth?" asked Bream.

It went against the honest openness of his nature to be guilty of even such innocent feigning as this, but he held the woman's secret in trust, and had bound himself in silence. Sir George was his oldest friend, and he must needs show sympathy for him in his trouble.

"She is Mrs. Dartmouth," answered the baronet. "That is all I know, and all I want to know, except for the last five years she has been the only woman in the world to me."

"You know nothing of her antecedents?"

"Nothing whatever. She came here with her child five years ago, and took the farm through an agent. A year later she made personal overtures to buy it. My father was very unwilling to let her go, but I persuaded him, and he gave way. That was the beginning of a misunderstanding between us, which lasted to his death—the only one we ever had together. I was so infatuated with Gillian after my first meeting with her that I couldn't keep away from her, and my constant presence at the farm got to be the talk of the country. There was some scandal about it, I heard—fools about here would talk scandal of an angel, I think."

He paused, angrily striking his boots with his riding-whip.

"Well, it came to my father's ears, and he spoke of it to me, and warned me that I was damaging Mrs. Dartmouth's reputation and hurting my own prospects. He had plans for me. Our neighbour, Sir James Dayne, had an only daughter, and the two estates run side by side. It was the old man's dream to put a ring-fence round them. He told me all this. I don't know what I said, but I remember what I did. I jumped on horseback, and went over to Mrs. Dartmouth, and asked her to marry me. She refused, as I have already told you."

Bream listened, but expressed no surprise. Sir George continued:

"I was like a man dazed for weeks after, and then I had a severe illness—a brain fever. I thought that I should die; but I recovered. My father was very good about it; he did not try to coax me, or press me to obey his wishes in the direct way, for some time. I suppose he saw the case was desperate, and understood that his only chance was to give me time. After a while, he returned to the subject very delicately, and brought Miss Dayne and me together, and encour-