

**Anthony Trollope's
Can You Forgive Her?**

Abridged

Edited by Emma Laybourn

This is a free ebook from www.englishliteratureebooks.com

To return to the table of contents at any time, click on the [↑](#) symbol at the start of each chapter.

Table of Contents

Introduction

- [1. Mr. Vavasor and His Daughter.](#)
- [2.. Lady Macleod.](#)
- [3. John Grey, the Worthy Man.](#)
- [4. George Vavasor, the Wild Man.](#)
- [5. The Balcony at Basle.](#)
- [6. The Bridge over the Rhine.](#)
- [7. Aunt Greenow.](#)
- [8. Mr. Cheesacre.](#)
- [9. The Rivals.](#)
- [10. Nethercoats.](#)
- [11. John Grey Goes to London.](#)
- [12. Mr. George Vavasor at Home.](#)
- [13. Mr. Grimes Gets His Odd Money.](#)
- [14. Alice Vavasor Becomes Troubled.](#)
- [15. Paramount Crescent.](#)
- [16. The Roebury Club.](#)
- [17. Edgehill.](#)
- [18. Alice Vavasor's Great Relations.](#)
- [19. Tribute from Oileymead.](#)
- [20. Which Shall It Be?](#)
- [21. Alice Is Taught to Grow Upwards, Towards the Light.](#)
- [22. Dandy and Flirt.](#)
- [23. Dinner at Matching Priory.](#)
- [24. Three Politicians.](#)
- [25. In Which Much of the History of the Pallisers Is Told.](#)
- [26. Lady Midlothian.](#)
- [27. The Priory Ruins.](#)
- [28. Alice Leaves the Priory.](#)
- [29. Burgo Fitzgerald.](#)
- [30. Containing a Love Letter.](#)
- [31. Among the Fells.](#)
- [32. Containing an Answer to the Love Letter.](#)
- [33. Monkshade.](#)
- [34. Mr. Vavasor Speaks to His Daughter.](#)
- [35. Passion versus Prudence.](#)
- [36. John Grey Goes a Second Time to London.](#)
- [37. Mr. Tombe's Advice.](#)
- [38. The Inn at Shap.](#)
- [39. Mr. Cheesacre's Hospitality.](#)
- [40. Mrs. Greenow's Little Dinner in the Close.](#)
- [41. A Noble Lord Dies.](#)
- [42. Parliament Meets.](#)
- [43. Mrs. Marsham.](#)
- [44. The Election for the Chelsea Districts.](#)
- [45. George Vavasor Takes His Seat.](#)

- [46. A Love Gift.](#)
 - [47. Mr. Cheesacre's Disappointment.](#)
 - [48. Preparations for Lady Monk's Party.](#)
 - [49. How Lady Glencora Went to Lady Monk's Party.](#)
 - [50. How Lady Glencora Came Back from Lady Monk's Party.](#)
 - [51. Bold Speculations on Murder.](#)
 - [52. What Occurred in Suffolk Street, Pall Mall.](#)
 - [53. The Last Will of the Old Squire.](#)
 - [54. Showing How Alice Was Punished.](#)
 - [55. The Will.](#)
 - [56. Another Walk on the Fells.](#)
 - [57. Showing How the Wild Beast Got Himself Back from the Mountains.](#)
 - [58. The Pallisers at Breakfast.](#)
 - [59. The Duke of St. Bungay in Search of a Minister.](#)
 - [60. Alice Vavasor's Name Gets into the Money Market.](#)
 - [61. The Bills Are Made All Right.](#)
 - [62. Going Abroad.](#)
 - [63. Mr. John Grey in Queen Anne Street.](#)
 - [64. The Rocks and Valleys.](#)
 - [65. The First Kiss.](#)
 - [66. Lady Monk's Plan.](#)
 - [67. The Last Kiss.](#)
 - [68. From London to Baden.](#)
 - [69. From Baden to Lucerne.](#)
 - [70. At Lucerne.](#)
 - [71. Showing How George Vavasor Received a Visit.](#)
 - [72. Showing How George Vavasor Paid a Visit.](#)
 - [73. In Which Come Tidings of Great Moment to All Pallisers.](#)
 - [74. Showing What Happened in the Churchyard.](#)
 - [75. Rouge et Noir.](#)
 - [76. The Landlord's Bill.](#)
 - [77. The Travellers Return Home.](#)
 - [78. Mr. Cheesacre's Fate.](#)
 - [79. Diamonds Are Diamonds.](#)
 - [80. The Story Is Finished Within the Halls of the Duke of Omnium.](#)
- [Other abridged books in this series](#)

Introduction

Anthony Trollope (1815 – 1882) was a prolific and popular writer of fiction in the Victorian era. He was born in London; his father was an unsuccessful lawyer and the family was largely supported by his mother Frances, herself an enterprising author.

Anthony began his career working for the Post Office as a clerk, and in 1841 was transferred to Ireland, where he married. He based himself in Ireland for the next eighteen years, although he travelled widely whilst rising in his career.

His first novel was published in 1847; another forty-six were to follow, as well as travel books and biographies. His novels became increasingly popular, until he became a well-known figure in literary society. However, his highest ambition was to stand for Parliament. Back in England, he resigned from the Post Office in 1867 and a year later stood unsuccessfully as a Liberal candidate.

Trollope's novels of contemporary life are wide-ranging, engaging and always humane. His characterisation is realistic and subtly drawn; the greatest interest of many of his books lies in the characters and relationships rather than dramatic plots. He was one of the first authors to write a series of linked books about interconnected characters, first in the Barchester novels and then in the Palliser series. His writing is frequently concerned with politics and ambition – whether the church politics of the Barchester series, or the Parliamentary politics of the Palliser books.

Can You Forgive Her? is the first of the six Palliser novels, and was published in 1864. The *Her* of the title is Alice Vavasor, who is torn between two suitors: her cousin George, who is aiming for a Parliamentary career, and the reclusive John Grey, who wishes for no career at all. Contrasting with Alice's plight is that of her friend Lady Glencora, who has had no choice in her marriage to the earnest politician Plantagenet Palliser and who is still drawn to her former lover. The intertwining fortunes of these two women form the core of the book. A subplot about Alice's aunt, an independent widow, and her hapless suitors, provides comic relief – whilst also making the point that many women in Trollope's society lacked the freedom to decide their own destinies.

Trollope's speed and facility in writing (it took him only months to finish a book) led perhaps inevitably to shortcomings in style. There is much repetition and discursion in his books, probably exacerbated by the fact that they were generally published in serial parts, so that the reader needed to be frequently reminded of what had gone before.

This edition abridges *Can You Forgive Her?* to just under two-thirds of its original length, whilst omitting no part of the plot. The language has also been slightly simplified where necessary to make the meaning clearer to the modern reader.

CHAPTER 1

Mr. Vavasor and His Daughter

Did she (whom you are to forgive, if you can) belong to the Upper Ten Thousand People of England? I cannot say for sure. By blood she was connected with some very big people indeed; but she had known and seen little of these distant relations.

Her grandfather, Squire Vavasor of Vavasor Hall, in Westmorland, was a country gentleman, with a thousand pounds a year at most. A hot-headed, ignorant, honest old gentleman, he never came to London, but lived at Vavasor Hall, declaring to any who would listen that the country was going to the dogs, and congratulating himself that in his county at least, there had been no parliamentary reform.

Alice Vavasor, whose offence I am to tell you, and if possible to excuse, was the daughter of his younger son. Her father, John Vavasor, had been a London barrister early in life, and had failed to earn much wealth, although he obtained a livelihood through his marriage. He had married a lady somewhat older than himself, who had four hundred pounds a year, and who was related to those big people to whom I have alluded. Who these were, I shall explain later, but at present it will suffice to say that Alice Macleod gave great offence to her relations by her marriage. She did not, however, give them much time to indulge their anger, for after giving birth to a daughter, she died.

But the Macleods did not cut all ties. They snubbed Alice and John Vavasor; but they did not give up the charge of her money. Her four hundred a year was settled very closely on her and on her children, without any going to Mr. Vavasor, so when she died her fortune became the property of baby Alice.

However, the big people gave some aid to the father. It was understood between them that if he made no demand upon them for his daughter's money, and allowed them to have charge of her education, they would do something for him. Thus Mr. Vavasor was appointed to some office to do with insolvents, a post which paid eight hundred pounds a year, and which was abolished three years later.

At first John Vavasor thought that he would keep his eight hundred a year for life and have to do nothing for it; but a wretched cheeseparing Whig government, as he called it, would not permit this. It gave him the option of taking four hundred a year for doing nothing, or of keeping the whole eight hundred by going three days a week, for three hours a day, to a miserable dingy little office near Chancery Lane, where his duty would consist in signing his name to accounts which he never read. He had sulkily chosen to keep the money, and this signing had been his work for nearly twenty years.

He considered himself to be a very ill-used man. However, there can be no doubt that he was better off and happier with his employment than he would have been without it. He had become used to London life. After his wife's death he dined at his club every day, and he was happiest when so dining. It was the only moment of the day when he was ever much in earnest.

I must not allow the reader to suppose that John Vavasor had no good qualities. If he had been industrious as a young man he might have shone in his profession. And although he was discontented, he was popular. He was as generous as his means would permit; he was a man of his word; and he understood the code of gentleman in his circle. By nature, too, he was kindly, loving many people a little, if none

passionately. At fifty he was still a handsome, upright man, whose hair and beard were only beginning to show grey.

Although Alice Vavasor's big relatives cared little for her in her early years, they were careful to take charge of her education. I must explain this. There was a certain Lady Macleod, not very big herself, but, as it were, hanging on to the skirts of those who were, who cared very much for Alice. She was a widow, who for many years had lived at Cheltenham, making short stays in London when she could afford it. Old Lady Macleod was a good woman, though a Calvinist, and a devout believer in the high rank of her noble relatives. She could almost worship an aristocrat of the most disgraceful habits, although she mentally condemned crowds of ordinary men and women to eternal torments, because they listened to music in a park on Sunday.

Yet she was a good woman. Out of her small means she gave much away. She strove to love her neighbours. She bore much pain with calm, quiet endurance, and she lived in trust of a better world. She loved her cousin young Alice Vavasor exceedingly, and yet Alice had done much to extinguish such love.

Alice, in her childhood, had been brought up by Lady Macleod. At the age of twelve she had been sent to a school at Aix-la-Chapelle, against Lady Macleod's wishes; at nineteen she had returned to Cheltenham, and after living there for a year, had expressed her unwillingness to remain any longer with her relative. She made an arrangement, therefore, with her father, that they two would keep house together in London, and so they had lived for the last five years; for Alice at the time of this story was twenty-four.

Their way of life had been unusual and not altogether satisfactory. At twenty-one Alice gained control of her fortune; and persuaded her father, who had lived in lodgings, to take a small house in Queen Anne Street, for which she offered to pay part of the expense. He had agreed, although he knew he would not give his child the attention which a widowed father should pay to an only daughter.

The house had been taken, and Alice and he had lived together, but their lives had been quite apart. For a month or two, he had tried to dine at home and even to remain at home through the evening; but the effort had been too hard for him and he had broken down. He had told her and himself that his health would fail if he made so great a change so late in life. The effort had been abandoned, and Mr. Vavasor now never dined at home.

Nor did he and his daughter ever dine out together. They could not afford to give dinners, and therefore could not mix in the same circle. They saw each other daily; but they did little more than see each other. They did not even breakfast together, and after three o'clock Mr. Vavasor was never to be found in his own house.

Miss Vavasor had made for herself a certain footing in society, though not among the Upper Ten Thousand. Her aunt's preferences had driven her to avoid aristocrats, along with all Calvinistic people.

However, Lady Macleod did not avoid Alice Vavasor. When in London she persevered in visiting Queen Anne Street, even though she was not on speaking terms with Mr. Vavasor. And she tried hard to nurture an intimacy between Alice and her noble relatives – an intimacy such as that which she herself enjoyed, which gave her a footing in their houses but no place in their hearts. But all this Alice declined.

A few words must be said about Alice Vavasor's appearance; one fact also must be told, and then I may start my story. As for her character, I will leave it to be read in the story itself.

There was nothing girlish in her manners. She appeared staid and self-possessed. She was tall and well made, but by no means fat. Her hair and her eyes were dark

brown; and her complexion was also dark. Her nose was somewhat broad and retroussé, but a charming nose, full of character, and giving her face a look of pleasant humour which it would otherwise have lacked. Her mouth was large, and her chin finely chiselled, like her father's. All in all, she was a fine, handsome, high-spirited young woman.

And now for my fact. At the time of which I am writing she was already engaged to be married.

CHAPTER 2

Lady Macleod

I cannot say that the house in Queen Anne Street was a pleasant one. It was a small house squeezed in between two large mansions which seemed to crush it. The stairs were narrow; the dining-room was dark and unwelcoming. This would not have mattered if the drawing-room had been pretty. But Alice Vavasor's drawing-room was not pretty. Her father had had the task of furnishing the house, and he had entrusted the duty to a tradesman who had chosen green paper, a green carpet, green curtains, and green damask chairs. There was a green damask sofa, and two green arm-chairs, one at either side of the fireplace.

Alice knew that her drawing-room was ugly, and she would greatly have liked to banish the green sofa, to re-paper the wall, and to hang up curtains with a dash of pink in them. But her father was an extravagant man; and she was determined to avoid extravagance.

"It's the ugliest room I ever saw in my life," her father once said to her.

"It is not very pretty," Alice replied.

"I'll go halves with you in the expense of redoing it," said Mr. Vavasor.

"Wouldn't that be extravagant, papa?"

Mr. Vavasor had shrugged his shoulders and said nothing more about it.

It was now June; in that month Lady Macleod usually visited her noble relatives in London, when she had succeeded in saving up the fifty pounds necessary for this purpose. For although she spent her month in London among her noble friends, it must not be supposed that they gave her bed or board. They sometimes gave her tea, and once or twice a second-rate dinner.

On these occasions she hired a little parlour and bedroom in King Street, Saint James's, and lived a hot, uncomfortable life, going about at nights to gatherings of fashionable people of which she in her heart disapproved, seeking for smiles which seldom came to her, and telling herself that she made this journey for the good of Alice Vavasor. On her previous visit she had reminded herself that she was seventy-five years old, and had sworn that she would come to London no more; but here she was again, because of the circumstances of Alice's engagement. Her niece, she thought, was not managing her affairs discreetly.

"Well, aunt," said Alice, as the old lady walked into the drawing-room one morning. Alice always called Lady Macleod her aunt, and made a point of staying at home to receive her almost daily visits, although she did not enjoy them.

"Would you mind shutting the window, my dear?" said Lady Macleod, seating herself stiffly on one of the small ugly green chairs. She had been educated at a time when easy-chairs were considered vicious, and could still boast, at seventy-six, that she never leaned back. "I'm so warm that I'm afraid of the draught."

"You don't mean to say that you've walked from King Street?" said Alice.

"Indeed I do. Cabs are so expensive."

"I really think it's too far for you to walk when it's so warm."

"But what can I do, my dear? I shall have a cab home again, because it'll be hotter then, and dear Lady Midlothian has promised to send her carriage at three to take me to the concert. I do so wish you'd go, Alice."

"It's out of the question, aunt. The idea of my going at the last moment, without any invitation!"

“It wouldn’t be without an invitation, Alice. The marchioness has said to me over and over again how glad she would be to see you.”

“Then why doesn’t she come and call on me?”

“My dear, you’ve no right to expect it. She never calls even on me.”

“I know I’ve no right, and I don’t expect it, or want it. But neither has she a right to suppose that I shall go to her house. You might as well give it up, aunt.”

“I think you are very wrong, Alice. A young woman that is going to be married, as you are—”

“As I am, perhaps.”

“That’s nonsense, Alice. Of course you are; and for his sake you are bound to cultivate any advantages you may have. Nobody can say that I run after great people or rich people. It just happens that some of my nearest relations are people of high rank; and they are anxious to keep up the connexion.”

“I was only speaking of myself, aunt. It is very different with you. You have known them all your life.”

“And how are you to know them if you won’t begin? Lady Midlothian said to me only yesterday that she was glad to hear that you were going to be married so respectably—”

“Upon my word I’m very much obliged to her ladyship. I wonder if she considered that she married respectably when she took Lord Midlothian?”

Now Lady Midlothian had been unfortunate in her marriage, having united herself to a man of bad character, who had mistreated her, and from whom she had now been separated for some years. Alice was angered by that odious word *respectable*; and perhaps the more angered as she felt that her engagement was indeed very respectable, although it lacked other attractions which it should have possessed.

She was not quite pleased with herself in having accepted John Grey – or rather, perhaps, was not satisfied with herself in having loved him. She admitted to herself that she had accepted him simply because he had won her heart. But she was sometimes almost angry that she had permitted her heart to be so easily and quickly taken from her.

But the marriage would be respectable. Mr. Grey was a man of high character, and good though moderate means; he was well educated, of good birth, a gentleman, and a man of talent. Her father had been more than satisfied. Why Miss Vavasor herself was not quite satisfied will, I hope, in time appear. In the meanwhile, Lady Midlothian’s praise galled her.

“Alice, don’t be uncharitable,” said Lady Macleod severely. “No one can say that Lady Midlothian’s misfortunes were her own fault.”

“Yes, they can, aunt, if she married a man whom she knew to be a rascal, just because he was a rich earl.”

“She was the daughter of a nobleman herself, and only married at her own level. But I don’t want to discuss that. She meant to be good-natured when she mentioned your marriage. After all she was your mother’s second cousin—”

“Dear aunt, I make no claim on her cousinship.”

“But she does. She has taken the trouble to find out everything about Mr. Grey, and told me that nothing could be more satisfactory.”

“Upon my word I am very much obliged to her.”

Lady Macleod was a patient and persevering woman. For another half-hour she detailed the advantages which Alice would gain from knowing these noble relatives, and tried to persuade her to take the opportunity. There would be a place in Lady

Midlothian's carriage. Lady Midlothian would take it as a compliment, and an unmarried girl might very properly go to a concert without any special invitation.

Lady Macleod ought to have known her adopted niece better. Alice was immovable. Lady Macleod had seldom been able to persuade her to anything, and ought to have predicted this.

At last they came to another subject, which Lady Macleod had had in mind all along. She had discussed it at length with Lady Midlothian; though she was not going to tell Alice that. It was a proposed Swiss tour which Alice was about to make. She had heard about this Swiss tour before, but had not heard who Miss Vavasor's companions were to be until Lady Midlothian had told her. How Lady Midlothian knew this, I cannot say; but she did not approve of the arrangement.

"When do you go, Alice?" said Lady Macleod.

"Early in July, I believe. It will be very hot, but Kate must be back by the middle of August." Kate Vavasor was Alice's first cousin.

"Oh! Kate is to go with you?"

"Of course she is. I could not go alone, or with no one but George."

"Of course you could not go alone with George," said Lady Macleod, very grimly.

Now George Vavasor was Kate's brother, and therefore cousin to Alice. He was heir to the old squire down in Westmorland, the grandfather with whom Kate lived, their father being dead. Nothing could be more rational than that Alice should go to Switzerland with her cousins; but Lady Macleod was clearly not of this opinion. She looked very grim, and seemed to be preparing for a fight.

"That is exactly what I say," answered Alice. "But he is simply going as an escort to me and Kate, as we don't like the rôle of unprotected females. It is very good-natured of him, seeing how much his time is taken up."

"I thought he never did anything."

"That's because you don't know him, aunt."

"No; certainly I don't know him." She did not add that she had no wish to know Mr. George Vavasor, but she looked it. "And has your father been told that he is going?"

"Of course he has."

"And does—" Lady Macleod hesitated before she went on. "And does Mr. Grey know that he is going?"

Alice remained silent for a full minute before she answered, while Lady Macleod watched her grimly and intently. If she supposed Alice to be ashamed, she was much mistaken. She did not understand the character of the girl whom she thought she knew so well.

"I might tell you simply that he does," said Alice at last, "seeing that I wrote to him yesterday, letting him know the arrangements; but you want to know whether Mr. Grey will approve of it. Of course I have not heard yet, and therefore cannot say. But I can say, aunt, that I if he did disapprove, it would make no change in my plans."

"Would it not? Then I must tell you, you are very wrong. It ought to make a change. What! the disapproval of the man you are going to marry would make no change in your plans?"

"Not in that matter. Come, aunt, let us be fair. If Mr. Grey asked me to give up my trip altogether for any reason, I should certainly do so. But if he asked me not to travel with my cousin George, I should refuse, simply because of the nature and closeness of my connection with him. I suppose you understand what I mean, aunt?"

"I suppose I do. You mean that you would refuse to obey Mr. Grey on the very subject on which he has a right to claim your obedience."

"He has no right to claim my obedience on any subject," said Alice, so vehemently that Aunt Macleod gave a little involuntary start. "His advice he may give me, but I am quite sure he will not ask for obedience."

"And if he advises you, you will ignore his advice."

"If he tells me that I had better not travel with my cousin George I shall certainly not take his advice. Moreover, I should let him know I was offended by such advice. It would show a littleness on his part, and a suspicion of which I cannot suppose him to be capable."

Alice, as she said this, got up from her seat and walked about the room, pausing at a window with her back to her visitor. There was silence for a minute or two, while Lady Macleod considered how best she might speak the terrible words which she felt herself bound to utter. At last she collected her courage, and spoke out.

"My dear Alice, I need hardly say that if you had a mother living, I should not interfere in this matter."

"Of course, Aunt Macleod, if you think I am wrong you have a perfect right to say so."

"I do think you are wrong, very wrong indeed; and if you persist in this I am afraid I shall think you wicked. Of course Mr. Grey cannot like you to travel with George Vavasor."

"And why not, aunt?" Alice turned round and confronted Lady Macleod boldly. She spoke with a steady voice, and fixed her eyes upon the old lady's face.

"Surely you do not wish me to say."

"But I do wish you to say why not. How can I defend myself till the accusation is made?"

"You are now engaged to marry Mr. Grey, with the approval of all your friends. Two years ago you had – had –"

"Had what, aunt? If you mean to say that two years ago I was engaged to my cousin George, you are mistaken. Three years ago I told him that under certain conditions I would become engaged to him. But my conditions did not suit him, nor his me, and no engagement was ever made. Mr. Grey knows the whole history. As far as it was possible I have told him everything that took place."

"Alice, George Vavasor's way of life was such that an engagement with him would have been absolute madness."

"Dear aunt, I cannot discuss George Vavasor's mode of life. If I were thinking of becoming his wife you would have a perfect right to discuss it. But he is simply a cousin; and as I like him and you do not, we had better say nothing about him."

"I must say this – that after what has passed, and at the present crisis of your life–"

"Dear aunt, I'm not in any crisis."

"Yes, you are, Alice; in the most special crisis of a girl's life. You are the promised wife of a worthy man. George Vavasor has the reputation of being very wild."

"The worthy man and the wild man must fight it out between them. If I were going away with George by himself, there might be something in what you say."

"That would be monstrous."

"Monstrous or not, it isn't what I'm about to do. Kate and I have put our purses together, and are going to have an outing for our own pleasure. As we should be poor

travellers alone, George has promised to go with his sister. Papa knows all about it, and never objected.”

Lady Macleod shook her head, meaning that Mr. Vavasor’s assent in such a matter was worth nothing.

“I think Mr. Grey will be displeased, and with good cause. And I think, moreover, that his approval should be your chief concern. My dear, ask Jane to get me a cab. I need to dress for the concert.”

Alice rang the bell. When Lady Macleod was leaving, Alice kissed her, as usual, and the old lady uttered her customary farewell.

“God bless you, my dear. Good-bye! I’ll come tomorrow if I can.” There was therefore no quarrel between them. But both felt that words had been spoken which must lessen their intimacy.

When Lady Macleod had gone Alice sat alone for an hour thinking of those two men, the worthy man and the wild man.

John Grey was a worthy man, she told herself. And she told herself, also, that her cousin George was very wild. And yet her thoughts were, I fear, more kindly towards her cousin than towards her lover.

She had declared to her aunt that John Grey would be incapable of suspicion over the arrangements made for the tour. She believed it; and yet she continued to brood over what would happen if he did object. She told herself over and over again, that under such circumstances she would not give way an inch.

She said to herself, “If he does not trust me he is quite free to go.” And she came at last to anticipate from her lover that very answer to her own letter which she had declared him to be incapable of making.

CHAPTER 3

John Grey, the Worthy Man

Alice received Mr. Grey's answer to her letter the next morning. It was written at Nethercoats, his small country-house in Cambridgeshire, where he spent much of his time, and intended to live after his marriage.

Dearest Alice,

I am glad you have settled your foreign affairs so much to your liking. As for your home affairs, they are not, to my thinking, quite so satisfactorily arranged. But as I am involved in them, I may be biased.

About the tour, I quite agree that you and Kate would have been uncomfortable alone. It's a very fine theory that women can get along without men just as well; but, like other fine theories, it will be found very troublesome by those who first try it, and a male companion will be a comfort. I don't quite know whether your cousin George is the best possible knight you might have chosen. I should consider myself to be infinitely preferable, if it were possible. If you should meet Paynim foes, he, no doubt, would kill them off much quicker than I could do, and would be much more useful in rescuing you from dungeons, or from any stray tigers in the Swiss forests. But I doubt if he will be punctual with the luggage. He will be slow in getting you glasses of water at railway stations, and will always keep you waiting at breakfast. I believe that a man with two ladies on a tour should be an absolute slave to them. I have my doubts as to whether your cousin is fit for the position; but, as to myself, it is just the thing that I was made for. Luckily, however, neither you nor Kate are without wills of your own, and perhaps you may be able to reduce Mr. Vavasor to obedience.

As to the home affairs, I have very little to say in this letter. I shall of course run up and see you before you start, and shall probably stay a week in town. I know I ought not to do so, as it will be a week of idleness, and yet not a week of happiness. I'd sooner have an hour with you in the country than a whole day in London. And in town it is a feverish idleness, in which one is driven here and there, expecting some gratification which never comes. I will come for the last week of this month, and hope to see as much of you as your town doings will permit.

About those home affairs: I believe you will understand why I saying nothing now. Perhaps all my arguments have been of no use; but as you do not answer them, I shall still trust to my eloquence in person for success.

The garden is going on very well. Your commands have been obeyed in all things, and Morrison always says "The mistress didn't mean this," or "The mistress intended that." God bless the mistress is what I now say, and send her home, to her flowers, and her house, and her husband, as soon as may be, with no more of these delays which are to me so grievous, and which seem to me to be so unnecessary. That is my prayer.

Yours ever and always,
J. G.

"I didn't give commands," Alice said to herself, as she sat with the letter at her solitary breakfast-table. "He asked me how I liked the things, and of course I was obliged to say, even if I didn't care." Such were her first thoughts after reading the letter the second time.

When she opened it, her mind was full of that rebuke which she had almost taught herself to expect. She had torn the letter open rapidly, and scanned it with quick eyes. In half a moment she had seen the nature of the reply about her companion for the tour, and then she had finished reading slowly.

“No; I gave no commands,” she repeated, as though to absolve herself from blame in any possible future accusations.

Then she considered the letter bit by bit, taking it backwards. No; she had no home, no house, there. She had no husband; not yet. He spoke of their engagement as though they were already in some way married. Yet they were both still free to withdraw from the engagement. If he came to her and said that he found that their marriage would not make him happy, would not she release him without a word of reproach? Would not she regard it as an honourable act? And if things were the other way round, was it not reasonable that she should expect a similar acquittal?

Then she told herself that it was theoretical. She had no intention of going back from her word. She loved him much, and admired him even more than she loved him. He was noble, generous, clever, good – almost perfect. If only he had some faults! How could she, full of faults as she knew herself to be, make such a perfect man happy?

But there was no doubt as to her present duty. She loved him, and having accepted his love, nothing but a change in her heart could justify her in seeking to break the engagement. She did love him, and him only.

However, she had once loved her cousin.

Yes, it was true. In her thoughts she did not deny it. She had loved him, and was tormented by a feeling that she had had a more full delight in that love than in this. She had told herself that this was a result of her youth; that love at twenty was sweeter and more rapturous than it could be afterwards.

Now that she was older and perhaps wiser, love meant a partnership, in which each partner would be honest to the other, in which each would strive for the other's welfare. This love was of earth, and therefore possible. The other had been a ray from heaven – and impossible, except in a dream.

And she had been mistaken in her first love. She admitted that frankly. She had worshipped an idol of clay, and had done the best thing in abandoning that idolatry. George had not only been untrue to her, but had made false excuses. He had made promises with a deliberate, premeditated falsehood. And he had been coldly selfish, weighing the value of his own low lusts against that of her love. She had known this, and had parted vowing to herself that no contrition on his part should ever bring them together again.

But though she did not pardon him as a lover, she had again welcomed him as a cousin, and as her friend Kate's brother. She had become very anxious about his career. She knew him to be clever, ambitious, bold – and perhaps not bad at heart. Now, as she told herself that she loved John Grey, I fear that she almost thought more of that other man from whom she had torn herself apart.

“Why should Mr. Grey find himself unhappy in London?” she said, as she went back to the letter. “Why condemn the place which most men find the fittest for their energies? If I were I a man, I would live there. It is odd how we differ in all things. However brilliant his own light might be, he would be contented to hide it under a bushel!”

And at last she reflected on his response to her travelling with her cousin. He had written on the matter with a pleasant joke, like a gentleman, without alluding to the past or implying that she needed his permission. When Alice had told him of their

plan, she had tried to make it a simple, ordinary statement; but she knew that she had failed, and that he had read her failure. She was quite conscious of this; and she knew that he was a gentleman to the last drop of his blood. And yet – yet there was almost a feeling of disappointment that he had not written a disapproving letter such as Lady Macleod had anticipated.

During the next week Lady Macleod still came almost daily to see Alice, but nothing was said about the Swiss tour; nor did she ask about Mr. Grey's opinion. When the old lady discovered that there was no quarrel, she had to be contented. Nor did she again attempt to take Alice to Lady Midlothian's.

Indeed, their usual subjects of conversation were almost abandoned. Lady Macleod did not dare to talk about Mr. Grey, and became silent, reserved, and fretful. At length came the last day of her London season, and her last visit to her niece.

"I came because it's my last day," said Lady Macleod; "even though I have so many things to do."

"It's very kind," said Alice, giving her aunt an affectionate squeeze of the hand.

"I'm keeping the cab, so I can just stay twenty-five minutes. I've marked the time accurately, but I know the man will swear it's over the half-hour."

"You'll have no more trouble about cabs, aunt, when you are back in Cheltenham."

"It's my last time here. I shall never come up to London again, my dear."

"Oh, aunt, don't say that!"

"But I do say it, my dear. Why should an old woman like me come trailing up to town every year?"

"To see your friends, of course. Age doesn't matter when a person's health is as good as yours."

"If you knew what I suffer from lumbago. But as for friends—! Well, I suppose one has no right to complain; but I believe that those I love best would rather be without me than with me."

"Do you mean me, aunt?"

"No, my dear, I don't mean you. I don't know that I meant any one. You shouldn't mind what an old woman like me says."

"You're a little melancholy because you're going away."

"No, indeed. I don't know why I stayed the last week. Though I told Lady Midlothian that I should be leaving, she has not once asked me even to lunch since. It's so very lonely dining by myself in lodgings."

"And yet you never will come and dine with me."

"No, my dear. But we won't talk about that. I've just one word more to say. I've six minutes. I've made up my mind that I'll never come up to town again – except for one thing."

"And what's that, aunt?" Alice already knew the answer.

"Your marriage, my dear. I do hope you will not keep me waiting long."

"Ah! I can't make any promise. There's no knowing when that may be."

"Why not? When a girl is once engaged, the sooner she's married the better. You don't mean to say that Mr. Grey is putting it off?"

Alice was silent for a moment, while Lady Macleod's face assumed a look of almost tragic horror. Alice was too honest to allow the impression to remain.

"No, aunt," she said; "Mr. Grey is not putting it off. It has been left to me to fix the day."

"And why don't you fix it?"

“It is such a serious thing! After all, it is not more than four months yet since I – I accepted him.”

“But you might fix the day now.”

“Well, perhaps I shall – some time, aunt. I’m going to think about it, and you mustn’t push me.”

“But you should have someone to advise you, Alice.”

“Ah! that’s just it. People always do seem to think it so terrible that a girl should have her own way in anything. She mustn’t like any one at first; and then, when she does like someone, she must marry him as soon as she’s told. I haven’t much of my own way at present; but when I’m married I shan’t have it at all. So I’m in no hurry.”

“I am not advocating any hurry, my dear. But, goodness me! I’ve been here twenty-eight minutes, and that horrid man will impose upon me. Good-bye; God bless you! Mind you write.” And Lady Macleod hurried out.

Then John Grey came up to town. Alice may have used some diplomatic skill in preventing a meeting between Lady Macleod and her lover, for if they had put their forces together she might have found herself unable to resist their joint endeavours. She was resolved not to name any day for her marriage before her return from Switzerland.

During this visit of Mr. Grey’s to London, Mr. Vavasor did a very memorable thing. He dined at home to welcome his future son-in-law; and asked, or rather agreed to Alice’s asking, George and Kate Vavasor to join the dinner-party.

“What an auspicious omen for your marriage!” said Kate, with her little sarcastic smile. “Uncle John dines at home, and Mr. Grey joins in the dissipation of a dinner-party. We shall all be changed soon, I suppose, and George and I will take to keeping a little cottage in the country.”

“Kate,” said Alice, angrily, “I think you are about the most unjust person I ever met.”

“And to whom am I being unjust; to your father?”

“It was Mr. Grey whom you meant to attack. If I can forgive him for not caring for society, surely you might do so.”

“Exactly; but you can’t, my dear. You don’t forgive him. If you did, I would say nothing. But when you tell me all your own thoughts about it you can hardly expect me to keep quiet. Still, if you are ready for a little useful hypocrisy, I won’t prevent you. I mayn’t be quite so dishonest as you call me, but I can speak a few falsehoods if you wish it. Only let us understand each other.”

“You know I wish for no falsehood, Kate.”

“It’s very hard to understand what you do wish. For the last year or two I have been trying to find out your wishes, without success. I suppose you wish to marry Mr. Grey, but I’m by no means certain. I suppose the last thing on earth you’d wish would be to marry George?”

“The very last. You’re right there at any rate.”

“Alice! You make me doubt whether I hate or love you most. Knowing what my feelings are about George, I cannot understand how you can bring yourself to speak of him with such contempt!” Kate Vavasor left the room quickly, and hurried up to her own chamber. There Alice found her in tears, and was driven by her friend’s real grief into making an apology which she felt she did not owe.

Kate knew all the circumstances of that old affair between her brother and Alice. She had agreed with the propriety of what Alice had done. She had admitted that her brother George’s behaviour had made any engagement impossible. The fault had been hers, in referring to the possibility of such a marriage.

It had not been for the first time. Since Alice had become engaged to Mr. Grey, Kate had been constantly mentioning those past events, which all of them should have tried to forget. Under these circumstances was not Lady Macleod right in saying that George Vavasor should not have been accepted as a companion for the Swiss tour?

The little dinner-party went off very quietly. The two young men had never before met each other; and George Vavasor had gone to his uncle's house, prepared not only to dislike but to despise his successor. But in this he was disappointed.

"He has plenty to say for himself," he said to Kate on his way home.

"Oh yes; he can talk."

"And he doesn't talk like a prig either, like I expected. He's uncommonly handsome."

"So you're going into raptures in favour of John Grey."

"No, I'm not. I very seldom go into raptures about anything. But he talks in the way I like a man to talk."

There was nothing more said then about John Grey; but Kate understood her brother well enough to be aware that this praise meant very little. George Vavasor spoke sometimes from his heart, but generally from his head.

On the day after the little dinner, John Grey came to say good-bye to Alice. Though he had been constantly with her during the last three days, he had not said anything about the day of their marriage. He had told her much of Switzerland, which he knew well, and of his house and garden, and other matters, for Mr. Grey was a man who knew how to make words pleasant; but he had said nothing on that subject on which he was so intent.

"Well, Alice," he said, when the last hour had come, "and about that question of home affairs. Is there any reason why you'd rather not have this thing settled?"

"No; no special reason."

"Then why not let it be fixed? Do you fear coming to me as my wife?"

"No."

"I cannot think that you repent your goodness to me."

"No; I love you too entirely for that."

"My darling!" He passed his arm round her waist. "Then why should you not wish to come to me?"

"I do wish it, I think. But a person may wish for a thing, and yet not wish for it instantly."

"Instantly! Come; I have not been hard on you. This is still June. Will you say the middle of September, and we shall still be in time for warm pleasant days among the lakes? Is that asking for too much?"

"It is not asking for anything."

"Nay, but it is, love. Grant it, and I will swear that you have granted me everything."

She was silent, not knowing what words to use. Now that he was with her she could not say the things which she had told herself that she would say to him. She could not bring herself to hint that his views of life were so unlike her own that there could be no chance of happiness between them, unless each could strive to lean towards the other.

No man could be more gracious or chivalrous than John Grey; but he always spoke as though there could be no question that his manner of life was to be adopted, without a thought of doubting, by his wife. Why should not each yield something, and each claim something? This she had meant to say to him; but now that he was with her she could not say it.

“John,” she said at last, “do not press me about this till I return. I cannot answer you now; it is such a solemn thing.”

“Will it ever be less solemn, dearest?”

“Never, I hope.”

He did not press her further then, but kissed her and bade her farewell.

CHAPTER 4

George Vavasor, the Wild Man

It will be understood that George Vavasor did not roam about in the woods in leather clothes and sandals, like Robinson Crusoe. His wildness was of another kind. Indeed, I don't know that he was truly wild at all.

George Vavasor had lived in London since he was twenty, and was now just over thirty. He was the heir to his grandfather's estate; but that estate was small. He had therefore needed a profession; and with his uncle John's help, he had been placed in the office of a parliamentary land agent. He had quarrelled with this land agent, but not before his talents had made him useful. George Vavasor had many faults, but idleness was not one of them. He would occasionally postpone his work for pleasure. He would be at Newmarket races when he should have been at Whitehall. But when he was at his desk he did not waste time.

Upon the whole his friends were pleased with the first five years of his life in London – in spite of the debts he ran up. But his debts were paid; and all was going on swimmingly, when one day he knocked down the parliamentary agent, and that was the end of that. However, he had friends who helped him to another position, as a partner in an established firm of wine merchants. A great-aunt had just then left him a couple of thousand pounds, which no doubt helped him in the wine merchants' eyes.

In this employment he remained for another five years, and did not do badly, but did not do well enough to satisfy himself. He was ambitious for the company, and scared his partners by the boldness of his views. So at the end of the five years George Vavasor left the wine house, not having knocked anyone down on this occasion, and taking with him a very nice sum of money.

The two last of these five years had certainly been the best period of his life, for he had really worked very hard. It was during these two years that he had had his love passages with his cousin; and presumably had intended to become a respectable married man. He had, however, behaved very badly to Alice, and the match had been broken off.

He had also quarrelled with his grandfather. He had wished to raise a sum of money on the Vavasor estate, which he could only do with his grandfather's agreement. The old gentleman would not hear of it. In vain George tried to make the squire understand that the wine business was flourishing, but that his trade might be greatly extended by the use of a few thousand pounds.

Old Mr. Vavasor was furious. He was convinced that the wine merchants and his grandson were all ruined. No one but a ruined man would attempt to raise money on the family estate! So they had quarrelled, and had never spoken or seen each other since.

"He shall have the estate once I'm gone," the squire said to his younger son John. "It never has been left away from the heir. But I'll tie it up so that he shan't cut a tree on it." John Vavasor perhaps thought that the old rule of primogeniture might have been judiciously abandoned in this case, in his own favour. But he did not say so.

After that George Vavasor had become a stockbroker, and a stockbroker he was now. In the first twelve months after his leaving the wine business, and after his breach with Alice, he had gone backwards in men's esteem. He had been, it seemed, on the road to ruin. Aunt Macleod was thinking of this period of his life when she said he was a man who never did anything. But now he was working in the City every

day. During the last two years he had earned a reputation as a shrewd fellow who was honourable in his money transactions.

And during these two years he had stood for a seat in Parliament, having striven to represent Chelsea as a Radical candidate. It is true that he had failed, after spending a large sum of money in the contest. But though he failed, he did not spend his money fruitlessly. Men began to speak of him as a man who would do something. He was a stockbroker, a Radical, and yet the heir to a fine old estate! There was something captivating about his history and adventures, especially as at the time of the election he became engaged to an heiress, who died a month before their marriage. She died without a will, and her money all went to some third cousins.

George Vavasor bore this last disappointment like a man, and it was at this time that he again became fully reconciled with his cousin. Before this there had been no renewal of real friendship, although Alice had given her cordial assent to her cousin's marriage with the heiress, telling Kate that such an engagement was the very thing to put George on his feet. And she had been pleased by his spirit at the Chelsea election.

"It was grand of him, wasn't it?" said Kate, her eyes brimming with tears.

"It was very spirited," said Alice. "I hope it didn't cost him much."

"It did, though; nearly all he had got. But money's nothing to him, except for its uses. He shall have every farthing of my own money for the next election, even if I have to go out as a housemaid." There must have been something great about George Vavasor, or he would not have been idolized by such a girl as his sister Kate.

Early in the spring, before the arrangements for the Swiss journey were made, George Vavasor had spoken to Alice about that intended marriage which had been broken off by the lady's death. They were sitting one evening in her drawing-room, waiting for Kate to join them. I wonder whether Kate had had a hint from her brother to be late! At any rate, the two were together for an hour, and the talk had been all about himself. He had congratulated her on her engagement with Mr. Grey, and had then spoken of his own intended marriage.

"I grieved for her," he said, "greatly."

"I'm sure you did, George."

"Of course the world thinks I was lamenting the loss of her money. But the truth is, that as regards both herself and her money, it is much better for me that we were never married."

"Do you mean even if she had lived?"

"Yes."

"Why? If you liked her, her money was surely no drawback."

"No; not if I had liked her."

"And did you not like her?"

"I liked her very much. But I did not love her as a man should love his wife."

"But you would have come to love her?"

"I don't know. I don't find that task of loving very easy. I might have learned to hate her. And yet I grieve for her, and feel almost guilty of her death."

"But she never suspected that you did not love her?"

"Oh no. She took all that for granted. Poor girl! she is at rest now, and her money has gone, where it should go, among her own relatives. I would not have taken it – I hope so, at least. Money is a sore temptation."

"But you are not a poor man, are you, George? I thought your business was a good one."

"It is, and I have no right to be a poor man. I had three or four thousand pounds clear, but I spent every shilling on the Chelsea election. Goodness knows whether I

shall have a shilling at all when another chance comes round; but if I have I shall certainly spend it, or else go in debt to raise the money.”

“I hope you will be successful.”

“I feel sure that I shall. But meanwhile, no woman ought to join her lot to mine unless she is brave enough to be as reckless as I am. I keep myself ready to risk everything at any moment, in order to gain any object that may serve my turn.”

Alice did not quite understand him, and perhaps he intended to mystify her. I fear that she admired the kind of courage which he professed.

George described himself as ugly. One side of his face been dreadfully scarred, with a dark line running down from his left eye to his lower jaw. That black ravine through his cheek was certainly ugly, and sometimes, when his face was distorted by anger or disappointment, it was hideous; for it seemed to stretch itself out, and his countenance would become all scar.

But in other respects George was not ugly. His hair was black; his forehead, though low, was broad. His eyes were dark and bright, and his black eyebrows were very full. He wore a thick black moustache, but no sideburns. People said that he was so proud of his wound that he would not grow a hair to cover it. The fact, however, was that no whisker could be made to fully cover it, and therefore he wore none.

The story of that wound should be told. When he was a youth, he lived in his father’s house in the country. At the time his father was absent, and only he and his sister were in the house with the maid-servants. His sister had a few jewels in her room, and when an exaggerated report of them reached the ears of some enterprising burglars, they hatched a little plan. A small boy was hidden in the house, a window was opened, and in the dead of night a man crept upstairs in his stocking-feet, and was already at Kate Vavasor’s door – when George, in his nightshirt, wholly unarmed, flew at the fellow’s throat. George’s face was ripped open from the eye downwards, with a chisel used as a house-breaking instrument. But the man was dead. George had wrenched his own tool from him, and after several vain jabs, had at last driven the steel through his windpipe. The small boy escaped.

George Vavasor was not tall, but well made, broad-chested and strong. He was a fine horseman, and could shoot and fence, it was said, better than most men.

He had always lived alone in London; but just now his sister Kate was much with him, as she was staying up in town with an aunt – another Vavasor by birth, now called Mrs. Greenow. But Kate Vavasor’s home was her grandfather’s house in Westmorland.

On the evening before they started for Switzerland, George and Kate walked from Queen Anne Street, where they had been dining with Alice, to Mrs. Greenow’s house. Everything had been settled about luggage and routes for their few first days; and that part of Mr. Grey’s letter had been read which alluded to the Paynims and the glasses of water, in the best of good-humour.

Now the brother and sister walked in silence, before Kate asked, “George, I wonder what your wishes really are about Alice?”

“I have no wishes on the subject. Of course she’ll marry this man John Grey, and then no one will hear another word about her.”

“She will, no doubt, if you don’t interfere. But if you wish to interfere—”

“She’s got four hundred a year, and is not so good-looking as she was.”

“Yes; she has got four hundred a year, and she is more handsome now than ever she was. I know that you think so; and that you love her and no-one else – unless you have a sneaking fondness for me.”

“I’ll leave you to judge that.”

“As for me, I only love two people in the world; her and you. If ever you mean to try, you should try now.”

CHAPTER 5

The Balcony at Basle

I am not going to describe the Vavasors' Swiss tour. It would not be fair on my readers to palm off "Six Weeks in the Bernese Oberland" in the pages of a novel. It is true that I have just returned from Switzerland, and should find such a course of writing very convenient. But I dismiss the temptation, strong as it is.

The Vavasors were not very energetic on their tour, having gone for pleasure and not for work. They went direct to Interlaken and then hung about between that place and Grindelwald and Lauterbrunnen, It delighted George to sit on some bench, looking at the mountains, with a cigar in his mouth, and it seemed to delight them to be with him. The two girls were ministers to him, instead of having him as their slave.

"What fine fellows those Alpine club men think themselves," he said on one of these occasions. "They rob the mountains of their poetry. Mont Blanc can have no mystery for a man who has been up it half a dozen times. It's like getting behind the scenes at a ballet, or making a conjuror explain his tricks."

"But is the exercise nothing?" said Kate.

"Yes; the exercise is very fine."

"And they all botanize," said Alice.

"I don't believe it. I believe that the most of them simply walk up the mountain and down again. But that is beside the point. The poetry and mystery of the mountains are lost to those who make themselves familiar with their details. In this world things are beautiful only because they are not quite seen, or not perfectly understood. Poetry is precious chiefly because it suggests more than it declares. Look through that valley, where you just see the distant little peak at the end. Are you not dreaming of the unknown beautiful world that exists up there; beautiful because you know nothing of the reality? If you travel up there and back tomorrow, and find out all about it, will it be as beautiful to you when you come back?"

"Yes; I think it would," said Alice.

"Then you've no poetry in you. Now I'm made up of poetry." They began to laugh at him and were very happy.

I think that Mr. Grey was right in answering Alice's letter as he did; but I think that Lady Macleod was also right in saying that Alice should not have gone to Switzerland with George Vavasor. A peculiar familiarity sprang up, which would not have entirely satisfied Mr. Grey, even though no word was said which might have displeased him – at least, during the first few weeks.

But at last, when the time for return was drawing near, when their happiness was nearly over, and that melancholy was coming on them which always pervades the last hours of any pleasant time – then unwise references were made to old days.

Alice had been very happy, more happy perhaps as a joint minister to her cousin George's idle fantasies, than she would have been with him as her slave. She and Kate had tacitly agreed to spoil him with comforts; and he had been amusing always, apparently without any effort. But it had not been effortless. George Vavasor had done his very best to please his cousin.

They were sitting at Basle one evening on the balcony of the big hotel which overlooks the Rhine. The swift broad river runs underneath, rushing through from the bridge; and on summer evenings shouts come up from strong swimmers, glorying in the swiftness of the current.

The three were sitting there, by themselves, with their coffee on a little table, and George's cigar in his mouth.

"It's nearly all over," said he.

"I do think it has been a success," said Kate. "Except about the money. I'm ruined for ever."

"I'll make your money all straight," said George.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Kate. "I'm ruined, but you are ruined. But what does it matter? It is such a great thing to have had six weeks' happiness, that the ruin is a good investment. What do you say, Alice? Have we done it well?"

"I think we've done it very well. I have enjoyed myself thoroughly."

"And now you've got to go home to John Grey and Cambridgeshire! It's no wonder you are melancholy." That was the thought in Kate's mind, but she did not speak it aloud.

"That's good of you, Alice," she said. "We are prepared to admit that we owe almost everything to you, are we not, George?"

"I'm not, by any means," said George.

"Well, I am, and I expect to have something pretty said to me in return. Have I been cross once, Alice?"

"No; I don't think you have. You are never cross, though you are often ferocious."

"But I haven't once been ferocious; nor has George."

"He would have been the most ungrateful man alive if he had," said Alice. "We've done nothing but wait upon him."

"And now he has got to go home to his lodgings, and wait upon himself again. Poor fellow! I pity you, George."

"No, you don't; nor does Alice. I believe girls always think that a bachelor in London has the happiest of lives. That's why they generally want to put an end to the man's condition."

"So it's envy that makes us want to get married," said Kate.

"It's the devil in some shape, as often as not," said he. "With a man, marriage always seems to him to be an evil."

"Not always," said Alice.

"Almost always; but he does it, as he takes medicine, because something worse will come if he don't. A man never likes having his tooth pulled, but all men do have teeth pulled, and those who delay it suffer the very mischief."

"I do like George's philosophy," said Kate, getting up from her chair as she spoke; "it is so sharp, and pleasantly acid; and we all know that it means nothing. Alice, I'm going upstairs to finish packing."

"I'll come with you, dear."

"No, don't. To tell the truth I'm going into that man's room because he won't pack a single thing of his own decently. Whatever you disarrange tonight, Master George, you must rearrange for yourself tomorrow morning. I'll be down again very soon," said Kate. "Then we'll take one turn on the bridge and go to bed."

Alice and George were left together sitting in the balcony. They had been alone together many times during their travels; but they both felt that there was something different now – something sweet, undefinable, and dangerous. Alice knew that it would be better for her to go upstairs with Kate; but she could have given no good reason why she needed to go. Why should she show such a need?

Alice was seated at the end of the balcony, and George sat at the other side of the small coffee-table, so that Alice was, as it were, a prisoner. She could not slip away. But why should she wish to escape?

Nothing could be more lovely and enticing than the scene before her. The night had come on quickly, but there was a rising moon, which gave a sheen to the water beneath her. The air was deliciously soft, seeming to touch her with loving tenderness. The Rhine was running at her feet, so near that in the soft half light it seemed as though she might step into its ripple. Its refreshing gurgle was delicious to the ear. Alice felt that the air kissed her, that the river sang for her its sweetest song, that the moon shone for her with its softest light. Why should she leave it?

Nothing was said for some minutes after Kate's departure, and Alice was beginning to shake off that half feeling of danger which had come over her. Vavasor had sat back in his chair, his arms folded, smoking silently. As Alice looked upon the river, her thoughts strayed to her future home among John Grey's flower-beds and shrubs; but the river seemed to sing a song of other things – a song full of mystery, as are all river songs.

“When are you to be married, Alice?”

“Oh, George! You startled me.”

“I'm sorry. But when are you to be married?”

“I do not know. It is not fixed.”

“But this summer?”

“Certainly not this summer, for the summer will be over when we reach home.”

“This winter? Next spring? Next year? – or in ten years' time?”

“Before ten years are up, I suppose. Anything more exact than that I can't say.”

“I suppose you like it?” he said.

“What, being married? I've never tried it yet.”

“The idea of it. You look forward with satisfaction to the life you will lead at Nethercoats? I am not saying anything against it, for I don't know what sort of a place Nethercoats is. On the whole there is no kind of life better than that of an English country gentleman in his own place; that is, if he can keep it up, and not live as my grandfather does, in a state of chronic poverty.”

“Mr. Grey's place doesn't entitle him to be called a country gentleman.”

“But you like the prospect of it?”

“Oh, George, how you do cross-question one! Of course I like it, or I shouldn't have accepted it.”

“That does not follow. But I quite acknowledge that I have no right to cross-question you. If I ever had such right on the score of cousinship, I have lost it on the score of – but we won't mind that, will we, Alice?” When she did not answer, he repeated, “Will we, Alice?”

“Will we what?”

“Recur to the old days.”

“Why should we recur to them? They are passed, and as we are again friends and dear cousins the sting of them is gone.”

“Ah, yes! The sting of them is gone. So why not talk of them freely?”

“No, George; that would not do.”

“By heavens, no! It would drive me mad; and if I know aught of you, it would hardly leave you as calm as you are now.”

“As I wish to be left calm—”

“I suppose I ought to hold my tongue. But, Alice, I shall never be able to speak to you again as I speak now. On this trip, we have been dear friends; is it not so?”

“And shall we not always be dear friends?”

“No, certainly not. How can we, when you are the mistress of that man’s house in Cambridgeshire?”

“George!”

“I mean nothing disrespectful. Let me say that gentleman’s house; for he is a gentleman.”

“That he certainly is.”

“But how can I be your friend when you are his wife? I may still call you cousin Alice, and pat your children on the head if I chance to see them; but as for friendship, that will be over when we part next Thursday at London Bridge.”

“Oh, George, don’t say so!”

“But I do.”

“And why on Thursday? Do you mean that you won’t come to Queen Anne Street any more?”

“Yes, that is what I do mean. This trip of ours has been very successful, Kate says. Perhaps Kate knows nothing about it.”

“It has been very pleasant – at least, to me.”

“It has been very pleasant to me, also; – but the pleasure has been mixed. Alice, I have nothing to ask, but I have one word to say.”

“George, do not say it. Let me go upstairs to Kate.”

“Certainly; if you wish it you shall go.” He did not attempt to rise and clear the way. “But after six weeks of companionship, I think you ought to listen to me. I am not going to make love to you.”

Alice had begun to stand, but again sank down in her chair and waited.

“I am not going to make love to you,” he said again. “As for love, that must be over between you and me. It has been made and marred, and cannot be remade.”

“It should not be spoken of between us.”

“So little children should be told; but we are adults. I perfectly understood your breaking away from me, and in spite of my sorrow I knew that you were right.”

“Then let there be no more about it.”

“Yes; there must be more about it. I did not understand you when you accepted Mr. Grey. He may be perfect for all I know. But I could not understand your loving such a man as him. It was as though one who had lived on brandy should take himself suddenly to a milk diet! A milk diet is no doubt the best. But men who have lived on brandy can’t make those changes suddenly. They perish in the attempt.”

“Not always, George.”

“You will tell me the cure was made, so I thought to find you changed. I thought that you, who had been all fire, would now have turned yourself into soft-flowing milk and honey. With such a one I might have travelled from Moscow to Malta without danger. The woman fit to be John Grey’s wife would certainly do me no harm. I might have loved her once – but in her new form, she could be nothing to me. I am wise enough to know how much better and happier a woman she might be; it was not that I thought you had descended in the scale; but, Alice, you do not possess those virtues. That wholesome diet of milk and honey is not your diet. You would starve on it, and perish.”

He had spoken with great energy, but in a low voice. She was looking full at him; and that scar and his gloomy eyes seemed to make up the whole of his face. But the scar had never been ugly to her. When he was her lover she had taken pride in the mark.

When he paused she did not speak. The music of the river was still in her ears, and there came upon her a struggle as though she were striving to understand its song.

Were the waters telling her of the mistake she had made in accepting Mr. Grey as her husband? What her cousin was now telling her – had she not said it to herself hundreds of times during the last two months? Was she not telling herself daily – hourly – that in accepting Mr. Grey she had assumed herself to have virtues which she did not possess? She sat silent and convicted.

“I have learned this since we have been again together, Alice; and finding you, not the angel I had supposed, but the same woman I had once loved – I have not been safe from you at all. Here’s Kate, and now we’ll go for our walk.”

CHAPTER 6

The Bridge over the Rhine

“George,” said Kate as she approached them, “have you been preparing all your things for sale by auction?” Then she stole a look at Alice, and gathering that something had occurred, she went on rapidly, as though to cover Alice’s confusion, “Would you believe it? he had three razors laid out on his table—”

“A man must shave, even at Basle.”

“But not with three razors at once; and three hair-brushes, and half a dozen toothbrushes, and several combs and little glass bottles. I have packed them all; but now you are responsible for them. And I will not pack your boots, George. What can you have wanted with three pairs of boots?”

“When you have completed the list of my wardrobe we’ll go out upon the bridge. That is, if Alice likes it.”

“Oh, yes; I shall like it.”

“Come along, then,” said Kate. And so they moved away, Alice and Kate together, while George strolled behind, close to them, but not joining in their conversation – as though he had merely gone with them as an escort. Kate was chattering to Alice to show that there was nothing serious on their minds. George followed them with his hands behind his back, looking down at the pavement.

“Do you know,” said Kate, “I have a very great mind to run away – perhaps to the little inn at Handek. It’s a lonely place, where nobody would hear of me – and I should have the waterfall.”

“But why run away just now?”

“I won’t. But I do dread going home. You are going to John Grey, which may be pleasant enough; but I’m going to Aunt Greenow.”

“It’s your own choice.”

“No, it’s not. I haven’t any real choice in the matter. Fancy a month at Yarmouth with no companion but her!”

“I shouldn’t mind it. Aunt Greenow seems to be a very good sort of woman.”

“She may be a good woman, but I must say I think she’s a bad sort. You’ve never heard her talk about her husband?”

“No, never; I think she did cry a little the first day she came to Queen Anne Street after he died, but that was natural.”

“He was thirty years older than her.”

“But still he was her husband. And even if her tears are assumed, what of that? What’s a woman to do? Of course she was wrong to marry him. She was thirty-five, and had nothing, while he was sixty-five, and very rich. But according to all accounts she made him a very good wife, and you wouldn’t have her go about laughing within three months of his death.”

“No; but she needn’t be so outrageous in wearing her mourning, or so very careful that her widow’s caps are becoming. Her eyes are always red with weeping, and yet she is ready to flutter her eyelids at any man she sees.”

“Then why have you consented to go to Yarmouth with her?”

“Because she’s rich. It’s the fault of the world. Does anybody ever drop their rich relatives? When I told George, wasn’t it natural that he should say, ‘Oh, go by all means. She’s got forty thousand pounds!’ And what can I expect from her money?”

“Nothing, I should say.”

“Not a halfpenny. I’m nearly thirty and she’s only forty, and of course she’ll marry again. As for me, nobody cares less for money. Yet one sticks to one’s rich relatives. It’s the way of the world.” Then she paused a moment. “But shall I tell you, Alice, why I do stick to her?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s possible that she may help George in his career. I do not need money, but *he* may. And for such purposes as his, I think it fair that all the family should contribute. I feel sure that he would make a name for himself in Parliament; and if I had my way I would spend every shilling of Vavasor money in putting him there. When I told the squire so I thought he would turn me out of the house. He swore at me; and then he was so unhappy at swearing that he came and kissed me and gave me a ten-pound note. What do you think I did with it? I sent it to George as a contribution to the next election. Don’t tell him that I told you.”

They stopped and leaned over the parapet of the bridge.

“Come here, George,” said Kate, making room for him between herself and Alice. “Wouldn’t you like to be swimming down there? The water looks so enticing.”

“I can’t say I should; unless it might be a pleasant way of swimming into the next world.”

“I should so like to feel myself going with the stream,” said Kate. “I can’t imagine that I should be drowned.”

“I can’t imagine anything else,” said Alice.

“It would be so pleasant to be carried away headlong to Rotterdam.”

“And arrive there without your clothes,” said George.

“They would be brought after in a boat. The water looks so clear and bright in the moonlight, and the sound of it is so soft! The sea at Yarmouth won’t be anything like that, I suppose.”

She went on talking about the river, and their aunt, and Yarmouth. Still they stood looking down upon the river, and every now and then Kate’s voice was heard, preventing the feeling which might otherwise have arisen that their hearts were too full for speech.

At last Alice seemed to shiver.

“You are cold,” said George.

“It wasn’t that. I was thinking of something. Don’t you ever think of things that make you shiver?”

“Indeed I do – so often that I have to do my shiverings inwardly.”

“I don’t mean important things,” said Alice. “Little bits of things make me do it; perhaps a word that I ought not to have said ten years ago. The most ordinary little mistakes are always making me shiver.”

“Ah! When I think of a chance I’ve let go by, as I have thousands, then I shiver – but inwardly. I’ve been in one long shiver ever since we came out because of one chance that I let go by. Come, we’ll go in. We have to be up at five o’clock, and now it’s eleven. I’ll do the rest of my shivering in bed.”

They walked back to the hotel. On the stairs George handed Alice her candle, and as he did so he whispered a few words to her.

“My shivering fit has to come yet,” said he, “and will last me the whole night.”

She would have given much to be able to answer him lightly, as though he had meant nothing; but she couldn’t. She went to her own room without answering him at all. Here she sat down at the window looking out upon the river till Kate should join her. Their rooms adjoined, and she would not begin her packing till her cousin came.

But Kate was with her brother.

"If you'll take my advice," said Kate to him, with her candle in her hand, "you'll ask her to give you another chance. Do it tomorrow at Strasbourg; you'll never have a better opportunity."

"And bid her throw John Grey over!"

"Don't say anything about John Grey. Leave her to settle that herself. She has quite courage enough to dispose of John Grey, if she has courage enough to accept your offer."

"Kate, you women never understand each other. She must find out first that she wishes to be rid of her engagement."

"She has found that out long ago, I am sure of it. But if you can't bring yourself to speak to her, she'll marry him in spite of her wishes. You must be glad to find that she still loves you. You still love her, I suppose?"

"Upon my word I don't know."

"Don't provoke me, George. I'm moving heaven and earth to bring you two together; but if I didn't think you loved her, I'd tell her never to see you again."

"Upon my word, Kate, I sometimes think it would be better if you'd leave heaven and earth alone. Why shouldn't she marry John Grey if she likes him?"

"But she doesn't like him. And I hate him. I hate the sound of his voice, and the turn of his eye, and that slow, steady movement of his – as though he was always reminding himself not to wear out his clothes."

"I don't see that your hating him ought to have anything to do with it."

"If you're going to preach, I'll leave you. It's the darling wish of my heart that she should be your wife. If you ever loved anybody, you loved her."

"*Did* and *do* are different things."

"Very well, George; I have done. It has been the same in every twist and turn of my life. In everything that I have striven to do for you, you have thrown yourself over, in order that I might be thrown over too. But I believe you say this merely to vex me."

"Kate, I think you'd better go to bed."

"But not till I've told her everything. I won't leave her to be deceived and ill-used again."

"Who is ill-using her now? Is it not the worst of ill-usage, trying to separate her from that man?"

"No. She would be miserable with him, and make him miserable as well. She does not really love him. He loves her, but it's nothing to me if he breaks his heart."

"I shall break mine if you don't let me go to bed."

With that she went away to her cousin's room. She found Alice still seated at the window, with her head out through the lattice.

"Why, you lazy creature," said Kate; "I declare you haven't touched a thing."

"You said we'd do it together."

"But he has kept me. Oh, what a man he is! If he ever does get married, what will his wife do with him?"

"I don't think he ever will," said Alice.

"Don't you? Sometimes I think that the only thing needed to make him thoroughly good is a wife. But it isn't every woman that would do for him. And the woman who marries him should have high courage. There are moments when he is very wild; but he is never cruel or hard. Is Mr. Grey ever hard?"

"Never; nor wild."

"Oh, I'm quite sure he's never wild."

"When you say that, Kate, I know that you mean to abuse him."

“No; upon my word. What’s the good of abusing him to you? I like a man to be wild, wild in my sense. You know that.”

“I wonder whether you’d like a wild man for yourself?”

“Ah! I’ve never asked myself what sort of husband I would like. The truth is, I’m married to George. Ever since—”

“Ever since what?”

“Since you and he were parted, I’ve had nothing to do in life but to stick to him. And I shall do so to the end, unless one thing should happen.”

“And what’s that?”

“Unless you should become his wife after all. He will never marry anybody else.”

“Kate, you shouldn’t say such a thing. You know that it’s impossible.”

“Well, perhaps so. And it’s all the better for me. If George ever married, I should have nothing to do in the world; literally nothing!”

“Kate, don’t talk in that way,” and Alice embraced her.

“Go away,” said Kate. “Oh, Alice, I cannot bear it any longer. You must know it all. When you are married to John Grey, our friendship must be over. But I’d give up everything to see you become George’s wife. I know I’m not good. Don’t, Alice; I don’t want your caresses. Caress him, and I’ll kneel at your feet and cover them with kisses.” She had now thrown herself upon a sofa, and had turned her face away to the wall.

“Kate, you shouldn’t speak in that way.”

“Of course I shouldn’t – but I do.”

“You know that I cannot marry your brother – even if he wished it.”

“He does wish it.”

“Not even if I were bound to no other engagement.”

“And why not?” said Kate, again starting up. “That engagement will end in misery. Do you think I can’t see which of the two men you like best?”

“You are making me sorry, Kate, that I ventured to come here with your brother. It is not only unkind of you, it is indelicate.”

“Oh, indelicate! How I hate that word. Are your thoughts delicate? that’s the thing. You are engaged to marry John Grey. If you love anyone better, marrying him is about the most indelicate thing you can do.”

“If you think ill of me like that—”

“No; I don’t think ill of you. It hasn’t been your fault; it has been his. It is he who has driven you to sacrifice yourself on this altar. If we can, both of us, manage to lay aside all delicacy and pretence, and dare to speak the truth, we shall acknowledge that it is so. If Mr. Grey had come to you while things were smooth between you and George, would you have thought it possible that he could be George’s rival?”

Alice made no answer. She had intended to fight bravely, and to have shown the excellence of her position as Mr. Grey’s fiancée, but she felt that she had failed. She felt that she had somehow acknowledged that the match was to be deplored. But she would hurry home and bid Mr. Grey name the earliest day he pleased. After that her cousin would cease to disturb her.

It was nearly one o’clock before the two girls began to pack, and about two when they got into bed. At six they were at the railway station. Half an hour later they were on their way to Strasbourg.

There is nothing further to be told of their tour. They were two days and nights on the road from Basle to London; and during those two days and nights neither

George nor Kate spoke a word to Alice of her marriage, nor was any allusion made to the balcony at the inn, or the bridge over the river.

CHAPTER 7

Aunt Greenow

Kate Vavasor remained only three days in London before she started for Yarmouth.

“I’m my aunt’s, body and soul, for the next six weeks,” she told Alice when she visited. “And she is exacting in a way I can’t describe. You mustn’t be surprised if I don’t even write a line. I’ve escaped by stealth now. She went upstairs to try on some new clothes for the seaside, and I bolted.” She did not say a word about George; nor did George show himself. He said afterwards that he had gone off to Scotland, and had remained a week among the grouse.

It will be as well to say a few words about Mrs. Greenow before we go with her to Yarmouth. Mrs. Greenow was the only daughter of the old squire at Vavasor Hall. She was ten years younger than her brother John, but looked younger still. In early life she lived with relatives in a town in the north of England. Although she had the reputation of being a beauty, at thirty-four she was still unmarried. She had, moreover, acquired the character of being a flirt; and I fear that there was some truth in this.

Now this was very sad, seeing that Arabella Vavasor had no fortune, and that she had offended her father and brothers by declining to take their advice at various times. They were, indeed, quite troubled about her, when they heard the news that that she was going to be married to an old man.

The marriage fortunately turned out satisfactorily. The Vavasors were relieved from their trouble, and were as much surprised as gratified when they heard that she did her wifely duty well. Her husband was a retired merchant, very rich, not very well, and devoted to his bride. Rumours soon reached Vavasor Hall that Mrs. Greenow was a model wife, and that Mr. Greenow considered himself to be the happiest old man in Lancashire.

On one occasion she took her husband to Vavasor Hall; he was very old for his age, but the marriage was quite respectable, and there was, at any rate, no doubt about the money. Then Mr. Greenow died; and the widow came to London and claimed the commiseration of her nieces.

“Why not go to Yarmouth with her for a month?” George had said to Kate. “Of course it will be a bore. But an aunt with forty thousand pounds has a right to claim attention.” The old squire had also written to her, telling her to go if asked. So Kate agreed to go to Yarmouth for a month.

Yarmouth is not a very prepossessing place. There is an old town which summer visitors do not venture into; and there are the new houses down by the sea-side. A kind of esplanade runs for nearly a mile along the sands, and there are rows of new houses for summer visitors, all looking out upon the sea. There is no beauty unless the yellow sandy sea can be called beautiful. The coast is low and straight, and the east wind blows full upon it. But the place is healthy.

“Omnibus; no, indeed. Jeannette, get me a hackney cab.” These were the first words Mrs. Greenow spoke as she put her foot upon the platform at Yarmouth station. Her maid’s name was Jenny; but Kate had found, somewhat to her dismay, that the girl was to be called Jeannette.

Mrs. Greenow’s taste for masterdom had not shown itself so plainly in London as it did now. As a provincial person among Londoners, her spirit had been somewhat

cowed. But outside London she was herself again; and at Ipswich she had ordered Jeannette to get her a glass of sherry with an air which had created a good deal of attention among the porters.

The cab was found; and all Mrs. Greenow's boxes, together with the more moderate belongings of her niece and maid, were stowed on the top of it, around the driver, on the maid's lap, and Kate's also, and upon the vacant seat.

"The large house in Montpelier Parade," said Mrs. Greenow.

"They is all large, ma'am," said the driver.

"The largest," said Mrs. Greenow. "Mrs. Jones's. I was told it was the largest in the row."

"I know Mrs. Jones's," said the driver, and away they went.

Mrs. Jones's house was handsome and comfortable; but I fear Mrs. Greenow was disappointed to find that it was not perceptibly bigger than those on either side. This ambition would have amused Kate greatly had she been a bystander, and not her aunt's companion. Mrs. Greenow was good-natured and generous; but she desired that all the world should see that she had forty thousand pounds. She had no bashfulness about this. She called aloud for such comfort and grandeur as Yarmouth could give her, and was well pleased that all around should hear her calling. Joined to all this was her uncontrolled grief for her husband's death.

"Dear Greenow! sweet lamb! Oh, Kate, if you'd only known that man!" When she said this she was sitting in the best of Mrs. Jones's sitting-rooms, before dinner. "Oh, Kate, I do wish you'd known him!"

"I wish I had," said Kate, untruthfully. "I was away when he came to Vavasor Hall."

"Ah, yes; but it was at home that Greenow had to be seen to be appreciated. I was a happy woman, Kate." And Kate was surprised to see that real tears were making their way down her aunt's cheeks. But they were soon checked with a handkerchief of the finest cambric.

"Dinner, ma'am," said Jeannette, opening the door.

"Jeannette, I told you always to say that dinner was served."

"Dinner's served then," said Jeannette angrily.

"Come, Kate," said her aunt. "I've little appetite myself, but there's no reason you shouldn't eat your dinner. I do hope Mrs. Jones has got a decent cook."

The next day was Sunday; and it was beautiful to see how Mrs. Greenow went to church in all the glory of widowhood. There had been a great unpacking after dinner, and all her funereal outfits had been displayed before Kate's wondering eyes. Mrs. Greenow had pointed out the richness of each garment, the fineness of the fabric, the breadth of the frills – telling the price of each to a shilling, while she explained how expense had been of no consideration. This she did with all the pride of a young bride showing off her trousseau. Now and again, Mrs. Greenow would pause and address the shade of the departed one with affectionate words. In the midst of this Mrs. Jones came in; but the widow was not at all abashed by her presence.

"He left her uncommon well off, I suppose," said Mrs. Jones to Jeannette afterwards.

"You may say that, ma'am. It's more nor a hundred thousand of pounds!"

"No!"

"Indeed it is."

"Why don't she have a carriage?"

"She do; but a lady can't bring her carriage down to the sea when she's only just buried her husband. What'd folks say? But it ain't because she can't afford it, Mrs.

Jones. And now we're talking of it you must order a cab for church tomorrow. She said I was to get a man that had a livery coat and gloves."

The man with the coat and gloves was procured; and Mrs. Greenow's entry into church made quite a sensation. She walked up the middle aisle as though the chancel had belonged to her family for years; and the respectable pew-opener deserted two or three old ladies to show Mrs. Greenow into her seat. All eyes were on her.

I regret to say that this continued throughout the whole service. Every person in that church looked at Mrs. Greenow. There was a general conviction that something remarkable had happened that morning. Even the minister, while preaching his sermon, could not keep his eyes off that wonderful bonnet and veil.

Next morning Mrs. Greenow's name was put down at the Assembly Room. "I need hardly say that in my present condition I care nothing for these things. But, my dear Kate, I know what I owe to you."

Kate, with less intelligence than might have been expected from one so clever, began to assure her aunt that she needed no society, and was expecting a quiet time. But Mrs. Greenow soon corrected her, without any sign of annoyance.

"My dear," she said, "you must let me do what I know to be right. I should be very selfish if I allowed my grief to interfere with your amusements."

"But, aunt, I don't care for such amusements."

"That's nonsense, my dear. You ought to care for them. How are you to settle yourself in life if you don't care for them?"

"My dear aunt, I am settled."

"Settled!" said Mrs. Greenow, astounded, as though there must have been some hidden marriage of which she had not heard. "But that's nonsense. Of course you're not settled; and how are you to be, if I allow you to shut yourself up?"

It was in vain that Kate tried to stop her.

"No, my dear; I shall do my duty by you. Although my heart is desolate, I'm not going to immolate you on the altars of my grief. I shall force myself to go out for your sake, Kate."

"But, dear aunt, the world will think it so odd."

"I don't care twopence for the world. What can the world do to me? I'm not dependent on the world – thanks to that sainted lamb. No, Kate; I mean to make the place pleasant for you if I can, and the world may object if it likes."

The people of Yarmouth no doubt did remind each other that old Greenow was hardly yet four months buried. Mrs. Jones and Jeannette probably had their little jokes downstairs. But this did not hurt Mrs. Greenow. Mrs. Jones's bills were paid punctually; and everybody in the house treated the lady with due deference.

Numerous people came to call at Montpelier Parade, and Kate was astonished to find that her aunt had so many friends. She was indeed so bewildered by these strangers that she could hardly work out whom her aunt had known before, and whom she met for the first time. Somebody had known somebody who had known somebody else, and that was sufficient introduction. Mrs. Greenow could smile from beneath her widow's cap in a most bewitching way, and look most handsome. But she could also frown, and knew how to quell any attempt at familiarity from unsuitable people.

"My dear aunt," said Kate one morning after their walk upon the pier, "how you did snub that Captain Bellfield!"

"Captain Bellfield, indeed! I don't believe he's a captain at all. At any rate he has sold out, and the tradesmen have scrambled for the money. He was only a lieutenant when the 97th were in Manchester."

“But everybody here seems to know him.”

“Perhaps they do not know so much of him as I do. His impudence in telling me I was looking very well! Nothing can be so mean as men who go about in that way when they haven’t enough money in their pockets to pay their washerwomen.”

“But, aunt, how do you know that Captain Bellfield hasn’t paid his washerwoman?”

“I know more than you think, my dear. It’s my business. How could I tell whose attentions you should receive and whose you shouldn’t, if I didn’t inquire into these things?”

It was in vain that Kate attempted to rebel against this care. She told her aunt that she was now nearly thirty, and that she had managed her own affairs for the last ten years; but it was to no purpose. Mrs. Greenow would push aside all that her niece said as though it were unimportant. Kate was an unmarried woman with a very small fortune, and therefore, of course, wished to get married as soon as possible. It was natural that she should deny this, although when she came to know her aunt more intimately, she might admit it. But Mrs. Greenow would spare neither herself nor her purse on Kate’s behalf, and she would be a dragon of watchfulness in protecting her from such useless men as Captain Bellfield.

“I declare, Kate, I don’t understand you,” she said one morning over a late breakfast. They had fallen into luxurious habits, and I am afraid it was past eleven o’clock.

“What don’t you understand, aunt?”

“You only danced twice last night, and once with Captain Bellfield.”

“On purpose to ask after his poor washerwoman who doesn’t get paid.”

“Nonsense, Kate; you didn’t ask him anything of the kind. It’s very provoking.”

“But what harm can Captain Bellfield do me?”

“What good can he do you? That’s the question. I don’t think I ever saw a young woman so improvident as you are. When are you to begin to think about getting married if you don’t do it now?”

“I shall never begin to think about it.”

“That’s nonsense. Didn’t Mr. Cheesacre ask you for a dance last night?”

“Yes, he did; while you were talking to Captain Bellfield yourself, aunt.”

“Captain Bellfield can’t hurt *me*, my dear. And why didn’t you dance with Mr. Cheesacre?”

“He’s a fat Norfolk farmer, with not an idea beyond the virtues of stall-feeding.”

“My dear, every acre of it is his own land! And he bought another farm for thirteen thousand pounds only last autumn. They’re better than the squires, some of those gentlemen farmers; they are indeed. And of all men in the world they’re the easiest managed.”

“That’s a recommendation, no doubt.”

“Of course it is. He’s to take us to the picnic tomorrow, and I do hope you’ll let him sit beside you. It’ll be the place of honour, because he provides the wine. That man Bellfield is to be there; but if you allow your name to be mixed up with his, it will be all over with you as far as Yarmouth is concerned.”

“I don’t want to be mixed up with Captain Bellfield,” said Kate. In truth, the aunt did not understand her niece. Whatever Kate’s faults were, an unmaidenly desire of catching a husband was certainly not one of them.

CHAPTER 8

Mr. Cheesacre

Yarmouth is not a happy place for a picnic. A picnic should be held among green things. There should be grass, trees, small paths, thickets, and hidden recesses. There should be hills and dales – on a small scale; and above all, there should be running water.

But the spot chosen for Mr. Cheesacre's picnic had none of these virtues. It was on the seashore. Nothing was visible but sand and sea. There were no trees and nothing green; but there was a long, dry, flat beach; there was an old boat half turned over, under which it was proposed to dine; and benches, tables, and some canvas for shelter were provided by Mr. Cheesacre. Therefore it was called Mr. Cheesacre's picnic.

It was to be a marine picnic; an idea taken from some boating expeditions, during which food had been eaten, not altogether comfortably, in the boats. Captain Bellfield had suggested that they might land and eat their food, and his friend Mr. Cheesacre had promised his aid. A lady had said that the sand would be the very place for dancing in the cool of the evening. And so the thing had progressed.

Mr. Cheesacre was to supply the boats, the wine, the cigars, the music, and the carpenter's work necessary for turning the old boat into a banqueting saloon. But Mrs. Greenow had promised to provide the food. She had known Mr. Cheesacre now for ten days and was quite intimate with him. He was a stout, florid man of about forty-five, a bachelor, apparently much attached to ladies' society, rather bald, and very fond of his farming – and yet somewhat ashamed of it in what he considered to be polite circles.

He was, moreover, inclined to seek the honour which comes from a well-filled and generous purse. He liked to give a man dinner and then to boast of the dinner he had given. Mrs. Greenow had already learned that he was the owner of his own acres.

"It wouldn't do for me," she had said to him, "to be putting myself forward, as if I were giving a party myself."

"Well, perhaps not. But you might come with us."

"So I will, Mr. Cheesacre, for that dear girl's sake. I should never forgive myself if I prevented her pleasures, because of my sorrows. Just now nothing of that sort can give me any pleasure."

"I suppose not," said Mr. Cheesacre solemnly.

"Quite out of the question." Mrs. Greenow wiped away her tears. "For how is a woman to enjoy herself if her heart lies buried?"

"But it won't be so always, Mrs. Greenow."

Mrs. Greenow shook her head doubtfully. "But as I was saying, if you and I do it between us, won't that be best? I'll do the meat and pastry and fruit, and you shall do the boats and the wine."

"And the music," said Cheesacre, "and the expenses." He did not choose that any part of his outlay should go unnoticed.

"About the music – I was thinking of getting Blowhard to come."

"It shall be Blowhard," said Mr. Cheesacre.

On the morning of the picnic Mr. Cheesacre came to Montpelier Parade with Captain Bellfield, whose linen that day certainly gave no sign of any quarrel with his washerwoman. He was got up wonderfully, in a pseudo-sailor's jacket, liberally

ornamented with brass buttons, a fine white waistcoat, and pseudo-sailor's trousers. He wore a pair of very shiny patent-leather shoes, well adapted for dancing on the sand. He had bejewelled studs in his shirt, and yellow kid gloves on his hands; and his appearance struck dismay into the heart of his friend Cheesacre. The captain was a tall, handsome, well-made man, whose hair and whiskers were nearly black, but of that suspicious hue which seems to tell of the hairdresser's shop.

Cheesacre, too, had adopted a sailor's garb. He had on a rougher, looser jacket than the captain's, perhaps more like a real seaman's garment. But he was disgusted with himself the moment that he saw Bellfield.

"I say, you are a swell," he exclaimed.

"I don't know about that," said the captain. "I'll change with you if you like." But Cheesacre could not have worn that jacket, and he walked on, hating himself.

It will be remembered that Mrs. Greenow had spoken severely of Captain Bellfield's pretensions when discussing him with her niece; nevertheless, on this occasion she received him with most gracious smiles. But she had smiles for Mr. Cheesacre too. She had a wondrous power of smiling; and could, at times, favour half a dozen different gentlemen in as many minutes.

They found her in the midst of half-packed hampers, while Mrs. Jones, Jeannette, and the cook moved around her. She wore a huge apron, to protect her dress from any possible escape of cream or gravy; but otherwise she was clothed in full mourning. There she was, a widow of four months' standing, with a buried heart, skilfully making ready a dainty banquet. Mr. Cheesacre and Captain Bellfield were charmed.

"Oh, Mr. Cheesacre, if you haven't caught me before I've half done! Captain Bellfield, I hope you think my apron becoming."

"Everything that you wear, Mrs. Greenow, is always becoming."

"Don't talk in that way when – but never mind; we will think of nothing sad today. Will we, Mr. Cheesacre?"

"Oh dear no; unless it should happen to rain."

"It won't rain. By the by, Captain Bellfield, I and my niece mean to send ahead a few things in a bag, so that we may tidy ourselves up a little after the sea. I don't want it mentioned, because if it gets about among the other ladies, they'd think we wanted to dress up; and there wouldn't be room for them all, would there?"

"No," said Mr. Cheesacre.

"But you don't mind Jeanette's going with our things? She'll ride in the cart, you know, with the food."

"We shall be delighted to have Jeanette," said Mr. Cheesacre.

"Thank ye, sir," said Jeannette, with a curtsey.

"Jeannette, don't you let Mr. Cheesacre turn your head; and mind you behave yourself and be useful. Mrs. Jones, you might as well give me that ham now. Captain Bellfield, don't you put it into the basket upside down. There now, if you haven't nearly made me upset the apricot pie." Some innocent little by-play in the transfer of the dishes seemed to give offence to Mr. Cheesacre; he turned his back upon the hampers and stepped towards the door.

Mrs. Greenow saw this at a glance, and immediately applied herself to cure the wound.

"What do you think, Mr. Cheesacre," said she, "Kate wouldn't come down because she didn't want you to see her with an apron on!"

"I'm sure I don't know why Miss Vavasor should care about that."

"That's just what I said. Do step into the drawing-room; you'll find her there, and you can make her answer for herself."

But Mr. Cheesacre didn't stir. Perhaps he wasn't willing to leave his friend with the widow.

At length the food was packed and Mrs. Greenow went upstairs with the two gentlemen. There they found Kate and two or three other ladies who had promised to come: including the two Miss Fairstairs, whom Mrs. Greenow had patronized, and who repaid that lady for her kindness by an amount of outspoken praise which startled Kate.

"Your dear aunt!" Fanny Fairstairs had said on arriving. "I don't think I ever came across a woman with such milk of human kindness!"

"Or so much true wit," said her sister Charlotte – who had been called Charlie in Yarmouth for the last twelve years.

When the widow came into the room, they devoured her with kisses, and swore that they had never seen her looking so well. But as the girls' bright new gloves had been presents from Mrs. Greenow, they certainly did owe her some affection. Not many ladies would bestow such gifts upon their friends after so very short an acquaintance.

And then was there a Mrs. Green, whose husband was first-lieutenant on board a man-of-war in the West Indies. Mrs. Green was a quiet, ladylike little woman, very silent, and, one would have thought, hardly adapted to be a friend of Mrs. Greenow. But Mrs. Greenow had found out that she was alone, not very rich, and in need of society. Therefore she had good-naturedly forced Mrs. Green to come to the picnic.

There came in also a younger brother of the Fairstairs girls, Joe Fairstairs, a lanky, useless, idle young man, who was supposed to earn his bread in an attorney's office at Norwich.

"We told Joe to come to the house," said Fanny to the widow, apologetically, "because we thought he might be useful in carrying the cloaks." Mrs. Greenow smiled graciously upon Joe, and assured him that she was charmed to see him.

They set off. Both Cheesacre and the captain tried to take the widow's arm; but she had it all arranged.

"I'll take your arm, Mr. Joe," said she, and Captain Bellfield found himself obliged to attend to Mrs. Green, while Mr. Cheesacre walked to the beach beside Kate Vavator.

When they got to the boats, where the other picnickers were assembled, Mr. Cheesacre found himself separated from the widow. He got into the boat which contained Kate Vavator, and was shoved off from the beach while he saw Captain Bellfield arranging Mrs. Greenow's cloak.

"How absurd Bellfield looks in that jacket, doesn't he?" he said to Kate.

"Do you think so? I thought it very becoming for the occasion."

Mr. Cheesacre hated Captain Bellfield. He could not bear to think that his friend, who paid for nothing, should defraud him of the delights which should justly belong to him.

"It may be becoming," said he; "but it's dreadfully extravagant! and he's got no money, Miss Vavator; literally nothing. Do you know," and he reduced his voice to a whisper, "I lent him twenty pounds the other day. As you are seeing a good deal of him just now, I think it right that you should know."

All's fair, they say, in love and war, and this small breach of confidence was a love stratagem. Mr. Cheesacre was smitten with the charms both of the widow and the niece, and he constantly found that the captain was interfering with him. On this occasion he had desired to take the widow for his share, and was, upon the whole, inclined to think she was the more worthy of his attentions.

“You won’t mention it, of course, Miss Vavasor,” he continued.

“Of course not.”

“Bellfield’s a very pleasant fellow, and has seen the world; but he’s better for eating and drinking with than he is for buying and selling with, as we say in Norfolk. Do you like Norfolk, Miss Vavasor?”

“I never was here before, and I’ve only seen Yarmouth.”

“A nice place, Yarmouth; but you should come and see our lands. We feed one-third of England during the winter months.”

“Dear me!”

“We do, though; altogether, I don’t think there’s a county in England to beat Norfolk. Ah! you should certainly come and see our lands. The 7.45 a.m. train would take you through Norwich to my door, as one may say, and you would be back by the 6.22 p.m.” In this way he brought himself back into good-humour, feeling that in the absence of the widow, he made good progress with the niece.

In the meantime Mrs. Greenow and the captain were getting on very comfortably in the other boat.

“What a fine generous fellow your friend, Mr. Cheesacre, is!” said the widow.

“Yes; he’s a capital fellow in his way, for a farmer.”

“I suppose he’s something more than a common farmer. He has a good sort of place, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, yes; a very good house; – a little too near to the horse-pond for my taste.”

Here they were interrupted by an exclamation from a young lady that Charlie Fairstairs was feeling sick; and they prepared to land close to the spot at which the banquet was prepared.

CHAPTER 9

The Rivals

There had been a pretence of fishing, but no fish had been caught. Water got over the ladies' dresses, and the fishing was given up, to Mr. Cheesacre's indignation.

"Some people like to take everything and never give anything," he said to Kate afterwards, as he was walking with her to the picnic dinner.

"You can't suppose that any girl will like to be drenched with sea-water when she has taken so much trouble with her dress," said Kate.

"Then she shouldn't come fishing," said Mr. Cheesacre. "I hate such airs."

When they arrived at the old boat, Mrs. Greenow was the mistress of the occasion, altogether overshadowing Mr. Cheesacre. There was a little contest for supremacy between them, invisible to most eyes; but Mr. Cheesacre had not a chance against Mrs. Greenow. He soon gave way; and though he bustled about, it was in obedience to her orders. Captain Bellfield also made himself useful, but he drove Mr. Cheesacre into paroxysms of suppressed anger by giving directions. A man to whom he had lent twenty pounds, and who had not contributed so much as a bottle of champagne!

"We're to dine at four," said Mrs. Greenow.

"And we begin to dance at six," said an eager young lady.

"Maria, hold your tongue," said the young lady's mother.

"Yes, we'll dine at four," said Mr. Cheesacre. "And as for the music, I've ordered it to be here punctual at half-past five. We're to have three horns, cymbals, triangle, and a drum."

"How very nice; isn't it, Mrs. Greenow?" said Charlie Fairstairs.

"And now suppose we unpack," said Captain Bellfield.

"Bellfield, don't mind about the hampers," said Cheesacre. "Wine is a ticklish thing to handle, and there's my man there to manage it."

"I know more about wine than the boot-man from the hotel," said Bellfield. This made Mr. Cheesacre turn away, leaving Bellfield with the widow.

There was a great unpacking, during which Captain Bellfield and Mrs. Greenow constantly had their heads in the same hamper. There was nothing wrong in this. People engaged together in unpacking pies and cold chickens must have their heads in the same hamper. But the widow seemed to have laid aside her prejudice regarding the washerwoman.

There was a long table placed on the sand, with an awning over it. On the whole it was a more comfortable arrangement than might be expected; and this owed much to Mr. Cheesacre's expenditure. With the placing of the guests for dinner, Mr. Cheesacre made another great effort.

"Bellfield and I will take the two ends of the table," he announced, "and Mrs. Greenow shall sit at my right hand."

"I don't think that will do," said Captain Bellfield. "Mrs. Greenow gives the dinner, and Cheesacre gives the wine. We must have them at the two ends of the table. I will sit at her right hand." Mrs. Greenow did not refuse, and so the matter was settled.

Mr. Cheesacre took his seat in despair. It was nothing to him that he had Kate Vavasor beside him. He liked talking to Kate, but he could not enjoy himself while Captain Bellfield was talking to the widow.

“One would think that he had given it himself; wouldn’t you?” he said to Maria’s mother, who sat on his right.

“Given what?” said she.

“Why, the music and the wine and all the rest of it. There are some people full of that kind of impudence, who never pay a shilling. I pay my way.”

Maria’s mother said, “Yes, indeed.” She had other daughters there besides Maria, and her youngest and prettiest one, Ophelia, was sitting next to that ne’er-do-well Joe Fairstairs. “Ophelia, my dear, you are dreadfully in the draught; there’s a seat up here where you’ll be more comfortable.”

“There’s no draught here, mamma,” said Ophelia, without moving.

The mirth of the table certainly came from Mrs. Greenow’s end. The widow got up and changed places with the captain, so that he could carve the great grouse pie. Cheesacre, when he saw this, absolutely threw down his knife and fork violently upon the table.

“Is anything the matter?” said Maria’s mother.

“Matter!” said he. Then he shook his head in grief and vexation.

Kate watched it all, and was greatly amused. “I never saw a man so nearly broken-hearted,” she said, in her letter to Alice the next day.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Captain Bellfield, as soon as the eating was over, “I am going to propose a toast.” Mr. Cheesacre had actually not yet swallowed his last bit of cheese. The thing was indecent in its injustice.

“If you please, Captain Bellfield,” said he, “I’ll propose the toast.”

“Nothing on earth could be better, my dear fellow,” said the captain, “but as it’s your health that we’re going to drink, I don’t see how you are to do it.”

Cheesacre grunted and sat down. He certainly could not propose his own health, nor could he complain of the honour. He had now to think of the words in which he would return thanks.

But the extent of his horror may be imagined when Bellfield got up and made a most brilliant speech in praise of Mrs. Greenow. For full five minutes he went on without mentioning Cheesacre. Yarmouth, he said, had never been so blessed as it had been this year by the presence of the lady who was now with them. She had come among them, he declared, forgetful of herself and of her great sorrows, with the sole desire of adding something to the happiness of others.

Altogether the scene was very affecting, and Cheesacre was driven to madness. They were the very words that he had intended to speak himself.

“I hate all this kind of thing,” he said to Kate.

“After-dinner speeches never mean anything,” said Kate.

At last, when Bellfield had finished praising Mrs. Greenow, he told the guests that he wished to join his friend Mr. Cheesacre in the toast. There was no better fellow than his friend Cheesacre, whom he had known for many years. There was a clattering of glasses and a murmuring of healths, and Mr. Cheesacre slowly got upon his legs.

“I’m very much obliged to this company,” said he, “and to my friend Bellfield. I’ve had the greatest pleasure in getting up this little thing, and I’d made up my mind to propose Mrs. Greenow’s health; but, no doubt it has been in better hands. Perhaps Bellfield might have waited.”

“I couldn’t wait a moment.”

“I didn’t interrupt you, Captain Bellfield, and perhaps you’ll let me go on without interrupting me. We’ve all drunk Mrs. Greenow’s health, and I’m sure she’s very much obliged. So am I for the honour you’ve done me. I have taken some trouble in

getting up this little thing, and I hope you like it. I think somebody said something about liberality. I beg to assure you that I don't think of that for a moment. Somebody must pay for these sort of things, and I'm always very glad to take my turn. I dare say Bellfield will give us the next picnic, and if he'll appoint a day before the end of the month, I shall be happy to be one of the party." Then he sat down with some satisfaction, fully convinced that he had given his enemy a fatal blow.

"Nothing on earth would give me so much pleasure," said Bellfield. He turned back to his conversation with Mrs. Greenow.

There was no more speaking, for the three horns, the cymbals, the triangle, and the drum were soon heard tuning-up, and the ladies went to the further end of the old boat to get ready for the dance. Then the thoughtful care of Mrs. Greenow, in having sent Jeannette with brushes, combs, and so on, became apparent. The widow good-naturedly offered the services of Jeannette to all the young ladies, so that they forgave her for changing her own cap.

When ladies have made up their minds to dance, they will dance no matter what. A ploughed field in February would not be too wet. In truth the Yarmouth sands were not adapted for the exercise; nevertheless our friends danced; finding, however, that sedate dances were easier than polkas and waltzes.

"No, my friend," Mrs. Greenow said to Mr. Cheesacre when he asked her to dance. "I am sure Kate will be delighted to join you, but you must excuse me."

However, Mr. Cheesacre had a vague idea that Kate had snubbed him, and had no intention of courting her favour.

"I'm not sure that I'll dance myself," said he, seating himself by Mrs. Greenow's side under the canvas awning. Captain Bellfield led Miss Vavasor away to a new place on the sands, where he was followed by a score of dancers; and Mr. Cheesacre was alone with the widow at last.

He was by no means a poor man, and he despised poverty in others. He knew Mrs. Greenow's money to a penny. And she was handsome too. Mr. Cheesacre felt that he should have been smitten even without the forty thousand pounds. All in all, he thought that he couldn't do better. He was a thriving man, and what might not they two do in Norfolk if they put their wealth together?

"Oh, Mr. Cheesacre," said Mrs. Greenow, "they'll not enjoy themselves without you. Kate will think that you mean to neglect her."

"I shan't dance, Mrs. Greenow, unless you like to stand up."

"No, my friend. I fear you forget my recent bereavement. Your asking me is the bitterest reproach to me for having ventured to join your party."

"Upon my honour I didn't mean it, Mrs. Greenow."

"I do not suspect you. It would have been unmanly."

"And nobody can say that of me. There isn't a man or woman in Norfolk that wouldn't say I was manly."

"I'm quite sure of that."

"I have my faults, I'm aware."

"And what are your faults, Mr. Cheesacre?"

"Well; perhaps I'm extravagant. But it's only in these kind of things you know, when I want to make my friends happy. When I'm at home, I ain't extravagant. But when a man's enamoured, and perhaps looking out for a wife, he does like to be a little free, you know."

"And are you looking out for a wife, Mr. Cheesacre?"

"If I told you, you'd only laugh at me."

“No; indeed. How could I laugh at marriages, seeing how happy I have been in mine?” and Mrs. Greenow put her handkerchief to her eyes.

“So happy that you’ll try it again some day?”

“Never, Mr. Cheesacre. Love is over for me, buried with my dear departed saint.”

“But, Mrs. Greenow,” and Cheesacre came closer to her, “Mrs. Greenow, I’m in earnest, I am indeed. There isn’t a fellow in Norfolk pays his way better than I do. I don’t pay a sixpence of rent, and I have seven hundred acres of as good land as there is in the county. I’m Samuel Cheesacre of Oileymead, and it’s all my own.” Mr. Cheesacre brought down his fist powerfully on the slight table. “It’s all my own, Mrs. Greenow, and the half of it shall be yours if you’ll please to take it.” He stretched out his hand to her, as if he expected her to shake it in acceptance of the bargain.

“If you’d known Greenow, Mr. Cheesacre, you would not have addressed me in this way.”

“What difference would that make? I never knew what was the good of being unhappy, or crying over spilt milk. Come, say the word. There ain’t a bedroom in my house – the front ones – that isn’t mahogany furnished!”

“What’s furniture to me?” said Mrs. Greenow, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

Just at this moment Maria’s mother stepped in under the canvas. It was most inopportune. Mr. Cheesacre felt that he was progressing well. But now he was interrupted just as he was expecting success, and he drew suddenly away from the widow’s side, and sat there confessing his guilt in his face.

Mrs. Greenow felt no guilt, and was afraid of no strange eyes. “Mr. Cheesacre and I are talking about farming,” she said, rising from her seat.

“I’d just come in to say that I thought we might be getting to the boats,” said Mrs. Walker. “My Ophelia is so delicate.” At this moment the delicate Ophelia was to be seen distantly upon the sands with Joe Fairstairs’ arm round her waist, so Mrs. Walker’s solicitude was not unreasonable.

The distant dancers were recalled and preparations were made for the return journey. Others had strayed besides the delicate Ophelia and the idle Joe, and it took some time to collect the party.

“Ophelia, mind you come in the boat with me,” said her mother. But Joe Fairstairs and her daughter were too clever for her. When the boats went off she found herself to be in Mr. Cheesacre’s, while Ophelia and her admirer were under the protection of Captain Bellfield.

Mr. Cheesacre had vainly tried to arrange that Mrs. Greenow should return with him. But the widow said, “I think we’d better go back as we came,” and gave her hand to the Captain.

“Certainly,” said Captain Bellfield. “Cheesacre, old fellow, mind you look after Mrs. Walker. Come along, my hearty.” Mrs. Greenow took her place in the stern, and Bellfield sat beside her, with the tiller in his hand.

“If you’re going to steer, Captain Bellfield, I beg that you’ll be careful.”

“Careful!” said the Captain. “Don’t you know that I would sooner perish beneath the waves than that a drop of water should touch you roughly?”

“But you see, we might perish beneath the waves together.”

“Together! What a sweet word that is; perish together! Were it not that there might be something better even than that, I would wish to perish in such company.”

“But I should not wish anything of the kind, Captain Bellfield.”

There was no perishing by water on that occasion. Captain Bellfield’s boat reached the pier at Yarmouth very shortly after Mr. Cheesacre’s.

“There,” said the Captain, as he handed out Mrs. Greenow. “I have brought you to no harm.”

“And, I hope, will not do so hereafter.”

“Heavens forbid, Mrs. Greenow! I trust that your lot may be free from all disaster. Oh, that I might venture to hope that, at some future day, I might have the privilege of protecting you from all danger!”

“I can protect myself very well, I can assure you. Good night, Captain Bellfield. We won’t take you and Mr. Cheesacre out of your way, will we, Kate? We have had a most pleasant day.”

Each of the gentlemen fought for the privilege of accompanying the widow to her door; but Mrs. Greenow would have neither of them.

“Mr. Joe Fairstairs will see us home. Mr. Cheesacre, good night. Indeed you shall not; —not a step.” There was that in her voice which induced both men to obey.

“Well, Kate, what do you think of the day?” the aunt said when she was alone with her niece.

“It was all very well, aunt, but I fear I have not the temperament fitted for enjoying the fun. I envied Ophelia Walker because she made herself thoroughly happy.”

“I do like to see girls enjoy themselves,” said Mrs. Greenow, “and young men too. It seems so natural; why shouldn’t young people flirt?”

“Or old people either for that matter?”

“Or old people either, if they don’t do any harm to anybody. If I had sons and daughters I should think a little flirting the very best thing for them as a safety valve. When people get to be old, if they want to flirt together, I don’t see why they should give it up.”

This was Mrs. Greenow’s doctrine on the subject of flirtation.

CHAPTER 10

Nethercoats

We will leave Mrs. Greenow with her niece at Yarmouth, and will call upon Mr. Grey at his place in Cambridgeshire. That county has few rural beauties. It is very flat; there are few trees; the rivers are merely dikes; and in much of the county the fields are divided simply by ditches, not by hedgerows. Mr. Grey's residence was in the Isle of Ely, a few miles from the Cathedral town, beside a long straight road which ran through the fields for miles without even a bush to cheer it. The name of his place was Nethercoats, and here he lived throughout the year, and intended to live throughout his life.

His father had been a prebendary at Ely Cathedral, and a minister in the neighbourhood, who had built the house in which his son now lived. His wife had lived there for only a few months, dying soon after the birth of their son. After that, the old clergyman had gone back to the Cathedral Close at Ely, and there John Grey grew up under his father's eye. He had taken honours at a Cambridge college, and had then, when his father died, declined a fellowship. His father had left him an income of some fifteen hundred a year, and with this he settled near to his college friends and the old cathedral he loved, in the house which his father had built.

But though Nethercoats possessed no beautiful scenery, it was an excellent residence for a country gentleman of small means. I doubt whether prettier rooms were ever seen than the drawing-room, the library, and the dining-room at Nethercoats, which all opened out on to the garden. The library, which was a handsome chamber, was known as one of the best private collections in that part of England.

But perhaps the spacious gardens of Nethercoats were its greatest glory. They were excellently tended, and had been laid out wisely. There could be no fine forest trees there; nor could there be a clear rippling stream with steep green banks. But the shrubs were of the rarest kind, and mature enough to be in their full beauty. The fruit-trees were perfect, and the glass-houses extensive. The whole estate, with gardens, lawns and fields, covered about twelve acres.

Mr. Grey had lived there for seven years. He had easy access to Cambridge, and found most of his society in the Close of Ely Cathedral. But he had gradually learned to feel that he wanted a companion in his home.

His visits to London had generally been short and far between, to visit libraries or the editor of some periodical. On one of these visits he had met Alice Vavasor, and had resolved to ask her to share his home. He had obtained her promise, and from that moment all his life had been changed.

At Nethercoats he now began to surround himself with feminine belongings, and to promise himself an infinity of feminine blessings. He became impatient, longing for the fruition of his new idea of happiness – longing to have that as his own which he certainly loved beyond all else in the world.

But he acknowledged that Alice could not be expected to share his impatience. She had her house in London, her town society, and her father; and as the change for her would be much greater than it would be for him, it was natural that she should require some small delay. He had not pressed her. But in truth his impatience was now growing strong, and during her absence in Switzerland, he resolved that a

marriage late in the autumn – even in winter – would be better than a marriage postponed till the following year.

Alice had written to him occasionally from Switzerland, and her first two letters had been very charming. They had described the tour pleasantly, with some slightly coloured account of George Vavasor's idleness, and of Kate's obedience to her brother. Alice had never written much of love in her love-letters, and Grey was contented. He did not doubt her love. He was a man who could never have suggested to himself that a woman loved him till she accepted him; but after that, he could never think that her love would fail.

After those first two letters, however, there seemed to have crept into them an unconscious melancholy, which he soon recognised and thought much about. During the three or four last days of the journey, while they were on their way home, she had not written.

But on her arrival she received from Mr. Grey a letter which told her how very much she would add to his happiness if she would agree that their marriage should not be postponed beyond October. She answered this letter at once, in such words that Mr. Grey resolved that he must go to her in London. I will give her letter here.

Dearest John,

We reached home yesterday tired, as we came through from Paris without stopping. I got your letter when I came in last night, and I suppose I had better dash at it at once. I would willingly delay doing so, if I did not know that this would be mere cowardice. I won't be a coward, and therefore I will tell you at once that I cannot let you hope that we should be married this year. Of course you have a right to ask me why, and of course I am bound to answer. I do not know that I can give any answer with which you will not have a right to complain. If so, I can only ask your pardon.

Marriage is a great change in life – much greater to me than to you, who will remain in your old house, will keep your old pursuits, will still be your own master, and will change in nothing – except that you will have a companion who may not be all that you expect. But I must change everything. It will seem to me as though I were passing through a grave to a new world. I must abandon all the ways of life that I have hitherto adopted. Of course I should have thought of this before I accepted you; and I did think of it. I made up my mind that, as I truly loved you, I would risk the change for your sake and for mine, hoping that I might add something to your happiness, and that I might secure my own.

Dear John, do not think that I despair that it may be so; but, indeed, you must not hurry me. I must tune myself to the change that I have to make. What if I should wake some morning after six months living with you, and tell you that the quiet of your home was making me mad?

Do not ask me again till after winter. If in the meantime I shall find that I have been wrong, I will humbly confess it, and ask you to forgive me. And I will freely admit this: if a delay is so contrary to your own plans as to make your marriage not that which you had expected, you are free to tell me so, and to say that our engagement shall be over. I will obey your wishes in anything – except in that one thing which you urged in your letter.

Kate is going down to Yarmouth with Mrs. Greenow, and I shall probably see no more of her till next year, as she will be in Westmorland after that. George left me at the door when he brought me home, and declared that he intended to leave London. Papa offers to go to Ramsgate for a fortnight, but he looks so wretched when he makes the offer that I shall not have the heart to hold him to it. Lady Macleod very

much wants me to go to Cheltenham. I very much want not to go; but it will probably end in my going there for a week or two.

Beyond that, I shall be at home. There is a project that we shall all eat our Christmas dinner at Vavasor Hall – not including George of course – but this project is quite in the clouds, and, as far as I am concerned, will remain there.

Dear John, let me hear that this letter does not make you unhappy.

Most affectionately yours,

Alice Vavasor.

At Nethercoats, the post was brought in at breakfast-time, and Mr. Grey was sitting with his tea and eggs before him, when he read Alice's letter. He read it twice, and then carefully referred to one or two others which he had received from Switzerland. After that, with the letters in his hand, he walked out into his garden.

He thought that there was more in Alice's mind than a mere wish for delay. He felt that she was unhappy because she distrusted the results of her marriage; but it never for a moment occurred to him that therefore the engagement should be broken.

In the first place he loved her too well. He was a constant, firm man, somewhat reserved, and unwilling to make new acquaintances, and, therefore, especially unwilling to break away from those which he had made. Breaking the engagement would have caused him great unhappiness. If he felt that that Alice's happiness demanded it, he would have made the sacrifice without a word of complaint, although the bruise would have remained on his heart, indelible but unseen by others.

But it did not occur to him that his breaking the engagement could be beneficial to Alice. He thought of her as of one wounded, and wanting a cure. Some weakness had fallen on her, and strength must be given to her from another. He assumed himself to be the stronger. He did not doubt her love, but he knew that she had associated for the last few weeks with two people whose daily conversation would tend to weaken the tone of her mind. He would go up to town and see her. By that day's post he wrote a short note to her.

Dearest Alice.

I have resolved to go to London at once. I will be with you at eight in the evening, the day after tomorrow.

Yours, J. G.

“And now,” she said, when she received it, “I must dare to tell him the whole truth.”

CHAPTER 11

John Grey Goes to London

And what was the whole truth? Alice Vavasor intended to end her engagement with Mr. Grey.

And yet, why? She had not been false in her love to him. It was not that her heart had veered round and given itself to her wild cousin George. Although she felt herself constrained to part from John Grey, George Vavasor could never be her husband. Of that she assured herself fifty times. Nay, she went farther, and vowed to herself that if she did not marry John Grey, she would never marry.

People often say that marriage is an important thing, and should be deeply considered. However, I feel that marriage may be pondered over too much. I am inclined to believe that most men and women take their lots as they find them, marrying by force of nature, and going on with their mates with a general if not an undisturbed satisfaction.

That Alice Vavasor had thought too much about it, I feel quite sure. She had gone on thinking of it till she had filled herself with a cloud of doubts which even the sunshine of love was unable to drive away.

With all her doubts, Alice never doubted her love for Mr. Grey. Nor did she doubt his character. But she had gone on thinking of the matter till her mind had become filled with some undefined idea of the importance to her of her own life.

What should a woman do with her life? At that time a flock of learned women asked that question. Fall in love, marry, have two children, and live happy ever afterwards – that answer has as much wisdom in it as any other. That advice cannot, perhaps, always be followed to the letter; but neither can the advice given by the flock of learned ladies.

A woman's life is important to her – as is a man's to him – not chiefly with regard to what she shall do with it. The chief thing is the manner in which that something shall be done. It is important to a young man to decide whether he shall make hats or shoes; but not half so important as that other decision, whether he shall make good shoes or bad. And so with a woman; if she recognises the necessity of truth and honesty in her life, I do not know that she need ask what she will do with it.

Alice Vavasor was always asking herself that question, and had filled herself with a vague idea that there was a something to be done beyond that marrying and having two children – if she only knew what it was. She was full of an undefined ambition that made her restless without giving her any real food for her mind. When she told herself that she would have no scope for action in life in Cambridgeshire with Mr. Grey, she did not herself know what she meant by action. She assured herself that she cared little for London society, or the shops, or the city's bustle; and yet she told herself that she feared the desolate calm of Cambridgeshire.

When she did manage to find any answer to that question of what she should do with her life, it was generally of a political nature. She was not so far advanced as to think that women should be lawyers and doctors, or to wish for the vote; but she undoubtedly hankered after some second-hand political manoeuvring. She would have liked to have around her ardent spirits, male or female, who talked of "the cause," and kept alive in her some flame of political fire.

As it was, she had no cause. Her father's political views were very mild. Lady Macleod's were deadly conservative. Kate Vavasor was an aspiring Radical just now,

because her brother was; but during the year of the love-passages between George and Alice, George Vavasor's politics had been as conservative as you please. He did not become a Radical till he quarrelled with his grandfather.

Now, indeed, George held very advanced Radical views, with which Alice felt that she could sympathize. But what would be the use of sympathizing down in Cambridgeshire? John Grey had no interest in modern politics. He had decided views about the Roman Senate and Augustus, and the Girondists in the French Revolution; but for Manchester and its concerns he cared nothing, and had declared to Alice that he would not accept a seat in the House of Commons if it were offered to him free. What political enthusiasm could she indulge with such a companion?

She thought too much of all this; and to give her due credit, was quite as anxious for his happiness as for her own.

"I don't care for the Roman Senate," she said to herself, "or for the Girondists. How am I to talk to him day after day, when we are alone together?"

No doubt her tour in Switzerland with her cousin had strengthened these thoughts. She was not in love with her cousin, and was firmly sure that she never could be. He had insulted her love; and though she had forgiven him and he was a dear friend, she could never again feel that passion for him. That was over.

But, nevertheless, there had been something of romance during those days in Switzerland which she feared she would regret when she found herself settled at Nethercoats. She envied Kate, who could attach herself to George's political career, and obtain from it all that excitement of life which Alice desired for herself. Alice could not marry her cousin; but she felt that if she could do so without impropriety, she would like to stick close to him like another sister, and to spend her money in aiding his career in Parliament as Kate would do. She did not love her cousin; but she still believed in him – with a faith which he certainly did not deserve.

In the two days before she was to see Mr. Grey, her mind grew more fixed in its purpose. She would tell Mr. Grey that she was not fit to be his wife. It never occurred to her that he might refuse to let her go. She felt that she merely needed the strength to speak in order to be free. She thought of telling all to her father and of begging him to break the matter to Mr. Grey; but she knew that her father would not understand. Nor would she write to Kate, although Kate would sympathize with her. She would tell Kate once the thing was done, but not before.

As the hour approached at which John Grey was to arrive, she felt her heart was beating with a violence which she could not repress. She began to be aware that she was about to be guilty of a great iniquity. She would not change her mind. Yet she felt that her purpose was wicked.

When the knock at the door was at last heard she trembled. Then he was in the room with her.

"My dearest," he said, coming towards her. His smile was sweet and loving as always, and his voice had its usual manly, loving tone. As he walked across the room Alice felt that he was a man of whom a wife might be very proud. He was tall and handsome, with bright blue eyes, and a mouth like a god. It was the firm beauty of his mouth that made Alice afraid of him.

"My dearest," he said, advancing across the room, and before she knew how to stop him, he had taken her in his arms and kissed her.

He did not immediately begin to talk about the letter, but placed her upon the sofa, sitting by her side, and looked at her lovingly. There was no reproach or scrutiny in his face – as yet; nor any fear.

Alice summoned up her courage to speak.

“Though I am very glad to see you,” she said, “I am sorry that my letter should have given you the trouble of this journey.”

“Trouble!” he said. “Nay, you ought to know that it is no trouble. So your Swiss journey went pleasantly?”

“Yes; very pleasantly.” This she said as if not thinking of it.

“And Kate has now left you?”

“Yes; she is with her aunt, at the seaside.”

“And your cousin George?”

“I never know much of George’s movements. He may be in town, but I have not seen him since I came back. John, you have come to me about my letter. Is it not so?”

“Certainly it is so.”

“I have thought much, since, of what I wrote; and I feel sure that we had better—”

“Stop, Alice; stop a moment, love. Do not speak hurriedly. Shall I tell you what I learned from your letter?”

“Yes; if you think it better that you should do so.”

“I learned, love, that something had been said or done during your journey – or perhaps only something thought, that had made you melancholy, and filled you with those indefinable regrets which we are all apt to feel at certain moments of our life. There are few of us who do not encounter, now and again, some of that irrational spirit of sadness which, when over-indulged, drives men to madness and self-destruction. I used to know it well, before I knew you; but since I have had the hope of having you in my house, I have banished it utterly. Do not speak under the influence of that spirit till you have thought whether you, too, cannot banish it.”

“I have tried, and it will not be banished.”

“Try again, Alice. It is an unholy spirit, and belongs neither to heaven nor to earth. Do not say to me the words that you were about to say till you have wrestled with it manfully. I think I know what those words were to be. If you love me, those words should not be spoken. If you do not—”

“If I do not love you, I love no one.”

“I believe it. I trust your love implicitly, Alice. Tell me that I may again plead my cause for an early marriage!”

She sat quiet, looking at him. She had not changed her mind, but she did not know how to declare her resolution to him. There was something in his manner that awed her, and also softened her.

“Tell me,” said he, “that I may see you again tomorrow morning in our usual quiet, loving way. I will ask for nothing further.”

“No; I cannot,” she said. And the tone of her voice was different to any tone that he had heard before from her mouth.

“Is that melancholy fiend too strong for you?” He smiled as he said this, and took her hand. She did not attempt to withdraw it, but sat by him in a strange calm. “You have not struggled with it. You know, as I do, that it is a wicked fiend, that is prompting you to the worst cruelty in the world. Alice! Alice! Try to think as though some other person were concerned. If it were your friend, what advice would you give her?”

“I would bid her tell the good and noble man who loved her that she found herself unfit to be his wife; and then I would bid her ask his pardon humbly on her knees.” And Alice sank before him to the floor, and looked up into his face with sad contrition.

He had intended to yield to her in nothing, resolving to treat all that she might say as hallucination – as the effect of lack of health, for which some change in her mode of life would be the best cure. He knew what she intended. But he would not allow a word she said to disturb arrangements made for their joint happiness. He would treat her as a loving husband would treat a wife who was in the grip of a melancholy malady.

“But what if he granted no such pardon, Alice? I will grant none such. You are my wife, my dearest chosen one. You are all that I value in the world, my treasure and my comfort. Do you think that I shall let you go from me in that way? No, love. If you are ill I will wait till your illness is gone; and, if you will let me, I will be your nurse.”

“I am not ill.”

“Not with any defined sickness. You do not shake with fever; but yet you must be ill.”

“You will not hear my reasons,” she said, still kneeling before him and looking up into his face.

“I will hear them if you refer to supposed faults of my own.”

“No, no!”

“Then I will not hear them. It is for me to find out your faults, and when I have found any that require complaint, I will come and make it. Dear Alice, I wish you knew how I long for you.” He put his hand upon her hair, as though he would caress her. But at this she rose, and stood in the middle of the room.

“Mr. Grey,” she said, “I hope that you will take me at my word.”

“Oh, but I will not, if that would be adverse to my own interests.”

“I am thinking of your interests as much as of my own. I feel quite sure that I should not make you happy as your wife; and feeling that, I think that I am right to ask your forgiveness, and to beg that our engagement may be over.”

“No, Alice, never with my consent. I would happily marry you tomorrow. But if it cannot be so, then I will wait. Nothing but your marriage with someone else would convince me.”

“I cannot convince you in that way,” she said, smiling.

“You will convince me in no other. You have not spoken to your father yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Do not do so for the present. You will admit that it might be possible that you would have to unsay what you had said.”

“No; it is not possible.”

“Give us both the chance. It can do no harm. And, Alice, I ask you for no reasons, because I do not believe that they will long have an effect on you. Do you still think of going to Cheltenham?”

“I have not decided.”

“I think a change of air would be good for you.”

“Yes; you treat me as though I were partly silly, and partly insane; but it is not so. The change you speak of should be in my nature, and in yours.”

He shook his head and still smiled. There was something in the unperturbed security of his manner which almost made her angry with him. It seemed as though he assumed so great a superiority that he felt himself able to treat any resolve of hers as the petulance of a child. And though he spoke of his love, yet he was so well able to command his feelings that he showed no sign of grief. She did not doubt his love, but she believed him to be so much the master of his love – as he was the master of everything else – that their separation would cause him no uncontrollable grief.

In that she utterly failed to understand his character. Had she known him better, she might have been sure that such a separation would carry its mark on him to the grave. He would go home and settle himself to his books; but he would never again be capable of walking forth among his flowers with an easy heart. He was a strong, constant man, perhaps over-conscious of his own great strength.

“He is perfect!” Alice had said to herself often. “Oh, if only he were less perfect!”

He did not stay with her long. “Perhaps,” he said, as he held her hand at parting, “I had better not come tomorrow.”

“No, better not.”

“I advise you not to tell your father of this; but if you do tell him, let me know.”

“Why?”

“Because in that case I also must see him. God bless you, dearest, dearest Alice!” Then he went, and she sat on the sofa without moving, till she heard her father’s feet coming up the stairs.

“What, Alice, are you not in bed yet?”

“Not yet, papa.”

“So John Grey has been here. He has left his stick in the hall.”

“Yes; he has been here.”

“Is anything the matter, Alice?”

“No, papa, nothing.”

“He has not made himself disagreeable, has he?”

“Not in the least. He never does anything wrong.”

“So that’s it, is it? He is just a shade too good. Well, I have always thought that myself. But it’s a fault on the right side.”

“It’s no fault, Papa. If there be any fault, it is not with him. But I am tired, and I will go to bed.”

“Is he to be here tomorrow?”

“No; he returns to Nethercoats early. Good night, papa.”

Mr. Vavasor, as he went to his bedroom, felt sure that something was wrong between his daughter and her lover. “I don’t know how she’ll ever put up with him,” he said to himself, “he is so terribly conceited.”

Alice, before she went to bed, sat down and wrote a letter to her cousin Kate.

CHAPTER 12

Mr. George Vavasor at Home

George Vavasor was not an un hospitable man. He would sometimes invite a friend to dine with him at his club. But he never gave dinners under his own roof. During his wine-selling career, he had presided at feasts given to customers by the firm; but he had not enjoyed it. Since then he had moved to lodgings in Cecil Street, a quiet area near the river. Here he had two rooms on the first floor, and his friends came to him very rarely, and generally on business. Only a few of his friends knew where he lived.

And he wished that no one knew it. He was a man who had always lived as though secrecy might be useful to him. When he went out at night he dressed in a style that meant nobody would recognise him. The people at his lodgings did not even know that he had relatives. Kate had never been to Cecil Street, and addressed all her letters to his club. He would bear no inquiry into himself. If he had been away for a month, and his friends asked him where he had been, he answered the question falsely, or left it unanswered.

Vavasor also maintained another little establishment, down in Oxfordshire; but the two establishments did not even know of each other's existence. There was a third, too, very closely hidden from the world's eye, which shall be nameless; but of Roebury, the place in Oxfordshire, he did sometimes speak among his friends. When talking about hunting, he would speak of his two nags at Roebury, saying that they were for sale. And men very often did buy Vavasor's horses. When he rode them they always went well and sold themselves readily. And though he spoke of two, and perhaps did not keep more during the summer, he always seemed to have horses to hunt with when he was in the country.

At Roebury, he kept an ancient, trusted groom; and many were the long whisperings between George and Bat Smithers at the stable door, behind the yard of the hunting inn. Of any other portion of his master's life Bat knew nothing.

But though Vavasor's lodgings were so very private, he had, nevertheless, adorned them with care. The furniture was very neat, and the book-shelves were filled. He had a good portrait of a woman's head hanging on a wall. He had special places for his pistols, his fencing foils, and his hunting whips. The room was a pretty bachelor's room, but it had only one easy-chair.

Here George sat lounging over his breakfast, late on a Sunday morning in September, reading a letter from his sister Kate which had just been brought to him from his club. He read it very quickly, and then threw it aside as though it were of no importance, keeping, however, an enclosure in his hand. And yet the letter was of much importance, and made him think deeply.

"If I did it at all," said he, "it would be more to cut him out than any other reason."

The *him* in question was John Grey, and Kate's letter was urging her brother to renew his love affair with Alice. And Vavasor was inclined to renew it, and would have begun the renewing it at once, if he had not doubted his power with his cousin. Indeed he had already tried some such renewal at Basle. He had told Kate that Alice's fortune was not much, and that her beauty was past its prime; but he was, in truth, very anxious to obtain from Alice a second promise of her hand.

Perhaps it was not Alice's beauty that he coveted, nor her money alone. He thought her very beautiful, and was fully aware that her money would be of great use to him. But I believe that he spoke truly to himself – that his chief attraction was the delight which he would have in robbing Mr. Grey of his wife. Alice had once been his love, and although he had been in the wrong, he had enough human weakness to feel hurt that John Grey should be her lover.

And when he had met the man, he had hated him. George Vavasor, when he hated, was apt to follow up his hatred with injury. At present, as he sat lounging in his chair, he thought that he would like to marry his cousin Alice; but he was quite sure that he would like to stop the marriage between Alice and John Grey.

Kate had been very false to her friend, and had sent to her brother part of the letter which Alice had written to her after seeing John Grey. Alice had written out all her heart on the matter.

"But you must understand," she wrote, "that all that I said to him had no effect. I tried to make him know that everything between us must be over, but I failed. He talked to me as though I were a child. He told me that I was sick and full of fantasies, and needed a change of air. I could not blame him; but I felt also that he, in his mighty superiority, could never be a fitting husband for a creature so inferior to him as I am. Though I altogether failed to make him understand this, every moment that we were together made me more fixed in my resolution."

This letter from Alice to Kate, Vavasor read over and over again. He wished to learn how he would play his game from a knowledge of Alice's mind.

"She'll never marry him, at any rate," he said to himself, "and she is right. He'd make an upper servant of her. Now with me;— well, I hardly know what I should make of her. I cannot think of myself as a married man." Then took up his newspaper and cigar.

Two hours later, when he was still lounging in his dressing-gown, the waiting-maid at the lodgings brought word that a gentleman wished to see him.

"A gentleman!" said he. "Does the gentleman look like a public-house keeper?"

"I think he do," said the girl.

"Then show him up," said George.

As Vavasor expected, the gentleman was Mr. Grimes from the "Handsome Man" tavern, in the Brompton Road, and he had come by appointment to have a little conversation on political matters. Mr. Grimes had considerable weight in his own neighbourhood, and politics to him meant business.

Vavasor had been, as I have said, lately rejected as a member of Parliament for Chelsea, and the new member who had beaten him would sit in Parliament for one more session. Then his period of glory – for which he was said to have paid nearly six thousand pounds – would be over. But he might be elected again; and it might be hoped that this second election would be conducted more economically.

Mr. Grimes was very much opposed to the economical view, and was now visiting George Vavasor with the object of opposing the new member on this head. No doubt Mr. Grimes was personally in favour of Mr. Vavasor, and would do all in his power to prevent the re-election of the young Lord Kilfenora; but his main object was that money should be spent.

"Well Mr. Grimes," said George, "how are you this morning?"

"Times is very bad, Mr. Vavasor," said the publican.

"Of course they are. They're always bad. But I should have thought you publicans were doing well."

“Lord love you, Mr. Vavator; we’re the worst put upon of men. Yesterday was Saturday, yet we only took three pound ten and nine. What’ll that come to, Mr. Vavator, when you reckons it up with the brewer? Why, it’s next to nothing. If I had nothink to look to but beer I couldn’t keep a house over my head; no I couldn’t. But if I sells that beer as I gets it, there ain’t a halfpenny coming to me out of a gallon.”

“But you don’t sell it as you get it. You stretch it.”

“Well, I won’t lie, Mr. Vavator. You know what’s what as well as I do.”

Mr. Grimes was a stout man dressed all in black, with a mottled red face, and large protruding eyes: a fair sample of the English innkeeper. He had just finished speaking when the door-bell was again rung.

“There’s Scruby,” said George Vavator, “and now we can get down to business.”

CHAPTER 13

Mr. Grimes Gets His Odd Money

The handmaiden announced “another gent,” and Mr. Scruby entered the room. He was an attorney, supposed to be very knowing in the ways of elections; and he had now come to say a few words to Mr. Grimes. I think it very likely that some other words had been spoken between the two men behind Mr. Vavator’s back. But Vavator probably knew this.

The two men saluted each other very civilly, and then got proceeded to business.

“We must pull the governor through better next time than we did last,” said the attorney.

“Of course we must, Mr. Scruby; but, Lord love you, Mr. Vavator, whose fault was it? What notice did I get?”

“Nobody is blaming you, Mr. Grimes,” said George.

“And nobody can’t, Mr. Vavator. I done my work true as steel, and there ain’t another man as could have done half as much. You ask Mr. Scruby. I tell you what it is, Mr. Vavator, them Chelsea fellows down by the river ain’t like your Maryboners or Finsburyites. It wants a man to manage them. Don’t it, Mr. Scruby?”

“It wants a man to manage any of them,” said Mr. Scruby.

“Of course it do; and there ain’t one in London knows so much about it as you do, Mr. Scruby. But the long and the short of it is – business is business, and money is money.”

“Money is money, certainly,” said Mr. Scruby. “and you had a deal of it for the last election, Grimes.”

“No, I hadn’t, begging your pardon, Mr. Scruby. What I had for myself wasn’t nothing to speak of. I wasn’t paid for my time. And then the state of my tavern afterwards! What would the governor say if I was to put down painting in my little bill? But I ain’t been paid yet; have I, Mr. Vavator?”

“Well, I should say you had,” said George. “I know I paid Mr. Scruby three hundred pounds on your account.”

“And I got every shilling of it, Mr. Vavator. I’m not going to deny that. But what’s three hundred pounds when a man’s bill is three hundred and ninety-two thirteen and fourpence?”

“I thought that was all settled, Mr. Scruby,” said Vavator.

“Why, Mr. Vavator, it’s very hard to settle these things,” said the attorney. “We were a little short of money when we came to a settlement, as is generally the case at such times, and so we took Mr. Grimes’ receipt for three hundred pounds – in full payment of all demands. If you were to go to a court of law, Grimes, you wouldn’t have a leg to stand upon.”

“A court of law? That’s not what I’ve come here about, Mr. Vavator. Going to law, indeed! There’s my public-house; in all them Chelsea districts it’s the most convenientest for all manner of election purposes. And I can work them Chelsea fellows along the river – Mr. Scruby knows that. But them Bunratty people are a-bidding for the ‘Handsome Man’ already.”

“And you’d let your house to the Tory party, Grimes!” said Mr. Scruby, in tones of disgust.

“Who said anything about that? But suppose as all the liberal gents as employs you, Mr. Scruby, was to not pay your little bills, wouldn’t you look for customers of another kind?”

“You won’t make much of that game, Grimes.”

“Perhaps not. But Mr. Vavator, I should like to see you a Parliament gent; I should indeed. You’d be a credit to the districts.”

“I’m much obliged,” said George.

“But Lord love you, Mr. Vavator, it’s a thing a gentleman has to pay for.”

“A good deal more than it’s worth, generally.”

“A thing’s worth what it fetches. I just wants my ninety-two pounds thirteen and fourpence, and then we’ll go to work for the new fight with contented hearts. If we’re to begin at all, it’s time.”

“You mean that you won’t begin at all without your money,” said the lawyer.

“That’s about it, Mr. Scruby.”

“Take a fifty-pound note, Grimes,” said the lawyer.

“Fifty-pound notes are not so ready,” said George.

“I don’t mind the thirteen and four, but if I didn’t get all them ninety-two pounds I should be a broken-hearted man; I should indeed, Mr. Vavator. I couldn’t go about your work so as to do you justice among the electors.”

“You’d better give him a bill for ninety pounds at three months, Mr. Vavator,” said the attorney.

“You must make it ninety-two; you must indeed, Mr. Vavator. And do make it two months if you can.”

George Vavator and Mr. Scruby yielded at last, so far as to allow the bill to be drawn for ninety-two pounds, but at three months distant.

“If it must be, it must,” said the publican, with a deep sigh, as he folded up the paper and put it away. “And now, gents, we’ll make safe work of this here next election. If we don’t win, my name ain’t Jacob Grimes. I’ll wish you good morning.” Mr. Grimes bowed himself out of the room.

“You couldn’t have done it cheaper,” said the lawyer, once he had gone.

“Perhaps not; but what a thief the man is! You told me the bill was preposterous.”

“So it was, and if we hadn’t wanted him again of course we shouldn’t have paid him. But we’ll have it all off his next account, Mr. Vavator. You see, if he hadn’t got your bill, he’d have gone over to the other fellows before the week was over. You’ve got him cheap. A seat in Parliament is a great thing to a man who wants to make his way; specially a young man like you.”

“Young!” said George. “Sometimes it seems as though I’ve been living for a hundred years. I believe I needn’t keep you any longer, Mr. Scruby.” He saw the attorney out.

“Young!” he said to himself, when he was alone. “My uncle and the old squire are both younger men than I am. One cares for his dinner, and the other for his bullocks and his trees. But what do I care for, except not getting arrested for debt?”

Then he took out a little notebook from his pocket, and having made an entry about the publican’s bill, he looked through its pages.

“Very blue, indeed,” he said to himself. “But nobody shall say I hadn’t the courage to play the game out; and that old fellow in Westmorland must die some day. If I were not a fool, I should make it up with him before he went; but I am a fool.” Then he dressed himself, took up his hat and umbrella and sauntered out.

CHAPTER 14

Alice Vavasor Becomes Troubled

Kate Vavasor had sent to her brother only the first half of her cousin's letter, in which Alice had described her meeting with Mr. Grey. In doing this, Kate had been a wicked traitor to Alice. But her treason would have been worse if she had sent the second half, in which Alice had spoken of George Vavasor himself.

Kate might have done even this, if Alice had not spoken of George as a man with whom any closer connection was impossible. She had begged Kate to cease making futile attempts in that direction.

"I feel myself driven," Alice had said, "to write all this, as otherwise, when I tell you that I have resolved to part from Mr. Grey, you would think that the other thing might follow. The other thing cannot follow."

"But the other thing shall follow," Kate said, as she read the words.

To give Kate Vavasor her due, she was unselfish in her intrigues. She was obstinately persistent, and unscrupulous, but she was not selfish. Many years ago she had made up her mind that George and Alice should be man and wife, feeling that such a marriage would be good at any rate for her brother. It had almost happened, and had then been hindered through her brother's fault. But she was now at work on his behalf again, determined that the two should be married. The intrigue itself was dear to her, and success was necessary to her self-respect.

She answered Alice's letter with a pleasant, gossiping epistle about Mrs. Greenow's proceedings at Yarmouth. Kate had promised to stay at Yarmouth for a month, but she had already been there six weeks, under her aunt's wing. She wrote:

Dearest Alice,

Of course I am delighted. It is no good saying that I am not; but I answer your letter with fear and trembling, lest I should say too much. I have long thought that Mr. Grey could not make you happy. He is good and noble, and all that sort of thing; but he was not suited to you, and his life would have made you wretched. So I rejoice.

I can well understand how the interview went. I can see him so plainly in his unruffled self-possession, ignoring all that you said, suggesting that you were feverish, waving his hand over you as though that might do you good, and leaving with an assurance that it would be all right as soon as the wind changed. I suppose it's very noble in him, giving you, as it were, another chance; but there is a kind of nobility which is almost too great for this world.

Of course I'm very glad. No woman wishes her dearest friend to marry a man whom she herself does not like. You would have been lost to me as Mrs. Grey of Nethercoats. I daresay it is a lovely place, but if ever bird banged his wings to pieces against gilded bars, you would have banged yours to pieces in that cage.

You say that you have failed to make him understand that the matter is settled. Of course it is settled, and he must be made to understand it. You owe it to him now to put him out of all doubt.

And now I must tell you a little about myself; or rather, tell you a great deal. I have got such a lover! I described him before. Of course it's Mr. Cheesacre. As yet he has not declared himself, and, what's worse, is very anxious to marry a rival – my aunt. But she wants him to take me, so he will be driven to make me an offer sooner or later, in obedience to her orders.

My aunt has another lover, Captain Bellfield, and she prefers him. He is a penniless scamp and looks as though he drank. He paints his whiskers too; otherwise he is agreeable enough.

But my lover has solid attractions. He is a man of substance, and should I ever become Mrs. Cheesacre, I should not be left in want. We went to visit his place the other day. Oileymead is its name – and we had such a time there! We reached the place at ten and left it at four, and he managed to give us three meals. I'm sure we saw every bit of china, glass, and plate in the establishment. He made us go into the cellar, and told us how much wine and beer he had got there.

"It's all paid for, Mrs. Greenow, every bottle," he said with a pathetic earnestness. "I don't call anything a man's own till it's paid for. Now that jacket that Bellfield swells about with – that's not his own."

Then he took us into every bedroom, and showed us all their glories. You should have seen him bidding my aunt feel the thickness of the blankets! And she turned round to me and said:

"Kate, it's simply the best-furnished house I ever went over in my life!"

"Yes," said he, "nobody can say that Oileymead isn't comfortable." I thought of you and Nethercoats. The attractions are the same; only in the one place you would have a god for your keeper, and in the other a brute.

But when we got to the farmyard his eloquence reached the highest pitch.

"Mrs. Greenow," said he, "look at that," and he pointed to heaps of manure. "I've more muck upon this place here than any farmer in Norfolk." Only fancy, Alice; it may all be mine; the blankets, the wine, the muck, and the rest of it. So my aunt assured me when we got home that evening. When I remarked that the wealth had been exhibited to her and not to me, she did not deny it, but said, "He wants a wife, my dear, and you may have him tomorrow by putting out your hand."

When I mentioned the muck, she only laughed. "Money's never dirty," she said, "nor what makes money." She talks of taking lodgings in Norwich for the winter, and she wants me to stay with her up to Christmas. I fancy that she is unwilling to tear herself away from Captain Bellfield. At any rate, I have promised not to leave her before the second week in November. With all her absurdities and faults, I like her. She is never stupid, and she is very good-natured. She absolutely offered to give me my trousseau if I would marry Mr. Cheesacre.

I hope that you will come up to the old place at Christmas. I won't offend you more than I can help. At any rate *he* won't be there. If I were you I would certainly not go to Cheltenham. You are never happy there.

Do you ever dream of the river at Basle? I do; so often.

Most affectionately yours,

Kate Vavasor.

"I will go to Cheltenham," said Alice to herself after reading this. "He has recommended it. I shall never be his wife; but I will show him that I think well of his advice." That afternoon she told her father that she would go to Lady Macleod's at Cheltenham.

She was, in truth, prompted by a resolution, of which she was herself hardly conscious, that she would not be guided by her cousin just now. She would go to Cheltenham. Lady Macleod would no doubt vex her by begging that the match might be renewed; but she had strength to withstand Lady Macleod.

She received one letter from Mr. Grey before she departed, and she answered it, telling him that she now felt bound to explain the position to her father.

On the following morning she told her father at breakfast.

“What!” said he, putting down his tea-cup. “What! not marry John Grey!”

“No, papa; I know how strange you must think it.”

“And there has been no quarrel?”

“No. But I have learned to feel that I should not make him happy as his wife.”

“It’s d—d nonsense,” said Mr. Vavasor, very deeply moved.

“Oh, papa! don’t talk to me in that way.”

“But it is. I never heard such trash in my life. If he comes to me I shall tell him so. Not make him happy! Why can’t you make him happy?”

“We are not suited to each other.”

“But what’s the matter with him? He’s a gentleman.”

“Yes.”

“And a man of honour, and with good means, and with all that knowledge and reading which you profess to like. Look here, Alice; I am not going to interfere. You are your own mistress. But I do hope that there is nothing again between you and your cousin.”

“There is nothing, papa.”

“I did not like your going abroad with him, though I didn’t want to say so. But I must tell you that men do not speak well of your cousin.”

“There is nothing between us, papa; but if there were, men speaking ill of him would not deter me.”

“And men speaking well of Mr. Grey will not do the other thing.”

“No. I have thought a great deal about it, papa.”

“Well; I can’t make you marry John Grey. I think you very foolish, and if he comes to me I shall tell him so.” Then he took up his newspaper, thereby showing that he had nothing further to say on the matter, and Alice left him alone.

The whole thing was so vexatious that when Mr. Vavasor went to his club the waiters found him quite unmanageable about his dinner. But later in the evening he regained his composure over a whiskey-toddy and a cigar.

“She’s got her own money,” he said to himself, “and what does it matter? I don’t think she’s fool enough to marry her cousin. And she’ll probably make it up again with John Grey.” So he decided that he need not take any fatherly trouble about it.

But while he was at his club a visitor came to Queen Anne Street: the dangerous cousin. Alice had not seen him since they had parted on their arrival in London. In her trouble at this step which she was taking – a step which she had taught herself to regard as her duty, but which seemed to herself to be false and treacherous the moment she had taken it – she had become aware that she had been wrong to travel with her cousin.

She felt sure it had not affected her dealings with Mr. Grey. She was very certain – she thought she was certain – that she would have rejected him just the same. But everyone would say that her journey had caused it, and she wished to avoid all communication with her cousin for now. However, she had not given any orders about his admittance; and now, before she had time to think, he was in the room with her, just as the October dusk was coming on.

She was sitting away from the fire, very unhappy in her thoughts, when George Vavasor was announced. He had received his sister’s letter, and had had time to consider the matter.

“She can turn all her income into capital tomorrow, if she pleases,” he had said to himself. But he had also reminded himself that her grandfather would probably allow

him to settle an income upon Alice out of his property if they married. And he had also felt that he could have no greater triumph than “walking atop of John Grey.”

“You must have thought I had vanished out of the world,” said George.

Alice, confused, hardly knew how to address him. “Somebody told me that you were shooting,” she said after a pause.

“So I was, but two days among the grouse and two more among the partridges was about the extent of it. Have you heard from Kate?”

“Yes, once or twice; she is still at Yarmouth with Aunt Greenow.”

“And is going to Norwich, as she says. Kate seems to have made friends with Aunt Greenow, and I think that she is quite right. Friends with forty thousand pounds are always agreeable.”

“I don’t believe that Kate thinks much about that,” said Alice.

“Not so much as she ought, I dare say. Poor Kate is not a rich woman, or, I fear, likely to become one. She doesn’t seem to dream of getting married, and her own fortune is less than a hundred a year.”

“Girls who never dream of getting married are just those who make the best marriages at last,” said Alice.

“Perhaps so, but I wish I was easier about Kate. She is the best sister a man ever had.”

“Indeed she is.”

“I did think, while I was in that wine business, that I could have done something for her. But my grandfather’s obstinacy prevented that; and now I’m beginning the world again – that is, comparatively. I wonder whether you think I’m wrong in trying to get into Parliament?”

“No; I admire you for it. It is just what I would do in your place. You are unmarried, and have a right to run the risk.”

“I am so glad to hear you speak like that,” said he. He had now managed to take up that friendly, confidential tone of talking which he had often used when abroad with her.

“I have always thought so.”

“But you have never said it.”

“Haven’t I? I thought I had.”

“Not heartily like that. I know that people abuse me, saying that I am reckless and the rest of it. I do risk everything for my object; but I do not know that anyone can blame me, unless it be Kate. To whom else do I owe anything?”

“Kate does not blame you.”

“No; she sympathizes with me; no-one else does, unless it be you.” Then he paused for an answer, but she made him none. “She is brave enough to give me her hearty sympathy. But perhaps for that very reason I ought to be more careful in endangering the only support that she is likely to have.”

“I hope that Kate will live with me,” said Alice; “that is, once she has lost her home at Vavasor Hall.”

He had been very crafty and had laid a trap for her, and she had fallen into it. She had been determined not to talk of herself; but the words were out of her mouth before she remembered where they would lead her.

“What – at Nethercoats?” said he. “Few men would like such an intruder into their household, and of all men Mr. Grey, whose nature is retiring, would like it the least.”

“I was not thinking of Nethercoats,” said Alice.

“Ah, no. Kate says often to me that when you are married she will be alone in the world. Poor Kate! You cannot be surprised that she should dread your marriage. How much of her life has been made up of her companionship with you! You ought not to be angry with her for regarding your marriage with dismay.”

Alice could not let him talk of Nethercoats as though it were to be her future home.

“Kate may still live with me,” she said slowly. “Everything is over between me and Mr. Grey.”

“Alice! is that true?”

“Yes, George. I would rather not talk about it at present.”

“And does Kate know it?”

“Yes.”

“And my uncle?”

“Yes, papa knows it also.”

“Alice, how can I help speaking of it? I am rejoiced that you are saved from a thralldom which I was sure would break your heart!”

“Pray do not talk of it further.”

“Well; I shall of course obey. But how can I not congratulate you?” To this she answered nothing, but beat with her foot upon the floor as though impatient of his words. “Yes, Alice, I understand. You are angry with me,” he continued. “Yet surely your cousin has a right to say what he thinks of this change in your life; especially if he approves of it.”

“I am glad of your approval, George; but pray let that be an end to it.”

After that the two sat silent for a minute or two. She was waiting for him to go, but she could not bid him leave. She was angry with herself, for allowing herself to tell him of her altered plans, and she was angry with him because he would not understand that she ought to be spared all conversation on the subject. So she sat looking through the window at the gas-lamps as they were being lit, and he remained in his chair.

“Do you remember asking me whether I ever shivered,” he said at last, “on the bridge at Basle?”

“Yes; I remember.”

“Well, Alice, one cause for my shivering is over. I won’t say more than that now. Shall you remain long at Cheltenham?”

“Just a month.”

“And then you come back here?”

“I suppose so. Papa and I will probably go to Vavasor Hall before Christmas.”

“I shall see you at any rate after your return from Cheltenham? Of course Kate will know.”

“Yes; I suppose Kate will stay here when she comes back from Norfolk. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Alice. I shall have fewer fits now of that inward shivering that you spoke of. God bless you, Alice; good-bye.”

“Good-bye, George.”

He took her hand and pressed it closely between his own. In the days when they were engaged, a close pressure of her hand had been his most eloquent speech of love. He had not been given to many kisses – not even to many words of love. But he would take her hand and hold it, and she remembered well the touch of his palm. It was a cool, smooth, small hand that had a firm grip. There had been days when she

had loved to feel that her own was within it, when she trusted in it, as her staff through life.

Now she distrusted it; and she drew her hand away rapidly. What did he think of her? Did he suppose that she could transfer her love in that way, as a flower may be taken from one buttonhole and placed in another?

He read it all, and knew that he was hurrying on too quickly.

“I can understand well,” he whispered, “what your present feelings are; but I do not think you will be really angry with me because I have been unable to repress my joy at your release from a great misfortune.” Then he went.

“My release!” she said. “My release from a misfortune! No; my fall from heaven! Oh, what a man he is! That he should have loved me, and that I should have driven him away!” Her thoughts travelled off to the sweetness of that home at Nethercoats, to the excellence of its master; and in an agony of despair she told herself that she had been an idiot and a fool, as well as a traitor. Had she not been mad, when she sent away the only man that she loved – the only man that she had ever truly respected? For hours she sat there, all alone, leaving untasted the tea that was brought to her.

Poor Alice! I hope that she may be forgiven. Sitting there, full of these regrets, she declared to herself that she would wait for her father’s return, and then, throwing herself upon his love and mercy, would beg him to go to Mr. Grey and ask for pardon for her.

“I should be very humble to him,” she said; “but he is so good, that I may dare to be humble before him.” So she waited for her father. She waited till twelve, till one, till two;—but still he did not come. Later than that she did not dare to wait for him. His temper at such a time would not be fit for the task. Between two and three she went to bed, and on the following morning she left Queen Anne Street for the station before her father was up.

CHAPTER 15

Paramount Crescent

Lady Macleod lived at No. 3, Paramount Crescent, in Cheltenham, where she occupied a very handsome first-floor drawing-room, with a bedroom behind it overlooking the stable-yard, and a small dining-room. The stable-yard was not attractive; but it lowered the rent. Lady Macleod's income, though small, would have sufficed for her to live without such discomforts; but she thought it her duty to leave some money behind to be inherited. So she inhaled the scent of the stables, and squabbled with the cabmen, in order that she might bequeath a thousand pounds or two to some Lady Midlothian, who would hardly thank her memory for the money.

The saving, however, was postponed whenever Alice visited Cheltenham; and a bedroom was secured for her which did not look out over the stables. Lady Macleod was a hospitable, good old woman, painfully struggling to do the best she could in the world. It was a pity that she was such a bore, a pity that she suspected all tradesmen, servants, cabmen and people of an inferior rank generally – and a pity that while she was so suspicious of the poor she was so lenient to the vices of the high-born.

Alice had thought it prudent to tell Lady Macleod by letter about Mr. Grey. This had seemed preferable to telling her face to face; some of Lady Macleod's bitterness of rebuke would have passed away before Alice's arrival.

But Alice trembled as the cab drew up at Paramount Crescent. She met her aunt at the drawing-room door, and saw at once that if any bitterness had passed away from that face, the original bitterness must indeed have been bitter. Anger and sorrow were mingled in those austere features.

“Alice!” she said, as she kissed her niece; “oh, Alice, what is this?”

“Yes, aunt; it is very bad, I know.” Poor Alice tried to make a jest of it. “Young ladies are very wicked when they don't know their own minds. But if they haven't known them, what can they do but repent?”

“Repent!” said Lady Macleod. “Yes; I hope you will repent. Poor Mr. Grey; what must he think?”

“I hope, aunt, that he won't think of it at all for very long.”

“That's nonsense, my dear, Of course he'll think of it, and of course you'll marry him.”

“Shall I, aunt?”

“Of course you will. Why, Alice, is not your word pledged to him? I don't see how you can go back on it. Gentlemen when they do that kind of thing are expelled from society; but I really think it is worse in a woman.”

“Then they may expel from society; only I don't think I'm particularly in it.”

“The wickedness of it, Alice!”

“When you talk to me about society, aunt, I let you,” answered Alice boldly. “But when you tell me about wickedness, then I must be my own judge. It is my conscience, and the fear of committing wickedness, that has made me do this.”

“You should be guided by your elders, Alice.”

“No; in such a matter my elders cannot teach me. It cannot be right that I should be a man's wife if I do not think that I can make him happy.”

“Then why did you accept him?”

“Because I was mistaken. If you choose to scold me for that, you may do so, aunt. But as to marrying him, I must judge for myself.”

“It was a pity you did not know your own mind earlier.”

“It was a great pity. I have done myself an injury that is quite irretrievable; I know that. I have done him, too, an injustice which I regret with my whole heart. I can only excuse myself by saying that I might have done him a worse injustice.”

All this was said at the very moment of her arrival, and did not seem to promise much for the happiness of the next month; but perhaps it was better for them both that the attack and the defence should be made at once.

“Well, my dear,” said her ladyship, “I suppose you will like to go upstairs and take off your bonnet. Mary shall bring you some tea when you come down.”

So Alice escaped, and when she returned to the drawing-room, the fury of the storm had passed away. They talked of other things till dinner; and though Lady Macleod did make one allusion to “poor Mr. Grey,” the subject was allowed to drop. Alice was very attentive in asking about her aunt’s ailments, and listening to her long list of Cheltenham iniquities, and refrained from combating any of her aunt’s religious views.

After a while they got onto the subject of Aunt Greenow, for whom Lady Macleod had a special aversion – as indeed she had for all the Vavasor side of Alice’s family; and then Alice offered to read from one of those terrible books of wrathful sermons which Lady Macleod took much pleasure in.

Lady Macleod no doubt did enjoy her niece’s stay, but Alice did not. On the second day nothing was said about Mr. Grey, and Alice hoped that by her continual readings in the book of wrath her aunt’s heart might be softened towards her. But on the third day Lady Macleod returned to the attack.

“Did John Grey still wish that the match should go on?” she asked. Alice had to admit that she believed he did wish it. She could hardly say otherwise, seeing that she had a letter from him in her pocket, in which he still spoke of his engagement as binding on him, and expressed a hope that this change to Cheltenham would bring her round and set everything to rights. This letter Alice had resolved that she would not answer. He would probably write again, and she would beg him to stop. Instead of bringing her round, Cheltenham had made her firmer than ever in her resolution.

After ten terrible days devoted to discussions on matrimony in the morning, and to the book of wrath in the evening – relieved by two tea-parties, in which the sins of Cheltenham were discussed at length – Lady Macleod herself got a letter from Mr. Grey.

Mr. Grey sent her his kindest compliments. He believed that Lady Macleod was aware of the circumstances of his engagement with Miss Vavasor. Might he call on Miss Vavasor at Lady Macleod’s house? and also have the pleasure of making Lady Macleod’s acquaintance?

Alice was in the room when her aunt received this letter, but her aunt said nothing. After breakfast Lady Macleod privately wrote a reply to Nethercoats, informing Mr. Grey that he would be received in Paramount Crescent with great pleasure.

On the morning of his visit Lady Macleod had presided over the teacups in a state of nervous excitement which was quite visible to Alice. She asked about her aunt’s restlessness without suspecting it had anything to do with her.

“There’s nothing the matter, my dear,” Lady Macleod said. She waited until after breakfast to pull Mr. Grey’s letter out of her pocket.

“Alice,” she said, “I expect a visitor here today.”

Alice knew instantly who the visitor was. “A visitor, aunt?”

“Yes, Alice. Mr. Grey.”

“Indeed, aunt! Is he coming to see you?”

“Well, no doubt he wants to see you more; but he has expressed a wish to make my acquaintance. I have his letter here, and you can see it if you wish. It is very nicely written. And now comes the question. What are we to do with him? Am I to ask him to dinner? I should be most happy to entertain him, though you know how very scanty my means are; but I really do not know how it might be – between you and him, I mean.”

“We would not fight, aunt. I shall always regard him as a dearly loved friend; though for many years, no doubt, I shall be unable to express my friendship.”

“That is all very well, Alice, but it is not what he will want. I think upon the whole that I had better not ask him to dinner. I think there might be some awkwardness if he were to dine here.”

“I really think there would,” said Alice, anxious to have the subject dropped.

“I hope he won’t think that I am inhospitable. I dare say he’ll want to see you alone, and therefore I’ll retire to my own rooms. But if you wish, I will receive him first, and then the maid can fetch you down.” Although this discussion was not pleasant to Alice, she felt grateful to Lady Macleod, who was attempting to make Mr. Grey’s visit as little painful as possible.

At three o’clock Mr. Grey was announced, and Lady Macleod received him alone in her drawing-room. She had intended to give him a great deal of good advice: to bid him keep up his heart and hold up his head, to confess to him how badly Alice was behaving, and to express her agreement with his theory of illness.

But she found that Mr. Grey was a man to whom she could not give much advice. It was he who did the speaking. She was overawed by him after the first three minutes. He was so handsome – and had so quiet and almost saddened an air! Strange to say, after she had seen him, Lady Macleod admired him much more than before, and yet she was less surprised than she had been at Alice’s refusal of him. The conference was very short; and after fifteen minutes the maid went to Alice with her summons.

Alice came down instantly. She found Mr. Grey waiting to receive her, and the look of majesty which had cowed Lady Macleod had gone. He could not have received her with a kinder smile.

“At any rate it does not make him unhappy,” she said to herself.

“You are not angry,” he said, “that I should have followed you all the way here, to see you?”

“No, certainly not. Any anger must be on your side.”

“Then there shall be none on either side. Whatever happens, I will not be angry with you. Your father advised me to come here. I believe that according to the rule in such matters I should not have come to you, but I don’t know that I care much about such rules.”

“It is I who have broken all rules.”

“When a lady tells a gentleman that she does not wish to see more of him—”

“Oh, Mr. Grey, I have not told you that.”

“Have you not? I am glad to hear that. But you understand what I mean. When a gentleman gets his dismissal from a lady he should accept it. But I cannot lay down my love in that way; nor can I give up the battle. It seems to me that I have a right at any rate to know something of your comings and goings – unless, Alice, you should take another name than mine.”

“I intend to keep my own.” This she said almost in a whisper, with her eyes fixed upon the ground.

“And you will not deny me that right?”

“I have sinned so against you that I can have no right to blame you.”

“There shall be no question between us of injury. In any conversation that we may have, or in any correspondence—”

“Oh, Mr. Grey, do not ask me to write.”

“Listen to me. Should there be any communication on either side, there shall be no idea of any wrong done.”

“But I have done you great wrong.”

“No, Alice. When I asked you to accept my hand – begging the greatest gift which I could ever ask for – I knew how great was your goodness to me in accepting it. Now that you refuse it, I know that in doing so you are thinking more of my welfare than of your own.”

“Oh yes, indeed.”

“Then how can I talk of wrong? That you are wrong in your thinking – that your mind has become twisted by false impressions – that I believe. But I cannot therefore love you less, nor consider myself to be injured. I am more selfish than you. I think if you were my wife that I could make you happy; but I feel sure that my happiness depends on your being my wife.”

She looked up into his face, but it was still serene in its manly beauty. Her cousin George, if he were moved to strong feeling, showed it at once in his whole expression. He glared in his anger, and was impassioned in his love. But Mr. Grey, when speaking of the happiness of his entire life, spoke without a quiver in his voice, and with no more sign of passion in his face than if he were telling his gardener to move a rose tree.

“I hope that you will find your happiness elsewhere, Mr. Grey.”

“Well; in that we differ, Alice. And now I will explain why I have come. I cannot accept your decision as final. I come simply to tell you that I am still your suitor. If you will let me, I will see you again early in January, when you return to town. You will hardly refuse to see me.”

“No,” she said; “I cannot refuse to see you.”

“Meanwhile I will not trouble you with letters, nor will I trouble you any longer now with words. Tell your aunt that I give her my kindest thanks.” Then he took her hand and pressed it – not as George Vavasor had pressed it – and was gone.

CHAPTER 16

The Roebury Club

It has been said that George Vavasor had a little establishment at Roebury, in Oxfordshire; and he went there in the middle of November, to hunt. In this county, men spoke well of him, as one who knew how to ride.

Not that Vavasor was popular among his fellow-sportsmen. He did not care for the loose talk of men when they meet in idleness. He was not open enough in his nature for popularity, and kept others at a distance. He had never been a jovial man. He always seemed to think that his conversations with men should serve some purpose of business. With women he was quite the reverse. With women he could be happy. A woman he could really love; but I doubt whether he could treat a woman well.

However, he was welcome in Oxfordshire as a man who knew what he was about. There were several men who formed a kind of club at Roebury, travelling to the inn there from London for the hunting. They comprised a couple of brewers, a banker, a would-be attorney, a sporting literary gentleman, and a young unmarried Member of Parliament.

These men formed the Roebury Club at the King's Head, and a jolly life they had of it. They supplied their own game, while the landlord supplied everything else; and as they were not very particular about their bills, they were allowed to do pretty much as they liked. They were rather imperious, very late in their hours, and sometimes noisy; but they paid well, joked with the servants more than they bullied them, and on the whole were very popular.

Vavasor did not belong to this club, claiming that he could not afford it; when he visited the little town, he lodged elsewhere. But he occasionally went in, and would make up a table at whist.

He had come down to Roebury by mail train, ready for hunting the next morning, and walked into the club-room at midnight. There he found Maxwell the banker, Grindley the would-be attorney, and Calder Jones the Member of Parliament, playing dummy.

"Here's Vavasor," said Maxwell. "Somebody told me, Vavasor, that you were gone away. Or that you were married, or dead. By George, I've lost the trick! I hate dummy. Yes, I know; that's seven points on each side. Vavasor, come and cut. If anyone had asked me, I should have said you were dead."

"But nobody ever does think of asking you anything."

"What you probably mean," said Grindley, "is that Vavasor did not win the seat at Chelsea last February. Are you going to try it again, Vavasor?"

"If you'll lend me the money I will."

"I don't see what a man gains by going into the House," said Calder Jones. "I couldn't help myself, but it's a dead bore. It wouldn't do for me to give it up, because—"

"Oh no, of course not; where should we all be?" said Vavasor.

"It's you and me, Grindems," said Maxwell. "D— parliament, and now let's have a rubber of whist."

They played till three, and Mr. Calder Jones lost a good deal of money. Vavasor was the winner, and when he left the room he became the subject of some ill-natured remarks.

“I wonder he likes coming in here,” said Grindley, the man who had first invited him to belong to the club, and who had hoped to become his friend.

“I can’t understand it,” said Calder Jones, a little bitter about his money. “Last year he seemed to walk in just when he liked, as though he were one of us.”

“He’s a bad sort of fellow,” said Grindley; “I don’t know where on earth he gets his money from. He was heir to some property in the north, but he lost every shilling in the wine trade.”

“You’re wrong there, Grindems,” said Maxwell. “He made a pot of money at the wine business.”

“He’s lost it all since then, and that place in the north into the bargain.”

“Wrong again, Grindems, my boy. If old Vavasor were to die tomorrow, Vavasor Hall would go to him. He’s the natural heir.”

“All the same,” said Calder Jones, “isn’t it rather odd he should come in here?”

“We’ve asked him often enough,” said Maxwell, “to make up a rubber. I don’t like George Vavasor; but I’d sooner play whist with men I don’t like, than not play at all.”

The club breakfasted the next morning at nine o’clock, in order to leave at half-past for the hunting meet at Edgehill. Edgehill is twelve miles from Roebury, and the horses would do it in an hour and a half.

“Does anybody know anything about that brown horse of Vavasor’s?” said Maxwell. “I saw him in the yard yesterday with that old groom of his.”

“He had a brown horse last season,” said Grindley; “a very fast little thing.”

“That was a mare,” said Maxwell, “and he sold her to Cinquebars.”

“For a hundred and fifty,” said Calder Jones, “and she wasn’t worth it.”

“He won seventy with her at Leamington,” said Maxwell.

“Is Cinquebars coming down here this year?”

“I don’t know,” said Maxwell. “I hope not. He’s the best fellow in the world, but he can’t ride. I wish someone could tell me something about that fellow’s brown horse.”

“I’d never buy a horse of Vavasor’s,” said Grindley. “He never has anything that’s all right all round.”

“And who has?” said Maxwell, helping himself to a second mutton chop. “You can’t have perfect horses any more than perfect women. I never expect a perfect animal. I like ’em to see; I like ’em to have four legs, and decent lungs. I don’t much mind about anything else.”

“By Jove, you’re right,” said Calder Jones. The reader will see that Mr. Maxwell the banker reigned as king in that club.

Vavasor had sent two horses ahead in the charge of his old groom Bat Smithers, and followed on a big pony which he kept as a hack. He did not start till near ten, but he was able to catch Bat with his two horses about a mile outside Edgehill.

“Have you managed to come along pretty clean?” the master asked as he joined his servant.

“They be the most beastly roads in all England,” said Bat. “I’m cleaner than most on ’em. But why any county should make such roads I never could tell.”

“The roads are very bad, certainly. And what do you think of the brown horse, Bat?”

“Well, sir.” He said it with a drawl.

“He’s as fine an animal to look at as ever I saw,” said George.

“He’s all that,” said Bat.

“He’s got lots of pace too.”

"I'm sure he has, sir."

"And they tell me you can't beat him at jumping."

"They can mostly do that, sir, if they're well handled."

"You see he's a deal over my weight."

"Yes, he is, Mr. Vavator. He is a fourteen stoner, or more."

George asked his groom no more questions, but felt sure that he had better sell his brown horse if he could. There was nothing specially amiss with the brown horse. He had gone lame at the end of the preceding season, and had been sold by some owner who had not cared to wait for a cure. Then there had gone with him a bad character, and a vague suspicion had attached itself to him, as it does to hundreds of horses which are very good animals in their way. Vavator had bought him cheap, and found nothing amiss with him; but his character went with him, and therefore Bat Smithers thought it well to be knowing. George Vavator knew as much of horses as most men, but he doubted his own knowledge. Therefore he took Bat's word and felt sure that something was wrong with the horse.

"We shall have a run from the big wood," said George. "I'll ride the brown horse." Then the Roebury Club overtook them.

There was now a rush of horses on the road to Edgehill church. Bat, with his two hunters, fell a little behind, and the others trotted on together.

"Are you well mounted this year?" Maxwell asked George Vavator.

"No, indeed; I generally have one horse and three or four cripples. That brown horse behind there is pretty good, I believe."

"I see your man has got the old chestnut mare."

"She's one of the cripples – sound as a bell, and a good hunter; but she makes a noise when she's going."

"So that you can hear her three fields off," said Grindley.

"Five if the fields are small enough," said Vavator. "All the same I wouldn't change her for the best horse I ever saw under you."

"Had you there, Grindems," said Maxwell.

"No, he didn't," said Grindley.

"Your horses, Grindley, are up to all the work they have to do," said George; "and I don't know what any man wants more than that."

"Had you again, Grindems," said Maxwell.

"I can ride against him any day," said Grindley. And he trotted round the corner by the church, and into the field in which the hounds were assembled, to escape. Had it been Vavator alone he would have turned upon him and snarled, but he could not afford to exhibit any ill temper to the king of the club. Mr. Grindley was not popular, and he did not wish Maxwell to turn openly against him.

Grindley was a rich enough man, and not ignorant, or a fool; whereas I rather think Maxwell was a fool. Grindley had made his own way in the world, but Maxwell would certainly not have made a banker if his father had not been a banker before him; there were many better men of business. Grindley knew this, yet he allowed Maxwell to snub him. Maxwell was not even a better rider; but one looked imposing and the other insignificant. So Maxwell held dominion over him.

"By George, there's Pollock!" said Maxwell, as he rode into the field. "I'll bet half a crown that he's come down from London this morning, that he was up all night, and that he tells us so three times before the hounds leave the paddock." Mr. Pollock was the heavy-weight sporting literary gentleman.

CHAPTER 17

Edgehill

Of all sights in the world there is, I think, none more beautiful than that of a pack of fox-hounds round the huntsman on a winter morning. There are some well-known hunting meets in the parks of noblemen, but these are too grand and ornate, and have more to do with fashion than with sport. The meeting I am thinking of is arranged for sport, but may happen to be the prettiest thing in the world.

Such was the case at Edgehill. The village consisted of three or four cottages, a small church with a grey tower, and a narrow green churchyard surrounded by elm-trees. The field by the church where the hounds gathered was green and soft, never splashing with mud or heavy with holes.

Edgehill was a favourite meet in that country, partly because foxes were very abundant in the great wood nearby. On the present occasion the field was full of horsemen, chatting, smoking cigars, getting off their hacks and mounting their hunters, and giving orders to their servants. There were old country gentlemen, greeting each other from far sides of the county; sporting farmers who love to find themselves alongside their landlords; men come from town to hunt, like our friends of the Roebury club; officers from garrisons round about; a cloud of servants, and a few nondescript stragglers.

Outside the gate on the road were drawn up a variety of open carriages and waggonettes, in some of which were seated ladies who had come to see the meet. There were one or two ladies on horseback; but Edgehill was not popular with hunting ladies. From one carriage, the master of the hounds was descending, just as Maxwell, Calder Jones, and Vavasor rode into the field.

“I hope I see you well, Sir William,” said Maxwell, greeting the master.

“Humph – yes, I’m pretty well, thank’ee.” Having slowly been assisted up on to his horse – for he was over seventy – he trotted off to the hounds, while all the farmers touched their hats to him. He whispered his instructions to his huntsman, who said, “Yes, Sir William,” “No, Sir William,” “No doubt, Sir William.”

“Where shall we find first, Sir William?” said Calder Jones humbly.

“How the mischief am I to know where the foxes are?” said Sir William, with an oath; and Calder Jones retired unhappy and silenced.

And yet Sir William was the most popular man in the county; a mild, courteous gentleman when out of his saddle. But a master of hounds of long standing obtains an unequalled power. He may say and do what he pleases, and his tyranny is always respected.

“Well, Pollock, when did you come?” said Maxwell.

“By George,” said the literary gentleman, “just down from London by the 8.30 from Euston, and got over here from Winslow in a trap. I did three hours’ work before I started.”

“Then you did it by candle-light,” said Grindley.

“Of course I did. Why shouldn’t I? I suppose you fellows were playing whist, and drinking. I’m uncommon glad I wasn’t with you, for I shall be able to ride.”

“I bet you a pound,” said Jones, “if there’s a run, I see more of it than you.”

“I’ll take that bet with Jones,” said Grindley, “and Vavasor shall be the judge.”

“Gentlemen, the hounds can’t get out, if you stand in the gate,” said Sir William.

Then the pack of hounds passed through, and they all trotted on for four miles, to Cranby Wood. Vavasor rode alone, or speaking occasional words to his servant.

"I'll ride the chestnut mare in the wood," he said, "and you stay near me, so that I can change horses if a fox should go away."

"You'll be here all day, sir. That's my belief."

"If so, I won't ride the brown horse at all. But let me have him if there's a chance. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Only I don't think you'll ever get a fox out of that wood today. The wind's from the north-east."

Cranby Wood is very large, and it was nearly twelve before they found a fox; and then for an hour there was great excitement as the hounds drove the fox from one end to another of the enclosure. Once or twice the poor animal did try to get away, and then there was great hallooing, galloping, and jumping over unnecessary fences; but he was headed back again.

After one o'clock the crowd of men became more indifferent, and clustered together eating their lunch, smoking cigars, and chaffing each other. An amazing quantity of ham sandwiches and sherry had been carried into Cranby Wood that day. Maxwell and Pollock formed the centre of one of these crowds, and chaffed and made fun of each other with the utmost industry, and then turned upon Grindley. Meanwhile Vavasor sat apart, quite alone, and Bat Smithers grimly stood about three hundred yards away.

Lunch and cigars lasted till two. From then till three there were two or three false reports of foxes which had gone away, which first set men galloping, and then made them very angry. After three, men began to abuse Cranby Wood and to wish that they had stayed at home.

"It's the cussidest place in all creation," said Maxwell. "I won't come here again."

"You'll be here the next meet," said Grindley.

"Grindems, you know a sight too much," said Maxwell; "you do indeed."

Just then the huntsman came galloping up, with several hounds at his heels.

"He isn't away, Tom, surely?" said Maxwell.

"He's out of the wood somewheres," said Tom – and off they all went. Vavasor changed his horse, getting on to the brown one, and giving up his chestnut mare to Bat Smithers, who suggested that he might as well go home to Roebury now.

Vavasor gave him no answer, but stopped a moment and listened carefully. Then he took a path diverging away from that by which the huntsmen and the crowd of horsemen had gone, and made his way through the wood. At the end of this path he came upon Sir William, with no one near him but his servant, standing by a little hunting-gate.

"Hold hard," said Sir William. "The hounds are not out of the wood yet."

"Is the fox away, sir?"

"What's the good of that if we can't get the hounds out? Yes, he's away. He came out here." Then he began to blow his horn, and other men and a few hounds came down the ride. Soon there came Tom the huntsman and after him a rush of men, nearly on top of one another.

Tom touched his hat, and looked at his master inquiringly.

"He's gone for Claydon's," said the master. "Try them up that hedgerow."

Tom did try them up the hedgerow, and in half a minute the hounds found the scent. Men settled their hats on their heads, and their feet in the stirrups. The moment for which they had so long waited had come, and yet there were many who would

now have preferred that the fox should be headed back into cover. Some had little confidence in their horses; and others needed a gallop over a field or two before their enthusiasm would be restored. Most men at such a moment are a little nervous. But there was a great rush and a mighty bustle as the hounds scented their game.

And then certain sly old stagers might be seen turning off to the left, instead of following the hounds. They were men who had felt the air, and knew that the fox must soon run downwind, whatever he might do for the first half mile or so – men who knew also knew the shortest way to Claydon's by the road.

At present the fox seemed determined to go straight, for the hounds ran the scent along three or four hedgerows in a line. He had managed to get full ten minutes' start, and had left his enemies well behind him. And here, from field to field, there were little hunting-gates at which men crowded, poking and shoving each other's horses, and hating each bitterly. No hunting man ever wants to jump if he can help it, and the hedges near the gate were not alluring.

There were a few who took their own route through an adjoining field, or scrambled through the corners of the fences; and among these was George Vavasor. He never rode in a crowd. If he lost the trail he would go home by himself, leaving no report of his failure to be spoken of by his companions.

After crossing some four or five fields in this way they came out upon a road, and the dogs crossed it without hesitation. Many men narrowly watched the leading hounds to see whether they showed signs of turning to one side or the other. Sir William turned sharp to the left, knowing that he could reach Claydon's that way; and very many horsemen followed him. But a few took the road to the right, having in their minds some little game of their own.

The fastest riders had already crossed the road into the country, close behind the hounds, some of them ignorant of the brook before them. Foremost among these was Burgo Fitzgerald, who never spared his own neck or his horse's. Poor Burgo seldom finished well; he came repeatedly to grief in his hunting, as he did so constantly in other matters of his life.

But almost neck and neck with Burgo was Pollock, the sporting literary gentleman. Pollock had only two cheap horses – and he weighed fifteen stones barefoot! No one ever knew how Pollock did it; but he would ride as long as the beast under him could go.

Then came Tom the huntsman, with Calder Jones close to him, and Grindley intent on winning his sovereign. Vavasor had also crossed the road somewhat to the left, along with one or two who knew that he was a safe man to follow. Maxwell had been turned by the hedge.

"By George!" said he, "that's too big for me; and there's no end of a river at the bottom." So he had followed the master down the road.

All those whom we have named managed to get over the brook. Some horses refused it, and their riders thus lost all their chance of sport for that day. George Vavasor found that his horse went uncommonly well, taking his fences almost in the stride of his gallop.

"I wonder what it is that's amiss with him," said George to himself, resolving, however, that he would sell him that day if he got a chance.

"Where are we now?" said Burgo, as four or five of them dashed through the open gate of a farmyard.

"This is Bulby's farm," said Tom, "and we're going for Elmham Wood."

"Elmham Wood be d——," said a stout farmer. "You won't see Elmham Wood today."

“I suppose you know best,” said Tom; and then they were through the yard, across another road, and down a steep ravine by the side of a little copse. “He’s been through them firs, anyway,” said Tom. Then up they went the other side of the ravine, and saw the hounds almost a field ahead of them at the top.

“I say, that took some of the wind out of a fellow,” said Pollock.

“Don’t mind about that now,” said Burgo, dashing on.

“Wasn’t the pace awful?” said Calder Jones, looking round to see if Grindley was shaken off. But Grindley, with some six or seven others, was still there.

And there, also, always in the next field to the left, was George Vavasor. He had spoken no word to anyone, nor had he wished to. He desired to sell his horse – and he desired also to succeed in the hunt for other reasons, though he would have found it difficult to define them.

Now they had open grass for about a mile, but with very heavy fences; and the hounds veered round to the left, making, after all, for Claydon’s.

“Darned if the Squire warn’t right,” said Tom. They came to a double rail and a quick-set hedge. A double rail is a nasty fence, and one which a man with a wife and family is justified in avoiding. They mostly can be avoided, having gates; and this one could have been avoided. But Burgo never avoided anything, and went over it beautifully. Tom went through the gate, as did Pollock, who knew that he could have no chance at the double rails.

But Calder Jones came to grief, striking the top bar, and going head-first out of his saddle, as though thrown by a catapult. There we must leave him. Grindley, rejoicing greatly at this discomfiture, took the gate; but a country gentleman with a fresh horse jumped the rails, and was soon alongside Burgo.

“I didn’t see you at the start,” said Burgo.

“And I didn’t see you,” said the country gentleman.

Burgo said no more. Grindley and Tom were soon after them, the huntsman doing his utmost to shake off the attorney. Pollock was coming on also; but the pace had been too much for him, and his poor beast laboured and grunted sorely. The hounds were still veering to the left, and Burgo, jumping over a small fence into the same field with them, saw that there was a horseman ahead of him. This was George Vavasor, who was going well.

And now they were at Claydon’s, having run over some seven miles of ground in about thirty-five minutes. To those who do not hunt, this pace does not seem very extraordinary; but it had been quick enough. Our party entered Claydon’s Park through a back gate, but many more, including Sir William and Maxwell, had come in by the main entrance.

“A jolly thing so far,” said Burgo to Maxwell.

“I didn’t see a yard of it,” said Maxwell. “I was on the road. Who’s been with you?”

“Tom; and Calder Jones was there for a while. I think he killed himself somewhere. And Pollock and Grindley, and a chap whose name I don’t know who appeared about half-way; and another man – by heavens, it’s Vavasor!”

They hung about for ten minutes, and then their fox went off again, turning towards Roebury. Those ten minutes had brought up some fifty men, among them Grindley, very triumphant in his own success, and already talking of Jones’s sovereign. And Pollock was there also, thankful for the ten minutes’ wait.

But on leaving Claydon’s they went faster than ever, and the pace soon became too good for poor Pollock. His horse refused a little hedge, and there was not another trot to be got out of him. Vavasor had again taken his own route, this time to the right

of the meet; but Maxwell followed him and rode close with him to the end. Burgo for a while led the body of the field, incurring condemnation from Sir William, who was behind him.

Going down into Marham Bottom, some four or five were left behind, for they feared the soft ground near the river, and did not know the way through it. But Sir William knew it, and those who remained close to him got over that trouble. Burgo nearly foundered in the bog; but he was light, and his horse pulled him through, leaving a shoe in the mud. After that Burgo was content to give Sir William the lead.

Then they came up by Marham Pits to Cleshey Small Wood, and over the grass lands of Cleshey Farm. Here Vavator and Maxwell joined the others, having gained some three hundred yards, but having been forced to jump the Marham Stream. The pace now was as good as the horses could make it. Sir William's servant had been with him, and he had got his second horse at Claydon's; Maxwell had been equally fortunate. But Tom's second horse had not come up, and his beast was in great distress. Grindley had remained behind at Marham Bottom, being contented with having beaten Calder Jones (from whom, however, he never got his sovereign.)

Burgo, Vavator, and the country gentleman still held on; but it was devoutly desired by all of them that the fox might soon come to the end of his tether. Ah! that intense longing that the fox may fail, when the horse is failing – and the knowledge that all the effort will go for nothing unless the thing ends soon! So far you have triumphed, leaving scores of men behind; but of what good is that, if you also are left behind at the last?

It was clear now that the fox was making for Thornden Deer Park, but that was still two miles ahead, and the hounds were so near to the poor beast that it could hardly hope to get there.

"I'm about done for," said Burgo to Maxwell.

"Luckily for you," said Maxwell, "the fox is much in the same way."

But the fox had still more power left in him than poor Burgo Fitzgerald's horse. He started off again, and away they went, onto the land of Sorrel Farm – a spot to be well remembered by one or two ever afterwards. Here Sir William made for a gate, but Maxwell and Burgo Fitzgerald, followed by Vavator, went straight ahead. There was a huge ditch and boundary bank there which Sir William had known and avoided.

Maxwell took it well. His horse was comparatively fresh and made nothing of it. Then came poor Burgo! He rode at the bank as though it had been the first fence of the day. The animal somehow got upon the bank, and then fell headlong into the ditch at the other side, a confused mass of head, limbs, and body. Poor noble beast, he had broken his heart! To his very last gasp he had done his best, and deserved to have been in better hands. His master's ignorance had killed him.

There was a small gap in the fence where Maxwell had first ridden it: to this spot Vavator followed, and was on the bank at Burgo's heels before he knew what had happened. Burgo had dismounted and the horse lay there in the ditch.

"Are you hurt?" said Vavator; "can I do anything?" But he did not stop.

"If you can find a chap just send him to me," said Burgo in a melancholy tone. Then he sat down, with his feet in the ditch, and looked at his dead horse.

There was no more need of jumping that day. The way was open into the next field; and there amidst the crisp breaking turnip-tops, with the breath of his enemies hot upon him, the poor fox finished his career. Maxwell was the first there, but Sir William and George Vavator were close behind him. If the taking of brushes were

still in fashion, the honour would have been due to Vavasor. But he claimed no honour.

He and Maxwell rode home together, having sent assistance to Burgo Fitzgerald; and as they went along the road, Maxwell, in a very indifferent voice, asked:

“What do you want for that horse, Vavasor?”

“A hundred and fifty,” said Vavasor.

“Done,” said Maxwell. So the brown horse was sold for half his value, because he had brought with him a bad character.



CHAPTER 18

Alice Vavasor's Great Relations

Burgo Fitzgerald, of whom something has been told in the last chapter, was a young man born into the English aristocracy. He was related to half the dukes in the kingdom, and had three countesses for aunts. When he came of age he had a large enough fortune to make it out of the question that he should be asked to earn his bread; and though the fortune had long since been spent, no one had ever made to him so ridiculous a suggestion as that.

He was now thirty, and worse than penniless; but still he lived in the same circles, drank of the best, went about with his valet and his groom and his horses, and dined sumptuously every day. Some people said the countesses did it for him, and some said the dukes; while others declared that the money-lenders were his most generous friends. At any rate he still seemed to live as he had always lived.

About eighteen months before the time of which I am writing, a great opportunity had come in this young man's way, and he had almost succeeded in making himself one of the richest men in England. There had been a great heiress, on whom the properties of half-a-dozen ancient families had concentrated; and Burgo had almost succeeded in obtaining the hand and the wealth – and people still said the heart – of the Lady Glencora M'Cluskie.

But various mighty magnates, aghast at the prospect of such a marriage, had put their heads together to make Lady Glencora hear reason. She had listened with many haughty tossings of her proud little head, with many throbbings of her passionate young heart; but she listened and heard reason. She saw Burgo for the last time, and told him that she was the promised bride of Plantagenet Palliser, nephew and heir of the Duke of Omnium.

Burgo had borne it like a man. Lady Glencora had married Mr. Palliser at St. George's Square, and on the morning of the marriage Burgo had hung about his club door in Pall Mall, listening to the bells, and speaking about the wedding with admirable courage. He spoke once of it to a married sister, in whose house he had first met Lady Glencora.

"I shall never marry now," he said – and then he went on living his old life, as recklessly as ever. No more handsome man than Burgo Fitzgerald lived; and he had the merit of thinking nothing of his own beauty. But he lived without conscience and without purpose – feeling no need to do anything but eat and drink – or ride to hounds till some poor brute, much nobler than himself, perished beneath him.

He concerns our story because the Lady Glencora who had loved him was a cousin of Alice Vavasor's. She was among those very great relations with whom Alice was connected through her mother – being indeed first cousin, once removed, to Lady Macleod. Lady Midlothian was aunt to Lady Glencora, and the Marquis of Auld Reekie was her uncle.

Alice had kept herself aloof from these grand relations. With Lady Glencora, however, she had for a short time – a week or ten days – been on terms of almost affectionate intimacy. It had been when the wayward heiress had been most strongly minded to give herself to Burgo Fitzgerald. She came to her cousin in Queen Anne Street, and told Alice all the tale.

"Would Alice," she asked, "permit Lady Glencora and Burgo to see each other in the drawing-room at Queen Anne Street, just once?" Just once – so that they might

arrange a little plan of an elopement. But Alice could not do that for her cousin. She tried to explain that she felt it was wrong.

“Why should I not marry him?” said Lady Glencora, with her eyes flashing. “He is my equal.”

Alice explained that she had no word to say against such a marriage. But she could not help in that way.

“If you will not help me, I am helpless!” said the Lady Glencora, and she kneeled at Alice’s chair with her wavy hair on Alice’s lap. “Next to him I will love you better than all the world.” But Alice, though she kissed the fair forehead, could not take any bribe for such a cause.

Then Lady Glencora had been angry with her, calling her heartless, and threatening her that she too might have sorrow and want help. Alice told nothing of her own tale – how she had loved her cousin and had been forced to give him up, but said what kind words she could, and Lady Glencora had been pacified. Then she had come again, had come daily – and Alice had been a comfort to her.

So Lady Glencora M’Cluskie became Lady Glencora Palliser, instead of becoming wife to poor Burgo. She wrote a letter to Alice, very short but with a certain sweetness in it.

“She had been counselled that it was not fitting for her to love as she had thought to love, and she had resolved to give up her dream. She knew Alice would respect her secret. She was going to become the wife of the best man in the world; and it should be the care of her life to make him happy.” Glencora said not a word in her letter of loving her husband. “Would Alice be one of her bridesmaids?”

Alice wished her joy heartily, and sent her cousin a little ring, but declined the office of bridesmaid. From that time to the present she had heard no more of Lady Glencora, who had gone away with Mr. Palliser to spend her honeymoon by some Italian lake. They had not returned to England till it was time to attend the magnificent Christmas festivities of Mr. Palliser’s uncle, the Duke of Omnium.

Gatherum Castle, the vast palace which the Duke had built at huge cost, was opened as it had never been opened before; for the Duke’s heir had married to the Duke’s liking, and the Duke was well pleased. There had been a throng of bridal guests, and a succession of bridal gaieties had continued past the time at which Mr. Palliser was due at Westminster, although Mr. Palliser served his country with the utmost assiduity. So the London season passed, and Alice heard nothing of her friend and cousin.

But this had not troubled her. She had told no-one of her short intimacy with this fair child of the gold mines, but she had felt that such intimacy could not be sustained. It seemed strange that she should have listened to Glencora’s passionate protestations of love for one man, only to be told the next week she was to marry another man! Alice reflected that her own career was much the same – only over a longer time.

But her own career was not the same. Glencora had married Mr. Palliser without pausing to doubt; but Alice had gone on doubting till at last she had resolved not to marry Mr. Grey. She often thought of Glencora, and wondered whether she was happy in her marriage.

One morning, about three days after Mr. Grey’s visit, two letters came to Alice at Cheltenham. She recognised the writing of neither. Lady Macleod was not present when these letters arrived, but she knew one of them was coming: a letter from Lady Midlothian, who was shocked by Alice’s treatment of Mr. Grey. Of the other Lady Macleod knew nothing. This other letter was from Lady Glencora.

Alice opened them both very slowly. Lady Midlothian's was the first, and Alice flushed with anger as she saw the signature, and caught a word or two on the page. Then she opened the other, which was shorter, and when she saw her cousin's signature, "Glencora Palliser," she read that letter first, before she went back to the disagreeable task of perusing Lady Midlothian's lecture.

The reader shall see both the letters, but that from the Countess of Midlothian shall have precedence.

Castle Reekie

My dear Miss Vavasor,

I have not the pleasure of knowing you personally, though I have heard of you often from our dear mutual friend and relative Lady Macleod. Your grandmother Lady Flora Macleod, and my mother the Countess of Leith, were half-sisters; and though circumstances have prevented our seeing each other, I have always regarded you as one in whose welfare I am bound by ties of blood to take a warm interest.

I had learned with great gratification that you were going to be married to a most worthy gentleman, Mr. John Grey of Nethercoats. When I made inquiries, I was heartily glad to find that your choice had done you so much credit. I was informed that Mr. Grey is in every respect a gentleman of excellent habits and very good means, and that there was no possible objection to such a marriage. All this gave me great satisfaction, in which I was joined by the Marchioness of Auld Reekie, who feels a considerable interest in your welfare. I am staying with her now, and in all that I say, she agrees with me.

You may imagine then how dreadfully dismayed we were when informed by dear Lady Macleod that you intend to change your mind! My dear Miss Vavasor, can this be true? There are things in which a young lady has no right to change her mind; and when a young lady has accepted a gentleman, that is one of them. Have you considered that he has probably furnished his house – perhaps in compliance with your own special wishes? Have you any reason to give? I am told, none! Nothing should ever be done without a reason; much less such a thing as this in which your own interests and respectability are involved. I hope you will think of this before you persist in destroying your own happiness and perhaps that of a very worthy man.

I had heard, some years ago, when you were much younger, that you had become imprudently attached in another direction – with a gentleman with none of excellent qualities possessed by Mr. Grey. It would grieve us very much if your rejection of Mr. Grey had been caused by any renewal of that project. Nothing, my dear Miss Vavasor, could be more unfortunate.

I have been advised that a line from me, expressing Lady Auld Reekie's sentiments as well as my own, might be of service. I implore you, my dear Miss Vavasor, to remember what you owe to God and man, and to carry out an engagement made by yourself, which will give entire satisfaction to your friends and relatives.

Margaret M. Midlothian.

Lady Macleod had been wrong when she supposed that this could do any good. She should have known Alice better. But her own reverence for her own noble relatives was so great that she could not understand that the voice of a countess should have no weight whatever. Alice read it, slowly, and then replacing it in its envelope, leaned back quietly in her chair, with her eyes fixed upon the teapot. She had, however, the other letter to distract her.

Lady Glencora's letter was as follows:

Dear Cousin,

I have just come home from Scotland, where they have been telling me something of your little troubles. I had little troubles once too, and you were so good to me! Will you come to us here for a few weeks? We shall be here till Christmas-time, when we go somewhere else. I have told my husband that you are a great friend of mine as well as a cousin, and that he must be good to you. He is very quiet, and works very hard at politics; but I think you will like him. Do come! There will be a good many people here, so that you will not find it dull. If you will name the day we will send the carriage for you at Matching Station, and I dare say I can manage to come myself.

Yours affectionately,
G. Palliser.

P.S. I know you will say to yourself, why did not she come to me in London? Dear Alice, believe me, I had much to do and think of in London. And if I was wrong, forgive me. Mr. Palliser says I am to give you his love, as a cousin, and say that you must come!

This letter was certainly better than the other, but Alice, on reading it, resolved that she would not accept the invitation. In the first place, even that allusion to her little troubles jarred upon her feelings; and then she thought it very possible that she might have been invited in order to meet Lady Midlothian there. She would answer Lady Glencora's letter, but to Lady Midlothian she would not make any reply whatever.

When Lady Macleod came down to her, Alice said nothing; nor did Lady Macleod ask any question. She looked inquisitively at Alice, eyeing the letter lying by her niece's workbasket, but she said no word until at last Alice spoke.

"Aunt," she said, "I have had a letter this morning from your friend, Lady Midlothian."

"She is my cousin, Alice; and yours."

"Your cousin then, aunt. But it matters more that she is your friend. She certainly is not mine, nor is cousinship any justification for her interfering in my affairs. There is her letter, which you can read if you please. After that you may burn it. I need hardly say that I shall not answer it."

"What am I to say to her, Alice?"

"Nothing from me, aunt; from yourself, whatever you please, of course." Then there was silence for a few minutes. "And I have had another letter, from Lady Glencora, who married Mr. Palliser, and whom I knew in London last spring."

"And has that offended you, too?"

"No, there is no offence in that. She asks me to go and see her at Matching Priory, her husband's house; but I shall not go."

But at last Alice agreed to pay this visit. It happened this way. She wrote to Lady Glencora, declining, and explaining frankly that she thought she might meet Lady Midlothian there; and that Lady Midlothian had interfered unnecessarily in her affairs. To this Lady Glencora replied that she had intended no such horrid treachery, for Lady Midlothian would not be there; and then she named an early day in November, at which she would herself meet Alice at Matching Station. On receiving this letter, Alice accepted the invitation.

CHAPTER 19

Tribute from Oileymead

Kate Vavasor, in writing to Alice, felt some difficulty in excusing herself for remaining in Norfolk with Mrs. Greenow. In all her letters, she had spoken of her aunt as a silly, vain, worldly woman, weeping crocodile tears for an old husband, and spreading lures to catch new lovers. Yet she agreed to stay with her aunt in Norwich for another month.

For Mrs. Greenow had more about her than Kate had acknowledged. She was clever and persuasive, and very generous. In asking Kate to stay, she had made it appear that Kate was to confer the favour.

"I have money," she had said, with more appearance of true feeling than Kate had seen before, "but I have nothing else in the world. I have no home. Why should I not remain here in Norfolk, where I know a few people? If you'll say that you'll go anywhere else with me, I'll go to any place you'll name." Kate had yielded, and at the end of October the two ladies, with Jeannette, settled in comfortable lodgings within the precincts of the Cathedral Close at Norwich.

Mr. Greenow had now been dead nearly six months, but his widow appeared to think that the interval had been longer. On the day of their arrival at Norwich, she unpacked a little miniature of the departed one, and sat with it for a moment in her hands, saying, as she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, "Only think, it is barely nine months since he was with me!"

"Six, you mean, aunt," said Kate, ill-advisedly.

"Only nine months," repeated Mrs. Greenow, as though she had not heard her niece. After that Kate attempted to correct no more such errors.

"It happened in May, Miss," Jeannette said afterwards to Miss Vavasor, "and that, as we reckon, it will be just a twelvemonth come Christmas." But Jeannette was very ungrateful to indulge in such sarcasms. When Mrs. Greenow made a slight change in her mourning garments, adding a little lace to her crapes, Jeannette reaped a rich harvest in gifts of clothes.

Kate promised to stay a month with her aunt at Norwich; and Mrs. Greenow promised that Mr. Cheesacre should declare himself as Kate's lover before the end of that month. It was in vain that Kate protested that she wanted no such lover.

"That's all very well, my dear," Aunt Greenow would say. "A girl must settle herself some day, you know; and you'd have it all your own way at Oileymead."

But the offer certainly showed much generosity on Aunt Greenow's part, considering that Mr. Cheesacre's attentions were paid to herself rather than to her niece. Mr. Cheesacre was very attentive. He had found their lodgings in the Close for them, and had sent over fowls and cream from Oileymead, and called on them the morning after their arrival; but in all his attentions he distinguished the aunt more than the niece.

"I am all for Mr. Cheesacre, Miss," said Jeannette. "The Captain is nicer-looking, and he ain't so podgy like; but what's good looks if a gentleman hasn't got nothing?"

Captain Bellfield was also at Norwich, having obtained some quasi-military employment in drilling volunteers. As his friend Cheesacre said, he was going to earn an honest penny for once in his life. The Captain and Mr. Cheesacre had made up any differences that had existed between them at Yarmouth, and were close allies again. Some little business arrangement must have been made, for the Captain was in funds,

thanks to his friend. Mr. Cheesacre had been generous, and had declared that if all went well the hospitality of Oileymead should not be lacking during the winter. Captain Bellfield had nodded and declared that all should go well.

"You won't see much of the Captain, I suppose," said Mr. Cheesacre to Mrs. Greenow on the morning after her arrival at Norwich. He had come the whole way from Oileymead to see her. He wore a pair of black riding boots, and a round topped hat, and looked much more at home than he had done by the seaside.

"Not much, I dare say," said the widow. "He tells me that he must be on duty ten or twelve hours a day. Poor fellow!"

"It's a deuced good thing for him, and he ought to be very much obliged to me for putting him in the way of getting it. But he told me to tell you that if he didn't call, you were not to be angry with him."

"Oh, no; of course not."

"You see, if he don't work now he must come to grief. He hasn't got a shilling to call his own, Mrs. Greenow; and he's awfully in debt. He isn't a bad fellow, you know, only there's no trusting him for anything." Then after a few further tender inquiries, Mr. Cheesacre took his leave, almost forgetting to ask after Miss Vavasor.

But as he left the house he had a word to say to Jeannette. "He hasn't been here, has he, Jenny?"

"We haven't seen him yet, sir, and I have thought it a little odd." Then Mr. Cheesacre gave the girl half-a-crown, and went his way. Jeannette, I think, must have forgotten that the Captain had looked in on the previous evening.

The Captain's ten or twelve hours of daily work must have been performed at irregular times, for he might be seen about Norwich at all times of day, very often going to the Close. On Norwich's two weekly market-days, however, the Captain kept to his military employment. Mr. Cheesacre's visits to the town were generally made on market-days, and so they did not meet.

On such occasions Mr. Cheesacre came by train and was driven to Mrs. Greenow's door in a cab, with a basket bearing the rich produce of his dairy. In vain Mrs. Greenow protested against these gifts, saying she would send them back; but they continued, and she was at her wits' end about them. Cheesacre would come to get his basket from Jeannette, and would ask about the Captain, and Jeannette would give him confidential answers.

"What am I to do about it?" said Mrs. Greenow, as Kate came into the sitting-room one morning, and saw a small hamper on the table. "He is such a good creature. I don't want to offend him."

"If I were you, aunt, I should leave the basket just as it is till he comes in the afternoon."

"Would you mind seeing him yourself, Kate, and explaining to him that he can't carry on in this way? Perhaps you could tell him that if he'll promise not to bring any more, you won't object to taking this one."

"Indeed, aunt, I can't do that. They're not brought to me."

"Oh, Kate!"

"I won't have you say so, aunt; in front of Jeannette, too."

"I think it's for both of you, ma'am," said Jeanette.

"I wonder what is in it." And the widow lifted up the corner of the cloth. "I declare if there isn't a turkey!"

"My!" said Jeannette. "Why, that's worth ten and sixpence."

"It's out of the question that I should say anything to him about it," said Kate.

"I don't see why you shouldn't," said Mrs. Greenow.

"I'll tell you what, ma'am," said Jeannette: "let me just ask him who they're for."

"Don't do anything of the kind, Jeannette," said Kate. "Of course they're brought for you, aunt."

"I don't see why a gentleman shouldn't bring cream and turkeys to you just as well as to me."

"Then, if they're for me, I'll leave them outside the front door, for him to find." And Kate proceeded to lift the basket off the table.

"Leave it alone, Kate," said Mrs. Greenow, with a voice that was rather solemn and sad. "I'll see Mr. Cheesacre myself."

"I do hope you won't mention my name. It's the most absurd thing in the world. The man never spoke two dozen words to me in his life."

"He speaks to me, though," said Mrs. Greenow. "And about you, my dear."

However, Mrs. Greenow promised to see the gentleman, and try to stop the supplies from his farmyard. He would generally call about four o'clock, after his business in the town, bringing a little boy to carry away the basket.

At that hour Kate was absent, and the widow received Mr. Cheesacre alone. The basket was in the sitting-room, and on the table were laid out the rich things which it had contained; the turkey, a dozen fresh eggs, cream in a little tin can, two or three heads of broccoli, and a stick of celery as thick as a man's wrist. Altogether the tribute was a very comfortable assistance to a lady living in a small way in lodgings.

Mr. Cheesacre, when he saw the array on the table, prepared himself for some resistance; but he thought it would give him an opportunity of saying a few words.

"I just called in," he said, "to see how you were."

"We are not likely to starve," said Mrs. Greenow, pointing to the delicacies.

"Just a few trifles my old housekeeper asked me to bring."

"But she is far too magnificent," said Mrs. Greenow. "She really frightens Kate and me out of our wits."

Mr. Cheesacre had no wish to bring Miss Vavator's name into the conversation. "Dear Mrs. Greenow," said he, "there is no cause for you to be alarmed. Mere trifles, you know. I don't think anything of them."

"But Kate and I think a great deal of them. Do you know, we had a long debate this morning whether we would return them to Oileymead?"

"Return them, Mrs. Greenow!"

"Yes, indeed: consider our circumstances. When gentlemen are too liberal, their liberality must be repressed."

"Have I been too liberal, Mrs. Greenow? What is a young turkey and a stick of celery when a man is willing to give everything that he has in the world?"

"We won't talk of that now, Mr. Cheesacre."

"When shall we talk of it?"

"If you really have anything to say, you had better speak to Kate herself."

"Mrs. Greenow, you mistake me."

The widow called her maid, who did not hear her; but the bell was rung, and then Jeannette came.

"You may take these things down, Jeannette," she said. "Mr. Cheesacre has promised that no more shall come."

"But I haven't promised," said Mr. Cheesacre.

"You will oblige me and Kate, I know. And, Jeannette, tell Miss Vavator that I am ready to walk with her."

Then Mr. Cheesacre knew that he could not say those few words this time; so he departed, followed by the little boy carrying the basket.

CHAPTER 20

Which Shall It Be?

The next day was Sunday. Mrs. Greenow had warned Mr. Cheesacre that she was not fond of Sunday visitors, fearing that otherwise he might give them too much of his society. In the morning the aunt and niece went to the Cathedral, and at three o'clock they dined.

But today they did not dine alone. Charlie Fairstairs had been asked to join them; and so that Charlie might not feel it dull, Mrs. Greenow had, with her usual good-nature, invited Captain Bellfield. The captain carved the turkey, giving due honour to Mr. Cheesacre as he did so; and when he nibbled his celery with his cheese, he joked prettily about the richness of the farmyard at Oileymead.

"He is the most generous man I ever met," said Mrs. Greenow.

"So he is," said Captain Bellfield, "and we'll drink his health. Poor old Cheesy! It's a pity he shouldn't get himself a wife."

"I don't know any man more calculated to make a young woman happy," said Mrs. Greenow.

"No, indeed," said Miss Fairstairs. "I'm told that his house and all about it is quite beautiful."

"Especially the straw-yard and the horse-pond," said the Captain. And then they drank the health of their absent friend.

The ladies were to go to church in the evening, and it was thought that Captain Bellfield would accompany them; but when it was time to set out, Kate and Charlie were ready, but the widow was not. She stayed behind – as she afterwards explained to Kate – so as not to turn Captain Bellfield out of the house.

However, when the young ladies returned from church, he was not there, and the widow was alone, "looking back," she said, "to things that were gone. But come, dears, I am not going to make you melancholy." So they had tea, with Mr. Cheesacre's cream.

Captain Bellfield had not allowed the opportunity to slip. After the younger ladies had gone, he said little, but sat with a wine-glass before him, which once or twice he filled from the decanter.

"I'm afraid the wine is not very good," said Mrs. Greenow. "But one can't get good wine in lodgings."

"I'm not thinking about it, Mrs. Greenow; that's the truth," said the Captain. "I suppose you find it rather dull, living in lodgings?"

"A woman in my circumstances can't find her life very gay, Captain Bellfield. It's not yet a full year yet since I lost all that made life happy."

"It's wicked to give way to grief too much, Mrs. Greenow."

"That's what my dear Kate says, and I do my best to overcome it." Upon this, soft tears trickled down her cheek. She pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and smiled faintly. "I didn't intend to treat you to such a scene as this, Captain Bellfield."

"There is nothing on earth, Mrs. Greenow, that I desire so much as permission to dry those tears."

"Time alone can do that, Captain Bellfield."

"But cannot time be aided by love and friendship and affection?"

"By friendship, yes. What would life be worth without friendship?"

“And how much better is the warm glow of love?” Captain Bellfield, as he asked this question, deliberately got up, and moved his chair over to the widow’s side. But the widow as deliberately changed her position to the corner of a sofa. The Captain refrained from following her immediately.

“How much better is the warm glow of love?” he said again.

“The warm, glow of love, Captain Bellfield, if you have ever felt it—”

“If I have ever felt it! Do I not feel it now, Mrs. Greenow? There can be no longer any mask kept upon my feelings. I never could restrain the yearnings of my heart when they have been strong.”

“Have they often been strong, Captain Bellfield?”

“Yes; often; on the field of battle—”

“I did not know that you had seen active service.”

“What! – not on the plains of Zuzuland, when with fifty men I kept five hundred Kaffirs at bay – and never knew the comfort of a bed for seven long weeks! And did I not see active service at Essiquebo, on the burning coast of Guiana, when all the wild Africans from the woods rose up to destroy the colony; or at the mouth of the Kitchyhomy River, when I captured a slaver with my own hand and my own sword!”

“I really hadn’t heard,” said Mrs. Greenow.

“Ah, I understand. Cheesy is the best fellow in the world in some respects, but he cannot bring himself to speak well of a fellow behind his back. Yet who was the first to storm the heights of Inkerman?” demanded the Captain.

“When you spoke of yearnings, I thought you meant yearnings of a softer kind.”

“So I did. I have been led away to speak of deeds that are seldom mentioned. But I cannot bear that a slanderous backbiting tongue should make you think that I have seen no service. I have served her Majesty in the four quarters of the globe, Mrs. Greenow; and now I am ready to serve you in any way in which you will allow me.” He took one stride over to the sofa, and went down upon his knees before her.

“But, Captain Bellfield, I don’t want any services. Pray get up; the girl will come in.”

“I care nothing for any girl. I am planted here till you give me a little hope.”

Then he attempted to take her hand, but she put her hands behind her back and shook her head. “Arabella,” he said, “will you not speak a word to me?”

“Not a word, Captain Bellfield, till you get up; and I won’t have you call me Arabella. I am the widow of Samuel Greenow, and it is not fitting that I should be addressed in that way.”

“But I want you to become my wife – and then—”

“Ah, then indeed! But that isn’t likely to happen. Get up, Captain Bellfield, or I’ll push you over and then ring the bell. A man never looks so much like a fool as when he’s kneeling down, unless he’s saying his prayers, as you ought to be doing now. Get up, I tell you. It’s half past seven, and I told Jeannette to come to me then.”

Something in the widow’s voice made him get up, and he rose slowly to his feet.

“You’ve pushed all the chairs about, you stupid man,” she said. In one minute she had restored them to their proper places, and had rung the bell. When Jeannette came she desired that tea might be ready by the time the young ladies returned, and asked Captain Bellfield if he would stay for a cup.

He declined, and said farewell. She shook hands without any sign of anger, and even expressed a hope that they might see him again before long.

“He’s a very handsome man, is the Captain,” said Jeannette, as he descended the stairs.

“You shouldn’t think about handsome men, child,” said Mrs. Greenow. “I suppose Captain Bellfield has given you a kiss and a pair of gloves.”

“As for gloves and such like, Mr. Cheesacre is much better for giving than the Captain. But kisses is presents as I never takes from anybody. If the Captain ever gets a wife, let him kiss *her*.”

On the following Tuesday morning Mr. Cheesacre called as usual in the Close, but brought no basket. He merely left a winter nosegay made of green leaves and viburnum flowers, and sent a message to say that he should call at half past three, and hoped that he might then be able to see Mrs. Greenow on particular business.

“That means you, Kate,” said Mrs. Greenow.

“It doesn’t mean me at all.”

“It seems to be the fashion now for gentlemen to make offers by deputy. If he says anything, I can only refer him to you, you know.”

“You can tell him simply that I won’t have him. But he is not thinking of me.”

“Well, we shall see. If he does mean anything, of course you can please yourself; but I really think you might do worse.”

At half past three o’clock Mr. Cheesacre arrived, and was shown upstairs. He was told by Jeannette that Captain Bellfield had looked in on Sunday afternoon, but that Miss Fairstairs and Miss Vavasor had been there the whole time. As he wore a new frock coat, and kid gloves, Jeannette was quite sure that he intended business of some kind. His new boots creaking loudly, he walked up into the drawing-room, and found the widow alone.

“Thanks for the flowers,” she said, and sweetly bade him sit down.

First he put his hat and stick carefully in a corner, and laboriously pulled off his gloves. There came from his hair an ambrosial perfume – as of bone-marrow oil – and the fixed position of his whiskers indicated that he had recently been at a hairdresser’s.

“How goes everything at Oileymead?” said Mrs. Greenow, seeing that her guest needed some assistance in starting the conversation.

“Pretty well, Mrs. Greenow. Everything will go very well if I am successful in my object today.”

“I’m sure I hope you’ll be successful in all your undertakings.”

“In all my business undertakings I am, Mrs. Greenow. I don’t owe a shilling to any bank in Norwich.”

“I know that Providence has been very good to you, Mr. Cheesacre.”

“I haven’t left it all to Providence, either. I’m always at work, late and early. I like a bit of fun well enough, as you saw at Yarmouth. And I keep my three or four hunters, as I think a country gentleman should. But I always stick to my work. There are men, like Bellfield, who won’t work. What do they come to? They’re always borrowing.”

“But he has fought his country’s battles, Mr. Cheesacre.”

“He fight! I suppose he’s been telling you some of his old stories. He was ten years in the West Indies, and all his fighting was with the mosquitoes.”

“But he was in the Crimea. At Inkerman, for instance—”

“He in the Crimea! Well, never mind. But you inquire before you believe that story. But as I was saying, Mrs. Greenow, you have seen my little place at Oileymead.”

“A charming house. All you want is a mistress for it.”

“That’s just it. All I want is a mistress for it. And there’s only one woman on earth that I would wish to see in that position. Arabella Greenow, will you be that woman?” He got up and stood before her, placing his right hand upon his heart.

“I, Mr. Cheesacre!” she said.

“Yes, you. Who else? Since the first day I saw you I felt that my happiness depended on you.”

“Oh, Mr. Cheesacre, I thought you were looking elsewhere.”

“No, no, no. I have the highest regard for Miss Vavasor, but really—”

“Mr. Cheesacre, what am I to say to you?”

“Say that you’ll be mine. Come, Mrs. Greenow!”

“Ah, Mr. Cheesacre, you don’t know what it is to have buried the pride of your youth hardly twelve months.”

“But you have buried him, and sitting here all alone won’t bring him back. I’m sorry, indeed. But what more can I do?”

“I can mourn for him in solitude and silence, Mr. Cheesacre.”

“No, no, no. What’s the use of breaking your heart for nothing – and my heart too.” Mr. Cheesacre spoke reproachfully.

“It cannot be, Mr. Cheesacre.”

“Ah, but it can be. We understand each other well enough now, surely. Come, dearest.” And he approached her as though to put his arm round her waist.

But at that moment there came a knock at the door, and Jeannette, entering, told her mistress that Captain Bellfield was below and wanted to know whether he could see her for a minute on particular business.

“Show Captain Bellfield up, certainly,” said Mrs. Greenow.

“D— Captain Bellfield!” said Mr. Cheesacre.

CHAPTER 21

Alice Is Taught to Grow Upwards, Towards the Light

Before she left for Matching Priory, Alice regretted that she had promised to go. She feared this closer connection with her great relations. She had told herself so often that she was quite separated from them that she did not to put her idea aside.

And perhaps she was a little afraid of the great folk whom she might meet at her cousin's house. Lady Glencora herself she had liked – and loved too, with that momentary love which is strong while it lasts, but which can be laid down when the need of it is passed. However, she was by no means sure that she should like Lady Glencora in the midst of her grandeur and pomp. She would have no other acquaintance in that house. She felt unhappy, fearing that she would be out of her element, and half made up her mind to excuse herself.

Her aunt approved of her going, for Lady Glencora would become a Duchess. Lady Macleod was not selfish in her worship of rank. She bade Alice go to Matching Priory, simply because she loved her niece, and therefore wished her to live in the best way within her reach.

What letters had passed between Lady Macleod and Lady Midlothian Alice never knew. She steadily refused to answer the Countess's letter, and at last threatened her aunt that if she were asked again, she would answer by telling Lady Midlothian that she had been very impertinent.

"I am becoming an old woman, Alice," the poor lady said, piteously, "and I won't interfere any further. Whatever I have said I have always meant for your good." Then Alice kissed her aunt, and tried to explain that she felt grateful; but that she could not endure meddling from people whom she did not know.

Alice left Cheltenham about the middle of November. She was to sleep in London one night, and go to Matching in Yorkshire with her maid on the following day. Her father met her at the Great Western Station, and was to take her on the following morning to the Great Northern.

"I'm very glad you are going, Alice," he said when they were in the cab together.

"Why, papa?"

"Why? because it's the proper thing to do. I've never said much to you about these people. I know they hate the name of Vavasor – although the name is a deal older than theirs, and the family too."

"So I don't understand why you think I'm right to go."

"Because rank and wealth are advantages."

"But I shan't get them by going to Matching Priory."

"You'll get part of their value. On the whole, the nobility of England are pleasant acquaintances to have. I haven't run after them very much myself; but men and women ought to grow, like plants, upwards. Everybody should endeavour to stand as well as he can in the world. It's not toadying. It's simply growing up, towards the light, as the trees do."

Alice listened to her father's worldly wisdom with a smile. It was very seldom that he lectured her.

"Well, papa, I hope I shall find myself growing towards the light," she said as she got out of the cab at their house. He continued on to his club.

On her table Alice found a note from her cousin George. "I hear you are going down to the Pallisers at Matching Priory tomorrow, and as I shall be glad to say one word to you before you go, will you let me see you this evening, say at nine? G. V."

She felt immediately that she could not help seeing him, but she greatly regretted the necessity. Then she began wondering how George had heard of her visit to the Priory, and how had he learned the precise evening which she would pass in London? Why should he be so intent on watching all her movements? At nine she awaited him in the drawing-room.

"I'm so glad you're going to Matching Priory," were the first words he said. She did not ask him why.

"How did you learn that I was going?" she said.

"I heard it from a friend of mine. Burgo Fitzgerald, if you must know."

"How could Mr. Fitzgerald have heard of it?" said Alice, in profound astonishment.

"That's more than I know, Alice. Not directly from Lady Glencora, I should say. I think she keeps up her intimacy with Burgo's sister, and perhaps it got round to him that way."

"And did he tell you also that I was going tomorrow?"

"No; then I asked Kate, and Kate told me. Yes; I know. Kate has been wrong, hasn't she? But she never mentioned it till I told her that I knew all about your journey to Matching. I do not understand why it should be necessary to keep me so much in the dark."

Alice felt that she was blushing.

"I cannot understand it," continued George, speaking without looking at her. "The other day we were such dear friends! Do you remember the balcony at Basle? and now it seems that we are quite estranged; nay, worse; that I am under some ban. Have I done anything to offend you, Alice?"

"Nothing."

"Then why am I tabooed? Why was I told the other day that I might not congratulate you on your freedom? If you had resolved on that while we were together in Switzerland, you would have permitted me, as a friend, almost as a brother, to discuss it with you."

"I think not, George."

"I am sure you would. And why has Kate been warned not to tell me of this visit to the Pallisers? I know she has been warned though she has not confessed it. If there be any reason, Alice, I think that I have a right to ask it."

For a few seconds she sat considering. He also remained silent with his eyes fixed upon her. She looked at him and saw nothing but his scar, and the fierce brightness of his eyes. She knew that he was in earnest, and therefore resolved that she would be in earnest also.

"I think that you have a right to ask," she said at last, "but I think also that you are ungenerous to exercise it."

"By heavens, Alice, I cannot be left in this suspense! If I have done anything to offend you, perhaps I can apologise."

"You have done nothing to offend me."

"Or if there be any cause why our friendship should be dropped, I may acknowledge it, if it is explained to me. But I cannot put up with the doubt."

"Then I will be frank with you, George, though it may be very painful." She paused again, looking at him to see if he would spare her; but he was all scar and eyes as before, with no mercy in his face.

“Your sister has thought that my parting with Mr. Grey might lead to a renewal of an engagement between you and me. You know her eagerness, and you ought now to understand.”

“Then I am being punished for her sins,” he said; and suddenly the scar on his face was healed up again, and there was something of the old pleasantness in his eyes.

“I have said nothing about any sins, George, but I have found it necessary to be on my guard.”

“Well,” he said, “You are an honest woman, Alice, the honestest I ever knew. Now, we may be friends again; may we not?” And he extended his hand to her across the table.

“Yes,” she said doubtfully, “certainly, if you wish it.”

“I certainly do wish it very much,” said he; and then she gave him her hand.

“And I may now talk about your new freedom?”

“No. A woman does not do what I have done without great suffering. I have to think of it daily; but do not make me speak of it.”

“But this visit to Matching; surely I may speak of that?” There was something now in his voice so bright that she answered him cheerfully.

“I don’t see what you can have to say about it.”

“But I have a great deal. I am glad you are going. Mind you make friends with Mr. Palliser.”

“Why?”

“He will be the new Chancellor of the Exchequer without a doubt.”

“Will he indeed? But why should I make a bosom friend of the Chancellor of the Exchequer? I don’t want any public money.”

“But I do, my girl. I think I shall get returned at this next election.”

“I hope you will.”

“And if I do, of course it will be my game to support the ministry; or rather the new ministry, for of course there will be changes.”

“I wish they might be changed altogether.”

“Ah! that’s impossible. There are no such men as you want to see – men really of the people – strong enough to take high office. A man can’t govern well, simply because he is genuinely anxious that men should be well governed.”

“And will there never be any such men?”

“I won’t say that. I don’t mind confessing that it is my ambition to be such a one myself. It would be something to me that Mr. Palliser should become the friend of any dear friend of mine.”

“I’m afraid, George, you’ll find me a bad hand at making any such friendship.”

“They say he is led by his wife, and that she is very clever. But what I really mean, Alice, is that I do hope I shall have your sympathy in any political career, and your assistance also.”

“My sympathy I can promise you. My assistance, I fear, would be worthless.”

“By no means worthless, Alice; do you think women nowadays have no bearing upon politics?”

Alice shook her head; but, nevertheless, she felt in some way pleased and flattered.

George left, and Alice as she went to bed felt glad that this explanation between them had been made.

CHAPTER 22

Dandy and Flirt

Alice reached the Matching Road Station at about three o'clock in the afternoon. A servant in livery came to the train window, and touching his hat, inquired if she were Miss Vavasor. Then her dressing-bag and shawls and cloaks were taken from her, and she was conveyed through the station by the station-master on one side, the footman on the other, and the railway porter behind. She instantly perceived that she had acquired great privileges by belonging even for a time to Matching Priory.

Outside the little station, she saw an omnibus that was going to the small town of Matching, intended for people who were not growing upwards to the light; and she saw also a stylish-looking cart, and a little low open carriage with two beautiful small horses, in which was sitting a lady enveloped in furs. Of course this was Lady Glencora. Another servant was holding the horses.

"Dear Alice, I'm so glad you've come," said a voice from the furs. "Your maid can go in the dog-cart with your things, and you get in here. Are you very cold?"

"Oh, no."

"But it is awfully cold out here, I can tell you."

"Oh! Lady Glencora, I am so sorry that I've brought you out on such a morning," said Alice, getting in.

"What nonsense! Why, I've looked forward to meeting you all alone, ever since I knew you were coming. If it had snowed all morning I should have come just the same. Wrap these things over you. You shall drive if you like." Alice, however, declined with pretty thanks.

"I like driving better than anything, I think," said Lady Glencora. "Mr. Palliser doesn't like ladies to hunt, and he does not hunt himself. I do ride, but he never gets on horseback. I almost fancy I should like to drive four-in-hand, only I know I should be afraid."

"It would look very terrible," said Alice.

"Yes; wouldn't it? I get along pretty well on the whole, I suppose. Baker, you must put Dandy in the bar; he pulls so that I can't hold him." She stopped the horses, and Baker, a very completely-got-up groom, put the impetuous Dandy in the bar to curb him.

"They're called Dandy and Flirt," continued Lady Glencora to Alice. "Ain't they a beautiful match? The Duke gave them to me and named them himself. Did you ever see the Duke of Omnium? He won't be here before Christmas, but you shall be introduced some day in London. He's an excellent creature and I'm a great pet of his; though I hardly speak half a dozen words when I see him. He's one of those people who never talk. I'm one of those who like talking, as you'll find out. I think it runs in families; and the Pallisers are non-talkers. That doesn't mean that they are not speakers, for Mr. Palliser has plenty to say in the House."

Alice was aware that she had as yet hardly spoken herself, and did not know what to say. So she asked how far it was to Matching Priory.

"You're not tired of me already, I hope," said Lady Glencora.

"I didn't mean that," said Alice. "I'm enjoying the drive. But somehow one expects Matching Station to be near Matching."

"Ah, yes; that's a great cheat. It's eight miles, so we have to be constantly sending over, and it's very expensive, I can assure you. I want Mr. Palliser to have a

branch line of the railway, but he says he would have to take all the shares himself, and that would cost more, I suppose.”

“Is there a town at Matching?”

“A little one. I’ll go round by it if you like.”

“Oh, no!” said Alice.

“Ah, but I should like. It was a borough once, and belonged to the Duke; but they put it out at the Reform Bill. They made some kind of bargain; he could keep either Silverbridge or Matching constituency, but not both. Mr. Palliser sits for Silverbridge, you know. The Duke chose Silverbridge, or rather his father did, as he was going to build his great place there, in Barssetshire. Then his father died, and the Duke hasn’t lived here much since. It’s a great deal nicer place than Gatherum Castle, only not half so grand. I hate grandeur; don’t you?”

“I never tried much of it, as you have.”

“Come now; that’s not fair. There’s no one in the world less grand than I am.”

“I mean that I’ve not had grand people about me.”

“Having cut all your cousins, and Lady Midlothian in particular, like the naughty girl you are. I was so angry with you when you accused me of selling you about that. You ought to have known that I was the last person in the world to have done such a thing.”

“I did not think that—”

“Yes, you did, Alice. You thought that Lady Midlothian was making a tool of me so that I might bring you under her thumb.”

“But it was so necessary that I should guard myself,” pleaded Alice.

“You shall be guarded. I’ll take you under my shield. Mr. Grey shan’t be named to you, except that I shall expect you to tell me all about it; and you must tell me all about that dangerous cousin, too, of whom they were saying such terrible things down in Scotland. I had heard of him before.” These last words Lady Glencora spoke in a lower voice and in an altered tone, as though she were thinking of something that pained her. She had heard of George from Burgo Fitzgerald.

Alice did not know what to say. She found it impossible to discuss all her most secret and deepest feelings out in that open carriage, perhaps in the hearing of the servant behind, on this first meeting with her cousin – of whom she actually knew very little. She had not intended to discuss these things at all.

“This is the beginning of the park,” said Lady Glencora, pointing to a grand old oak tree, by the corner of the park palings. “And that is Matching oak, under which Cœur de Lion or Edward the Third, I forget which, was met by Sir Guy de Palisere as he came from the war, or from hunting, or something. Jeffrey Palliser, who is my husband’s cousin, says that old Sir Guy luckily pulled out his brandy-flask for the king, and the king immediately gave him all the lands of Matching – only there was a priory then and a lot of monks. And the king gave him Littlebury at the same time, which is about seven miles away from here. As Jeffrey Palliser says, it was a great deal of money for a pull at his flask. Jeffrey Palliser is here now, and I hope you’ll like him. If I have no child, and Mr. Palliser were not to marry again, Jeffrey would be the heir.” And here again her voice was low and slow, and altogether changed in its tone.

“I suppose that’s the way most of the old families got their estates.”

“Yes, or else by robbery. Many of them were terrible thieves, and I dare say Sir Guy was no better than he should be. But since that they have always called some of the Pallisers Plantagenet. My husband’s name is Plantagenet. The Duke is called

George Plantagenet, and the king was his godfather. But there's no use in godfathers and godmothers, is there?"

"Not much as it's managed now."

"If I had a child – oh, Alice, it's a dreadful thing not to have a child when so much depends on it!"

"But you're such a short time married."

"I can see it in his eyes; but I don't think he'd say an unkind word, not if his own position depended on it. Ah, well; this is the town. That's the inn. That's our baker; and I know that man there mends Mr. Palliser's shoes. He's very particular about his shoes. We shall see the church as we go in at the other gate. It is in the park, and is very pretty, but not half so pretty as the priory ruins near the house. I do so love to wander about our ruins at moonlight. I often think of you when I do; I don't know why. No, I do know why, and I'll tell you some day."

As they drove up through the park, Lady Glencora pointed out the church and the ruins, through the midst of which the road ran, and then they were at the front door. The modern house came within two hundred yards of the gateway of the old priory. It was a large house, very pretty, with two long fronts and gabled roofs; but it was not a palace, nor even a mansion. The windows of the drawing-rooms opened out upon a lawn which separated the house from the old ruins, and which indeed surrounded the ruins, and went inside them, forming the floor of the old chapel, refectory, and cloisters. In the middle of the cloisters stood a large modern stone vase, out of whose broad basin hung flowering creepers and green tendrils.

As Lady Glencora drove up to the door, a gentleman came forth to meet them.

"There's Mr. Palliser," said she; "that shows that you are an honoured guest, for he is hard at work and would not have come out for anybody else. Plantagenet, here is Miss Vavasor. Alice, my husband." Mr. Palliser helped her out of the carriage.

"I hope you've not found it very cold," said he. "The winter has come upon us quite suddenly."

He said nothing more to her than this, till he met her again before dinner. He was a tall thin man, about thirty years of age, looking like a gentleman, but with nothing in his appearance that was remarkable. It was a face that you might see and forget, and see again and forget again; and yet it was a fairly good face, showing intellect in the forehead, and much character in the mouth. The eyes too, though not bright, had always something to say for themselves, looking as though they had a real meaning. But his face was perhaps too thin; and he wore no beard to give it character.

Indeed, Mr. Palliser was a man who wished not to be looked at, but to be read about in the newspapers. Men said that he was to be Chancellor of the Exchequer, and no one thought of suggesting that his face would stand in his way.

"Are the people all out?" his wife asked him.

"The men have not come in from shooting; and some of the ladies are driving, I suppose. But I haven't seen anybody since you went."

"Of course you haven't. He never has time, Alice, to see any one. But we'll go upstairs, dear. I told them to let us have tea in my dressing-room, as I thought you'd like that better than going into the drawing-room. You must be famished, I know. Then you can come down, or you can sit over the fire upstairs till dinner-time." So saying she skipped upstairs and Alice followed her. "Here's my dressing-room, and here's your room opposite. You look out into the park. It's pretty, isn't it? But come into my dressing-room, and see the ruins out of the window."

Alice followed Lady Glencora across the passage into what she called her dressing-room, and there found herself surrounded by an infinitude of feminine

luxuries. The prettiest of tables – the easiest of chairs – the most costly of cabinets. It was bright with colour, with books, and with nymphs painted on the ceiling and little Cupids on the doors.

“I call it my dressing-room because in that way I can keep people out of it,” said Lady Glencora, “but it isn’t really. Isn’t it pretty?”

“Very pretty.”

“The Duke did it all. He understands such things thoroughly. Now to Mr. Palliser a dressing-room is a dressing-room. He cares for nothing being pretty; not even his wife, or he wouldn’t have married me.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you meant it.”

“Well, I don’t know. Sometimes when I look at myself, when I simply am myself, I think I’m the ugliest young woman the sun ever shone on. And in ten years’ time I shall be the ugliest old woman. Only think – my hair is beginning to get grey, and I’m not twenty-one yet. Look at it;” and she lifted up the wavy locks just above her ear. “But there’s one comfort; he doesn’t care about beauty. How old are you?”

“Over five-and-twenty,” said Alice.

“I oughtn’t to have asked you. I am so sorry.”

“That’s nonsense. Why should I be ashamed of my age?”

“I don’t know, only somehow, people are; and I didn’t think you were so old. Five-and-twenty seems old to me. It would be nothing if you were married; only, you see, you won’t get married.”

“Perhaps I may some day.”

“Of course you will. You’ll have to give way. They’ll get the better of you. Your father will storm at you, and Lady Macleod will preach at you, and Lady Midlothian will jump upon you.”

“I’m not a bit afraid of Lady Midlothian.”

“I know what it is, my dear, to be jumped upon. When they all come upon you in earnest how are you to stand against them? How can any girl do it?”

“I think I shall be able.”

“To be sure you’re older – and not so heavily weighted. But I didn’t mean to talk about that; not yet at any rate. Well, now, my dear, I must go down. The Duchess of St. Bungay is here, and Mr. Palliser will be angry if I don’t behave prettily to her. The Duke is to be the new President of the Council, or rather, I believe he is President now. I try to remember it all, but it is so hard when one doesn’t really care two pence. Although I’m very anxious that Mr. Palliser should be Chancellor of the Exchequer. And now, will you stay here, or come down with me, or will you go to your own room until dinner? We dine at eight.”

Alice decided that she would stay in her own room till dinner time, and was taken there by Lady Glencora. She found her maid unpacking her clothes, and helped her; but that was soon done.

“I shall feel so strange, ma’am, among all those people downstairs,” said the girl. “They all look at me as though they didn’t know who I was.”

“You’ll get over that soon, Jane.”

“I suppose I shall; but you see, they all know each other, miss.”

Alice, when she sat down alone, felt herself to be very much in the same condition as her maid. What would the Duchess of St. Bungay or Mr. Jeffrey Palliser care for her? As to Mr. Palliser, the master of the house, it was already evident that he would not put himself out of his way for her. Had she done wrong to come? Lady Glencora was very kind to her, but she was aware that Lady Glencora could not devote herself especially to her. Lady Glencora must look after her duchesses.

And then she began to think about Lady Glencora herself. What a strange, weird nature, with her round blue eyes and wavy hair, looking sometimes like a child and sometimes almost like an old woman! And how she talked! What things she said! Why had she made that allusion to her own betrothal – and then, checking herself, almost declare that she meant to say more of it later?

“She should never mention it to anyone,” said Alice to herself. She vowed that no father, no aunt, no Lady Midlothian should persuade her into a marriage of which she feared the consequences. But then Lady Glencora had been very young, and had been terribly weighted with her wealth.

It seemed to Alice that her cousin had told her everything in that hour and a half that they had been together. She had given a whole history of her husband and of herself. She had said how indifferent he was to her pleasures, and how vainly she strove to interest herself in his pursuits. And she was still childless when, as she herself had said, “so much depended on it.” It was very strange to Alice that all this should have been already told to her. And why should Lady Glencora think of Alice when she walked among the priory ruins by moonlight?

The two hours seemed very long; but at last her maid came to dress her for dinner.

“How do you get on below, Jane?” Alice asked her.

“Why, miss, they are uncommon civil, and I don’t think after all it will be so bad. We had our teas very comfortable in the housekeeper’s room.”

A few minutes before eight Lady Glencora knocked at Alice’s door, to lead her to the drawing-room. Alice saw that she was magnificently dressed, with an enormous expanse of robe, and with her locks arranged so that no one could suspect the presence of a grey hair. For all her magnificence, she looked almost a child.

“I’ll tell Jeffrey to take you in to dinner,” she told Alice. “He’s about the easiest young man we have here. He rather turns up his nose at everything, but that doesn’t make him less agreeable – unless he turns up his nose at you, you know.”

“Perhaps he will.”

“No, he won’t. He’s the most courteous man in the world. Good, there’s nobody here,” she said as they entered the room. “It’s always proper to be first in one’s own house. I do so try to be proper – and it is such trouble. Oh dear! what fun it would be to be sitting somewhere in Asia, eating a chicken with one’s fingers, and lighting a big fire outside one’s tent to keep off the lions and tigers!” Then Lady Glencora strove to look like a lion, and grinned at herself in the glass. “I have been reading about it in that woman’s travels. Oh, here they are; I mustn’t make any more faces. Duchess, do come to the fire. This is my cousin, Miss Vavasor.”

The Duchess made a stiff little bow, and declared that she was charmingly warm. “I don’t know how you manage it, but the staircases are so comfortable. Now at Longroyston we’ve taken all the trouble in the world – put down hot-water pipes all over the house, yet there are draughts at every corner of the passages.” The Duchess spoke with an enormous emphasis on every other word, sometimes putting so great a stress on some special syllable, as almost to bring her voice to a whistle – especially when she said *pipes*. She was a woman of about forty, very handsome – but a fool. Two Miss Pallisers, cousins of Plantagenet Palliser, had entered the room at the same time, and they were certainly not fools.

“It’s always easy to warm a small house like this,” said Miss Palliser, whose Christian name, unfortunately, was Iphigenia Theodata, and whom her cousin and sister called Iphy; “and I suppose it’s difficult to warm a large one such as Longroyston.” The other Miss Palliser was called Euphemia.

“We’ve got no pipes, Duchess, at any rate,” said Lady Glencora; and Alice, as she sat listening, thought she discerned in Lady Glencora’s pronunciation of the word pipes an almost hidden imitation of the Duchess’s whistle. Lady Glencora’s eye met Alice’s for an instant, and was then withdrawn, so that Alice was compelled to think that her friend was not always quite successful in her struggles to be proper.

Then the gentlemen came in, and other ladies, till about thirty people were assembled. Mr. Palliser came up and spoke a kind word to Alice.

“My wife has been thinking so much of your coming. I hope we shall be able to amuse you.”

Alice, who had already begun to feel desolate, was grateful, and made up her mind that she would try to like Mr. Palliser.

Jeffrey Palliser was almost the last in the room. Lady Glencora went to meet him, saying, “You must take my cousin, Alice Vavasor, in to dinner, and try to make her comfortable.” She introduced them, and Jeffrey Palliser stood talking to Alice till dinner was announced.

CHAPTER 23

Dinner at Matching Priory

Alice found herself seated near Lady Glencora's end of the table, between Jeffrey Palliser and the Duke of St. Bungay, to whom Lady Glencora introduced her.

"My cousin, Duke," Lady Glencora said, "and a terrible Radical."

"Oh, indeed; I'm glad of that. We're sadly in want of a few leading Radicals."

Alice thought of her cousin George, and wished that he was sitting in her place.

"But I'm afraid I never shall be a leading Radical," she said.

"You may lead me at any rate," said he.

"As little dogs lead blind men," said Lady Glencora.

"No, Lady Glencora, as the pretty women lead the men who have eyes in their head. There is nothing I want so much, Miss Vavasor, as to become a Radical; if I only knew how."

"I think it's very easy to know how," said Alice.

"Do you? I don't. I've voted for every serious liberal measure that has come before Parliament since I had a seat in either House, and I've not been able to get beyond Whiggery yet."

"Have you voted for the secret ballot?" asked Alice, almost trembling at her own audacity.

"Well; no, I've not. And I suppose that is the crux. But I hate it with so keen a private hatred, that I doubt whether I could vote for it."

"But the Radicals love it," said Alice.

"Palliser," said the Duke, speaking loudly down the table, "I'm told you can never call yourself a Radical till you've voted for the ballot."

"I don't want to be called a Radical," said Mr. Palliser, "or to be called anything at all."

"Except Chancellor of the Exchequer," said Lady Glencora in a low voice.

"And that's about the finest ambition a man can have," said the Duke. "The man who can manage the purse-strings of this country can manage anything." Then the Duke ate his dinner.

"When I undertook to amuse you," said Mr. Jeffrey Palliser to Alice, "I had no idea that you would be hauling Cabinet Ministers over the coals about their politics."

"I did nothing of the kind, surely, Mr. Palliser. I suppose all Radicals do vote for the ballot, and that's why I said it."

"You are quite right. But unfortunately I'm not a politician. I haven't a chance of a seat in the House, and so I despise politics."

"Women are not allowed to be politicians in this country."

"Thank God; only think where we should be if we had a feminine House of Commons, with feminine debates, carried on with feminine courtesy. My cousins Iphy and Phemy there would of course be members. You don't know them yet?"

"No; not yet."

"They have decidedly liberal tendencies. There has never been a Tory Palliser, you know. But they are too clever to give themselves up to anything in which they can do nothing. Being women they live a depressed life, devoting themselves to literature, fine arts, social economy, and the abstract sciences. They write wonderful letters; but I believe their correspondence lists are quite full, so that you have no chance of getting on either of them."

“I haven’t the slightest pretension to ask for such an honour.”

“Oh! You don’t need to know them. Free communication with all the world is their motto. Are you fond of writing letters, Miss Vavasor?”

“Yes, to my friends; but I like getting letters better.”

“I suspect they don’t read half what they get. Could anyone get through two sheets of paper filled by our friend the Duchess there? No; their delight is in writing, every morning. There is a little rivalry between them. Iphy certainly does send off more.”

“Do they write to you?”

“Oh, dear no. I don’t think they ever write to any relative. They don’t discuss family affairs and such topics as that. Iphy has certain American correspondents, but she acknowledges she does not read their letters.”

“Then I certainly shall not write to her.”

“But you are not American, I hope. I do hate the Americans. It’s the only strong political feeling I have. I went there once, and found I couldn’t live with them.”

“I don’t see they are to be hated because they don’t live after our fashion.”

“Oh; it’s jealousy of course. I know that. I didn’t come across a cab-driver there who wasn’t better educated than I am. And as for their women, they know everything. But I intend to hate them. You haven’t been there?”

“Oh no.”

“Then I will make bold to say that any English lady who spent a month with them and didn’t hate them would have very singular tastes. Do you hunt?”

“No.”

“Do you shoot?”

“Shoot! No; I don’t shoot.”

“Do you ride?”

“No; I wish I did.”

“Do you drive?”

“No; I don’t drive either.”

“Then what do you do?”

“I sit at home, and—”

“Mend your stockings?”

“No; I don’t do that, but I do needlework a good deal. Sometimes I have amused myself by reading.”

“Ah; they never do that here. I have heard that there is a library, but the clue to it has been lost, and nobody now knows the way. I don’t believe in libraries. Do you mean to read all the time you are here, Miss Vavasor?”

“I mean to walk about the priory ruins sometimes.”

“Then you must go by moonlight, and I’ll go with you. Only isn’t it rather late in the year for that?”

“I should think it is for you, Mr. Palliser.”

Then the Duke spoke to her again, and she found that she got on very well during dinner. She could not help feel angry with herself for having any fear about it; and yet she could not dismiss that fear. She was conscious of a certain inferiority to Lady Glencora and Mr. Jeffrey Palliser, which almost made her unhappy. As regarded the Duke, she had no such feeling. He was old enough to be her father, and was a Cabinet Minister; therefore he was entitled to her reverence. But why did she accept that the people round her were indeed superior to herself? Was she really learning to believe that she could grow upwards by their sunlight?

“Jeffrey is a pleasant fellow, is he not?” said Lady Glencora to her as they went to the drawing-room.

“Very pleasant; a little sarcastic, perhaps.”

“I think you would be able to get the better of that if he tries it on you,” said Lady Glencora; and then the ladies were in the drawing-room.

“It is quite deliciously warm in the corridor,” said the Duchess.

“Then we had better keep moving,” said a certain Mrs. Conway Sparkes, a very clever literary lady, of whom the Duchess of St. Bungay was rather afraid.

“I hope we may be warm here too,” said Lady Glencora.

“But not deliciously warm,” said Mrs. Conway Sparkes.

“It makes me tremble in every limb when Mrs. Sparkes attacks the Duchess,” Lady Glencora said to Alice in Alice’s room that night, “for I know she’ll tell the Duke; and he’ll tell that tall man with red hair whom you see standing about, and he will tell Mr. Palliser, and then I shall catch it.”

“And who is the tall man with red hair?”

“He’s a political link between the Duke and Mr. Palliser. His name is Bott, and he’s a Member of Parliament.”

“But why should he interfere?”

“I suppose it’s his business. I believe he’s to be one of Mr. Palliser’s private secretaries if he becomes Chancellor of the Exchequer. Perhaps he doesn’t tell; only I think he does. He always calls me Lady Glen-cowrer. He comes from Lancashire, and used to make calico.” But this happened in the bedroom, and we must go back for a while to the drawing-room.

There was no general conversation. The number of ladies in the room was too great for that. Lady Glencora behaved prettily, telling the Duchess all about her pet pheasants; Mrs. Conway Sparkes told ill-natured tales of someone to Miss Euphemia Palliser; one of the Duchess’s daughters walked off to a distant piano with a friend and touched a few notes; while Iphigenia Palliser boldly took up a book, and placed herself at a table.

Alice speculated whether she might do the same, but her courage failed her, and she sat on, feeling out of her element.

“Alice Vavasor,” said Lady Glencora after a while, suddenly and loudly, “can you play billiards?”

“No,” said Alice, rather startled.

“Then you shall learn tonight.” Whereupon Lady Glencora rang the bell and ordered that the billiard-table might be got ready. “You’ll play, Duchess, of course,” she said.

“It is so nice and warm, that I think I will,” said the Duchess; but as she spoke she looked suspiciously at Mrs. Conway Sparkes.

“Let us all play,” said Mrs. Conway Sparkes, “and then it will be nicer – and perhaps warmer, too.”

The gentlemen joined them as they were settling themselves round the table, and as many of them stayed, the billiard-room became full. The duty of instructing Alice fell to Jeffrey Palliser, and the next hour passed pleasantly; though not so pleasantly as some of those hours in Switzerland with her cousins. However, Jeffrey Palliser took great trouble to teach her, and once or twice made her laugh by quizzing the Duchess’s attitude as she stood up to make her stroke.

“I wish I could play billiards,” said Mrs. Sparkes.

“I thought you said you were coming to play,” said the Duchess, with a tone of triumph at her own successes.

“Only to see your Grace,” said Mrs. Sparkes.

“I don’t know that there is anything to see,” said the Duchess. “Mr. Palliser, that was a cannon. Will you mark that for our side?”

“Oh no, Duchess, you hit the same ball twice.”

“Very well; then I suppose Miss Vavasor plays now. Will you mark a miss, if you please?” Before long, the Duchess, with her partner, Lady Glencora, won the game, and made her way back into the drawing-room with a step which seemed to declare that she had trumped Mrs. Sparkes at last.

Not long after this the ladies went upstairs to bed.

“I’ll come into your room just for one minute,” Lady Glencora said to Alice; and having dismissed the maid, she sat down by the fireside.

“I must keep you up for a quarter of an hour while I tell you something,” she said. “But first of all, how do you like the people? Will you be comfortable with them?”

Alice of course said that she thought she would; and then there came that little discussion about Mr. Bott, the man with the red hair.

“But I’ve got something to tell you,” said Lady Glencora. “Look at the fire while I say it.”

“Is it anything terrible?”

“It’s nothing wrong.”

“Oh, Lady Glencora, if it’s—”

“Don’t call me Lady Glencora. Don’t I call you Alice? Why are you so unkind? I am not asking you to do anything that you ought not to do.”

“But you are going to tell me something.” Alice felt sure that it would be about Mr. Fitzgerald.

“Of course I am. I’m going to tell you that in writing to you the other day I wrote a fib. It wasn’t that I wished to deceive you; only I couldn’t say it all in a letter.”

“Say all what?”

“I confessed that I had been very bad in not coming to you in London last year.”

“I never thought of it for a moment.”

“You did not care whether I came or not? But never mind. Why should you have cared? But I cared. I was longing to come to you every day. But I feared I could not come without speaking of him; – and I had determined never to speak of him again.” This she said in a peculiar low voice.

“Then why do it now, Lady Glencora?”

“Call me Cora. I had an older sister once, and she used to call me Cora. If she had lived– But never mind. She didn’t live. I’ll tell you why I do it now. Because I cannot help it. Besides, I’ve met him. I’ve been in the same room with him, and have spoken to him.”

“You have met him?”

“Yes; Mr. Palliser knew all about it. When he talked of taking me to the house, I whispered to him that I thought Burgo would be there.”

“Do not call him by his Christian name,” said Alice, almost with a shudder.

“Why not? I did when I told my husband. Or perhaps I said Burgo Fitzgerald.”

“Well.”

“And he bade me go. He said it didn’t signify, and that I had better learn to bear it. Bear it, indeed! If I am to meet him, and speak to him, and look at him, surely I may mention his name?”

“What am I to say?” exclaimed Alice.

“Anything you please, that’s not a falsehood. But I don’t think you will tell a falsehood. Oh, Alice, I do so want to go right, and it is so hard!”

Hard, indeed, poor creature, for one so weighted as she had been, and sent out into the world with so little in the way of training or friendship! Alice began to feel now that she had been enticed to Matching Priory because her cousin wanted a friend. She got up from her chair, and kneeling down at the other’s feet she kissed her.

“I knew you would be good to me,” said Lady Glencora. “And you may say whatever you like. But I could not bear that you should not know the real reason why I did not visit you or send for you in London. You’ll come to me now; won’t you, dear?”

“Yes; and you’ll come to me,” said Alice.

“I will,” said Lady Glencora. “We shall have dinners and parties and lots of people.”

“And we shall have none,” said Alice, smiling.

“And therefore there is so much more reason for your coming to me. Well, dear, I’m so glad I’ve told you.” Then she smiled and returned Alice’s kiss. It was singular to see her standing on the bedroom rug in her magnificent dress, but with her hair pushed back behind her ears and her eyes red with tears, as though the burden of the magnificence remained to her after its purpose was over.

“I declare it’s long past twelve. Good night, dear. I wonder whether he’s come up. But I would have heard his step. He seldom finishes work till after one, and sometimes goes on till three. It’s the only thing he likes, I believe. God bless you! good night. I’ve such a lot more to say to you; and Alice, you must tell me something about yourself, too; won’t you, dear?”

Then without waiting for an answer Lady Glencora went, leaving Alice in a maze of bewilderment. She could hardly believe all she had heard and done since she left Queen Anne Street that morning.

CHAPTER 24

Three Politicians

Mr. Palliser was one of those politicians of whom England can be prouder than of any other of her resources, giving her that combination of conservatism and progress which is her present strength and best security for the future.

He had both the money and the industry needed by a statesman. He was born into the nobility, and heir to the highest rank, already very rich; and yet he devoted himself to work with the grinding energy of a young penniless barrister, and did so unselfishly, wishing only to serve his country. He was not a brilliant man, and he knew it. He was listened to in the House as a laborious, earnest man, who was accurate in his facts, and who, though dull, was worthy of confidence.

And he was very dull. He rather prided himself on being dull, and on succeeding in spite of his dullness. He never allowed himself a joke in his speeches, nor attempted the smallest flourish of rhetoric. He was very careful in his language, labouring to learn to express himself accurately, with no needless repetition. He had taught himself to believe that oratory was a sin against honesty in politics. He desired to use words for the purpose of teaching things which he knew and which others did not know.

He was an upright, thin, laborious man; but his parts were sufficient to make his education, integrity, and industry useful in the highest degree. It is the trust which such men inspire which makes them so useful. Their labour, honesty, and patriotism gives them weight in politics.

If he was dull as a statesman he was more dull in private life, and it may be imagined that Lady Glencora would find some difficulty in making his society the source of her happiness. As a business arrangement, their marriage had been a complete success – and a success, too, when on Lady Glencora's side there had been terrible dangers of shipwreck, and on his side also there had been some little fears of a mishap.

It has been told how close Lady Glencora went to throwing herself and her vast wealth into the arms of an unsuitable young man. Mr. Palliser's little threatened mischance – a passing fancy for a married lady who was too wise to receive his vows – had given some alarm to his uncle, enough to make so very judicious a marriage doubly pleasant to that noble duke.

And as regards Mr. Palliser, I think that his married life, and the wife whom he had not chosen, but who had dropped upon him, suited him admirably. He needed great wealth for that position at which he aimed. He had been rich before his marriage; but for his career he needed that colossal wealth which would give him the rock-like solidity which is so necessary to our great aristocratic politicians.

And his wife was, as far as he knew, all that he desired. He had not dabbled much in love, though he had forgotten himself once, and sinned in coveting another man's wife. But his desire had been of a kind which was almost thankful for its disappointment. After the lady had frowned on him he had told himself that he was very well out of that trouble. So he married Lady Glencora and was satisfied.

The story of Burgo Fitzgerald was told to him, and he supposed that most girls had some such story to tell. He thought little about it, and did not understand her when she said to him, as impressively as she could, "You must know that I really loved him."

“You must love me now,” he had replied with a smile; and then he forgot about it. Since his marriage he had thought that things matrimonial had gone well with him, and with her too. He gave her almost unlimited power of enjoying her money, and interfered little in her way of life. Sometimes he would say a word of caution to her about her childish ways; and his words would hold some unintentional severity – whether instigated or not by the red-haired Member of Parliament, I will not say – but on the whole he was contented and loved his wife, as he thought, very heartily, and at least better than he loved anyone else.

One cause of care was beginning to make itself felt: he had hoped that his wife might soon give him a child. But the days were young, and the care had not become a sorrow.

But this well-ordered alliance had not perhaps suited her as well as it had suited him. She might have learned to forget her early lover if her new lord had been more tender. To love and caress someone, to be loved and caressed, were absolutely necessary to her happiness. She wanted the little daily assurance of her supremacy in the man’s feelings, the constant touch of love, the passing glance of the eye telling perhaps of some little private joke, the softness of an occasional chance kiss, some half-pretended interest in her little doings.

Such food should have been given to her daily, and then she would have forgotten Burgo Fitzgerald. But Mr. Palliser understood none of these things; and therefore the image of Burgo Fitzgerald was always before her eyes.

Even if Mr. Palliser were to pass through some violent domestic trouble, some ruin in the hopes of his home, it would not destroy him as it would other men. To lose his influence with his party would be worse to him than to lose his wife, and public disgrace would hit him harder than private dishonour.

And now success was coming to him. He had already held office, but had never sat in the Cabinet. He had worked much harder than Cabinet Ministers generally work, without much reward. For the income which he had received had been nothing to him. To have ascendancy over other men, to be known by his countrymen as one of their real rulers, to have an actual and acknowledged voice in the management of nations – those were the rewards he wished for; and now it seemed as though they were coming to him. It was known that the existing Chancellor of the Exchequer was about to separate himself from the Government, taking others with him; and it was thought that Mr. Palliser would fill his place. He could thus afford to put up with the small everyday calamity of having a wife who loved another man better than she loved him.

The presence of the Duke of St. Bungay at Matching was assumed to be a sure sign of Mr. Palliser’s coming triumph. The Duke was a statesman of a very different class, but he also had been eminently successful as an aristocratic pillar of the government. He was a minister of very many years’ standing; but he had never been a hard-working man. The world had said before now that the Duke might be Prime Minister, only he would not take the trouble. He was regarded as a strong rock of support to the liberal cause, and yet nobody ever knew what he did.

His speeches in the House were generally short and pleasant, with some slight, droll undercurrent of satire. But he had a good deal of common sense. He never lost his temper. He never made mistakes. He was never reckless in politics, nor cowardly. He snubbed no man, and took snubbings from no man. He was a Knight of the Garter, a Lord Lieutenant of his county, and at sixty-two had good health and his estate in excellent order. He was a great buyer of pictures, which, perhaps, he did not

understand, and a great collector of books which he never read. All the world respected him.

But even he was not without his skeleton in the closet, his thorn in his side; though the skeleton was not very terrible, nor the thorn very dangerous. The Duke was always uneasy about his wife.

It must not be supposed that he feared any Burgo Fitzgerald would destroy his domestic comfort. The Duchess was all that is proper. No breath of slander had ever touched her name. Nor was she a spendthrift, or a gambler. She was simply a fool, and always fearing that she was the object of ridicule. In such miseries she would complain sorrowfully, and occasionally angrily, to her dear Duke and protector, who did not quite know what to do with her. It did not suit him to beg mercy for his poor wife from such a one as Mrs. Conway Sparkes; nor could he lodge a formal complaint with his host.

"If you don't like the people, my dear, we will go away," he said to her late that evening.

"No," she replied, "I do not wish to go away. I have said that we would stay till December, and Longroyston won't be ready before that. But I think that something ought to be done to silence that woman."

The Duke did not know how to silence Mrs. Conway Sparkes. "I don't think she is worth your attention," said he.

"That's all very well, Duke," said the wife, "and perhaps she is not. But I don't like to be laughed at. I think Lady Glencora should make her know her place."

"Lady Glencora is very young, my dear."

"I don't know about that," said the Duchess, who had perhaps heard poor Lady Glencora's almost unintentional mimicry. As appeals of this kind were being made frequently to the Duke, he felt that the matter was an annoyance.

And there was a third politician staying at Matching Priory: Mr. Bott, the member for St. Helens, whom Lady Glencora had described as a man who stood about, with red hair, and perhaps told tales of her to her husband. Mr. Bott, at almost fifty, was now enjoying his second session in Parliament; but they who watched his political manœuvres in the House knew that he was striving hard to get his finger into the public pie. Though he claimed to be a thoroughgoing Radical, he was a man who liked to live with aristocrats. He was good with figures, industrious and obedient; a man who might make himself useful to a Chancellor of the Exchequer.

A huge pile of letters arrived for Mr. Bott every morning by post, but unfortunately he did not seem to spend much time attending to them. Twice he went out shooting, but as on the first day he shot the keeper, and on the second very nearly shot the Duke, he gave that up. Hunting he declined. He seemed to spend his time, as Lady Glencora said, in standing about – except when he was closeted with Mr. Palliser. He was a tall, wiry, strong man, with a bald head and bristly red beard, which unfortunately did not hide his thin mouth.

"I shouldn't dislike Mr. Bott so much," Lady Glencora said to her husband, "if he didn't rub his hands and smile so often, and seem to be going to say something when he is not."

"Don't trouble yourself about him, my dear," Mr. Palliser had answered.

"But when he looks at me in that way, I can't help stopping, as I think he is going to speak; and then he always says, 'Can I do anything for you, Lady Glen-cowrer?'"

She instantly saw that her husband did not like this. "Don't be angry with me, dear," she said. "You must admit that he is rather a bore."

“I am not at all angry, Glencora,” said the husband; “and if you insist upon it, I will see that he leaves; and will of course never ask him again. But that might be prejudicial to me, as he is a man whom I trust in politics, and who may be useful.”

Of course Lady Glencora declared that Mr. Bott might remain as long as he desired, and mentioned his name no more. But from that time forth she regarded Mr. Bott as an enemy, and felt that Mr. Bott regarded her in the same light.

When it was known that the Duke of St. Bungay was staying at Matching Priory, people became more sure than ever that Mr. Palliser would be the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, and that the old minister and the young one were arranging matters together. But I doubt whether the two ever spoke on the topic during the entire visit. The Duke went out shooting, read his newspaper, and looked with a connoisseur’s eye over all Mr. Palliser’s farming apparatus.

“You seem to have a good man, I should say,” said the Duke. “Of course he won’t make it pay, but he’ll make it look as though it did; which is the next best thing.”

“I suppose so,” said Mr. Palliser, who did not care much about it. The Duke would have talked to him by the hour together about farming if he could; but he talked very little about politics.

Mr. Bott was sometimes honoured by a few words with the Duke.

“We shall muster pretty strong, your Grace,” Mr. Bott had said to him one day before dinner.

“That depends on how the changes go,” said the Duke.

“I suppose there will be a change?”

“Oh yes; certainly. And it will be in your direction.”

“And in Palliser’s?”

“Yes; I should think so, if it suits him. By-the-by, Mr. Bott—”

Then there was a little whispered communication, in which perhaps Mr. Bott was undertaking some commission in what Lady Glencora had called “telling.”

CHAPTER 25 In Which Much of the History of the Pallisers Is Told

After ten days Alice felt quite comfortable at Matching Priory. She had promised to remain there till the second week of December, when she was to go to Vavasor Hall to meet her father and Kate. The Pallisers were to pass their Christmas with the Duke of Omnium in Barssetshire.

“It is the state occasion at Gatherum Castle,” said Glencora, “but it only lasts for one week. Then we go somewhere else. Oh dear!”

“Why ‘oh dear’?”

“Because – I don’t think I mean to tell you.”

“Then I won’t ask.”

“That’s so like you, Alice. But I won’t tell you unless you do ask.” Alice did not ask; but it was not long before Lady Glencora gave way.

Perhaps Alice was already growing upwards towards the light. At any rate she could listen with pleasure to the few words the Duke would say to her. She could even chat a little to the Duchess – so that her Grace had observed to Lady Glencora that “her cousin was a very nice person indeed. What a pity that she had been so ill-treated by that gentleman in Oxfordshire!”

Lady Glencora had to explain that the gentleman lived in Cambridgeshire, and that he had not treated anybody ill.

“Do you mean that she jilted him?” said the Duchess, almost whistling, and opening her eyes very wide. “Dear me, I’m sorry for that. I shouldn’t have thought it.” And when she next spoke to Alice she assumed rather a severe tone – until Alice listened to her pleasantly.

Alice had also begun riding, with Jeffrey Palliser as her squire. She had become friendly enough with him to quarrel, and to like him – so much, that Lady Glencora laughingly told her that she was going to do more.

“I rather think not,” said Alice.

“It would be very nice; and then perhaps some day you’d be the Duchess.”

“Glencora, don’t talk such nonsense.”

“Those are the speculations which people make. Only I should spite you by killing myself, so that he might marry again.”

“How can you say such horrid things?”

“I think I shall, some day. What right have I to stand in his way? He spoke to me the other day about Jeffrey’s altered position, and I knew what he meant; or rather what he thought. But I shan’t kill myself.”

“I should think not.”

“I only know one other way,” said Lady Glencora.

“You are thinking of things which should never be in your thoughts,” said Alice vehemently. “Have you no trust in God’s providence? Cannot you accept what has been done for you?”

Mr. Bott had gone away, much to Lady Glencora’s delight, but had unfortunately come back again. On his return Alice heard more of the feud between the Duchess and Mrs. Conway Sparkes.

“I was right about his tale-telling,” said Lady Glencora to her friend.

“Did he tell tales?”

“Yes; I got a scolding, and I know it came through him, though Mr. Palliser did not say so. But he told me that the Duchess had felt herself hurt by that other woman’s way of talking.”

“But it was not your fault.”

“No; that’s what I said. It was he who wanted me to ask Mrs. Conway Sparkes here. I didn’t want her, although she goes everywhere. When I told him that, he said it was nonsense, and I ought to make her hold her tongue. Of course I said I couldn’t. Mrs. Conway Sparkes wouldn’t care about me. And then I told him that I couldn’t take care of the Duchess – and he told me that I was a child.”

“He only meant that in love.”

“I am a child; I know that. Why didn’t he marry some strong-minded, ferocious woman that could keep his house in order, and frown Mrs. Sparkes out of her impudence? It wasn’t my fault.”

“You didn’t tell him *that*.”

“But I did. Then he kissed me, and said it was all right, and that I should grow older. ‘And Mrs. Sparkes will grow more impudent,’ I said, ‘and the Duchess more silly.’ And then I went away. Now this horrid Mr. Bott has come back again, and I wish I could punish him. He grins and smiles at me, and rubs his big hands. Is it not horrid to have to live in the house with such people?”

“I don’t think you need mind him much.”

“Yes; but I am the mistress here, and am told to entertain the people. Fancy entertaining the Duchess of St. Bungay and Mr. Bott!”

“As regards Mr. Bott,” said Alice, “I think you should bear it as though there were no such person.”

“But that would be pretence.”

“No; it would be the reticence which all women should practise – and you, in your position, almost more than any other woman.” Then Lady Glencora pouted, told Alice that it was a pity she had not married Mr. Palliser, and left her.

That evening, Mr. Bott found a place near to Alice in the drawing-room. He had often come up to her, rubbing his hands together, and speaking as though there was some reason that they should be friends. Alice had perceived this, and had tried to shake him off; but if he understood a hint, he never took it. A cold shoulder was nothing to him. It simply made him persevere.

“What a delightful person is our dear friend, Lady Glencora!” said Mr. Bott, having caught Alice in a position from which she could not easily escape.

Alice had half a mind to argue to get rid of him. But she did not dare.

“Yes, indeed,” she replied. “How very cold it is tonight!”

“Yes, it is cold. You and her ladyship are great friends, I believe, Miss Vavasor.”

“She is my cousin,” said Alice.

“Ah! yes; that is so pleasant. I have reason to know that Mr. Palliser is very much gratified that you should be so much with her.”

This was unbearable. Alice could not quite assume enough courage to get up from her chair and walk away from him, and yet she felt that she must escape further conversation. “I don’t know that I am very much with her, and if I were I can’t think it would make any difference to Mr. Palliser.”

But Mr. Bott was not a man to be put down when he had a purpose in hand. “I can assure you that those are his sentiments. Of course we all know that dear Lady Glencora is very young.”

“Mr. Bott, I really would rather not talk about my cousin.”

“But, dear Miss Vavasor; when we both have her welfare in view?”

“I haven’t her welfare in view, Mr. Bott. There is no reason why I should. You must excuse me if I say I cannot talk about her welfare with a perfect stranger.” Then she did get up, and walked away, leaving him rather astonished. But it simply made him resolve that he would try again.

I wonder whether Jeffrey Palliser did think much of the change in his position if Lady Glencora had a son. He must have been aware of its importance to him.

His present position was unfortunate. His father, the Duke’s youngest brother, had left him about six hundred a year, and with expensive tastes. The propriety of earning his bread had never been put before him. Of course he could live on six hundred a year; but he was a poor man, without prospects – until this fine ducal prospect became opened to him by the lack of an occupied cradle at Matching Priory.

But the prospect was very distant. Lady Glencora might yet have many sons. Or she might die, and some other more fortunate lady might bear sons in her place. Or the Duke might yet marry and have a son. Moreover, Jeffrey’s cousin was only one year older than himself, and the great prize might not come for forty years.

Nevertheless his hand might now be acceptable, where it would certainly be rejected if Lady Glencora had filled that cradle. He must have made some calculations of this nature.

“It is a pity you should do nothing all your life,” his cousin Plantagenet said to him one morning at this time. Jeffrey had sought the interview, I fear with a request for ready money.

“What am I to do?” said Jeffrey.

“At any rate you might marry.”

“Oh, yes; I could marry. The question would be how I might like the subsequent starvation.”

“I don’t see that you need starve. Though your own fortune is small, it is something, and many girls have fortunes of their own.”

“I don’t think I’m very good at that kind of thing,” said Jeffrey. “I fear I have not a mercenary tendency.”

“That’s nonsense. Men must have mercenary tendencies or they would not eat. It is a common error to say that mercenary tendencies are bad. A desire for wealth is the source of all progress. Let your mercenary tendencies be combined with honesty and they cannot take you astray.” This the future Chancellor of the Exchequer said with an appropriate air of wisdom.

“But I haven’t got any such tendencies,” said Jeffrey.

“You are too old, I fear, for the civil service.”

“You mean a desk in the Treasury, with a hundred a year. Yes; I think I am too old.”

“But have you no plan of your own?”

“Not much of one. Sometimes I have thought I would go to New Zealand.”

“Would you like to go into Parliament?”

“Of course I should. Only I should be sure to get terribly into debt. I don’t owe very much, now – except what I owe you.”

“You owe nothing to me,” said Plantagenet. “No; don’t speak of it. I have no brother, and between you and me it means nothing. You see, Jeffrey, it may be that I shall have to look to you as my – my heir, in short.” Jeffrey muttered something as to the small probability of such necessity.

“That’s true,” said the elder Palliser, “but still... In short, I wish you would do something. Think about it, and we will speak again.”

Jeffrey left with a cheque for £500 in his pocket, but not altogether satisfied. A seat in Parliament! Yes, indeed! If his cousin would do that for him – give him something of the status properly belonging to the younger son of the House, then indeed life would have some charms for him! Then he began to think that if he were destined to inherit, it might be his duty to prepare another heir, and leave a duke behind him.

“Are you going to ride with us after lunch?” said Lady Glencora to him.

“No,” said Jeffrey; “I’m going to study. Or rather, I shall sit down and consider what I should study. My cousin has just been telling me that I ought to do something.”

“So you ought,” said Iphigenia energetically from her writing-desk.

“But he didn’t have any clear idea what. Mrs. Sparkes, what ought a young man like me to set about doing?”

“Go into Parliament, I should say,” said Mrs. Sparkes.

“Ah, yes; exactly. He had some notion of that kind, too. At any rate I have got to do something, so I can’t go and ride,” said Jeffrey.

During this little conversation Lady Glencora had caught Alice’s eye, and Alice had known what she had meant. “You see,” the glance had said, “Plantagenet is beginning to take an interest in his cousin, and you know why. The man who is to be a duke must not be allowed to fritter away his time in obscurity. If I had a baby, Jeffrey might be as idle as he pleased.” Alice understood it well.

Of course Jeffrey did join the riding party.

“What is a man like me to do?” he said to Alice. Lady Glencora had contrived that he should be riding next to her. She liked Mr. Palliser, and had no objection; but she thought her cousin was a goose.

“Mrs. Sparkes says you ought to go into Parliament.”

“My cousin Plantagenet suggested – marriage.”

“A very good thing too, I’m sure,” said Alice; “only it depends on the sort of wife you get.”

“You mean how much money she has.”

“Not altogether.”

“From my cousin’s point of view, that it is the only important point. Who is coming up this year, in the way of heiresses?”

“I don’t know. How much money makes an heiress?”

“For such a fellow as me, I suppose ten thousand pounds ought to do.”

“That’s not much,” said Alice, who had exactly that amount of her own.

“No. But the more moderate my demands, the greater would be the number to choose from, and the better the chance of getting something decent in the woman herself. I have something of my own, so with the lady’s ten thousand pounds we might be able to live – in some second-rate French town perhaps. If you hear of any girl with about that sum, moderately good-looking, not too young and ignorant, decently born, and able to read and write, perhaps you will bear me in mind.”

“Yes, I will,” said Alice, well aware that he had described her own position.

“When I meet such a one, I will send for you at once.”

“You know no such person now?”

“Not just at present.”

“I don’t think he could do any better,” her cousin said to her that night. Lady Glencora was now in the habit of having Alice with her in her dressing-room every evening, when they would sit till the small hours. They would often talk of Mr. Palliser and his prospects, and Alice inspired his wife with more interest in him than

she had felt before. And Alice managed generally to drive her friend away from the dangerous topics of her childlessness, and Burgo Fitzgerald.

Sometimes, of course, they spoke of Alice's own prospects, till she was telling her cousin freely all that she felt. On this occasion they were speaking of Jeffrey Palliser.

"I don't think he could do any better," said Lady Glencora.

"If you talk such nonsense, I will not stay," said Alice.

"But why should it be nonsense? You would be very comfortable with your joint incomes. He is one of the best fellows in the world. It is clear that he likes you; and then we should be near each other. I am sure Mr. Palliser would do something for him if he married."

"I only know two things against it."

"And what are they?"

"That he would not take me for his wife, and that I would not take him for my husband."

"Do you dislike him?"

"Not at all. I like him very much. But one can't marry all the people one likes."

"But why shouldn't you marry him?"

"Because," said Alice, after a pause, "I have just separated myself from a man whom I certainly did love truly, and I cannot transfer my affections quite so quickly as that."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth she knew that they should not have been spoken. It was exactly what Glencora had done. She had loved a man and had separated from him and had married another all within a month or two.

Lady Glencora blushed as red as fire. Alice did the same as she looked up, searching in her cousin's eyes for pardon.

"It is an unmaidenly thing to do, certainly," said Lady Glencora in her lowest voice.

"Oh, Glencora!"

"I did not propose that you should do it suddenly. I did it suddenly, I know. I did it like a beast that is driven as its owner chooses. Oh, Alice, if you knew how I hate myself!"

"But I love you with all my heart," said Alice. "Glencora, I have learned to love you so dearly!"

"Then you are the only being that does. He can't love me. How is it possible? You – and perhaps another."

"There are many who love you. Mr. Palliser loves you."

"It is impossible. I have never said a word to him, or done anything for him, that could make him love me. The mother of his child he might have loved. Why should he love me? We were told to marry each other and did it. When could he have learned to love me? But, Alice, he requires no loving, either to take or to give. I wish it were the same with me."

Alice said what she could to comfort her, but her words were of little avail. At last Glencora said, "I am so grateful that you love me! Someone's love I must have found – or I could not have remained here."

CHAPTER 26

Lady Midlothian

A week after this, Alice, when she came down to breakfast one morning, found herself alone with Mr. Bott. When she entered the room he was standing with his back to the fire, waiting till the appearance of some other guest should give him the sanction necessary to start his morning meal. Alice would have retreated if possible, for she had learned to dislike him greatly, and was, indeed, almost afraid of him; but she could not do so without making her flight conspicuous.

“Do you intend to prolong your stay here, Miss Vavasor?” said Mr. Bott, taking advantage of the first moment at which she looked up from a letter she was reading.

“For a few more days, I think,” said Alice.

“Ah – I’m glad of that. Mr. Palliser has pressed me so much to remain till he goes to the Duke’s, that I cannot get away sooner. As I am an unmarried man, I can employ my time as well in one place as in another.”

“You must find that very convenient,” said Alice.

“Yes. You see, with my position in Parliament I am obliged to act in concert with others. We must give and take, you know, Miss Vavasor.”

As Miss Vavasor made no answer. Mr. Bott continued, “Of course I regard myself as belonging to the extreme Radicals.”

“Oh, indeed!” said Alice.

“Yes. But nothing can be done if we don’t give and take. I look upon our friend Mr. Palliser as the most rising public man in the country.”

“I am happy to hear you say so,” said his victim.

“And I do not think I can serve my party better than by keeping in the same boat with him. ‘He’ll make a Government hack of you,’ a friend of mine said to me the other day. ‘And I’ll make a Manchester school Prime Minister of him,’ I replied. I know what I’m about, Miss Vavasor.”

“No doubt,” said Alice.

“And so does he; Mr. Palliser is not the man to be led by the nose by anyone. What a charming woman is your relative, Lady Glencowrer! I remember what you said to me the other evening.”

“Do you?” said Alice.

“And I quite agree with you that confidential discussion of dear friends should not be lightly made.”

“Certainly not.”

“But there are occasions, Miss Vavasor, when the ordinary laws of social conduct must be made somewhat elastic.”

“I don’t think this is one of them, Mr. Bott.”

“Is it not? Just listen to me for one moment, Miss Vavasor. Our friend, Mr. Palliser, I am proud to say, relies much upon my humble friendship. But I need not tell you that Lady Glencowrer is very young; we may say, very young indeed.”

“Mr. Bott, I will not talk to you about Lady Glencora Palliser.”

This Alice said in a determined voice. She frowned too, and looked savagely at Mr. Bott. But he was a man of courage, and knew how to bear such opposition without flinching.

“Miss Vavasor, I speak solely with a view to her domestic happiness!”

“I don’t think that she wishes to have any such guardian of her happiness.”

“But if he wishes it, Miss Vavasor! Now I know he has the greatest reliance on your judgement.”

Hereupon Alice got up with the intention of leaving the room, but she was met at the door by Mrs. Conway Sparkes.

“Are you running from your breakfast, Miss Vavasor?” said she.

“No, Mrs. Sparkes; I am running from Mr. Bott,” said Alice, who was almost beside herself with anger.

“Mr. Bott, what is this?” said Mrs. Sparkes.

“Ha, ha, ha,” laughed Mr. Bott.

“I hope I shall be able to keep the peace,” said Mrs. Sparkes as Alice turned back into the room.

“Ha, ha, ha,” again laughed Mr. Bott, who rather liked his position.

Alice was very angry with herself for saying only part of the truth to Mrs. Sparkes. She wanted to say something, and did not know what to say; but her confusion was stopped by the entrance of Lady Glencora.

“Mrs. Sparkes, good morning,” said Lady Glencora. “Good morning, Mr. Bott. Oh, Alice!”

“What is the matter?” said Alice, going up to her.

“Oh, Alice, such a blow!” But Alice could see that her cousin was not quite in earnest;—that the new trouble was no calamity.

“Come here,” said Lady Glencora; and they both went to the window. “This letter is from – whom do you think? Lady Midlothian! She’s coming here on Monday. I assure you I did not expect this.”

“I am quite sure of that.”

“Ah! then we can consult. But first we’ll have some breakfast.” Then more ladies swarmed into the room; and Mr. Bott had his hands full in attending to their little wants.

The morning was nearly gone before Alice and her cousin had any chance of a private talk. Meanwhile Mr. Palliser was told of the visit.

“We shall be delighted to see Lady Midlothian,” said Mr. Palliser.

“But Alice will not be at all delighted, for reasons too long to explain,” said Lady Glencora.

“I am extremely sorry—” began Mr. Palliser.

“It does not signify in the least,” said Alice. “It will only be taking me away three days earlier.”

Upon hearing this Mr. Palliser looked very serious. What quarrel could make it impossible for Alice and Lady Midlothian to be visitors at the same house?

“Do you mean to say that you are coward enough to run away from her?” said Lady Glencora.

“I’m afraid, Miss Vavasor, that we can hardly ask her not to come,” said Mr. Palliser.

Alice protested that she would not wish it. “I should tell you, Mr. Palliser, that I have never met Lady Midlothian, though she is my distant cousin. But she has given me advice by letter, and I did not answer her because I thought she had no business to interfere. I shall go away because our meeting would be unpleasant to her.”

“You could tell her that Miss Vavasor is here,” said Mr. Palliser to his wife. “And then she need not come unless she pleased.”

The matter was so managed at last that Alice found herself unable to leave Matching without making more of Lady Midlothian’s coming than it was worth. It

would undoubtedly be very disagreeable; but, as Lady Glencora said, Lady Midlothian would not eat her. In truth, she felt ashamed to be so afraid of her relative.

On the following Monday, Lady Midlothian arrived. The carriage was sent to meet her at the station.

“I shall receive her when she comes,” said Lady Glencora, “and of course will tell her that you are here.”

“Yes, that will be best; but I don’t know how to manage our first meeting.”

“I’ll bring her to you in my room if you like.”

“No; we’ll let things take their chance.” However, it was decided that Lady Midlothian was to be informed of Alice’s presence as soon as she arrived.

Alice was in her own room when she heard the carriage-wheels, and knew that her enemy had come. She had striven to feel indifferent, but had not succeeded; and was angry with herself for feeling anxious. Why should she be afraid of Lady Midlothian? And yet she was.

At about five o’clock, having rebuked herself for her timidity, she descended into the drawing-room. Lady Glencora had promised that she would be there at that hour. When Alice entered, Lady Midlothian sat in a great chair opposite the fire, with Lady Glencora near her on a stool. One of the Miss Pallisers was reading further away, and there was no one else in the room.

The Countess of Midlothian was a very little woman of between sixty and seventy, who must have been very pretty in her youth. She wore a round bonnet and a short cloak, and sat perfectly upright, looking at the fire. Very small she was, but she carried in her grey eyes and sharp-cut features a certain look of importance. Alice at once saw that she was a lady over whom no easy victory could be obtained.

“Here is Alice,” said Lady Glencora, rising. “Alice, let me introduce you to Lady Midlothian.”

Alice, as she came forward, was able to assume an easy demeanour, even though her heart was failing her. She put out her hand.

“I am glad at last to be able to make your acquaintance, my dear,” said Lady Midlothian; “Your aunt, Lady Macleod, is one of my oldest friends, and I have heard her speak of you very often.”

“And Lady Macleod has often spoken to me of your ladyship,” said Alice.

“Then it is as well that we should be acquainted with each other,” said the Countess. “I am becoming an old woman, and if I do not get to know you soon, I might never do so.”

Alice could not help thinking that in that case neither might feel much sorrow; but she did not say so. She was wondering whether to speak of Lady Midlothian’s letter to her. She was sure that Lady Midlothian would mention the letter; and it would be better now, in Glencora’s presence.

“You are very kind,” she said.

“Blood is thicker than water, my dear,” said Lady Midlothian, “and no earthly ties are as strong as those of family. Your mother was my dearest friend.”

“I never knew my mother,” said Alice – feeling, however, that her resistance to the old woman was beginning to give way.

“No, my dear, you never did; but Lady Macleod is your nearest relative on your mother’s side, and she has done her duty by you well.”

“Indeed she has, Lady Midlothian.”

“She has, and others, therefore, have been less called upon to interfere. I only say this, my dear, in my own vindication – feeling, perhaps, that my conduct needs some excuse.”

"I'm sure Alice does not think that," said Lady Glencora.

"But I have wished to make up for lost opportunities," said Lady Midlothian. Alice knew that she was about to refer to her letter, and trembled. "I am very anxious now to be Alice Vavasor's friend, if she will allow me to become so."

"I would be glad – if—"

"If what, my dear?" said the old lady. Although she meant to be gracious, there was something repellent in her manner.

"I hardly know how to say what I mean," said Alice, her spirit rising higher. "I am sure that you and I, Lady Midlothian, differ very much about a certain matter, in which I must be guided by my own opinion—"

"You mean about Mr. Grey?"

"Yes."

"I think so much about that matter, and your happiness, that when I heard that you were here I was determined to visit Matching so that I might have an opportunity of speaking to you."

"Then you knew that Alice was here?" said Lady Glencora.

"Of course I did. I suppose you have heard all the history, Glencora?"

Lady Glencora was forced to acknowledge that she had heard the "history" of poor Alice's treatment of Mr. Grey.

"And what do you think of it?"

Both Alice and Lady Glencora looked towards the end of the room where Miss Palliser was reading, to indicate that the lady knew nothing of it.

"Perhaps another time and place may be better," said Lady Midlothian; "but I must go the day after tomorrow; indeed, I thought of going tomorrow. This is merely a brief visit. When shall I get an opportunity of speaking to Alice where we need not be interrupted?"

Lady Glencora suggested her room upstairs, and offered the use of it then, or in the evening. But the idea of being lectured was terrible to Alice, and she was determined not to endure it.

"Lady Midlothian, it would really be of no use. I did get your letter, you know."

"And as you have not answered it, I have come all this way to see you."

"I shall be so sorry to give offence, but it is a subject which I cannot bring myself to discuss."

"But you don't mean to say that you won't see me?"

"I will not talk upon that matter," said Alice. "I will not do it even with Lady Macleod."

"No," said Lady Midlothian, and her sharp grey eyes now began to kindle with anger; "and therefore it is so very necessary that other friends should interfere."

"But I will endure no interference," said Alice, "either from persons who are friends or who are not friends." And as she spoke she rose from her chair. "You must forgive me, Lady Midlothian, if I say that I can have no conversation with you on this matter." Then she walked out of the room, leaving the Countess and Lady Glencora together.

"The most self-willed young woman I ever met in my life," said Lady Midlothian, as soon as Alice was gone.

"I knew very well how it would be," said Lady Glencora.

"But it is quite frightful, my dear. She has been engaged, with the consent of all her friends, to this young man."

"I know all about it. I don't quite understand her, but I suppose she fears they would not be happy together."

“Understand her! I should think nobody can understand her. A young woman to become engaged to a gentleman in that way, and then turn round and simply say that she has changed her mind! She hasn’t given the slightest reason.” Lady Midlothian almost startled Lady Glencora by her eagerness. Lady Midlothian had been one of those who, not quite two years before, had assisted in obtaining the submission of Lady Glencora herself.

“I shall not give up,” she continued. “I have the greatest objection to her father, who contrived to connect himself with our family in a most shameful manner, without the slightest encouragement. I don’t think I have spoken to him since, but I shall see him now and tell him my opinion.”

Alice held her ground, and avoided all further conversation with Lady Midlothian during her stay.

“Good-bye to you,” Lady Midlothian said to her as she went. “Even yet I hope that things may go right, and if so you will find that I can forget and forgive.”

“If perseverance merits success,” said Lady Glencora to Alice, “she ought to succeed.”

“But she won’t succeed,” said Alice.

CHAPTER 27

The Priory Ruins

Lady Midlothian went away on Wednesday morning, and Alice was to leave the next day. It was now December, and the weather was clear and frosty, but at night there was bright moonlight. On this night the moon would be full, and Lady Glencora had declared that she and Alice would go out amidst the ruins. Mr. Palliser had remarked that the night air would be very cold, and Mr. Bott had suggested all manner of evil consequences. Had Mr. Palliser alone objected, Lady Glencora might have given way, but Mr. Bott's word strengthened her purpose.

"We shall wrap ourselves up warm," she said, "and nobody need be afraid. Jeffrey, we shall expect you to stand sentinel at the old gate, and guard us from the ghosts." Jeffrey Palliser promised to do so.

The party at Matching Priory had by this time become very small. There were indeed no guests left, except Miss Vavasor, Mr. Bott, and an old lady who had been a great friend of Mr. Palliser's mother. It was past ten in the evening when Lady Glencora declared that the time had come to go out. She invited the two Miss Pallisers to join her, but they declined. Mr. Bott offered to accompany them.

"No, indeed, Mr. Bott," said Lady Glencora. "You were one of those who preached a sermon against my dissipation, and I'm not going to allow you to join it."

"My dear Lady Glencora, if I were you, indeed I wouldn't," said the old lady, looking round towards Mr. Palliser.

"My dear Mrs. Marsham, if you were me, indeed you would," and Lady Glencora also looked at her husband.

"I think it a foolish thing to do," said Mr. Palliser sternly.

"If you forbid it, of course we won't go," said Lady Glencora.

"Forbid it – no; I shall not forbid it."

"Then let us go," said Lady Glencora.

She and Alice were already muffled in cloaks and thick shawls. Alice followed her out onto the grand terrace which ran in front of the house. Here they found Jeffrey Palliser armed with a cigar. Alice, to tell the truth, would have preferred to abandon the expedition, but could not desert Lady Glencora. She had a feeling that Mr. Palliser trusted her, and liked her to be with his wife. She wished to justify this supposed trust, and had said a word or two to her cousin upstairs, urging that perhaps her husband would not like it.

"Let him say so plainly," said Lady Glencora, "and I'll give it up instantly. But I'm not going to be lectured out of my purposes by Mr. Bott or old Mother Marsham. I understand all these people, my dear. And if you throw me over, Alice, I'll never forgive you."

After this Alice resolved that she would not throw her friend over. But she was becoming a little afraid of her friend – afraid that she would be driven some day either to throw her over, or to say words to her that she would not like.

"Now, Jeffrey," said Lady Glencora as they walked towards the ruins, "when we get under the old gateway you must let me and Alice go round the dormitory and the chapel alone. Then we'll come back by the cloisters, and we'll take another turn outside with you. I want to show Alice something by ourselves."

"You're not afraid, I know. If Miss Vavasor is not—"

“Miss Vavasor – who, I think, would allow you to call her Alice tonight – is never afraid.”

“Glencora, how dare you say so?” said Alice. “I really think we had better go back.” She felt very angry with her cousin for inviting Mr. Palliser to be familiar with her. Of course he would assume it was with Alice’s consent.

“Go back!” said Glencora. “No, indeed. We’ll go on, and leave him here. Then he can call nobody anything. Don’t be angry with me,” she said, as soon as they were out of hearing. “The truth is, if you choose to have him for your husband, you may.”

“But if I do not choose?”

“Then no harm is done. But, Alice, who will you meet that would suit you better? And you need not decide now. Let me to tell him to wait until he meets you in London.”

“You shall tell him nothing of the kind,” said Alice. “I believe you are joking, and the joke is a bad one.”

“No; indeed I am not joking. He has said enough to me to justify me in saying so. Alice, think of it. It would reconcile me to much, and it would be something to be the mother of the future Duke of Omnium.”

“To me it would be nothing,” said Alice. “Don’t say anything more about it, Glencora.”

“If you don’t wish it, I will not.”

“I do not wish it. I don’t think I ever saw moonlight so bright as this. Look at the lines of that window against the light. They are clearer than you ever see them in the day.”

They were now standing just within the gateway of the old chapel. The church was roofless, but the walls were standing. The small windows of the nave were perfect, and the large windows of the two transepts and of the west end were nearly so.

Of the opposite window, which had formed the back of the choir, very little remained. The top of it, with all its tracery, was gone, and three broken upright mullions alone remained.

“Is it not beautiful!” said Glencora. “I do love it so! And there is a peculiar feeling of cold about the chill of the moon, different from any other cold. It seems to go into your senses rather than into your bones. But I suppose that’s nonsense.”

“No more than what people are supposed to talk by moonlight.”

“That’s unkind. And now I’ll tell you why I always think of you when I come here by moonlight.”

“But I suppose you don’t often come.”

“I did come very often when we had the full moon in August. I used to run out through the open windows and nobody knew where I was gone. I made him come once, but he didn’t seem to care about it. I told him that part of the refectory wall was falling; so he had a mason sent the next day. If anything is out of order he has it put to rights at once. There would have been no ruins if all the Pallisers had been like him.”

“So much the better.”

“I say no. Things may live too long. But now I’m going to tell you: do you remember that night I brought you home from the play to Queen Anne Street?”

“Indeed I do.” It had been on that evening that she had positively refused to give any aid to her cousin about Burgo Fitzgerald.

“And do you remember how the moon shone? As we came round the corner from Cavendish Square he was standing there – and a friend of yours was standing with him.”

“Do you mean my cousin George?”

“Yes; and oh, Alice! dear Alice! I don’t know why I should love you, for if you had not been stony cruel that night, I should have gone with him then, and all this icy coldness would have been prevented.”

She was standing quite close to Alice, and as she spoke she shivered and wrapped her furs closer about her.

“You are very cold,” said Alice. “We had better go in.”

“No, not yet. Jeffrey will come to us directly. We should have escaped that night if you had allowed him to come into your house. Ah, well! we didn’t, and there’s an end of it.”

“But Glencora, you cannot regret it.”

“Not regret it! Alice, where can your heart be? I would give everything I have in the world to have been true to him. Though he should have made me a beggar, I regret it. They told me that he would ill-use me, and desert me. I do not believe it; but even if that should have been so, I regret it.”

“Glencora, do not speak like that. Do not try to make me think that anything could tempt you to be false to your vows.”

“Tempt me to be false! Why, child, it has been all false throughout. I never loved him. How can you talk in that way, when you know that I never loved him? They browbeat me and frightened me till I did as I was told;— and now – what am I now?”

“You are his honest wife. Glencora, listen to me.” Alice took hold of her arm.

“No; I am not honest. By law I am his wife; but the laws are liars! When I went to him at the altar, I knew that I did not love him. But Burgo I love with all my heart and soul. I could stoop at his feet and clean his shoes for him, and think it no disgrace!”

“Oh, Cora, my friend, do not say such words! Remember what you owe your husband and yourself, and come away.”

“I do know what I owe him, and I will pay it him. Alice, if I had a child I would be true to him. But what now is the only honest thing that I can do? Why, leave him; so that he may have another wife and be the father of a child. What injury shall I do him by leaving him? He does not love me; you know that.”

“I know that he does.”

“Alice, that is untrue. He does not. Maybe he can love no woman. But another woman would give him a son, and he would be happy. Every hour of every day and every night, I am thinking of the man I love. I have nothing else to think of. I have no occupation, no friends to talk to. But I am always talking to Burgo in my thoughts; and he listens to me. I dream that his arm is round me—”

“Oh, Glencora!”

“Do you begrudge me telling you the truth? You said that you would be my friend. And this is what I want to tell you. Immediately after Christmas, we are to go to Monkshade, and he will be there. Lady Monk is his aunt.”

“You must not go.”

“That is easily said; but I must go. I told Mr. Palliser that he would be there, and he actually said that it did not signify. I wonder whether he understands what it is for people to love each other.”

“You must tell him plainly that you will not go.”

“I did. I told him as plainly as words could tell him. ‘Glencora,’ he said – and you know the way he looks when he means to be lord and master – ‘This is an annoyance which you must bear and overcome. It suits me that we should go to Monkshade, and it does not suit me that there should be anyone whom you are afraid

to meet.' Could I tell him that he would lose his wife if I went? Could I threaten that I would throw myself into Burgo's arms? What would you have had me say?"

"I would have you now tell him everything, rather than go to that house."

"Alice, look here. I know what I am. I loathe myself, and I loathe the thing that I am thinking of. I could have loved a man ten times better than myself – even though he had ill-treated me – if I had been allowed to choose a husband for myself. Burgo would have spent my money. But there would have been something left, and I think that by that time I could have won even him to care for me. But with that man—! Alice you are very wise. What am I to do?"

Alice had no doubt as to what her cousin should do. She should be true to her marriage-vow, whether that vow when made were true or false. She should be true to it now. And therefore she should tell her husband as much as might be necessary to induce him to spare her the visit to Monkshade.

All this she said to Lady Glencora, as they walked slowly across the chapel. But Lady Glencora was more occupied with her own thoughts than with her friend's advice.

"Here's Jeffrey!" she said. "And now we'll go round the outside; only we must not stay long, or we shall frighten those two delicious old duennas, Mrs. Marsham and Mr. Bott."

They walked all round the ruin, on a gravel-path; and Alice, who could hardly bring herself to speak, was surprised to find that Glencora could go on in her usual light humour, chatting as though there were nothing to depress her spirits.

CHAPTER 28

Alice Leaves the Priory

As they came in, Mr. Palliser was there to meet them.

“You must be very cold,” he said to Glencora.

“No, indeed,” said Glencora; but her teeth were chattering.

“Jeffrey,” said Mr. Palliser, turning to his cousin, “I am angry with you. You should have known better than to have allowed her to remain so long.” Then Mr. Palliser led his wife off, taking no notice whatsoever of Miss Vavasor.

Alice felt the slight, and understood: it told her that he had trusted his wife with her, and that she had betrayed the trust. She might have brought Glencora in within five or six minutes, instead of allowing her to remain out there in the freezing night air for nearly three-quarters of an hour. Therefore Mr. Palliser did not ask whether she were cold. He spoke no word to her, nor did he even look at her. Although Alice knew that she had not deserved such severity, she did not resent it. There was so much in Mr. Palliser’s position to be pitied, that Alice could not find it in her heart to be angry with him.

“He is provoked with us, now,” said Jeffrey Palliser, handing her a candle.

“He is afraid that she will have caught cold.”

“Yes. You can easily understand, Miss Vavasor, that he has not much sympathy for romance.”

“I dare say he is right,” said Alice, not exactly knowing what to say. “Romance usually means nonsense, I believe.”

“That is not Glencora’s doctrine.”

“No; but she is younger than I am. My feet are very cold, Mr. Palliser, and I think I will go up to my room.”

“Good night,” said Jeffrey, offering her his hand. “I think it hard that you should have incurred his displeasure.”

“It will not hurt me,” said Alice, smiling.

“No; but he does not forget.”

“Even that will not hurt me. Good night, Mr. Palliser.”

“As it is the last night, may I say good night, Alice? I shall be away tomorrow before you are up.”

He still held her hand; but she did not draw it away suddenly.

“No,” said she, “Glencora was very wrong there. There can be no possible reason why you should call me other than Miss Vavasor.”

“Can there never be a reason?”

“No, Mr. Palliser. Good night; and good-bye. Had it not been for this folly of Glencora’s, our acquaintance would have been very pleasant.”

“To me it has been very pleasant. Good night.”

Then she left him, and went up alone to her own room, where she was very glad to get close to a good fire. She was, in truth, cold to her bones, and her feet were numbed with the damp. Certainly Mr. Palliser had reason to be angry that his wife should have remained out in the night air so long.

And then she began to think of what had been told her; and to try to think of what she ought to do. She could not doubt that Lady Glencora had intended to declare that, if opportunity offered itself, she would leave her husband for Burgo Fitzgerald. Alice knew that the poor unreasoning creature had taught herself to think that she might

excuse herself for this sin by the fact that she was childless, and that she might thus give her husband an chance to seek another wife to give him an heir. Alice, who was perfectly clear-sighted about her cousin, however impaired her vision might have been about herself, saw nothing but absolute ruin in Lady Glencora's plan. To her it was black as the depths of hell; and she knew that to Glencora also it was black.

"I loathe myself," Glencora had said, "and the thing that I am thinking of."

What was Alice to do? Mr. Palliser had quarrelled with her in his silent way. But if she told him that she wished to speak to him, he would listen; and then he would surely act in some way that would save his wife. What Mr. Palliser might think of herself, Alice cared little.

But then there came to her the feminine idea that she had no right to betray her friend. If Lady Glencora had told Alice that she meditated murder, or robbery, Alice would have had no difficulty in telling the tale. But now she hesitated. After all, was Glencora really intending to carry out a threat, the very thought of which must be terrible to herself?

As Alice was thinking of all this, sitting in her dressing-gown by the fire, there came a loud knock at the door. It was Iphigenia Palliser, Mr. Palliser's cousin.

"Miss Vavasor," she said, "I know that I am taking a great liberty, but may I come in for a few minutes? I so much wish to speak to you!" Alice of course bade her enter.

Alice Vavasor had formed very little intimacy with either of the two Miss Pallisers. It had seemed to her as though there had been two parties in the house, and that she had belonged to the one headed by the wife, whereas the Miss Pallisers had been naturally attached to that of the husband. Alice's friendship with Lady Glencora had marked her out as somehow separated from them.

"I know that I am intruding," said Miss Palliser, as though she were almost afraid of Alice.

"Oh dear, no," said Alice.

"You are going tomorrow, and if I did not speak to you now I should have no other opportunity. Glencora seems to be very much attached to you, and we all thought it so good a thing that she should have such a friend."

"I hope you have not changed your minds," said Alice, with a faint smile.

"Oh, no. I did not mean that. My cousin, Mr. Palliser, I mean, liked you so much when you came."

"And he does not like me quite so much now, because I went out in the moonlight with his wife. Isn't that it?"

"Well; no, Miss Vavasor. I had not intended to mention that. He was a little vexed, but it is not about that that I would speak to you."

"I saw plainly enough that he was angry with me."

"He thought you would have brought her in earlier."

"Why should he think that I can manage his wife? Mr. Palliser has been unreasonable. Not that it signifies."

"I don't think he has been unreasonable; I don't, indeed, Miss Vavasor. He has certainly been vexed. Sometimes he has much to vex him. You see, Glencora is very young."

Mr. Bott also had declared that Lady Glencora was very young. It was probable, therefore, that that special phrase had been used in some discussion among Mr. Palliser's party about Glencora's foibles.

"She is not younger than when Mr. Palliser married her," Alice said.

“You mean that if a man marries a young wife he must put up with the trouble. But when I say that Glencora is young—”

“You mean that she is younger in spirit, and perhaps in conduct, than he had expected to find her.”

“But he does not complain, Miss Vavasor. He is much too proud for that.”

“I should hope so,” said Alice, thinking of Mr. Bott.

“I hardly know how to explain what I wish to say, or whether you will believe me to be acting solely on Glencora’s behalf. I think you have some influence with her; and I know no one else that has any.”

“My friendship with her is not of very long date, Miss Palliser.”

“I know it, but still there is the fact. Am I not right in supposing – that you had heard the name of Mr. Fitzgerald connected with Glencora’s before her marriage?”

Alice paused a moment. “Yes, I had,” she said.

“And I think you were agreed, with her other relations, that such a marriage would have been very dreadful.”

“I never spoke of the matter to any relatives of Glencora’s. You must understand, Miss Palliser, that though I am her distant cousin, I do not even know her nearest relations. I never saw Lady Midlothian till she came here the other day.”

“But you advised her to abandon Mr. Fitzgerald.”

“Never!”

“I know she was much with you, just at that time.”

“I used to see her, certainly.”

Then there was a pause, and Miss Palliser, in truth, scarcely knew how to go on. There had been a hardness about Alice which her visitor had not expected. But at this point Alice came suddenly to her assistance.

“She was often with me,” said Alice, “and there was much talk between us about Mr. Fitzgerald. What was my advice then can be of little matter; but in this we shall be both agreed, Miss Palliser, that Glencora now should certainly not be called upon to be in his company.”

“She has told you, then, that he is to be at Lady Monk’s?”

“She has told me that Mr. Palliser expects her to meet him, and that she thinks it hard that she should be subjected to such a trial.”

“It should be no trial, Miss Vavasor.”

“How can it be otherwise? Come, Miss Palliser; if you are her friend, be fair to her.”

“I am her friend; but I am, above everything, my cousin’s friend. He has told me that she has complained of having to meet this man. He declares that it should be nothing to her, and that the fear is an idle folly. Is there any real reason why she should not go? Miss Vavasor, please tell me – even if in doing so you must cast deep reproach upon her name! Anything will be better than utter disgrace and sin!”

“I cast no reproach upon her in saying that there is great reason why she should not go to Monkshade.”

“You think there is absolute grounds for interference? I must tell him, you know, openly.”

“I think – nay, Miss Palliser, I know – that there is great reason why you should save her from being taken to Monkshade, if you can.”

“I can only do it by telling him just what you tell me.”

“Then tell him.”

“Yes – yes, Miss Vavasor. But I believed that you would have said that she was innocent.”

“And she is innocent,” said Alice, rising from her chair. “She is innocent. Who accuses her of guilt? You ask me a question on his behalf—”

“On hers – and on his, Miss Vavasor.”

“A question which I feel myself bound to answer truly; but I will not have it said that I accuse her. She had been attached to Mr. Fitzgerald when your cousin married her. He knew that this had been the case. She told him the whole truth. In a worldly point of view her marriage with Mr. Fitzgerald would probably have been very imprudent.”

“It would have been utterly ruinous.”

“Perhaps so. But as it turned out, she gave up her own wishes and married your cousin.”

“I don’t know about her own wishes, Miss Vavasor.”

“She would have married Mr. Fitzgerald, had she not been hindered by the advice of those around her. It cannot be supposed that she has forgotten him in so short a time. There can be no guilt in her remembrance.”

“There is guilt in loving any other than her husband.”

“Then, Miss Palliser, it was her marriage that was guilty, and not her love. But all that is done and past. It should be your cousin’s object to teach her to forget Mr. Fitzgerald, and he will not do that by taking her to a house where that gentleman is staying.”

“She has said so much to you herself?”

“I do not need to tell you what she said. You have asked me a question, and I have answered it, and I am thankful to you for having asked it. What object can either of us have but to help her?”

“And to save him from dishonour. I had so hoped that this was simply a childish dread on her part.”

“It is not so. It is no childish dread. If you have the power to prevent her going to Lady Monk’s, I implore you to use it. Indeed, I will ask you to promise me that you will do so.”

“After what you have said, I have no alternative.”

“Exactly. There is no alternative. Either for his sake or for hers, there is none.”

Thereupon Miss Palliser got up, and wishing her companion good night, she left the room. There was no pretence of friendship, even as they were parting. They acknowledged that their objects were different. That of Alice was to save Lady Glencora from ruin. That of Miss Palliser was to save her cousin from disgrace. One loved Lady Glencora, and the other clearly did not.

Nevertheless, Alice felt that Miss Palliser, in coming to her, had acted well, and she felt immense relief. Some step would now be taken to prevent that meeting, and she had said nothing about which Lady Glencora could feel aggrieved.

On the next morning she was down in the breakfast-room soon after nine, and in a few minutes Mr. Palliser entered.

“The carriage is ordered for you at a quarter to ten,” he said, “and I have come down to give you your breakfast.” There was a smile on his face, and Alice could see that he intended to make himself pleasant. “Glencora bids me say that she will be down immediately.”

Alice inquired about the effects of last night’s imprudence, which received only a half-reply. Mr. Palliser was willing to be gracious, but did not intend to be understood as having forgiven the offence.

The Miss Pallisers then came in together, and Mr. Bott and Mrs. Marsham, and all of them inquired after Lady Glencora, as though she might be in a perilous state.

“The frost was so uncommonly severe,” said Mr. Bott, “that any delicate person like Lady Glencora must have suffered in remaining out so long.”

The insinuation that Alice was not a delicate person was very open, and was duly appreciated. Mr. Bott was aware that his great patron had changed his opinion about Miss Vavasor, and he was of course disposed to change his own.

“I hope you do not consider Lady Glencora delicate,” said Alice to Mr. Palliser.

“She is not robust,” said the husband.

“By no means,” said Mrs. Marsham.

“Indeed, no,” said Mr. Bott.

Alice knew that she was being accused of being robust herself; but she bore it in silence. Ploughboys and milkmaids are robust, and the accusation was a heavy one.

“I think she is as strong as the rest of us,” said Iphigenia Palliser, who felt that after last night she owed something to Miss Vavasor.

“As some of us,” said Mr. Bott, determined to persevere in his accusation.

At this moment Lady Glencora entered, and encountered eager inquiries. These, however, she quickly put aside, and made her way to Alice. “The last morning has come, then,” she said.

“Yes, indeed,” said Alice. “Mr. Palliser must have thought that I was never going.”

“On the other hand,” said he, “I have felt much obliged to you for staying.” But he said it coldly.

“Obliged!” exclaimed Lady Glencora. “I can’t tell you how much obliged I am. Oh, Alice, I wish you were going to stay with us!”

“We are leaving in a week’s time,” said Mr. Palliser.

“Of course we are,” said Lady Glencora. “With all my heart I wish we were not. Dear Alice! I suppose we shall not meet till we are all in town.”

“You will let me know when you are there,” said Alice.

“I will write to you instantly; and, Alice, I will write to you from Gatherum – or from Monkshade.”

Alice could not help looking around and catching Miss Palliser’s eye. Miss Palliser made a slight sign with her head; but she said nothing.

Then the carriage was announced, and Mr. Palliser took Alice to it. “Don’t come to the door, Glencora,” he said. The two cousins kissed each other, and Alice went.

“Good-bye, Miss Vavasor,” said Mr. Palliser; but he expressed no wish that he might see her again as his guest at Matching. Alice, as she was driven away in solitary grandeur, could only wish that she had never gone there.

CHAPTER 29

Burgo Fitzgerald

On the night before Christmas Eve two men were sitting together in George Vavasor's rooms in Cecil Street. It was past twelve o'clock, and they were both smoking; there were bottles of spirits and jugs of water on the table.

However, Vavasor was not drinking. There was a little weak brandy and water in a glass by his side, but it had remained untouched for the last twenty minutes. In that time his companion had twice refilled his glass, and was now puffing out smoke from his pipe with the fury of a steamer's funnel.

This man was Burgo Fitzgerald. He was as handsome as ever; but in his eyes and cheeks there was a look of haggard dissipation – a sign of riotous living which had become wearisome even to himself. Habitual drink did not make him red-faced and bloated, but pale, worn, and haggard. He grew thin, and at times he had been ill to death's door. He declared to his friends that that his liver had become useless. But still his beauty remained.

He had come to Vavasor's room to ask him for assistance, and perhaps also for advice. These two men had known each other long, and had been close friends. When Lady Glencora tried, vainly as we know, to obtain aid from Alice Vavasor, Burgo had been led to believe that Alice's cousin might help him. George Vavasor had been quite ready to help; but Burgo's hopes had been frustrated, and Lady Glencora M'Cluskie had become Lady Glencora Palliser.

But now other hopes had sprung up, and Burgo was again looking to his friend for assistance.

"I believe she would," Burgo said, as he lifted the glass to his mouth. "I know that she is not happy with him, and I will at least ask her."

"But he would keep her fortune all the same?"

"I don't know, and I don't mean to ask. Of course I don't expect anyone to believe me, but her money has no bearing on the question now. Heaven knows I want money bad enough, but I wouldn't take away another man's wife for it."

"I must tell you that I wouldn't run away with any man's wife. I have an old-fashioned idea that when a man has got a wife he ought to be allowed to keep her."

"I think *he* ran away with *my* wife," said Burgo, with emphasis. "She was engaged to me first; and she really loved me, while she never cared for him."

"Nevertheless, marriage is marriage, and the law is against you. But if I did go in for such a troublesome job, I certainly should keep an eye upon the money."

"It can make no difference."

"It did make a difference, I suppose, when you first thought of marrying her?"

"Of course it did. My people brought us together because she had a fortune and I had none. And I'll tell you what; I believe that old harridan of an aunt of mine is willing to do the same thing again. Of course she doesn't dare say so, but I do believe she means it. Upon my soul I hate her. I do indeed. She is a wicked old woman. Some of us fellows are wicked enough – you and I for instance—"

"Thank you. I don't know, however, that I am qualified to run alongside you."

"But we are angels to that old she-devil. The truth is, I want Lady Glencora, partly because I love her; but chiefly because I believe that she loves me."

"It's for her sake then! You are ready to sacrifice yourself to do her a good turn."

“As for sacrificing myself, I’m utterly ruined in any case. I have made a shipwreck of everything, and have now only got to go down among the waves.”

“Only you would like to take Lady Glencora with you.”

“No, by heavens! But sometimes I think that I might still become a different fellow if I could marry her.”

“If you had you married her when she was free, it might have been so.”

“I think it would be so now. I do, indeed. If I could get her to Italy, or Greece, I think I could treat her well, and live with her quietly. I know that I would try.”

“Without the assistance of brandy and cigars.”

“Yes.”

“And without any money.”

“With only a little. I know you’ll laugh at me; but I imagine a sort of life which I think would suit us, and be very different from this hideous way of living. He’d get a divorce, of course, and then we should be married. I really don’t think he’d dislike it. They tell me he doesn’t care for her.”

“You have seen her since her marriage?”

“Yes; twice.”

“And have spoken to her?”

“Once, for about two minutes.”

“What did she say?”

“She said it would be better that we should not meet. When she said that, I knew that she was still fond of me.”

Vavasor paused a few minutes. “I dare say she is fond of you,” he said; “but I doubt if she has courage for such a thing. And even if she has, you might fail in carrying out your plan.”

“I must get a little money first,” said Burgo. “I went to Magruin this morning, the fellow near the Foundling Hospital. He was quite civil about it. He says I owe him over three thousand pounds.”

“How much did you ever have from him?”

“I don’t recollect. He got a bill of mine from a tailor who went to smash, and he kept on renewing that till it grew to be ever so many bills.”

“And he says he’ll give you money now? I suppose you told him why you wanted it.”

“I let him understand that I hoped to get off with a lady who had a lot of tin. He says he’ll let me have one hundred and fifty on a bill at two months for five hundred – with your name to it.”

“With my name to it! That’s kind of you.”

“Of course I can’t pay up at the end of two months.”

“I dare say not,” said Vavasor.

“But he won’t come upon you for a year or more afterwards. I did pay you what you lent me before.”

Before the evening was over Vavasor promised the assistance asked. He knew that he was creating trouble for himself. But he had asked for such assistance from others himself before now, and had received it. It was a reckless deed on his part, but then all his doings were reckless.

“I thought you would, old fellow,” said Burgo, as he got up to go away.

“Perhaps, you know, I shall pull through; and perhaps some of her fortune will come with her. If so you’ll be all right.”

“Perhaps I may. But, Burgo, don’t you give that fellow the bill till you’ve got the money in your fist.”

“Don’t worry. I know their tricks.” Then Burgo Fitzgerald took a little more brandy and water and went away.

He was living at this time in the house of one of his relatives in Cavendish Square. His uncles and his aunts had clung to him with surprising tenacity; for he did not even pretend to like them. His father, with whom he had not been on speaking terms, was now dead; but he had sisters whose husbands would still open their houses to him, and lend him horses, and provide him with every luxury – except ready money. Nobody thought of reproaching him. They knew it was a waste of time. They were still fond of him because he was beautiful, yet never vain; and because he had a certain kindness which made him pleasant. He was soft and gracious with children, and very courteous to his lady cousins. They knew he was worthless, but nevertheless they loved him – chiefly, I think, because he seemed to think so little of himself.

But now as he walked home in the middle of the night he did think much of himself. Every man to himself is the centre of the whole world; the axle on which it all turns. All knowledge is but his own perception of the things around him.

He had played his part very badly; of that he was well aware. He had sense enough to know that he should earn his bread in some way, and had never yet earned so much as a penny roll. He had learned that the world’s progress depends on men doing their duty by each other; and he knew that he had done nothing to promote such progress. He thoroughly despised himself. But when he was alone with the cold night air upon his face, when the stars were bright above him and the world was almost quiet, he would ask himself whether there might still be some hope of redemption – some chance of a better life.

And the way to this better life was to take away another man’s wife and make himself happy with her! What he had said to Vavasor about disregarding Lady Glencora’s money had been perfectly true. He believed that if she went off with him, some portion of her enormous wealth would still cling to her. But whereas his previous advances had been mercenary, he had learned to love the girl, and to care more for her than for her money.

The girl had married another man, and there was an end of it. But gradually reports had reached him that she was not happy – reports from people who were glad to exaggerate what they had heard. A whole tribe of his female relatives had been anxious to promote his marriage with Lady Glencora M’Cluskie on account of her great wealth. That tribe had been bitterly disappointed; and when they heard that Mr. Palliser’s marriage had given him no child, and that Lady Glencora was unhappy, they triumphed. I will not say that they approved of the step which Burgo now wished to take – though he accused his aunt, Lady Monk, of wanting it; but they whispered that such things must be expected, when such marriages were made.

As Burgo walked on, he tried hard to cheat himself into a belief that he would do a good thing in carrying Lady Glencora away from her husband. But he had never done anything so bad in his bad life; and the more he thought about it, the more thoroughly he saw how great was the crime which he contemplated.

He tried to think that there were special circumstances which would justify him. They had loved each other and had sworn constancy. There had been no change in their feelings; but she had been made to marry a man she did not love. Would it not be better that they should come together?

Then he reverted to those dreams of a life of love, in some sunny country. Vavasor had laughed at him. But Vavasor, he said to himself, was a hard cold man, with no romance in his character.

He had crossed from Regent Street through Hanover Square, and as he came out into Oxford Street, a poor wretched girl in thin clothing asked him for money. Would he give her something to get drink, so that for a moment she might feel warm?

Such midnight petitions were common, and he was passing on when she took hold of him.

“For love of God,” she said, “it’s only a penny to get a glass of gin! Feel my hand, how cold it is.” And she put it up against his face.

He looked round at her and saw that she was very young – sixteen, perhaps, at the most, and that she had once been exquisitely pretty. There still lingered about her eyes some remains of that look of innocence which had been hers twelve months since. And now, at midnight, in the streets, she was praying for a pennyworth of gin, as the only comfort she could expect!

“You are cold!” said he, trying to speak cheerily.

“Cold!” said she, striving to wrap herself closer in her rags, as she shivered. “Oh God! if you knew what it was to be as cold as I am! I have nothing in the world – not a hole to lie in!”

“We are alike then,” said Burgo, with a low laugh. “I also have nothing.”

“You, poor!” she said, looking up into his face. “Gracious; how beautiful you are! Such as you are never poor.”

He laughed again – in a different tone. He always laughed when anyone told him of his beauty.

“I am a deal poorer than you, my girl,” he said. “You have nothing. I have thirty thousand pounds worse than nothing. But come along, and I will get you something to eat.”

“Will you?” said she, eagerly.

He took her to a public-house and gave her bread and meat and beer, and stood by her while she ate it. She was shy with him then, so he turned his back to her, but still spoke to her a word or two as she ate. The woman at the bar who served him looked at him wonderingly; and the pot-boy stared at him, and so did the waterman from the cab-stand, and the women who came in for gin. He was untroubled by them; he paid for the girl’s meal and then walked with her out of the shop.

“And now,” said he, “what must I do with you? If I give you a shilling can you get a bed?” She told him that she could get a bed for sixpence. “Then keep the other sixpence for your breakfast,” said he. “But you must promise me that you will buy no gin tonight.” She promised him, and then she took his hand and pressed it to her lips.

“I wish I might once see you again,” she said, “because you are so good and so beautiful.” He laughed again cheerily, and walked on. She stood looking at him till he was out of sight, and as she moved away she exclaimed to herself again: “Gracious, how beautiful he was!”

Poor Burgo! All his life, people had loved him and tried to cherish him. Yet to what a state had he come! Poor Burgo! If his face had been less godlike, maybe things would have gone better with him. A sweeter-tempered man never lived. He had barely enough money to take him to his aunt’s house at Monkshade the next morning. Nevertheless, he had given half a crown to comfort the poor creature who had spoken to him in the street.

CHAPTER 30

Containing a Love Letter

Vavator, after Fitzgerald had left him, began to think of the days past when he had helped his friend; and he thought of Alice's behaviour then. Alice had steadfastly refused to give any aid. But she had been very earnest in declaring that it was Glencora's duty to stand by her promise to Burgo.

"He is a desperate spendthrift," Kate Vavator had said to her.

"Then let her teach him to be otherwise," Alice had answered. "If a woman won't venture her fortune for the man she loves, her love is not worth having." All this George Vavator remembered now; and he asked himself whether the woman that had once loved him would venture her fortune for him still.

He had until now hardly made up his mind that he really wanted to marry Alice. He had grown to love his independence; and he was inclined to think that marriage was an old-fashioned custom, not adapted to his advanced intelligence. If he loved and respected any woman, it was his cousin Alice. But that idea of tying himself down was distasteful. Nevertheless, as he thought now of Alice Vavator, he began to feel that if a Siamese twin were necessary for him, she of all others was the woman to whom he would wish to be bound.

And if he did it at all, he must do it now. He and his sister, as Kate thought, had induced Alice to break her engagement with Mr. Grey. But he believed that if left to herself, Alice would probably renew it again. And then, despite that advanced intelligence of his, he still had enough human frailty to feel pleasure at the idea of taking John Grey's prize from him.

George Vavator had very high ambition, and a fair hope of gratifying it if only things would go well with him for a year or so. He was still a poor man, but if he succeeded in getting into Parliament he would be able to live an agreeable and honourable mode of life.

But how was he to bear the cost of this for the next year or two? His grandfather would probably not die soon. If he married Alice he would do so with no idea of cheating her out of her money. She already knew how perilous was his enterprise. He knew her to be a woman who would boldly risk all in money; but could he tell her that he wanted to spend all her fortune in the first year or two of their married life!

He was still in his arm-chair, thinking of all this, when he heard a distant clock strike three. Then he rose from his seat, and sat down at a writing-desk.

"I needn't send it when it's written," he said to himself, "and the chances are that I won't." He wrote as follows:

Dear Alice,

Once I had the privilege of beginning my letters to you with a warmer show of love than 'dear' – when I could call you dearest; but I lost that privilege through my own folly, and since then it has been granted to another. But you have found, with a thorough honesty, that it has been best for you to withdraw that privilege also. Otherwise I should not be writing this.

I now once again ask you to be my wife. In spite of all that passed in those old days – all my selfish folly – I think you know that I always loved you. Indeed my love to you was true from first to last, and I do not think you ever doubted it.

Nevertheless, when you told me that I might no longer hope to make you my wife, I had no answer. You acted as any sensible woman would. Then came the episode of Mr. Grey; and bitter as have been my feelings during that engagement, I never tried to come between you and the life you had chosen. I do not forget the words which I spoke last summer at Basle, when you still intended to marry him. But what I said then was nothing to what I refrained from saying. Whether you remember those few words I cannot tell.

But you are now again a free woman; and once again I ask you to be my wife. We are both older than we were when we loved before, and will both think of marriage in a somewhat different light. Then personal love for each other was most in our thoughts. God forbid that love should not be in our thoughts now – and my love for you is stronger than any other consideration. But we have both reached that time of life when we should think more of our adaptability to each other than we did before.

I know that there is much in my character to make me unfit to marry an ordinary woman. You know my mode of life, and my hopes and my chances of success. I run great risk of failing. It may be that I shall encounter ruin where I look for a career of honour. The chances are perhaps more in favour of ruin than of success. But, whatever my chances, I shall go on as long as I can. If you were my wife tomorrow I should expect to use your money, if it were needed, in struggling to obtain a seat in Parliament. I do not ask you to be my wife for the sake of this aid; but if you were to become my wife I should expect all your cooperation – with your money, possibly, but certainly with your warmest spirit.

And now, once again, dearest Alice, will you be my wife? I have been punished, and no other woman has held any place in my heart. Providence has been very good to me in giving me another chance. Tell me whether you can pardon me and still love me.

Think well before you answer me. I will not expect your reply for a week. It can hardly be your desire to go through life unmarried. I should say that it must be essential to your ambition that you should join your lot to that of some man with aspirations like your own. It is because of this that you found yourself obliged to part from Mr. Grey. May I not say that with us there would be no such difference? I believe that in this respect we are fitted for each other.

This will reach you at Vavasor Hall, where you will now be with the old squire and Kate. I have told her nothing of my purpose in writing this letter. If you should accept me, I would try to be reconciled to my grandfather. He has misunderstood and ill-used me. But I am ready to forgive that, if he will allow me to. In that case I would, if possible, go down to Vavasor while you are there. But I am galloping on ahead foolishly.

If your answer is to be adverse, a meeting between me and the Squire would be impossible. But, oh, Alice! do not let it be adverse. I think you love me. Your woman's pride towards me has been great and good and womanly; but it has had its way; and, if you love me, might now succumb.

Dear Alice, will you be my wife?

Yours, in any event, most affectionately,

George Vavasor.

Vavasor, when he had finished his letter, went back to his seat over the fire, and there he sat with it by his hand for nearly an hour. Once or twice he took it up and

almost threw it in the fire. But the letter was put back upon the table. Then when the hour was nearly over he read it again.

“I’ll bet two to one that she gives way,” he said to himself, as he put the sheet of paper into the envelope. “Women are such fools.” Then he took his candle, and went to bed.

The next day was Christmas Eve. At about nine o’clock in the morning a boy came into his room to ask for orders for the day.

“Jem,” he said to the boy, “there’s half a crown lying there on the looking-glass. Is it a head or a tail?”

Jem scrutinized the coin, and declared that the uppermost surface showed a tail.

“Then take that letter and post it,” said George Vavasor. So Jem took it and posted it. It reached Vavasor Hall and was delivered to Alice on Christmas morning.

George Vavasor did not have a merry Christmas. He received an early gift in the shape of a very hurried note from his friend Burgo.

“I am sending the bill. Could you get the money and send it me, as I don’t want to go up to town again? Don’t let that rogue off for less than a hundred and twenty. Yours, B. F.”

Vavasor, therefore, spent his Christmas morning in calling on Mr. Magruin.

“Oh, Mr. Vavasor,” said Magruin, “this is no morning for business!”

“Time and tide wait for no man, Mr. Magruin, and my friend wants his money to-morrow. Come, Mr. Magruin, out with your cheque-book, and don’t let’s have any nonsense.”

“But is the lady sure, Mr. Vavasor?” asked Mr. Magruin, anxiously.

“Ladies never are sure,” said Vavasor. “I’m not going to wait here all day. Are you going to give him the money?”

He did get the money from Mr. Magruin – £122 10s. – in exchange for a promise of £500 in two months.

“Do tell him to be punctual,” said Mr. Magruin. “I really think Mr. Fitzgerald is the most unpunctual young man I ever knew.”

“I think he is,” said George Vavasor, as he went away.

He ate his Christmas dinner in solitude at an eating-house near his lodgings. After dinner he wandered through the streets, wondering how he would endure the restraints of married life. The same dull monotony of his days was continued for a week, while he waited for an answer to his letter. And before the end of the week the answer came.

CHAPTER 31

Among the Fells

Alice came down to breakfast on Christmas morning at Vavasor Hall to greet her grandfather, her father, and her cousin Kate. Kate remarked that she had received a letter from Aunt Greenow, and promised to show it to Alice after breakfast. But Alice said no word of her own letter.

“Why didn’t your aunt come here for Christmas dinner?” said the Squire.

“Perhaps, sir, because you didn’t ask her,” said Kate, standing close to the old man, who was somewhat deaf.

“And why didn’t *you* ask her?”

“I couldn’t do that without your bidding, sir. We Vavasors are not always fond of meeting each other.”

“Hold your tongue, Kate. Alice, my dear, come and sit next to me. I am much obliged to you for coming all this way to see your old grandfather at Christmas. I only wish you had brought better news about your sweetheart.”

“She’ll think better of it before long, sir,” said her father.

“Papa, you shouldn’t say that. You would not wish me to marry against my own judgement.”

“I don’t know much about ladies’ judgements,” said the old man. “It does seem to me that when a lady makes a promise she ought to keep it.”

“According to that,” said Kate, “if I were engaged to a man, and found that he was a murderer, I still ought to marry him.”

“But Mr. Grey is not a murderer,” said the Squire.

“Please don’t talk about it,” said Alice.

“I will say nothing more on the subject,” said John Vavasor. Alice meanwhile sat with her cousin’s letter in her pocket, and had not even begun to think how she should reply.

The Squire of Vavasor Hall was a stout old man, with a red face and fierce grey eyes; his long grey hair and beard gave him the appearance of an old lion. He was excitable, unreasoning, and impatient of all opposition; but he was also affectionate, ready to forgive, unselfish, and hospitable. He was guided strictly by what he believed to be rules of right.

His grandson George had offended him very deeply, and had never asked his pardon. He was determined that such pardon should never be given, unless it were asked for with bended knees; but, nevertheless, this grandson should be his heir. The Squire could not have rested quietly in his grave if he had left his estate to anyone but the eldest son of his eldest son. Though violent, he was more prone to love than anger; and he longed in his heart for some opportunity of being reconciled to George.

The whole party went to church on Christmas morning. The small parish church of Vavasor, an unpretending wooden building, stood all alone half a mile from the Squire’s gate. Vavasor was a parish between the mountains of the lake district and the plains. Its land was unproductive, ill-drained, and poor, with little of the beauty which tourists go to see. It was very dreary. There were dark pines around part of it, and at the back of the house there was a thick wood of firs running up to the top of a hill. Through this there was a wild steep walk which came out upon the moorland, and from there a track led across the mountain to Hawes Water, and on over many miles to the beauties of Windermere. But it was a long walk; and you might walk for miles

and miles in other directions without seeing anything but the stern, everlasting moorland.

The daily life at Vavator was melancholy for John Vavator, who regarded London as the only place where a man could live with comfort. The moors offered no charms to him; nor did the homely comforts of the old-fashioned Hall. But Alice could be very happy there with Kate; for both were good walkers and loved the mountains. Their regard for each other had grown as they had walked together over river and moor, disregarding the mud and wet which frighten so many girls away from the beauties of nature.

On this Christmas Day Alice accompanied the Squire to church in a vehicle which in Ireland is called a jaunting-car, and which is perhaps the most uncomfortable vehicle yet invented. John Vavator walked with Kate. But the girls had arranged that immediately after church they would start for a walk across the fells towards Hawes Water. They would have four hours for their excursion before dinner at five. This had all been planned before Alice received her letter.

“Alice, my dear,” said the old man to her in the jaunting-car after church, “you ought to get married.” The Squire was hard of hearing, and a jaunting-car is a bad place for conversation, as your teeth are nearly shaken out of your head by every movement of the horse.

“Well, sir, perhaps I shall some day.”

“Not if you quarrel with all your suitors,” said the old man. “You’ll never get married, my dear, if you go on in that way.”

“Why should I be married more than Kate?”

“I don’t know that anybody wants to marry Kate. I wish you’d think about it. If you don’t get married before long, perhaps you never will at all.”

On returning home the two girls each took a slice of cake, and started on their walk.

“We shan’t get to the lake,” said Kate.

“No,” said Alice; “but we can go as far as the big stone on Swindale Fell, where we can sit down and see it.”

“Do you remember the last time we sat there?” said Kate. “It was nearly three years ago, and it was then that you told me that all was over between you and George. Do you remember what a fool I was, and how I screamed in my sorrow? And then we got soaking wet coming home.”

“I remember that very well.”

“And how dark it was! If we go as far as Swindale we shall have it very dark coming home today; but I don’t mind, because I know my way so well. You won’t be afraid of half an hour’s dark?”

“Oh, no,” said Alice.

“Well; it’s all for the best, I suppose. And now I must read you my aunt’s letter.” Kate took out the letter and read it while they walked slowly up the hill. It seemed that neither of her two suitors had succeeded with the widow. Indeed, she wrote of Mr. Cheesacre as though he were inconsolable for the loss of Kate, and advised her to return to Norfolk so that she might secure him.

“You must understand, Alice,” said Kate, pausing, “that the dear man has never given me the slightest ground for hope, and that I know that he makes an offer to her twice a week – on every market day.” Then she went on reading. Poor Bellfield was working very hard at his drill, Mrs. Greenow wrote; sometimes she really thought the fatigue would be too much for his strength. He would sometimes come and just take a cup of tea – generally on Mondays and Thursdays. “These are not market days,” said

Kate; “and thus unpleasant meetings are avoided. I have not the slightest doubt that he also offers for her twice a week.”

“And will she accept him at last?”

“Really, I don’t know. Sometimes I fancy that she likes the fun of the thing, but that she is too wide-awake to put herself in any man’s power. I have no doubt she lends him money, because she is very generous.”

The letter went on to say that her aunt had decided to remain at Norwich through the winter and spring, and that she hoped dear Kate would go back to her. “Come and have another look at Oileymead,” said the letter, “and then, if you don’t like it or him, I won’t ask you to think of them ever again. I believe him to be a very honest fellow.”

“Did you ever know such a woman?” said Kate. Then Aunt Greenow’s letter was put away, and the two girls had come to the open fell.

It was a delicious afternoon for a winter’s walk. The air was clear and cold, but not frosty. The ground was dry, and the sky gave no sign of rain. There is a special winter’s light which is very clear, but melancholy; it tells of the shortness of the day and the coming of the early twilight. It is never seen so plainly as on the wide moorland, where the eye stretches away over miles to the faint low lines of distant clouds settling themselves upon the horizon.

Such was the light of this Christmas afternoon, and both the girls had felt the effects of it before they reached the big stone on Swindale Fell. At first they had discussed almost with mirth the merits of Oileymead and Mr. Cheesacre; but as they got further on to the fell, the half-melancholy wildness of the place struck them, and they ceased to speak.

Alice had still her letter in her pocket. She had come to no decision yet as to her answer; nor had she decided whether to show it to Kate. She regarded Kate as her steadfast friend, and suspected no treason by her. She had often quarrelled with Kate; but not because she did not trust her. Why should she not show this letter to Kate, and discuss it before she replied to it? This was in her mind as she walked silently along over the fell.

The reader will surmise from this that she was already half inclined to give way, and to accept her cousin George. Alas, yes! The reader will be right.

And yet it was not her love for him that prompted her to run so terrible a risk. That would have been easier to forgive. She was beginning to think that the love of which she had once thought so much did not matter. Of what use was it, and to what had it led? What had love done for her friend Glencora? What had love done for her? Had she not loved John Grey, and had she not felt that life with him would have been distasteful to her? She could not marry a man whom she disliked, but she liked her cousin George well enough, as she said to herself almost indifferently.

It was a grievous task to her these days – this having to do something with her life. Was it not all futile? As for her earlier dream of the joys of love – that had gone, never to return. How she could make herself useful in some way that might gratify her ambition; that was now the question which seemed most important.

Her cousin’s letter to her had been very crafty. He had considered her character, and had written it with care. Whether he cared to marry his cousin was a point of so little interest to him that he left it to chance; but once chance had decided that he did wish it, it was necessary for his honour that he should get what he wanted.

“At any rate he does me justice,” Alice said to herself, when she read his words about her money. “He is welcome to it all if it will help him in his career, whether as my friend or as my husband.” And would it not be well that she should be the means of reconciling George to his grandfather? George was the heir of a family so old that

it went back to the Saxons. Alice thought much about this, and felt that it should be her duty to help George attain honour in his position.

They walked on, exchanging a word or two, till the distant Cumberland mountains began to appear.

“There’s Helvellyn at last,” said Kate. “I’m always happy when I see that. That’s Scaw Fell on the left; the round distant top.”

Soon they were at the top of the bank; and then the beauty of the little lake of Haweswater lying down below them disclosed itself. A lake should, I think, be seen from above, to be seen in all its glory. The water beneath them was still as death, and as dark. But the slow clouds were passing over it, and the shades of darkness on its surface changed, as now a then a slight sheen was laid upon it by the breeze.

“I’m so glad I’ve come here,” said Alice, seating herself. “I cannot bear the idea of coming to Vavasor without seeing one of the lakes at least.”

“We’ll get over to Windermere one day,” said Kate.

“I don’t think so. I don’t think I can stay long. Kate, I’ve got a letter to show you.” And the tone of her voice instantly put Kate upon her mettle.

“Is it from Mr. Grey?” she asked.

“No,” said Alice. She gave her companion the paper, and Kate saw it was from her brother. As she opened it looked anxiously at Alice.

“Has he offended you?” she asked.

“Read it,” said Alice, “and then we’ll talk of it as we go home.” Then she got up and stood looking down upon the lake while Kate read.

“Well,” said Kate at last. “Alice, oh, Alice, may I hope? My own Alice, my darling! Say that it shall be so.” And Kate knelt at her friend’s feet upon the heather, and looked up at her with eyes full of tears. What shall we say of a woman who could be as false as she had been, and yet could be so true?

Alice made no answer, but continued to gaze down upon the lake.

“Alice,” continued Kate, “I did not think I should be made so happy this Christmas Day. You could not have the heart to bring me here and show me this letter, and then tell me that it is all for nothing. Alice, I am so happy. I will so love this place.”

Alice said nothing, but she began to feel that she had gone further than she had intended. It was almost impossible for her now to say that she must refuse George.

Kate went on. “Is it not a beautiful letter? I do feel proud of him. I know that he is a man with a manly heart, who will do manly things. Do you love him?”

“Love him!” said Alice.

“Yes. Is not your heart his?”

“I have always loved my cousin. Kate; but not so passionately as you seem to think.”

“Then there can be no passion in you.”

“Perhaps not, Kate. I sometimes hope that it is so. But come; we shall be late; and you will get cold sitting there.”

“I would sit here all night to be sure that your answer would be a yes. But, Alice, tell me what your answer is to be. I know you will not refuse him; but make me happy by saying so.”

“I cannot tell you, Kate. I have not yet decided.”

“Ah, that is impossible. On such a subject a woman must decide at the first moment. You had resolved, I know, before you had half read the letter.”

“You are quite mistaken. Let us walk, and I will tell you all.” They turned their backs to the lake, and began to make their way homewards. “I have shown you his

letter so that I might have someone with whom I could speak openly. I knew how it would be, and that you would try to hurry me into an immediate promise.”

“No, Alice, I will not hurry you. I will do nothing that you do not wish. But you cannot be surprised that I should be very eager. Has it not been the longing of my life? Have I not passed my time planning and thinking of it? Do you know what I suffered when the engagement was broken off? And, now, can you be surprised that I am wild with joy? – for it will be as I wish, Alice. You would have decided to refuse him instantly had that been your destiny.”

There was little more said until they were going down the path through the Beacon Wood. Then Kate again spoke:

“You will not answer him without speaking to me first?”

“I will, at any rate, not send my answer without telling you,” said Alice.

“And you will let me see it?”

“No,” said Alice. “But if it is unfavourable I will show it you.”

“Then I shall never see it,” said Kate, laughing. “That is enough for me. I know how sweet your words of forgiveness will be. Oh, heavens! how I envy him!”

Then they were at home; and the old man met them at the front door, glowering angrily, because the roast beef was ready. He had his great uncouth silver watch in his hand, which was always a quarter of an hour too fast, and he pointed at it fiercely.

“But, grandpapa, you are always too fast,” said Kate.

“And you are always too slow, miss,” said the hungry old squire.

“It is not five yet.” And the two girls hurried to their rooms to change.

Nothing more was said that evening about the letter; but Kate, as she wished her cousin good night, said, “Pray for him tonight, as you pray for those you love best.”

Alice made no answer, but we may believe she did as Kate desired.

CHAPTER 32

Containing an Answer to the Love Letter

Alice had a week to write her answer; but she sent it off before the full week was past.

“Why should I keep him in suspense?” she thought. She thought, also, that it might be well for Mr. Grey that all his doubts on the matter should be dispelled. She had treated him very badly; but she owed it to him to let him know her intentions. She tried to console herself by thinking that his wound would be easy to cure. “He is not passionate,” she said. But she deceived herself.

Each morning Kate asked her whether her answer was written; and on the third day after Christmas, Alice said that she had written it, and that it was gone.

“And what have you said?” asked Kate.

“I have kept my promise,” said Alice; “and do you keep yours by asking no further questions.”

“My sister – my own sister,” said Kate. And as Alice met her embrace, there could be no doubt about the nature of the reply.

After this they discussed what other steps should now be taken. Kate wanted her cousin to write immediately to Mr. Grey, and was somewhat frightened when Alice declined to do so till she had received a further letter from George.

“You have not proposed any horrid stipulations to him?” exclaimed Kate.

“I don’t know what you may call horrid stipulations,” said Alice gravely. “My conditions have not been very hard. I have told him that I cannot bring myself to marry him instantly; that he must allow me twelve months to wear off, if I can, the sadness and self-reproach I must feel.”

“Twelve months, Alice?”

“I have said so. But I have told him also that if he wishes it, I will at once tell papa and grandpapa that I am engaged to him, so that he may know that I bind myself to him. And I have added something else, Kate,” she continued after a slight pause, “something I could tell no other person. I can tell you because you would do the same. I have told him that my money is at his service if any is needed for his purposes before that year is over.”

“Oh, Alice! No. That is too generous.” Kate perhaps felt that her brother was a man to whom such an offer could hardly be made with safety.

“But I have done it. And, Kate, it is no more than fair. He has honestly told me that he will need my money to assist him in his career. It has been my earnest wish to see him in Parliament. How then can I bid him wait twelve months?”

“But my money, small as it is, will carry him over till then. I have told him that I expect him to spend it. Moreover, I have no doubt that Aunt Greenow would lend me what he wants.”

“But I should not wish him to borrow from Aunt Greenow.”

“He shall not touch your money till you are his wife,” said Kate, very seriously. “I wish you would change your mind about this stupid year. I have no doubt a settlement might be made from the property here, by my grandfather, to make you ultimately safe.”

“And do you think I care to be ultimately safe, as you call it? Kate, my dear, you do not understand me.”

“I suppose not.”

“It is because I do not care for that safety that I am going to become your brother’s wife. Do you think I do not see the risk? But George shall have my money whenever he wants it.”

Kate was very persistent in her objection to this till George’s answer came. He enclosed a letter to his sister, and after that Kate said nothing more about the money. She felt the same way about it, but her brother’s letter stopped her mouth.

In what words Alice had written her assent the reader will be told later. George’s reply to it was very short and apparently very frank. He regretted the delay of twelve months, and hoped to be able to induce her to be more lenient to him. He advised her to write to Mr. Grey at once, and to tell the Squire if she pleased. If the Squire required any apology from George, he would comply most willingly.

As to Alice’s money, he thanked her heartily for her confidence in him. If the coming contest at Chelsea should make it necessary, he would use her offer. Such was his letter to Alice. What was contained in his letter to Kate, Alice never knew.

Then came the business of telling this new love tale to Alice’s father and grandfather; and a grievous task it was. In this matter she feared her father much more than her grandfather, so she decided that she would tell the Squire, and that meanwhile Kate should talk to her father.

She went to the room where the old man breakfasted alone. It contained a broken spade, a hoe or two and some horses’ bits; and a small table in the corner was covered with tradesmen’s bills from Penrith, and dirty scraps which he called his farm accounts.

“Grandpapa,” said Alice, “you told me the other day that you thought I ought to be – married.”

“So I did. And so you ought, to that Mr. Grey.”

“That is impossible, sir.”

“Then what’s the use of your coming and talking to me about it?”

“I am come, grandpapa, to tell you of another engagement.”

“Another!”

“You know that some years ago I was to have married my cousin George.” She paused. “And I remember you told me that you were much pleased.”

“So I was. George was doing well then; or had made us believe that he was doing well. Have you made it up with him again?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And that’s why you jilted Mr. Grey, is it?”

Poor Alice! No-one till now had said that odious word to her. But she was a jilt; and perhaps it may have been well that the old man should tell her so.

“Grandpapa!” she said; and her tone softened the Squire’s heart.

“Well, my dear, I don’t want to be ill-natured. So you are going to marry George, are you? I hope he’ll treat you well, that’s all. Does your father approve?”

“I have told you first, sir, because I wish to obtain your consent to receiving George here as your grandson.”

“Never,” said the old man, snarling; “never!”

“If he has been wrong, he will beg your pardon.”

“If he has been wrong! Didn’t he want to squander every shilling of the property? —If he has been wrong!”

“I am not defending him, sir; but I thought that, perhaps...”

“You’ve got money of your own. He’ll spend all that now.”

“He will be less likely to do so if you will recognise him as your heir. Pray believe, sir, that he is not the sort of man that he was.”

“He must be a very clever sort of man, I think, when he has talked you out of such a husband as John Grey. It’s astounding to me! Well, my dear, if your father approves of it, and if George will ask my pardon; but I don’t think he ever will.”

“He will, sir.”

“Well, you can tell him that, for your sake, I’ll let him come here. I know he’ll insult me; but I’ll try and put up with it – for your sake, my dear. But I must know what your father thinks about it.”

Kate had even less success than Alice.

“I knew it would be so,” said John Vavasor, when his niece told him; and he struck his hand upon the table.

“Why should it not be so, Uncle John?”

“He is your brother, and I will not tell you why.”

“You think that he is a spendthrift?”

“I think that he is as unsafe a man as ever. That is all.”

“You are hard upon him, uncle.”

“Perhaps so. Tell Alice that as I have never yet been able to influence her, I do not expect that I shall be able to do so now. I will not even try. But I will not receive George Vavasor as my son-in-law. Tell Alice that.”

Alice was told her father’s message; but Kate felt deep regret about it. She knew that Alice would not be turned back by her father’s wishes. Her father had for many years relieved himself from the burden of a father’s cares, and now had hardly the right to claim a father’s privileges.

We will now return to George Vavasor’s room in Cecil Street, where he received Alice’s letter. He was dressing when it was brought to him; and he put it down, and went on brushing his hair, as though to prove to himself that he was indifferent about its contents. He cleaned his teeth, and tied his cravat carefully, while the unopened letter lay close by. His eye went to it from time to time; but he carried it with him into the sitting-room still unopened. After the girl had brought him his breakfast, he opened it, and read:

My dear George,

I feel great difficulty in answering your letter. Could I have my own way, I should make no answer at present, but leave it for the next six months. We have been like children who have quarrelled over our game, till now, at the close of our little day of pleasure, we meet each other in tears, and acknowledge that we have looked for delights where no delights were to be found.

Kate talks to me of passionate love. There is no such passion left to me; nor, I think, to you either. It would not now be possible that you and I should come together on such terms as that. We could not marry with any hope of happiness, unless we had both agreed that happiness might be had without passionate love.

You will see from all this that I do not refuse your offer. Without passion, I have for you a warm affection, which enables me to take a lively interest in your career. Of course, if I become your wife that interest will be still closer and dearer.

If it suits you, I will become your wife; but it cannot be quite at once. I have suffered much from the past conflicts of my life, and there has been much with which I must reproach myself. I know that I have behaved badly, and in a manner which the world will call unfeminine. I must beg you to allow me some time for a cure. I think that in twelve months I may so far have recovered my usual spirit as to enable me to devote myself to your happiness. Dear George, if you will accept me under such

circumstances, I will be your wife, and will endeavour to do my duty by you faithfully.

I have said that I take a lively interest in your career as a politician, especially in your hopes of entering Parliament. I understand what you have said about my fortune, and I perfectly appreciate your frankness. If I had no fortune you could not possibly take me as your wife. I know, moreover, that my money may be necessary to you within this year. Therefore, even before we marry, whatever you want for your political purposes shall be forthcoming at your wish. Dear George, let me have the honour and glory of marrying a man who has gained a seat in the Parliament of Great Britain! Of all positions which a man may attain that, to me, is the grandest.

I shall wait for a further letter from you before I speak either to my father or to my grandfather. If you agree, I will try to bring about a reconciliation between you and the Squire. I think that will be almost easier than inducing my father to look with favour upon our marriage. But I need hardly say that should either of them oppose it, that would not turn me from my purpose.

Your affectionate cousin,
Alice Vavasor.

After reading this letter George Vavasor threw it carelessly on to the breakfast table, as if taking pride in his carelessness, and began to munch his toast.

“Very well,” said he; “so be it. It is probably the best thing that I could do.” Then he took up his newspaper. But before the day was over he had made many plans about the use he could make of her money. And before night he had written his reply to her, and his letter to Kate.

CHAPTER 33

Monkshade

In the new year Lady Glencora did not go to Lady Monk's house. When the time came for moving on to Monkshade, she was unwell, and Mr. Palliser went there alone. Lady Glencora remained at Matching with the two Miss Pallisers.

When the tidings reached Monkshade that Lady Glencora was not to be expected, Burgo Fitzgerald was already there, armed with the money George Vavasor had been able to wrench out of the hands of Mr. Magruin.

"Burgo," said his aunt, Lady Monk, catching him one morning as he was about to go downstairs in his hunting-clothes, "Burgo, your old flame, Lady Glencora, is not coming."

"Not coming!" said Burgo, betraying too clearly by his look and voice that this was more important to him than it should have been.

"No. It can't matter much to you."

"But it does," said he, putting his hand up to his forehead, and leaning back against the wall as though in despair. "It does matter. I am the most unfortunate devil that ever lived."

"Burgo! You must not speak in that way of a married woman. I begin to think it is better that she should not come." As another guest approached, she said, "Come back into your room, Burgo."

There Lady Monk continued. "If this annoys you, keep it to yourself! What will people say?"

"How can I help what they say?"

"I thought it best to tell you, for fear you should show surprise if you heard it in public. It is very weak in you to allow yourself to feel that sort of regard for a married woman. If you cannot control yourself I shall be afraid to let you meet her in Brook Street."

Burgo looked for a moment at his aunt, and then turned towards the door. "You can do as you please about that," said he; "but you know what I have made up my mind to do."

"Nonsense, Burgo; I know nothing of the kind. Go downstairs to breakfast, and don't look like that when you get there."

Lady Monk was about fifty years of age, had been a great beauty, and was still good-looking, with a fine, tall figure. She was outwardly a handsome, upright, dame, of whom England might be proud – and of whom Sir Cosmo Monk was very proud.

She had come of the family of the Worcestershire Fitzgeralds, of whom it was said that there never was one who was not beautiful and worthless. Looking at Lady Monk you would hardly think that she could be a worthless woman; but her husband's fortune had suffered from her extravagance, she had quarrelled with her only son, and had married her daughter to the greatest fool in the peerage. She had striven very hard to bring about a marriage between her nephew Burgo and the great heiress Lady Glencora, and she was not a woman to pardon those who had foiled her.

Burgo felt certain that his aunt was aware of his purpose, and could not forgive her for pretending not to know it. Had he been a man who ever reflected, he must have known that his aunt could only assist him if she was presumed to be ignorant of his intention. But Burgo never reflected.

When Burgo reached the dining-room Sir Cosmo Monk, a fine bald-headed man of about sixty, was standing at the sideboard, cutting a huge game pie. He also was a man who did not reflect much, but who managed to keep straight in his course through the world without much reflection.

“Palliser is coming without her,” he was saying in his loud clear voice. “She’s ill, she says.”

“I’m sorry for it,” said one man. “She’s the better fellow of the two.”

“She has more go in her than Planty Pall,” said another.

“Planty is no fool, I can tell you,” said Sir Cosmo, coming to the table with his plate full of pie. “He’s about the most rising man we have.” Sir Cosmo was the member of parliament for his county, and was a Liberal.

“Burgo, do you hear that Palliser is coming without his wife?” said one man, who did not know Burgo’s history.

“I have heard, and be d—d to him,” said Burgo. There was suddenly silence in the room, and everyone attended assiduously to breakfast. Burgo sat back with his hands thrust into his breeches pockets, and the blackness of a thunder cloud upon his brow.

“Burgo, you had better eat your breakfast,” said Sir Cosmo.

“I don’t want any breakfast.” He took, however, a morsel of toast, and went to the sideboard and filled himself a glass of cherry brandy.

“If you don’t eat any breakfast the less of that you take the better,” said Sir Cosmo.

“I’m all right now,” said he, and coming back to the table, went through some form of making a meal with a roll and a cup of tea.

Those who were present used afterwards to say that they would never forget that breakfast. There had been something, they declared, in the tone of Burgo’s voice when he uttered his curse against Mr. Palliser, which struck them all with dread. And the expression on his face had been terrible.

On that day Burgo Fitzgerald startled everyone by the mad way in which he rode. He steered at gates and rails as though resolved to do himself and his uncle’s horse a mischief. This was so apparent that some friend spoke to Sir Cosmo Monk about it.

“I can do nothing,” said Sir Cosmo. “No words will control him. He must run his chance till he becomes quiet.” In the afternoon Burgo again rode as hard as he could; but he finished the day without accident, and as he went home, assured Sir Cosmo, in a voice which was almost cheery, that his mare Spinster was the best horse in the Monkshade stables. Burgo appeared at the dinner-table in a better humour than in the morning.

On the day appointed Mr. Palliser reached Monkshade. He could not have declined the invitation of so influential a man as Sir Cosmo, who had a little party of his own in the House, consisting of four or five other respectable and bald-headed country gentlemen. Therefore Mr. Palliser came to Monkshade, although Lady Glencora was unable to accompany him.

“We are so sorry,” said Lady Monk. “We have been looking forward to having Lady Glencora with us. I hope it is nothing serious.”

Then Mr. Palliser explained that Lady Glencora had unfortunately been foolish, and had gone out on a frosty night among the ruins at Matching, to show them to a friend. The friend had thoughtlessly allowed Lady Glencora to remain among the ruins till she had caught cold.

“How very wrong!” said Lady Monk with considerable emphasis.

“It was very wrong,” said Mr. Palliser. “Glencora caught a cold which, unfortunately, became worse at my uncle’s, and so I was obliged to take her home.”

Lady Monk perceived that Mr. Palliser had in truth left his wife behind because he believed her to be ill, and not because he was afraid of Burgo Fitzgerald. But she was sure that the wife’s absence was caused by fear of Burgo. She felt that Mr. Palliser had been deceived. As she was right in this, we must go back for a moment, to the events after Alice had left Matching.

Alice had told Miss Palliser that steps ought to be taken to save Lady Glencora from the peril of a visit to Monkshade. Miss Palliser had agreed, and, when she left Alice, was determined to tell Mr. Palliser. But her courage failed her. She could not find words in which to warn the husband that his wife would not be safe in the company of her old lover. However, she managed to speak to Lady Glencora herself.

“Glencora,” she said, “you won’t be angry, I hope, if I say a word to you?”

“That depends on what the word is,” said Lady Glencora. She had not done much to ingratiate herself with Mr. Palliser’s cousins; not perhaps so much as she should have done. She had taught herself to think that they were hard, stiff, and too proud of bearing the name of Palliser. If they tried to teach her on any point, she did not easily forgive them.

“Well, the word shall be as little unpleasant as I can make it,” said Miss Palliser. “You are going to Monkshade, I believe, with Plantagenet.”

“What of that?”

“Dear Glencora, I think you had better not go. Do you not think so yourself?”

“Who has been talking to you?” said Lady Glencora, turning upon her very sharply. “Plantagenet has spoken to you?”

“Not a word,” said Miss Palliser. “But, dear Glencora, you should not go there; I mean it in all kindness and love – I do indeed.” Saying this she offered her hand to Glencora, and Glencora took it.

“Perhaps you do,” said she in a low voice.

“Indeed I do. The world is so hard and cruel in what it says.”

“I do not care two straws for what the world says. But I do not want to go to Monkshade. Lady Monk was my friend once, but I do not care if I never see her again. I did not arrange this visit. It was Plantagenet.”

“But he will not take you there if you say you do not wish it.”

“I have said so, and he told me that I must go. I even told him why I thought it better to stay away. He told me that it was a silly folly which I must overcome, and that I should not be afraid of any man.”

“Of course you are not afraid, but—”

“I am afraid. That is just the truth. I am afraid; but what more can I do?”

This was very terrible to Miss Palliser. There were not many more words between them, and we already know the result of the conversation. Lady Glencora became so ill from the effects of her imprudent lingering among the ruins that she was unable to go to Monkshade.

Mr. Palliser remained three days at Monkshade, and cemented his political alliance with Sir Cosmo in the same way as he had done with the Duke of St. Bungay. There was little said about politics; but they sat at dinner together, drank a glass of wine or two out of the same decanters, and dropped a chance word now and again about the next session of Parliament.

“I can’t see that there’s so much in him,” said one young member of Parliament to Sir Cosmo, once Mr. Palliser had left.

“I rather think that there is,” said the baronet. “There’s a good deal in him, I believe! I dare say he’s not very bright, but a bright financier is the most dangerous man in the world. We’ve had enough of that already. Give me sound common sense!” From which it became evident that Sir Cosmo was satisfied with Mr. Palliser.

Lady Monk took an opportunity of introducing Mr. Palliser to Burgo Fitzgerald; why, it is difficult to say, unless it was to make mischief between the men. Burgo scowled at him; but Mr. Palliser did not notice, and put out his hand so affably that Burgo was forced to take it.

“I’m sorry that we have not the pleasure of seeing Lady Glencora,” said he.

“She is unfortunately indisposed,” said Mr. Palliser.

“I am very sorry for it,” said Burgo. Then he turned his back and walked away. His speech and manner were such that everyone around noticed, and felt an indefinable fear. But Mr. Palliser himself did not seem to notice anything; and nothing terrible came of it during his visit to Monkshade.

CHAPTER 34

Mr. Vavasor Speaks to His Daughter

Alice Vavasor returned to London with her father, leaving Kate at Vavasor Hall. The journey was not a pleasant one. Mr. Vavasor knew that he ought to do something to prevent his daughter marrying George Vavasor; but he did not know what that something should be, although he did know that doing it would be thoroughly disagreeable.

The squire had promised that he would consent to a reconciliation with his grandson, if Alice's father would say he was satisfied with the marriage. But John Vavasor had said nothing of the kind.

"I think so badly of George," he had said, "that I would rather almost any other calamity happened to her, than that she should marry him." Then the squire, with his usual obstinacy, had argued on his grandson's side.

"It would do very well for the property," he said. "I would settle the estate on their eldest son, so that he could not touch it; and I don't see why he shouldn't reform."

John Vavasor had declared that George was thoroughly bad, and would never reform. The squire had grown angry. When Alice wished him goodbye, the old man gave her a message to his grandson.

"You may tell him," said he, "that I will never see him again unless he begs my pardon for his bad conduct to me, but that if he marries you, I will take care that the property is properly settled upon your child. I shall always be glad to see you, my dear."

Alice felt that the squire was her friend rather than her enemy in the matter. However she was well aware that her father was an uncompromising enemy, so the journey up to London was not comfortable. She had resolved, with great pain to herself, that in this matter she owed her father no obedience.

"There cannot be obedience on one side," she said to herself, "without protection and support on the other." It was quite true that John Vavasor had done little to support or protect his daughter. Early in life, before she had come to live with him, he had, as it were, washed his hands of her upbringing. Then, when they first shared the same house, he did not attempt to change his bachelor ways, telling himself that Alice was unlike other girls, and that she required no protection. She was steady and independently minded, and he thought she needed no surveillance.

So Alice had been left to make the most she could of her own hours. She had eaten her lonely dinners in Queen Anne Street night after night, week after week, month after month; and when he spent every evening in society, but never an evening in her society, she could not help feeling that she lacked the strong bond which usually binds a father to his child. She had uttered no word of complaint; but she had learned to resolve that her father should not guide her in her path through life.

In that affair of John Grey they had both for a time thought alike, and Mr. Vavasor had been content to leave her alone. But now, as he sat opposite his daughter in the railway carriage, he felt that he must interfere. However, he put off speaking, and then others joined them in the carriage, and he could not say what he felt necessary. They reached home about eight in the evening, having dined on the road.

"She will be tired tonight," he said to himself, as he went off to his club, "and I will speak to her tomorrow." Alice specially felt his going out on this evening. If he

had stayed and sat with her at the tea-table, she would have endeavoured to be soft with him in any discussion; but he went at once.

“I want to speak to you after breakfast tomorrow,” he said as he went out. Alice answered that she should be there. She scorned to tell him that she was always there, always alone at home. She had never complained, and she would not begin now.

The discussion the next day began with formal and almost ceremonial preparation.

“Will you come upstairs?” said Alice.

“Perhaps that will be best,” said he, and followed her into the drawing-room.

“Alice, I must speak to you about this engagement.”

“Won’t you sit down, papa? It does look so dreadful, your standing up over one in that way.” He had stood with his back to the fire, but now he sat down.

“I was greatly grieved when I heard of this.”

“I am sorry that you should be grieved, papa.”

“Does Mr. Grey know yet of your engagement with your cousin?”

“He will know it by this time tomorrow.”

“Then I beg of you to postpone your letter to him.”

“I think it is my duty to let him know the truth.”

“But you may change your mind again.”

Alice found that this was hard to bear; but there was a certain amount of truth in it which made her bow her head. “I have no right to say that it is impossible,” she replied, in words that were barely audible.

“Exactly so,” said her father. “Therefore it will be better that you should postpone your letter.”

“For how long?”

“Till you and I shall have agreed together that he should be told.”

“No, papa; I will not consent to that. I consider myself bound to let him know the truth without delay. I have done him a great injury, and I must put an end to that as soon as possible.”

“You have done him a very great injury certainly, my dear,” said Mr. Vavasor; “and I believe he will feel it to the last day of his life.”

“I hope not. I believe not.”

“But of course I am thinking now of your welfare, not his. When you simply told me that you intended to break your engagement, I said little or nothing. I would not ask you to marry any man. But when you tell me that you are engaged to your cousin George, the matter is very different. I do not think well of your cousin. Indeed I must tell you that the world speaks very ill of him.” He paused, but Alice remained silent. “When you were about to travel with him,” he continued, “I ought perhaps to have told you. But I did not wish to pain you or his sister; and since then, I have heard much worse of him than I had heard before. If it were not for your money he would never think of marrying you.”

“Of that I am well aware,” said Alice. “He has told me so very plainly.”

“And yet you will marry him?”

“Certainly. Why should I be angry with a man for wishing to get the money for which every man is struggling? At this point of George’s career money is essential to him. He could not marry without it.”

“Then you had better give him your money without yourself,” said her father, speaking in irony.

“That is just what I mean to do, papa,” said Alice.

“What!” said Mr. Vavasor, jumping up. “You mean to give him your money before you marry him?”

“Certainly I do, if he wants it – or some of it.”

“Heavens and earth!” exclaimed Mr. Vavasor. “Alice, you must be mad.”

“To give money to my friend?” said she. “It is a kind of madness of which I need not be ashamed.”

“Tell me this, Alice; has he got any of it as yet?”

“Not a shilling. Papa, pray do not look at me like that. If I had no thought of marrying him you would not call me mad because I lent money to my cousin.”

“I should say that so much of your fortune was thrown away. When you rejected him before, did you not see that he was altogether unworthy of you?”

“We were both younger then,” said Alice, speaking softly, but very seriously. “We looked at life with different eyes. I expected much then, which I now seem hardly to regard at all; and he was attached to pleasures to which he has now learned to be indifferent.”

“Psha!” ejaculated the father.

“I can only say what I believe,” continued Alice. “And I think I know more of his way of life than you do, papa. But I am prepared to run risks now which I feared before. Even if he were all that you think, I would still try to do my duty to him, and to bring him to other things.”

“What is it you expect to get by marrying him?”

“A husband whose mode of thinking is congenial to my own,” answered Alice. “A husband who proposes to build a career with which I can sympathize, and perhaps help.”

“With your money?” said Mr. Vavasor with a sneer.

“Partly with my money.”

“Well, Alice, I can only implore you to pause before you commit yourself to his hands. If he demands money from you, give it to him in moderation. Anything will be better than marrying him. I know that I cannot stop you; you are your own mistress. But I suppose you must think something of your father’s opinion. It will not be pleasant for you to stand at the altar without me.”

To this Alice made no answer; but she told herself that it had not been pleasant to have stood at so many places during the last four years alone, without her father.

“Has any day been fixed?” he asked.

“No, papa. I have told him that it cannot be for a year yet, although I told him also that he should have my money when he wanted it.”

“Not all of it?” said Mr. Vavasor.

“I don’t suppose he will need it all. He intends to stand again for Chelsea, and it is the expense of the election which makes him need money. He has not asked me for it. I offered him the use of it.”

“And he has accepted?”

“He answered that when the need came he would take me at my word.”

“Then, Alice, I will tell you what I believe. He will drain you of every shilling, and when that is gone, there will be no more heard of the marriage. We must take a small house in some cheap part of the town and live on my income as best we may. I shall go and insure my life, so that you may not starve when I die.” Having said this, Mr. Vavasor went away, not to the insurance office, but to his club where he sat reading the newspaper, very gloomily, till the time came for whist and dinner.

Alice had no such consolations in her solitude. She had fought her battle with her father, but she now had to fight a battle with herself. Was her cousin – her betrothed –

the worthless, heartless, mercenary rascal which her father painted him? There had certainly been a time when Alice herself had almost felt so. Any change for the better in her opinion of him had been grounded on evidence given either by himself or by his sister Kate. He had done nothing to inspire her with any confidence. He had admitted that he was almost penniless; he had spoken of himself as being utterly reckless. Her father declared that all men spoke badly of him. Alice knew her father to be an idle man, but she had never found him to be false or malicious. He believed in what he said.

To tell the truth, Alice was frightened at what she had done, and almost repented of it already. Her acceptance of her cousin's offer had not come of love; nor even of ambition. She had not so much asked herself why she should do this thing, as why should she not do it? Her friend wished it, and after all what did it matter? That was her argument with herself.

It cannot be supposed that she looked back on her past life with any self-satisfaction. In truth she felt more self-reproach than she deserved. As a girl she had loved her cousin George passionately, and that love had failed. After that, would it not have been better for her to have remained without further thought of marriage?

Then came that terrible episode in her life for which she never could forgive herself. She had accepted Mr. Grey because she liked him and honoured him.

"And I did love him," she said to herself now. Poor heart-wrung woman! As she thought of Nethercoats, with its quiet life, its gardens, its books, and the peaceful affectionate ascendancy of its master, her feelings were very different from those which had made her resolve not to put her neck beneath that yoke. Would it not have been well for her to have a master whose wisdom and strength could save her from such wretched doubts as these? But she had refused to bend, and had found herself desolate and alone in the world.

"If I can do him good why should I not marry him?" That had been the chief argument which had induced her to accept George Vavasor. "For myself, what does it matter? At least I can make my life of some use to someone who is dear to me."

He had always been dear to her from her earliest years. She believed in his intellect, even if she could not believe in his conduct. As for that dream of love, it meant nothing. And what if she were ruined! She might save him from ruin, and help him to honour and fortune.

But she already dreaded the coming of the end of the year. She had said that she would become George Vavasor's wife, but she wished that saying so might be the end of it. When he came to embrace her how should she receive him? The memory of John Grey's last kiss still lingered on her lips.

"It may be as my father says," she thought. "It may be that he wants my money only; if so, let him have it. Surely when the year is over I shall know."

Then a plan formed itself in her head. He should have her money as he might call for it – all of it except some small portion of her income, which might keep her from burdening her father. Then, if he were contented, he should go free, without reproach, and there should be an end of all question of marriage for her.

As she thought of this, the door opened, and the servant announced her cousin George.

CHAPTER 35

Passion versus Prudence

It had not occurred to Alice that he would come to her so soon. She had not reflected that Kate would inform him of the date of her return. When George's step was heard outside, she felt the blood rush violently to her heart, and she jumped up from her seat panic-stricken and in utter dismay. How should she receive him? Would he try to embrace her? But he was there in the room with her before she could think.

She hardly ventured to look up at him; but, nevertheless, she became aware that his appearance and dress were brighter, more lover-like, perhaps newer, than usual. This in itself was an affliction to her. He ought to have understood that such an engagement as theirs not only did not require, but absolutely forbade, any such symptom of young love. Even when their marriage came, if it must come, it should be without any sign of exaltation. To come upon her thus, on the first morning of her return, was a cruelty not to be forgiven. These were the feelings with which Alice regarded her betrothed.

"Alice," said he, coming up to her with his hand out, "Dearest Alice!"

She muttered some inaudible word, gave him her hand, and immediately tried to draw it back; but he held it clenched within his own, and she felt that she was his prisoner. She could not escape from him, and was trembling with fear. She had promised to marry him, and now she was dismayed as she felt rather than thought how very far she was from loving him.

"Alice," he said, "I am a man once again. It is only now that I can tell you what I have suffered during these last few years." He still held her hand, and she knew that she was standing away from him awkwardly; but she was unable to act with ordinary ease. "Alice, will you not let me thank you for what you have done for me?"

She must speak to him! She must say some word which sounded kind. After all, it was his undoubted right to come to her. It was not his fault if at this moment he inspired her with disgust rather than with love.

"I have done nothing for you, George," she said, "nothing at all." Then she got her hand away from him, and retreated to a sofa where she sat, leaving him still standing. "That you may do much for yourself is my greatest hope. If I can help you, I will do so most heartily." Then she became thoroughly ashamed of her words, feeling that she was at once offering him the use of her purse.

"Of course you will help me," he said. "I am full of plans which you must share with me. But at the moment, my one great plan is that in which you have already consented to be my partner. Alice, you are my wife now. Tell me that it will make you happy to call me your husband."

Not for worlds could she have said so at this moment. It was ill-judged in him to press her. He should already have seen how it was. He had had his triumph when, in the solitude of his own room, he had thrown aside her letter of acceptance as though the matter was indifferent to him. He had no right to expect the double triumph.

"That must be still distant, George," she said. "I have suffered so much!"

"And it has been my fault that you have suffered; I know that. These years of misery have been my doing."

It was, however, the year of coming misery that she most dreaded.

"I do not say that," she replied. "I have myself only to blame." Here he altogether misunderstood her, believing her to mean that she blamed herself for separating herself from him on that former occasion.

"Alice, dear, let bygones be bygones."

"Bygones will not be bygones. It may be well for people to say so, but it is never true. Hair will grow grey, and the heart will grow cold."

"I do not see that one follows the other," said George. "My hair is growing very grey;" and he lifted the dark lock from the side of his forehead to show the greying hair behind. "If grey hairs make an old man, Alice, you will marry an old husband; but even you shall not be allowed to say that my heart is old."

That word "husband" was painful to Alice's ear. She shrunk from it.

"I spoke of my own heart," said she. "I sometimes feel that it has grown very old."

"Alice, that is hardly cheering to me."

"You have come to me too quickly, George. You have said that bygones should be bygones. Let them be so. Give me a few months in which I may learn – not to forget them, for that will be impossible, but to abstain from speaking of them."

There was something in her look and voice that was very sad. It struck him forcibly, but it struck him with anger rather than with sadness. Doubtless her money had been his chief object when he offered to renew his engagement with her. But, nevertheless, he desired more; he wanted the triumph of being preferred to John Grey. He would not have offered for Alice without her money; but he also wished for some expression of her love for him, to make him triumphant.

"Alice," he said, "your greeting to me is hardly all that I had hoped."

"Is it not?" said she. "Indeed, George, I am sorry that you should be disappointed; but what can I say? You would not have me pretend a lightness of spirit which I do not feel?"

"If you wish to retract your letter," said he, very slowly, "you now have my leave to do so."

What an opportunity was this of escape! But she had not the courage to accept it. What girl, under such circumstances, would have had such courage?

"I do not wish to retract my letter," said she; "but I wish to be left awhile, to recover my strength of mind. If I could be quiet for a few months, I think I could learn to face the future with better courage."

"And is that all you can say to me, Alice?"

"What would you have me say?"

"I would wish to hear one word of love from you; is that unreasonable? Maybe I was over-bold in pressing my suit upon you again; but as you accepted it, have I not a right to expect that you should show me you are happy in accepting it?"

But she was not happy in accepting it. She could not show him any sign of joy. And now she feared he would demand some demonstration of love; and she could not think of anything to do other than to keep aloof. So she made no reply. She would make for him any sacrifice that was possible to her, but this sacrifice was not possible.

"And you have not a word to say to me?" he asked. She looked up at him, and saw that the scar on his face was becoming ominous; his eyes were bent upon her with all their forbidding, angry brilliance.

"No other word, at present, George; I have told you that I am not at ease. Why do you press me now?"

He had her letter in the breast-pocket of his coat, and his hand was on it: he almost flung it back to her, telling her that he would not hold her to be his promised wife under these circumstances. The anger which would have induced him to do so was the better part of his nature. Three or four years ago, this better part would have prevailed, and he would have given way to his rage.

But now he remembered that her money was absolutely essential to him – that some of it was needed almost instantly – and that his hopes of Chelsea could not be maintained unless he was able to promise funds. His sister Kate's fortune was just two thousand pounds: and that was all the money he had at his command, if he did not use Alice's. Oh, if only that that old man in Westmorland would die! But there was no sign of that. So his fingers released their hold on the letter, and he stood looking at her in his anger.

"You wish me to leave?" he said.

"Do not be angry with me, George!"

"Angry! I have no right to be angry. But, by heaven, I am wrong there. I have the right, and I am angry. I think you owed me some warmer welcome. Is it to be thus with us always for the next accursed year?"

"Oh, George!"

"To me it will be accursed. But is it to be thus between us always? Alice, I have loved you above all women. I may say that I have never loved any woman but you; yet I am sometimes driven to doubt whether you have a heart capable of love. After all that has passed, you should have received me with open arms. I suppose I may go now, and feel that I have been kicked out of your house like a dog."

"If you speak to me like that, how can I answer you?"

"I want no answer. I wanted you to put your hand in mine, to kiss me, and to tell me that you are once more my own. Alice; kiss me, and let me feel my arm once more round your waist."

She shuddered, and he saw that she shuddered. This was too much for him; he turned and left the room without another word. She did not rise to stop him. She heard his quick steps, and the door slam as he left the house, but still she did not move from her seat. He was gone. There was in that a relief which almost comforted her. And this was the man from whom, within the last few days, she had accepted an offer of marriage.

George, when he left the house, walked hurriedly into Cavendish Square, and down to Piccadilly. Close by was the house of his parliamentary attorney, Mr. Scruby, on whom he had to call on that morning. As he walked away from Queen Anne Street, he thought of nothing but that visible shudder which Alice had been unable to repress. He indulged his anger, telling himself at one moment that he would let her and her money go – and the next moment making inward threats to punish her.

But he had to think of what he would say to Mr. Scruby. He still owed Mr. Scruby some trifle of the cost of the last election; but even if this were paid, Mr. Scruby would not advance much towards the expense of the next. He wanted the payment of some five hundred pounds, and an assurance that he would be repaid by the beginning of next June.

As George Vavasor crossed Regent Street, he gulped down his anger, and applied his mind to business. Should he prepare himself to give orders that Kate's little property should be sold, or would he use Alice's money? Asking for it would be unpleasant. That duty he must entrust to Kate.

But as he reached Mr. Scruby's door, he had decided that for these purposes, it was preferable that he should use his wife's fortune. It was thus that in his own mind

he worded it. He would use his wife's fortune, and explain to Mr. Scruby that his own heritage would be settled on her at her marriage.

I do not suppose that he altogether liked it. He was not yet a completely heartless swindler. He could not take his cousin's money without thinking that he meant to repay her in full. He managed to assure himself that he was doing her no wrong, and with this self-assurance he entered Mr. Scruby's office.

The clerks in the outer office were very civil, and promised that he should not be kept waiting an instant. There were four gentlemen, they said, wanting to see Mr. Scruby, but they should wait till Mr. Vavasor's interview was over. One gentleman, it seemed, was even turned out to make way for him; for as George was ushered into the lawyer's room, a meek little man was hurried away from it.

"You can wait, Smithers," said Mr. Scruby to him. "I shan't be long." Then he explained to Vavasor that Smithers was a poor devil of a printer, looking for payment of his little account. He had printed 30,000 placards for one of the Marylebone candidates, and found some difficulty in getting his money. "You see, when they're in a small way of business, it ruins them. That poor devil hasn't had a shilling of his money yet."

It comforted Vavasor to hear that there were others who were even more backward in their payments than himself, and it made him reflect that a longer credit might be within his reach.

"It is astonishing how much a man may get done for him," said he, "without paying anything for years."

"Yes, if he knows how to go about it. But when he does pay, Mr. Vavasor, he pays through the nose."

"How many there are who never pay at all," said George.

"True, Mr. Vavasor. But see what a life they lead. Lord love you, I could tell you such tales! I've had Members of Parliament almost down on their knees to me in this little room. It's about a month before the elections when they're at their worst. There is so much for which a gentleman must pay ready money."

George Vavasor perfectly understood that Mr. Scruby was explaining to him that funds for the Chelsea election were not to be forthcoming.

Then they went to business, and Vavasor became aware that he needed to lodge with Mr. Scruby a sum of six hundred pounds within the next week, and that he also needed to provide for that bill for ninety-two pounds which he had given to the landlord of the "Handsome Man." In short, it would be well that he should borrow a thousand pounds from Alice. As he did not wish that the family attorney of the Vavasors should be asked to raise it, he told Mr. Scruby as much of his plans as was necessary, feeling more hesitation than might have been expected from him.

"Yes, yes; a family arrangement," said Mr. Scruby, as he congratulated him on his proposed marriage. Mr. Scruby did not care a straw where the money came from.

CHAPTER 36

John Grey Goes a Second Time to London

Mr. Vavasor had implored Alice to wait before she informed Mr. Grey of her engagement with her cousin. Although she had declined, she did not feel bound to write to Mr. Grey at once. Indeed, when her cousin left her she had no appetite for writing such a letter. It was now the middle of January, and the reader may remember that Mr. Grey had promised that he would visit her in London that month. She must do something to prevent that visit. So she sat down to write.

It was a terrible job; perhaps the most difficult of all the difficult tasks which she had faced. She felt that it would have been easier if Kate had been nearby, as she was when Alice wrote the other letter to her cousin George. Then she had been comforted by Kate's affectionate happiness, and strengthened by a feeling that she was doing the best, if not for herself, then for others.

All that comfort and strength had left her now. The atmosphere of the fells had buoyed her up, and now the thick air of London depressed her. She sat for hours with the pen in her hand, and could not write. As the mental photographs of the two men forced themselves upon her, she could not help comparing them. How was it that she now knew how great was the difference between the two men, how immense the pre-eminence of him whom she had rejected? Why had she not been able to see this before? In that was her chief misery; that now – when it was too late – she could look at it aright.

But the letter was at last written and posted. John Grey received it at Nethercoats, at breakfast in his study. Lounging in an arm-chair opposite was his closest friend, Frank Seward, a fellow of the Cambridge college to which they had both belonged. Mr. Seward was a clergyman, and the tutor of his college. He spent much of his leisure time at Nethercoats, and he was the only man to whom Grey had told anything of his love for Alice and of his disappointment. Even to Seward he had not told the whole story.

“Don't speak of this yet,” he had said to Mr. Seward. “Of course when the matter is settled, people must know it. But as long as there is any doubt, it is better not discussed.”

He had said no more than this; but Seward had known that the girl had jilted his friend, and had made up his mind that she must be heartless and false. He also knew that his friend would never look for any other wife.

Letters were brought to both of them this morning, and Seward's attention was occupied by his own. Grey opened his letter from Alice at once, very calmly, but without any of that pretended indifference with which George Vavasor had received Alice's letter.

“It is right that I should tell you at once,” said Alice – oh, the difficulty of writing this! – “that my cousin, George Vavasor, has repeated to me his offer of marriage, and that I have accepted it. I tell you chiefly in order to save you from the trouble of visiting. I will not tell you the circumstances of this engagement, because I do not think that you will care to hear them. I hardly dare to ask you to believe that I have endeavoured to act with truth and honesty. That I have been very ignorant, foolish and bad, I know well; there is much in the last few years of my life of which I am utterly ashamed. For the injury that I have done you, I can only express deep contrition. I do not dare to ask you to forgive me.”

“Alice Vavasor.”

She had tormented herself in writing this. “He’ll know, and that is all that is necessary,” she said to herself.

Mr. Grey read it twice. The work of reading it was one of intense agony. Until now he had fed himself with hope. That Alice should have thought of her engagement with doubt had been very grievous to him; but he had considered it a fantasy which might be cured by time. He would give all his energies towards achieving such a cure. There had been one thing, however, which he feared; and this thing had now happened.

He had always disliked and feared George Vavasor and his influence upon Alice, although he barely knew him. He had also feared the influence of her cousin Kate. But to have cautioned Alice against her cousins would have been impossible. It was not his nature.

As he sat with the letter in his hand he suffered as, probably, he had never suffered before. But there was nothing in his face to show that he was in pain. Seward was reading a long letter with placid contentment. It did not occur to him to look across at Grey, but had he done so, I doubt whether he would have seen anything unusual.

But Grey, though wounded, would not allow himself to be dismayed. There was less hope now than before, but there might still be hope – hope for her, if not for him. He had heard that George Vavasor was needy, reckless, and on the brink of ruin. Such a marriage would be altogether ruinous to Alice. Whatever might be his own ultimate fate, he would still seek to save her from that. Her cousin, doubtless, wanted her money. Might it not be possible that he would be satisfied with her money, and that thus the woman might be saved?

“Seward,” he said at last.

“Is there anything wrong?” said Seward.

“Well; yes. I fear I must leave you, and go up to town today.”

“Nobody ill, I hope?”

“No. But I must go up to London. Mrs. Bole will take care of you.”

Seward assured him that Mrs. Bole was an excellent housekeeper; but that as he was so near his own college, he would return to Cambridge. He longed to ask about Grey’s trouble; but he knew that Grey was a man who did not well bear close inquiries.

“Why not stay here?” said Grey, after a minute’s pause. “I wish you would, old fellow; I do, indeed.” The affection in his voice struck Seward at once.

“Then I will.” There was a pause.

“I have got a letter here from – Miss Vavasor,” said Grey.

“May I hope that—”

“No; it does not bring good news. I would tell you if I could, but the whole story is one not to be told in a hurry. I should leave false impressions. There are things which a man cannot tell.”

“Indeed there are,” said Seward.

“I wish with all my heart that you knew it as I know it; but that is impossible.” Then there was another pause. “I have heard bad news, and I must go up to London at once. I shall go into Ely by noon, if you will drive me over. I may be back in a day; certainly in less than a week; but it will be a comfort to me to know that I shall find you here.”

The matter was arranged, and at eleven they started.

“Seward,” said Grey on the journey, “if I fail in what I am going to attempt, you will probably never hear Alice Vavasor’s name mentioned by me again; but I want you always to remember that at no moment has my opinion of her ever been changed. Do you understand me?”

“I think so.”

“To my thinking she is the finest of God’s creatures that I have known. It may be that in future she will be severed from me altogether; but I shall not, therefore, think the less well of her; and I wish that you should know that, even if her name should never be mentioned between us.” Seward assured him that it should be so, and they finished their journey in silence.

From the station at Ely, Grey wired a message to John Vavasor, saying that he would call on him that afternoon at his office in Chancery Lane. The telegram reached Vavasor there, and he remained till half past four to meet Grey.

“Have you heard from her?” he asked as soon as Grey entered.

“Yes,” said Grey; “she has written to me.”

“And told you about her cousin George. I tried to prevent her from writing, but she is very wilful.”

“Why should you have prevented her? If the thing was to be told, better that it should be done at once.”

“But I hoped that there might be an escape. I don’t know what you think of all this, Grey, but to me it is the bitterest misfortune that I have known.”

“What escape did you hope for?” asked Grey.

“I hardly know. The whole thing seems to me to be so mad, that I trusted that she would see the madness of it. I am not sure whether you know anything of my nephew George?”

“Very little,” said Grey.

“I believe him to be a man without means and without principle, on the whole about as bad a man as you may meet. He’s going to marry her for her money; then he will beggar her, after that he’ll ill-treat her, and yet what can I do?”

“Prevent the marriage.”

“But how, my dear fellow? She’s as much her own master as you are yours. She can give him every shilling of her fortune tomorrow. How am I to prevent her from marrying him?”

“Let her give him every shilling of her fortune tomorrow,” said Grey.

“And what is she to do then?” asked Mr. Vavasor.

“Then – then – then let her come to me,” said John Grey; and as he spoke there was the fragment of a tear in his eye, and the hint of a quiver in his voice.

Even the worldly, unsympathetic John Vavasor was struck.

“God bless you, my dear fellow. I heartily wish for her sake that I could look forward to such an end to this affair.”

“And why not look forward to it? You say that he merely wants her money. So let him have it!”

“But Grey, you do not understand my girl. Once she had lost her fortune, nothing would induce her to become your wife.”

“Leave that to follow as it may,” said John Grey. “Our first object must be to sever her from a man who is on the verge of ruin; and who would certainly make her wretched. I am here not because I wish her to be my own wife, but because I wish that she should not marry such a one as your nephew. If I were you I would let him have her money.”

“If you were me, you would have no say in the matter. I know that she will give him her money; but I have no power over her.”

John Grey knew well that Alice was independent, and he had not expected that her father would be able to do much, but he had wished that the two men should agree in their views. Grey thought it improbable that Alice would marry her cousin immediately, so soon after her breach with him; but there was no certainty of this, and he determined to ask her, if she would see him.

So he wrote to her, naming a day on which he would call upon her; and when she did not refuse, he arrived at the hour appointed.

He had thought of a scheme which he had not told to Mr. Vavasor. He was not sure if it was practicable, but, nevertheless, he was resolved to try it. He himself would buy off George Vavasor. He had money at command. If Vavasor was such a man as people said, this might be possible.

But before trying this, he must be quite sure that he knew his man, and he must satisfy himself also that in doing so he would not, in truth, add to Alice’s misery. He could hardly bring himself to think it possible that she actually loved her cousin with passionate love. But if it were so, that of course must put an end to his interference. It was to learn all this that he went to Queen Anne Street.

“Of course he must come if he wishes,” she said to herself when she received his note. “It can make no difference. He will say nothing half so hard to me as what I say to myself all day long.” But when the morning came, and she heard the knock, her heart misgave her, and she felt that this moment of her punishment would be hard to bear.

He came slowly upstairs – his step was always slow – and gently opened the door for himself. Then, before he even looked at her, he closed it again. It was this perfect command of himself at all times which had in part made Alice afraid of him, and drove her to believe that they were not fitted for each other. She stood with both her hands leaning on the centre table of the room, and with her eyes fixed upon its surface.

“Alice,” he said, walking up to her very slowly.

Her whole frame shuddered as she heard the sweetness of his voice. Oh, if she could only have been his again! What madness during these last six months had driven her to such a plight as this! The old love came back upon her. Nay; it had never gone. That trust in his love returned to her – but this confidence in him was worthless now! Even if he desired it, she could not change her mind again.

“Alice,” he said. “May I take your hand – as an old friend?” She put her hand in his, and then, withdrawing it, felt that she must never trust herself to do so again.

“Alice,” he continued, “I do not expect you to say much to me; but there is a question or two which I think you will answer. Has a day been fixed for this marriage?”

“No,” she said.

“Will it be in a month?”

“Oh, no – not for a year,” she replied hurriedly; and he knew at once by her voice that she already dreaded this new wedlock. Whatever anger he might have felt for her was banished. She had brought herself by her ill-judgement – by her ignorance – to a sad pass; but he believed that she was still worthy of his love.

“And now one other question, Alice; but if you are silent, I will not ask it again. Can you tell me why you have again accepted your cousin’s offer?”

“Because—,” she said very quickly, looking up as though she were about to speak with all her old courage. “But you would never understand me,” she said, “and there can be no reason why you should ever think well of me again.”

He knew that there was no love for that other man. However, he did not know how unchanged and true was her love for himself. Indeed, he was not thinking of himself at all. He wished to learn whether she would suffer, if the marriage were prevented. But it seemed that she shuddered at the thought of the marriage.

“Alice,” he said, “nothing has yet been done which need totally separate you and me. I am a persistent man, and I do not even yet give up all hope. A year is a long time. As you say yourself, I do not quite understand you. But, Alice, I love you now as well as ever, and should things change with you, I cannot tell you with how much joy and eagerness I should take you back to my bosom. My heart is yours now as it has been since I knew you.”

Then he again just touched her hand, and left her before she could answer a word.

CHAPTER 37

Mr. Tombe's Advice

Alice sat alone for an hour without moving when John Grey had left her, with his last words sounding in her ears. "My heart is yours now as it has been since I knew you." It almost comforted her. At any rate, he did not despise her. Nay; had he not even declared that he would take her back with joy?

Ah! that could never be. Yet the assurance was sweet to her – dangerously sweet, as she soon told herself. She sat there, thinking of her fate, as though it belonged to someone else. She had been shipwrecked altogether; but though she might sink, she had not been thrust from the ship by hands which she loved.

But would it not have been better if he had reviled her? In that case, at least he would have escaped the grief of disappointed love. She had no right to feel consoled by the fact that his sufferings were equal to her own.

But when she thought of this, she told herself that it could not be so. He was not a passionate man, she said. Alas! it was the mistake she had always made about his character! He might be persistent, she thought, and true; but when she was put beyond his reach, he would not allow his calmness to be harassed by vain regret. He was a man too whole at every point – so Alice told herself – to allow his happiness to be marred by such an accident.

But must the accident occur? Was there no chance that he might be gratified, and that she might be saved? Over and over again she considered this, but always as though it were another woman whom she would save, and not herself.

She knew that her own fate was fixed. She had been mad when she had done the thing, but the thing was done. She had been mad when she had trusted herself abroad with two people, both intent on wrenching her happiness out of her grasp. She had been mad when she had told herself, whilst walking over the Westmorland fells, that after all she might as well marry her cousin, since that other marriage was beyond her reach! Her two cousins had succeeded in blighting all the hopes of her life; but why had she had been so weak as to submit?

Alas! she told herself, admitting in her misery all her weakness – alas, she had no mother. She had gloried in her independence, and this had come of it! She had scorned the prudence of Lady Macleod, and her scorn had brought her to this pass!

Was she to give herself body and soul to a man whom she did not love? Must she submit to his caresses, lie on his bosom, turn warmly to his kisses?

"No," she said aloud, "no; it was not in my bargain; I never meant it." But if so, what had she meant? What marriage had she thought of, when she was writing that letter to George Vavasor?

She would make any sacrifice for her cousin which one friend could make for another. She would fight his battles with her money, with her words, with her sympathy. She would sit and speak comfort to him by the hour. His disgrace should be her disgrace; his glory her glory. Was not that the marriage to which she had consented? But he had come and asked her for a kiss, and she had shuddered. Then that other one had come and had touched her hand, and the fibres of her body had seemed to melt at the touch, so that she could have fallen at his feet.

She had done very wrong, and she knew it. Mad with a vile ambition, she had given up the man for whom her heart was longing. She had sinned against her sex; and, in an agony of despair, as she crouched down upon the floor with her head

against her chair, she told herself that there was no pardon for her. She understood it now, and knew that she could not forgive herself.

But can you forgive her, delicate reader? Or am I asking the question too early in my story? For myself, I have forgiven her.

Let us own that she had sinned. What; to think that she knew what love meant, and did not know which of two she loved!

“What am I to do?” She passed the whole day in asking herself that question. She was herself astounded at the rapidity with which she had become convinced that she could not marry her cousin; yet could she let it be said of her that she had thrice jilted a suitor – that three times she would go back from her word? Where could she find the courage to tell her father, to tell Kate, to tell George himself, that she had changed her mind?

But she had a year at her disposal. If only during that year he would take her money and squander it, and then need nothing further, might she not thus escape the doom before her? Might the refusal this time come from him?

She resolved on one thing. Come what might, she would never stand with George at the altar. While there was a cliff from which she might fall, water that would cover her, poison to be mixed in her cup, she could not submit herself to be George Vavator’s wife.

To no ear could she tell this resolve. She owed her money to the man, and he should have it. Only as his betrothed could she give it him. He should have her money, and then, when the day came, some escape should be found.

In the afternoon her father came to her, having seen Mr. Grey again that day. Mr. Grey, when he left Queen Anne Street, had gone to his lawyer, and then to Mr. Vavator. They had both returned to the lawyer’s chambers, where Mr. Vavator had been startled at the precision with which all his daughter’s circumstances had been explained to a mild-eyed old lawyer called Mr. Tombe.

Mr. Tombe had shown no surprise or dismay at the affair under discussion. George Vavator was to get money, but from John Grey’s funds rather than from Alice’s. Mr. Tombe could probably arrange that with Mr. Vavator’s lawyer. And then, at last, having taken the price of his bargain, George Vavator was to be made to surrender his bride. John Vavator sat by in silence as the arrangement was made. He had no money with which to assist.

“I wish you to understand from the lady’s father,” Grey said to the lawyer, “that he would regard the marriage with as much dismay as by myself.”

“Certainly; it would be ruinous,” Mr. Vavator said.

“And you see, Mr. Tombe,” Mr. Grey went on, “we only wish to try the man. If he is not as bad as we believe, he can prove it by his conduct. If he is worthy of her, he can then take her.”

“You merely wish to open her eyes, Mr. Grey,” said the mild-eyed lawyer. “Yes; we shall know our man. He shall have the money, Mr. Grey,” and so the interview had ended.

Mr. Vavator, when he came home after this and entered the drawing-room, found his daughter sitting in the dusk. He addressed her in a cheery voice. “What; all in the dark?”

“Yes, papa. I did not expect you.”

“No; I suppose not. I want to say a few words to you about business.”

“What business, papa?” Alice understood the tone of her father’s voice. He wanted to propitiate; but he also wanted his own way on some point.

“Well; my love, if I understood you rightly, your cousin George wants some money.”

“I think he will want it before the election.”

“He has not asked you for it yet?”

“No; he has merely said that if he is in need he will take me at my word. I should wish to oblige him whenever he may do so.”

“To what extent, Alice?”

“I don’t know what I have. I get about four hundred a year, but I do not know what my capital is worth, or how far it can all be turned into money. I should wish to keep a hundred a year and let him have the rest.”

“What; eight thousand pounds!” said the father in dismay.

“I do not imagine that he will want so much; but if he should, I wish that he should have it.”

“Heaven and earth!” said John Vavasor, unable to restrain himself. “Of course we should have to give up the house.”

“But he has asked me for nothing yet, papa.”

“No, and perhaps he may not; but I wish to know when the demand is made. I am not going to oppose you now; your money is your own – but would you gratify me in one thing?”

“What is it, papa?”

“When he does apply, will you come to me, so that I may see the lawyer, and have the arrangements made?” Then he explained to her that in dealing with large sums of money, it could not be right that she should do so without his knowledge, even though the property was her own.

“I promise you that I will not oppose your wishes,” he said. Then Alice agreed that the money should be raised through his means.

Two days after this she received a letter from Lady Glencora, who was still at Matching Priory. It was a light-spirited, chatty, amusing letter, intended to be happy in its tone, but just failing.

“You will see that I am at Matching,” the letter said, “instead of Monkshade. I escaped at last by a violent effort, and am now passing my time innocently with Iphy Palliser. She is a good creature. I admit that I am thinking of them all at Monkshade, and am truly delighted that I am not there. My absence is entirely laid upon your shoulders. That wicked evening amidst the ruins! Poor ruins. I go there alone sometimes and fancy that I hear such voices from the walls, and see all the old Pallisers frown at me through the broken windows, telling me that I am not good enough to belong to them. I told Iphy that the other day, and she answered very gravely, that I might, if I chose, make myself good enough for the Pallisers. Even for the Pallisers! Isn’t that beautiful?”

Then Lady Glencora went on to say that her husband intended to come to London early in the parliamentary session, and that she would accompany him. “That is,” she added, “if I am still good enough for the Pallisers at that time.”

CHAPTER 38

The Inn at Shap

When George Vavasor left Mr. Scruby's office, he knew that he needed money. And he knew that he had a very disagreeable job ahead of him. He did not like the task of borrowing his cousin Alice's money.

We are apt to imagine that rogues and swindlers carry out their dirty tricks with gusto and delight. In this, I think we are wrong. The poor, broken, semi-genteel beggar, who borrows half-sovereigns from all his old acquaintances, aware that they know that he will never repay them, suffers a little agony each time he asks for money. It is a comfortless, unsatisfying trade, that of living upon other people's money.

How was George Vavasor to make his first step towards getting his hand into his cousin's purse? Although she had shuddered at his approach, he knew that the money would be forthcoming when he demanded it – but how was he to make the demand? If he wrote to her, should he simply ask for money, and make no allusion to his love? If he went to her in person, should he make it a mere business visit?

He resolved that Kate should do the work for him, and act as his ambassador in money matters. He could talk to Kate as he could not talk to Alice. He decided to see Kate, and with this purpose he went north to Westmorland, to a small wayside inn at Shap among the fells. He wrote to tell his sister he would be there, and begged her to visit him the morning after his arrival.

He reached the place late in the evening by train. There is a station at Shap, for which the landlord at the inn, for one, is not thankful. Shap used to owe all its life to the stage-coach, being a stage on the road from Lancaster to Carlisle. It is a high, bleak, thinly-populated place, and Vavasor reached the little inn on a pitch dark, windy night.

“What a beastly part of the country,” he said to himself, resolving that he would certainly sell Vavasor Hall if it ever became his. “What trash it is, hanging on to such a place as that, simply because one's ancestors have done so. But the world does not hold a more ignorant, useless old fool than my grandfather.”

George rejected the landlord's friendly greeting, merely grunting in reply. He passed the evening in a little sitting-room in solitude, giving no encouragement to the landlord, who looked in three or four times, till at last George said that he wished to be alone.

“He was always one of them cankered chieles as never have a kindly word,” said the landlord. “Seems as though that raw slash in his face had gone right through into his heart.”

After that George was left alone, and sat thinking whether it would be better to ask Alice for two thousand pounds at once, so as to save him from the disagreeable necessity of a second borrowing before their marriage.

He was very uneasy. He had flattered himself all along that his cousin loved him. He had felt sure of it in Switzerland. When she had determined to give up John Grey, of course he had told himself the same thing.

Dark, selfish, and dishonest as he was, he had, nevertheless, enjoyed something of a lover's true pleasure in believing that Alice had still loved him. But his joy had been turned into gall during that interview in Queen Anne Street. He had read the truth at a glance. When Alice managed to escape his embrace, he knew the whole

truth. He was sore at heart, and very angry. He could have readily spurned her then, and would have done so had not his need for her money restrained him. He knew this, and he told himself that he was a rascal.

Vavator Hall was about five miles from Shap, and it was not easy for Kate to get over to the village without informing her grandfather. She could, indeed, walk; but her brother would not like to see her enter the Lowther Arms dirty and bedraggled. So she had to ask her grandfather to lend her the jaunting-car.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked sharply.

“Only to Shap, grandpapa.”

“To Shap! what on earth for? There are no shops there.”

“I am not going shopping. My brother is at the inn,” she said. “I had not intended to tell you, as I did not wish to mention his name till you had consented to receive him here.”

“And he expects to come here now, does he?” said the squire.

“Oh, no, sir, I don’t think so. He has come simply to see me – about business, I believe.”

“Business! what business? I suppose he wants to get your money from you?”

“I think it is with reference to his marriage.”

“Look here, Kate; if ever you lend him your money, I will never speak to him again. And more than that! Look here, Kate. In spite of all that has passed, the property will become his for his life when I die – unless I change my will. If he gets your money from you, I will change it, and he shall not be a shilling richer at my death. You can have the horse to go to Shap.”

What unlucky chance had put this idea into the old squire’s head this morning? Kate had resolved to ask her brother to use her little fortune. She feared that he was coming about his cousin’s money – that he wished to take up his cousin’s offer; and Kate was determined that he must be saved from such temptation. She knew he needed money for the election contest; and she was almost sure that he was a poor man.

As she was jogged along over the rough road to Shap, she made up her mind that Aunt Greenow would be the proper person to defray the expense of the coming election. To give Kate her due, she would have given up every shilling of her own money without hesitation. Perhaps she would not have been so opposed to his taking Alice’s money, if Alice had simply been his cousin, supporting him in the general Vavator interest. But she could not bear to think that her brother should take the money of the girl whom he was engaged to marry.

Aunt Greenow’s money she thought was fair game. Aunt Greenow had made generous offers to Kate herself, which she had declined; but she felt that she need not hesitate to ask for assistance for her brother.

“Grandpapa knows that you are here, George,” said Kate, after their first greeting.

“The deuce he does! why did you tell him?”

“I could not get the car without letting him know why I wanted it.”

“What nonsense! as if you couldn’t have made any excuse! I was particularly anxious that he should not guess that I am here.”

“I don’t see that it can make any difference, George.”

“But I see that it can. It may prevent my ever being able to get near him again before he dies. What did he say about my coming?”

“He didn’t say much.”

“He didn’t invite he over there?”

“No.”

“I should not have gone if he had. I don’t know that I ever shall go. To be there long enough to make him alter his will, and leave me in the position which I have a right to expect, would take more time than the whole property is worth. And he would try to tie me down in some way – perhaps ask me to give up my notion of going into Parliament.”

“He might ask you, but he would not make it ground for another quarrel.”

“He is so unreasonable and ignorant that I am better away from him. But, Kate, you have not congratulated me on my engagement.”

“Indeed I did, George, when I wrote to you.”

“Did you? I had forgotten. I don’t know that any great congratulations are necessary.”

“Oh, George! You know you have always longed to make her your wife.”

“I don’t know anything of the kind. You have always been under a match-making hallucination on that point. But you have succeeded, and are entitled to your triumph.”

“I don’t want any triumph; you ought to know that.”

“But I’ll tell you what I do want, Kate. I want some money.” Then he paused, but as she did not answer, he was obliged to go on speaking. “I’m not sure that I’m right in making this attempt to get into Parliament. It’s beyond my reach.”

“Don’t say that, George.”

“Ah, but I can’t help feeling it. I need hardly tell you that I am ready to risk anything of my own. But I have no ready money left.”

“Whatever I have can be yours tomorrow,” said Kate, in a hesitating voice, which too plainly pronounced her misery. She could not refrain herself. Though her grandfather’s threat was ringing in her ears – though she knew that she might be ruining her brother by proposing such a loan – she could not help offering.

“No, I shall not take your money. I should not think it right to make you a beggar. Therefore let there be an end of it,” said George loftily.

“What is it you wish then?” said Kate, who knew already.

“I will explain. When Alice and I are married, of course there will be a settlement made on her, and as we are both the grandchildren of the old squire I shall propose that the Vavasor property shall be hers for life in the event of her outliving me. If this is done, there can be no harm in my using some of her property, which would of course become mine when we are married.”

“But the squire might leave the property to whom he pleases.”

“We know very well that he won’t leave it out of the family. In fact, he would be only too glad to consent to such an agreement, because it would rob me of all power in the matter. Look here, Kate; don’t make difficulties.” As he looked at her, the scar on his face seemed to open and yawn at her. “If you won’t help me, say so, and I will go back to London.”

“I would do anything in my power to help you, that was not wrong!”

“That is not much of an offer if you keep the power of deciding what is wrong. Will you write to Alice, or better still, go to her, and explain that I want the money?”

“How can I go to London now?”

“You can do it very well, if you choose. But if not, then write to her. It will come much better from you than from me. Explain that I must pay the expenses of this contest in advance, and that I cannot hope for success unless I do so. I cannot expect them to carry on the fight for me, unless they know that the money is there. Scruby

has been bitten two or three times by these city fellows, and he is determined not to be bitten again.”

“George, I wish you would try any other scheme but that.”

“There is no other scheme! That’s so like a woman; to quarrel with the only plan that is practicable.”

“I do not think you ought to take Alice’s money.”

“My dear Kate, you must allow me to be the best judge of what I ought to do. Alice herself understands the matter perfectly. She knows that I cannot obtain this position without money, and has offered her assistance. I would rather that you should tell her how much I want, than that I should do so. That is all.”

Kate understood that her brother was ashamed; so ashamed that he wanted to use her voice instead of his own. “I want you to write to her at once,” he continued; “since you seem to think that it is not worthwhile to take the trouble of a journey to London.”

“There is no question about the trouble,” said Kate. “I would walk to London to get the money for you, if that were all.”

“Do you think that Alice will refuse to lend it me?” said he, looking into her face.

“I am sure that she would not, but I think that you ought not to take it from her. There seems to me to be something sacred about property that belongs to the girl you are going to marry.”

“If there is anything on earth I hate,” said George, walking about the room, “it is romance. When it gets mixed up with one’s business it plays the devil. It’s all nonsense. Alice and I are to be man and wife. All our interests, and all our money, are to be joint property. And yet she is the last person in the world to whom I ought to go for money to improve our prospects? That’s infernal nonsense.”

“George, I’ll ask Aunt Greenow to lend you the money – or to lend it to me.”

“I don’t believe she’d give me a shilling. Moreover, I want it immediately, and the time taken up in letter-writing and negotiations would be fatal. If you won’t apply to Alice, I must. Will you do it?”

Kate was still hesitating when there came a knock at the door, and a little crumpled note was given her. A boy had just brought it across the fell from Vavasor Hall, and Kate knew at once that it was from her grandfather. It was as follows:—

“If George wishes to come to the Hall, let him come. If he chooses to tell me that he regrets his conduct to me, I will see him.”

“What is it?” said George, and Kate put the note into his hand.

“I’ll do nothing of the kind,” he said. “What good should I get by going to the old man’s house?”

“Every good,” said Kate. “If you don’t go now you never can do so.”

“Never till it’s my own,” said George.

“If you show him that you are determined to disagree with him, it never will be your own – unless, indeed, it should some day come to you as part of Alice’s fortune. Think of it, George; you would not like to receive everything from her.”

He walked about the room, cursing between his teeth and balancing his pride against his profit. “If I go to the Hall, will you write to Alice?”

“No, George; I cannot write to Alice asking her for the money.”

“Then, Kate, you and my grandfather may work together for the future. You may get him to leave you the place if you have skill enough.”

“That is an undeserved reproach,” said Kate, standing her ground boldly. “If you have either heart or conscience, you will know it.”

“I’m not much troubled with either one or the other, I fancy. I am better off without them.”

“Will you take my money, George; just for the present?”

“No.”

“Will you let me write to Mrs. Greenow?”

“I have no objection; but it will be of no use whatsoever.”

“I will do so, at any rate. And now will you come to the Hall?”

“To beg that old fool’s pardon? No; I won’t. In the mood I am in at present, I should only anger him worse than ever. Tell him that I’ve business which calls me back to London at once.”

“It is a thousand pities. It may make so great a difference to your whole life!” urged Kate.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” said George. “I’ll go to Vavasor and put up with the old squire’s insolence, if you’ll make this application for me to Alice.”

She hesitated, feeling that she would almost do anything to achieve a reconciliation between her grandfather and her brother.

“But let me write to Aunt Greenow first,” said she. “It will take only two or three days.”

To this George agreed as though he were yielding a great deal; and Kate, with a sore conscience, promised that she would apply to Alice for her money, if funds should not be forthcoming from Mrs. Greenow. Then George graciously consented to pack his clothes before visiting the Hall.

“I shan’t stay more than two days,” he said. “I will stay there tomorrow night, and go into Kendal early, to catch the express train on Thursday morning.”

They spoke very little on the way, until they reached the old lodge at the entrance to the place.

“Eh, Mr. George; be that you?” said the old woman who came out to swing back the broken gate. “A sight of you is good for sair een.” It was the same welcome that the inn-keeper had given him, and equally sincere. George had never made himself popular about the place, but he was the heir.

“Remember, George,” said Kate on the road up to the house; “when you see our grandfather you must say that you regret that you ever displeased him. Don’t let there be any further misunderstanding.”

“I think it very probable that there will be,” said George. “I only hope he’ll let me have the old horse to take me back to Shap if there is. There he is at the front door now.”

The old man was standing at the hall steps when they car drove up, as though to welcome his grandson. He put out his hand to help Kate down the steps, keeping his eye on George’s face.

“So you’ve come back,” the squire said to him.

“Yes, sir; like the prodigal son in the parable.”

“The prodigal son was contrite. I hope you are.”

“Pretty well, sir. I’m sorry there has been any quarrel, and all that, you know.”

“Go in,” said the squire, very angrily. “Go in. To expect anything gracious from you would be to expect pearls from swine.”

George went in, shrugging his shoulders as his eyes met his sister’s. It was in this fashion that the reconciliation took place between Squire Vavasor and his heir.

CHAPTER 39

Mr. Cheesacre's Hospitality

As the winter passed, Mr. Cheesacre fretted anxiously about the widow Greenow. There were two dangers which disturbed him. She would give herself and all her money to Bellfield; or else she would spend her own money so fast before he got hold of it, that the prize would be greatly damaged.

"I'm — if she hasn't set up a carriage!" he said to himself one day in Norwich, on seeing Mrs. Greenow in a private brougham, accompanied by one of the Fairstairs girls. "She's been and set up her carriage as sure as my name's Cheesacre!"

However, Mrs. Greenow knew what she was doing with her money as well as any lady in England. The private carriage was only hired by the month, and as to that boy in buttons, why should she not keep a young servant, and call him a page, if she wished?

If Mr. Cheesacre had also known that she had lent the Fairstairs family fifty pounds to help them through some difficulty, he would have been beside himself with dismay. He desired to obtain the prize unutilized. Any such clippings he regarded as robberies against himself.

But he feared Bellfield more. That all is fair in love and war was no doubt Captain Bellfield's maxim; at any rate he told some monstrous lies to his friend. In war, no doubt, all stratagems are fair. If Bellfield could only be successful, and achieve mastery over those forty thousand pounds, the world would forgive him. In the meantime, his stratagems were as deep and his lies as profound as those of any general.

It must not be supposed that Cheesacre ever believed him. In the first place, he knew that Bellfield was not a man to be believed. Had he not been living on lies for the last ten years? But Mr. Cheesacre was kept in an agony of doubt. He paid Jeannette liberally. He even paid Charlie Fairstairs with gloves, and chickens from Oileymead, so that he might know whether that hawk fluttered about his dovecote. He went further, and paid the Captain himself, making him promise not to flutter in return for money. He even attempted to pay the widow — cautioning her against the fluttering, as he offered her, on his knees, a brooch as big as a plate.

She waved the brooch aside, declaring that her mourning ring was the only jewellery she would ever wear. She also declared that Captain Bellfield was nothing to her; Mr. Cheesacre need have no fears. But, she added, neither was he to have any hope. Her affections were all buried under the cold earth.

This was harassing. Nevertheless, though they could get no satisfaction in wooing Mrs. Greenow, the pleasantness of the occupation ought to have reconciled her suitors to their destiny. When a gentleman has been on his knees before a lady, and has been peremptorily refused, he would generally feel some awkwardness in sitting down to tea with the lady afterwards. But with Mrs. Greenow there was no such awkwardness. She would play the hostess with a genial hospitality, and at the end of the evening she would accept a good long squeeze of the hand.

Mr. Cheesacre, on such occasions, would leave the Close swearing that she should be his on the next market-day. Then, on the Monday, news would reach him that Bellfield had passed all Sunday afternoon with his lady-love — Bellfield, to whom he had lent five pounds to spend that very Sunday with some officers at Ipswich.

Driven to despair, he at last resolved to ask Bellfield to come to Oileymead for a month. Funds were low with the Captain, and he accepted the invitation.

"I'll hire you a horse, old fellow," Cheesacre had said; "and give you a little shooting. Only I won't have you go out when I'm not with you."

Bellfield agreed. Each of them understood the nature of the bargain; though Bellfield, I think, understood it better. He would not be so near the widow as he had been at Norwich, but he would no further away than his kind host was. His host would no doubt watch him closely; but he could also watch his host. There was a railway station two miles from Oileymead, and the journey into Norwich was only half an hour. Mr. Cheesacre could not prevent such journeys. And then he would pay for everything, while Captain Bellfield paid nothing. Would it not be sweet if he could carry off his friend's prize from under his friend's roof?

And Mrs. Greenow also understood the arrangement. "Going to Oileymead, are you?" she said when Captain Bellfield came to tell her of his departure. Charlie Fairstairs was with her, so that the Captain could not use the moment in any special way. "It's quite delightful," continued the widow, "to see how fond you two gentlemen are of each other."

"I wish with all my heart that dear old Cheesy would get a wife," said Bellfield. "He needs a wife badly, with that house full of blankets and crockery. Why don't you set your cap at him, Miss Fairstairs?"

"What; at a farmer!" said Charlie, who was particularly anxious that her dear friend Mrs. Greenow should not marry Mr. Cheesacre.

"Give him my kind love," said Mrs. Greenow. "And, Captain Bellfield, suppose you both dine with me next Saturday. He always comes on Saturday, and you might as well come too."

Captain Bellfield declared that he would only be too happy.

"And Charlie shall come to set her cap at Mr. Cheesacre," said the widow.

"I shall be happy to come," said Charlie, quite delighted; "but not with that object, though Mr. Cheesacre is very respectable, I'm sure."

So Bellfield went to Oileymead. He was not much surprised to find himself put not into one of the mahogany-furnished chambers, but into a back room overlooking the farm-yard, with no fire-place. Bellfield did not like it; but what is a poor man to do under such circumstances? So he washed his hands before dinner in the room without a fire-place, flattering himself that he would yet be even with his friend Cheesacre.

They dined together not in the best humour, and after dinner they sat down to enjoy themselves with pipes and brandy and water. Bellfield would have preferred cigars; but they were more expensive, and his friend put none upon the table. Mr. Cheesacre wasn't going to put himself out for Bellfield!

Both the men became talkative under the effects of the brandy, and the Captain then gave Mrs. Greenow's invitation to Mr. Cheesacre. He had wondered whether to forget the message, but decided that it should be delivered.

"I had to go and just wish her goodbye, you know," he said apologetically.

"I don't see that at all," said Cheesacre.

"Why, my dear fellow, how foolishly jealous you are. If I were to be downright uncivil to her, it would only call attention to the thing."

"I'm not a bit jealous. A man who sits upon his own ground as I do hasn't any occasion to be jealous."

"I don't know what your own ground has to do with it."

“It has a great deal to do with it. If a man intends to marry he ought to have things comfortable about him; unless he wants to live on his wife, which is about the meanest thing a man can do. By George, I’d sooner break stones than that.”

This was hard for any captain to bear; but Captain Bellfield did bear it – looking forward to revenge.

“There’s no pleasing you, I know,” said he. “But I went to say goodbye to her, and she asked me to give you that message. Shall we go or not?”

Cheesacre sat for some time silent and meditating a little plan. “I’ll tell you what, Bellfield,” he said at last. “She’s nothing to you, and if you won’t mind staying here, I’ll go. Mrs. Jones shall get you anything you like for dinner – and – and I’ll stand you a bottle of the ’34 port!”

But Captain Bellfield was not going to put up with this. “No, old fellow. She has asked me to dine with her on Saturday, and I mean to go.”

“I wish you’d pay me some of that money you owe me,” said Cheesacre.

“So I will – when I’ve married the widow.”

Cheesacre longed to turn him out of the house. But the man would only have taken himself to Norwich, to woo the widow; and all their treaties would be at an end.

“Why shouldn’t I go and dine with her next Saturday?” asked Bellfield.

“Because you’re in my way. I’ve made it clear enough. I’ve told you all my plans because I thought you were my friend, and I’ve paid you well to help me, too; and yet you do all you can to throw me over – only you can’t.”

“What an ass you are,” said the Captain. “Just you listen to me. That scraggy young woman, Charlie Fairstairs, is to be there. She was present when the whole thing was arranged, and I heard her asked, and heard her say that she would come – and she declared that she wouldn’t set her cap at you, because you’re a farmer.”

“Upon my word she’s kind,” said Cheesacre, getting very angry and very red. “Charlie Fairstairs, indeed! I wouldn’t pick her out of a gutter with a pair of tongs.”

“But somebody must take her in hand on Saturday, if you’re to do any good with the widow,” said the crafty Bellfield.

“What the deuce does she have that nasty creature there for?” said Cheesacre.

“As a companion, of course. You can get rid of Charlie, you know, when you make her Mrs. Cheesacre.”

“Get rid of her! She’ll never set foot in this house. I’ve detested that woman for the last ten years.” Cheesacre could forgive no slighting of his social position, and the idea of Miss Fairstairs looking down upon him galled him to the quick.

“You’ll have to dine with her at any rate,” said Bellfield, “and four are better company than three on such occasions.”

Mr. Cheesacre grunted an unwilling assent; and it was arranged that they should go together, and both dine with the widow. Indeed, Mrs. Greenow got two notes, one from each of them. Cheesacre wrote his acceptance, altogether ignoring Captain Bellfield.

The captain wrote, “We shall be so happy to come. Dear old Cheesy is out of his little wits with delight, and has already begun to polish off the effects of the farmyard.”

“Effects of the farmyard,” read Mrs. Greenow aloud to Jeannette. “It would be well for Captain Bellfield if he had a few such effects himself.”

“You can give him enough, ma’am,” said Jeannette, “to make him a better man than Mr. Cheesacre any day. And for a gentleman – of course I say nothing, but if I was a lady, I know which should be the man for me.”

CHAPTER 40

Mrs. Greenow's Little Dinner in the Close

How deep and cunning are the wiles of love! When that Saturday morning arrived, Cheesacre said not a word to his rival about his plans for the day.

"You'll take the dog-cart?" Captain Bellfield had asked.

"I don't know yet," he replied. But Bellfield knew that Cheesacre must take the dog-cart, and was contented. He would make sure that he was not left behind.

Before breakfast Mr. Cheesacre surreptitiously carried out into the yard a bag containing all his apparatus for dressing – his marrow oil for his hair, his shirt with the wondrous embroidered front, his shiny boots, and all the rest. He hid the bag away secretly in the back of the dog-cart.

But when he returned into the front hall, he perceived another bag lying near the door.

"What the deuce are you going to do with this?" said he, giving the bag a kick.

"Put it where I saw you putting yours just now," said Bellfield.

"D— it," exclaimed Cheesacre; and then they sat down to breakfast. "How you hack that ham about," he said. "If you ever provided hams yourself you'd be more particular in cutting them."

This was very bad. Feeling unable to eat the ham under such circumstances, Bellfield made do with a couple of fresh eggs.

"If you didn't mean to eat the meat, why the mischief did you cut it?" said Cheesacre.

"Upon my word, Cheesacre, you're too bad," said Bellfield, upset.

"What's the matter now?"

"It isn't fair to ask a fellow into your house, and then say such things to him. And it isn't what I've been accustomed to either; I can tell you that, Mr. Cheesacre. You and I have known each other a long time, and I'd put up with more from you than from anyone else; but—"

"Can you pay me the money that you owe me, Bellfield?" said Cheesacre.

"No," said Bellfield; "not immediately."

"Then eat your breakfast, and hold your tongue."

Captain Bellfield did eat his breakfast – leaving the ham untouched – and did hold his tongue, vowing vengeance in his heart. Yet the two men went into Norwich quite amicably. Cheesacre felt that he had trespassed a little, and offered the Captain a cigar in the cart. Bellfield accepted the peace offering.

"Now," said Cheesacre, as he drove into the Swan yard, "what do you mean to do with yourself all day?"

"I shall go down to the soldiers' quarters, and look the fellows up."

"All right. But mind this, Bellfield; you're not to be in the Close before four."

"I won't be!"

"Very well. If you deceive me, I'll not drive you back to Oileymead tonight."

In this instance Captain Bellfield had no intention to deceive. He did not think that he could do himself any good by hanging about the widow early in the day. She would be busy with the dinner.

The cathedral clock, therefore, had struck four before the Captain rang Mrs. Greenow's bell. When he was shown into the drawing-room, he found Cheesacre there alone, redolent with the marrow oil.

“Haven’t you seen her yet?” asked the Captain.

“No,” said Cheesacre sulkily.

“Nor Charlie Fairstairs?”

“I’ve seen nobody,” said Cheesacre. But he was compelled to swallow his anger as the ladies came into the room.

“Whoever would have expected two gentlemen to be so punctual!” said Mrs. Greenow.

The widow was almost gorgeous in her mourning dress. Widows’ caps are generally hideous; as are dresses of clinging, melancholy crape. But Mrs. Greenow’s cap sat jauntily on her head, and showed just enough of her rich brown hair to give her the appearance of youth. Her crape never became faded and rusty, or formed itself into old lumpy folds of cloth.

Mrs. Greenow would still talk much about her husband, as though he had left her only yesterday; but she mistook her dates, referring to the melancholy circumstance as having taken place fifteen months ago. In truth, it was nine months, as everyone knew. But why should they remind her of it? Charlie Fairstairs spoke of the fifteen months with bold confidence, false-tongued little parasite that she was.

“Yes, I’m well enough in health,” said the widow, “and I suppose I ought to be thankful for it. But if you had buried a wife whom you had loved within the last eighteen months, you too would be indifferent to all that kind of thing. If I were you, Mr. Cheesacre, I would not run the risk of marrying. The sufferings are too great!” Whereupon she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

“But I mean to try all the same,” said Cheesacre, gazing lover-like into the fair one’s face.

“Then I hope that she may not be torn away from you early in life. Is dinner ready, Jeannette? Good. Mr. Cheesacre, will you give your arm to Miss Fairstairs?”

There was no doubt as to Mrs. Greenow’s correctness. As a former soldier, Captain Bellfield was entitled to take the mistress down to dinner. But Cheesacre did not look at it in this light. He only remembered that he had paid for the Captain’s food, that the Captain had been brought into Norwich in his gig, that the Captain owed him money, and ought to be regarded as his property.

“I pay my way, and that ought to give a man a higher station than being a beggarly captain, which I don’t believe he is, if the truth was known,” he complained to Miss Fairstairs over dinner.

“If you were a magistrate, Mr. Cheesacre, you would have rank; but I believe you are not.” Charlie Fairstairs knew what she was doing. Mr. Cheesacre had tried hard to get his name put up as a magistrate, but had failed.

“Nasty, scraggy old cat,” he said to himself, as he turned away from her.

But Bellfield gained little by taking the widow down to dinner. He and Cheesacre were at either end of the table, and the ladies sat at the sides. Mrs. Greenow’s hospitality was very good. There was soup, fish, a cutlet, a roast fowl, and some game. Jeannette waited at table nimbly, and the thing could not have been done better. Mrs. Greenow played the kind hostess to perfection. Under her eye Cheesacre was forced into apparent cordiality with Bellfield, and the Captain took the good things provided with thankful good-humour.

The widow was so accurately fair in her favours that even Jeannette could not tell to which of the two men she gave the warmest smile. She talked and made others talk, till Cheesacre became almost comfortable, in spite of his jealousy.

“And now,” she said, as she got up to leave the room, “We will allow these two gentlemen just half an hour, eh Charlie? and then we shall expect them upstairs.”

“Ten minutes will be enough for us here,” said Cheesacre.

“Half an hour,” said Mrs. Greenow, with a little tone of command. Ten minutes might be enough for Mr. Cheesacre, but it was not enough for her.

Bellfield had opened the door, and the widow glanced at him as she left the room. Cheesacre saw it, and resolved to resent it.

“I’ll tell you what it is, Bellfield,” he said moodily, “I won’t have you coming here at all, till this matter is settled.”

“What matter?” said Bellfield, filling his glass.

“You know what matter I mean.”

“You take such a deuce of a time about it.”

“No, I don’t. That other fellow has only been dead about nine months, and I’ve got the thing in excellent train already.”

“And what harm do I do?”

“You disturb me, and you disturb her. You do it on purpose. I’ll tell you what; if you’ll go clean out of Norwich for a month, I’ll lend you two hundred pounds on the day she becomes Mrs. Cheesacre.”

“And where am I to go to?”

“You may stay at Oileymead, if you like.”

“And be told that I hack the ham because it’s not my own. Shall I tell you what I think, Cheesacre? That woman has no more idea of marrying you than she has of marrying the Bishop. Won’t you fill your glass, old fellow? You may as well give it up. You’re a podgy man, you see, and Mrs. Greenow doesn’t like podgy men.”

Cheesacre sat looking at him with his mouth open, dumb with surprise, and almost paralysed with impotent anger. What had happened during the last few hours to change so entirely the tone of his dependent captain?

“You are very podgy, Cheesacre,” Bellfield continued, “and then you so often smell of the farm-yard; and you talk too much of your money and your property. You’d have had a better chance if you had talked of hers – as I have done. As it is, you haven’t any chance at all.”

Bellfield went on drinking his wine comfortably. Cheesacre was so astounded that the creature whom he had fed – whom he had bribed – should thus turn against him, that for a while he could not speak. It occurred to him that he, Cheesacre, was expected to drive Bellfield home this very evening.

“Now I’ve told you my mind, Cheesy, my boy,” continued Bellfield, “and you’ll save yourself a deal of trouble if you’ll believe what I say. She doesn’t mean to marry you. It’s most probable that she’ll marry me; but, at any rate, she won’t marry you.”

“Do you mean to pay me my money, sir?” said Cheesacre, at last.

“Yes, I do.”

“When?”

“When I’ve married Mrs. Greenow – and therefore, I expect your assistance in that little scheme. Let us drink her health. We shall always be delighted to see you at our house, Cheesy, my boy, and you shall be allowed to hack the hams as much as you please.”

“You shall pay for this,” said Cheesacre, gasping with anger and dismay.

“All right, old fellow; I’ll pay for it – with the widow’s money. Come; our half-hour is nearly over; shall we go upstairs?”

“I’ll expose you.”

“Don’t be ill-natured.”

“Where do you mean to sleep tonight, Captain Bellfield?”

“If I sleep at Oileymead it will only be on condition that I have one of the mahogany-furnished bedrooms.”

“You’ll never put your foot in that house again. You’re a rascal, sir.”

“Come, come, Cheesy, it won’t do for us to quarrel in a lady’s house. It wouldn’t be the thing at all. You’re not drinking your wine. Take another glass, and then we’ll go upstairs. No? I might as well ring the bell for Jeannette to take away the wine.” Then he rang the bell, and when Jeannette came he skipped lightly upstairs into the drawing-room.

“Was he here earlier today?” demanded Cheesacre of Jeanette.

“Who? The Captain? Oh dear no. The Captain don’t come here often now.”

“He’s a confounded rascal.”

“Oh, Mr. Cheesacre!” said Jeannette.

“He is; and others are nearly as bad.”

“If you mean me, Mr. Cheesacre, I do declare you’re wronging me. I’ve been as true as true to you, sir; so I have.” And Jeannette put her handkerchief up to her eyes.

A thought occurred to Mr. Cheesacre. He put his hand to his trousers pocket, and gave her half-a-crown. He said nothing further, but followed his enemy up to the drawing-room.

“What game is up now, I wonder,” said Jeannette to herself. “They’ll cut each other’s throats before they’ve done.” But she decided that in that case Bellfield should be the survivor.

In the drawing-room Cheesacre found Bellfield sitting on the sofa with Mrs. Greenow looking at a book of photographs together. The outside rim of her widow’s frill on one occasion touched the Captain’s whisker, and the Captain looked up with an expression of triumph.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Greenow, waving her handkerchief. “Yes, there he is. It’s so like him. Dear man! Thou wast unmatched among husbands. Whose tender kindness was ever equal to thine? whose sweet temper was so constant? whose manly care so great?” While she spoke her little finger was touching Bellfield’s little finger, as they held the book between them. Charlie Fairstairs and Mr. Cheesacre were watching her narrowly, and she knew that they were watching her. She was certainly a woman of great courage.

Bellfield looked with some interest at the photograph. It showed a small, grey-looking, insignificant old man, with pig’s eyes and a toothless mouth. Any other widow, even if she had kept the photograph of such a husband, would have been ashamed to show it.

“Have you ever seen it, Mr. Cheesacre?” asked Mrs. Greenow.

“I saw it at Yarmouth,” said Cheesacre, very sulkily.

“That you did not,” said the lady with some dignity, and rebuke in her tone; “because it never was at Yarmouth.” Then she punished Mr. Cheesacre for his sullenness by whispering a few words to the Captain; and Cheesacre in his wrath turned to Charlie Fairstairs.

After that, coffee was brought to them, and here again Cheesacre in his ill-humour allowed the Captain to out-manœuvre him. It was the Captain who put the sugar into the cups and handed them round. He even handed a cup to his enemy, who refused it sulkily.

Cheesacre in his gloom resolved upon two things. He resolved that he would not leave the room that evening till Bellfield had left it; and that he would get a final answer from the widow, if not that night, then early after breakfast on the following morning. He sat silent, while Bellfield was talking fluently, and comforted himself

with reflections on his own wealth, and promised himself a rich harvest of revenge when he should tell Mrs. Greenow how that man was a beggar, a swindler, and a rascal.

And he was astonished when an opportunity for doing so came very quickly. Before the neighbouring clock had finished striking seven, Bellfield rose from his chair to go.

He spoke a word of farewell to Miss Fairstairs; then he said "Good night, Cheesacre," in the easiest tone in the world. After that he pressed the widow's hand and whispered his adieu.

"I thought you were staying at Oileymead?" said Mrs. Greenow.

"I came from there this morning," said the Captain.

"But he isn't going back there, I can tell you," said Mr. Cheesacre.

"Oh, indeed," said Mrs. Greenow; "I hope there is nothing wrong."

"All as right as a trivet," said the Captain; and then he left.

"I promised mamma that I would be home by seven," said Charlie Fairstairs, rising from her chair. So Mr. Cheesacre found himself alone with the lady.

"I'm sorry," said she, gravely, "that you two have quarrelled."

"Mrs. Greenow," said he, jumping up, and becoming on a sudden full of life, "that man is a downright swindler."

"Oh, Mr. Cheesacre."

"He is. He'll tell you that he was at Inkerman, but I believe he was in prison all the time. I doubt whether he ever saw a shot fired."

"He's none the worse for that."

"But he tells such lies; and he has not a penny in the world. How much do you suppose he owes me, now?"

"However much it is, I'm sure you are too much of a gentleman to say."

"Well – yes, I am," said he, trying to recover himself. "But when I asked him how he intended to pay me, what do you think he said? He said he'd pay me when he got your money."

"My money! He couldn't have said that!"

"But he did, Mrs. Greenow; I give you my word. 'I'll pay you when I get the widow's money,' he said."

"You gentlemen must have a nice way of talking about me when I am absent."

"I never said a disrespectful word about you in my life, Mrs. Greenow. He does – he says horrible things."

"What horrible things, Mr. Cheesacre?"

"Oh, I can't tell you – but he does. What can you expect from such a man as that, who doesn't have a spare set of clothes for his back? Where he's to get a bed tonight, I don't know, for I doubt whether he's got half-a-crown in the world."

"Poor Bellfield!"

"Yes; he is poor."

"But how gracefully he carries his poverty."

"I should call it very disgraceful, Mrs. Greenow." To this she made no reply, and then he thought that he might begin his work. "Mrs. Greenow – may I say Arabella?"

"Mr. Cheesacre!"

"But mayn't I? Come, Mrs. Greenow. You know well enough by this time what it is I mean. What's the use of shilly-shallying?"

"Shilly-shallying, Mr. Cheesacre! I never heard such language?"

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Greenow."

"Shilly-shallying, indeed! There's very little *shall* in it, I can assure you."

The poor man was so dreadfully crestfallen that the widow relented. It was not in her nature to quarrel with her lovers.

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. Greenow,” said the culprit, humbly.

“It is granted,” said the widow; “but never tell a lady again that she is shilly-shallying. And look here, Mr. Cheesacre, if it should ever come to pass that you are making love to a lady in earnest—”

“I couldn’t be more in earnest,” said he.

“—talk to her a little more about your passion and a little less about your purse. Now, good night.”

Cheesacre, as he drove himself home in the dark, tried to console himself by thinking of the miserable plight in which Bellfield would find himself at Norwich. But as he turned in at his own gate he met two figures emerging; one of them was laden with a portmanteau, and the other with a hat case.

“It’s only me, Cheesy, my boy,” said Bellfield. “I’ve just come down by rail to fetch my things, and I’m going back to Norwich by the 9.20.”

“If you’ve stolen anything of mine I’ll have you prosecuted,” roared Cheesacre, as he drove his gig up to his door.

CHAPTER 41

A Noble Lord Dies

George Vavasor remained about four days beneath his grandfather's roof; but he was not happy there, nor did he add to anyone else's happiness. However, he was unwilling to leave till an answer came from Aunt Greenow about Kate's request for money. Kate did everything in her power to induce her brother to be kind to his grandfather, but it was in vain. Both men were as obstinate as each other, and neither would take the first step towards graciousness. Poor Kate entreated each of them to no avail.

"He is an ill-mannered cub," the old man said, "and I was a fool to let him into the house."

So Kate told George that his conduct might drive the Squire to disinherit him completely.

"He must do as he likes," George said sulkily.

"But for Alice's sake!"

"Alice would be the last to expect me to submit to ill-usage for the sake of money. I confess that I'm very fond of money and would do anything that a man can do to secure it. But this I can't do. I have never cost him a shilling. When I was in the wine business he might have enabled me to make a large fortune simply by giving me my property in advance. He perversely chose to think that I was ruining myself, at the only time of my life when I was really doing well."

"But he had a right to act as he pleased," urged Kate.

"Certainly he had. But he had no right to resent my asking such a favour. Nature made him a fool, and that's not his fault. But I can't bring myself to kneel in the dirt before him simply because I asked for what was reasonable."

The two men said very little to each other. They were never alone together except during that half-hour after dinner in which they were supposed to drink their wine. The old Squire always took three glasses of port, but George would drink none at all.

"I have given up drinking wine after dinner," said he, when his grandfather pushed the bottle over to him. The old man could not openly quarrel with his heir on such a point. But, nevertheless, there was offence in it; and when George sat perfectly silent, looking at the fire, with no attempt at conversation, the offence grew, and became strong.

"What the devil's the use of your sitting there if you neither drink nor talk?" said the old man.

"No use in the world, that I can see," said George; "if, however, I were to leave you, you would abuse me for it."

"I don't care how soon you leave me," said the Squire. From all which it may be seen that George Vavasor's visit to his ancestral hall was not satisfactory.

On the fourth day Aunt Greenow's reply came. It said:

Dearest Kate,

I am not going to do what you ask me. You see, I don't know my nephew, and have no reason for being specially anxious that he should be in Parliament. I don't care two straws about the glory of the Vavasor family, who have never done much for me. I am very fond of you, and because you have been good to me I would give you a

thousand pounds if you wanted it for yourself; but I don't see why I should give my money to those I don't know. Pray tell my nephew that I mean no offence.

Your friend C. is still waiting – waiting, patiently; but his patience may be exhausted.

Your affectionate aunt,
Arabella Greenow.

“Of course she won't,” said George, as he threw back the letter to his sister. “Why should she? She is a sensible woman. Who is your friend C., and why is he waiting patiently?”

“He is a man who would be glad to marry her for her money, if she would take him. But she pretends to think that he is a lover of mine.”

“Has he got any money?”

“Yes; lots.”

“And what is his name?”

“His name is Cheesacre. But don't talk about him.”

“If he wants to marry you, and has plenty of money, why shouldn't you take him?”

“Good heavens, George! In the first place he does not want to marry me. In the next place all his heart is in his farmyard.”

“And a very good place to have it,” said George.

“Undoubtedly. But, really, do not talk about him.”

“I should be very glad to see you well married.”

“Should you?” said she, thinking of her close attachment to him.

“And now,” said George, “you must write to Alice at once. You promised.”

“I cannot do it.”

Then the scar on his face opened itself, making her tremble.

“Do you mean to tell me,” said he, “that you will go back from your word?”

“Take my money now, and pay me out of hers as soon as you are married.”

“That is nonsense. All that you have in the world would not pull me through this election, and such a loan would be worse than useless.”

“Am I to ask her for more than two thousand pounds?”

“You are to ask her simply for one thousand. That is what I need at present. She knows that I want it, and that she is to supply it; only she does not know that my need is immediate. That you must explain to her.”

“I would sooner burn my hand, George!”

“Look here, Kate; I insist. If you do not write, I shall; but I certainly shall not see you afterwards. I do not wish to write to Alice myself on any subject at present. If you refuse, I shall know very well what to do.”

With a sorrowful heart, she did write to her cousin, explaining that George Vavasor immediately wanted a thousand pounds for his electioneering. It was a stiff, uncomfortable letter, telling its own tale of grief and shame. Alice understood very plainly the circumstances under which it was written, but she sent back word to Kate at once, promising that the money should be forthcoming; and before the end of January she wrote to say that the sum named had been paid to George's credit at his bankers.

Kate had felt immense joy and pride in the renewal of the match between Alice and her brother. But all that pride and joy were now over. She could no longer write triumphant notes to Alice, speaking of George as their joint hero, and saying little soft

things of his enduring love. It was no longer possible for her to write of George at all, and it was equally impossible to Alice.

Indeed, no letters passed between them after that, until the end of winter. Kate remained in Westmorland, wretched and ill at ease, listening to her grandfather's hard words about her brother, and feeling unable to take her brother's part as she used to do.

George returned to town, and found the thousand pounds duly placed to his credit before the end of the month. It is hardly necessary to tell the reader that this money had come from Mr. Tombe, and that Mr. Tombe duly debited Mr. Grey with the amount. Alice, as she had promised to do, had told her father that the money was needed, and her father had procured it without a word of remonstrance.

"Surely I must sign some paper," Alice had said. But she had been content when her father told her that the lawyers would manage all that.

It was nearly the end of February when George Vavasor made his first payment to Mr. Scruby for the coming election; and when he called at Mr. Scruby's office, he received some news.

"The Marquis is as nearly dead as a man can be," said Mr. Scruby, as if the matter were of very great importance.

"I'm very sorry for him," said George. "Who is the Marquis?"

"It's the Marquis of Bunratty; and if he drops, our young Member will go into the House of Lords."

"What, immediately?" George now realised that there would be a by-election, sooner than expected.

"To be sure," said Scruby. "Unfortunately Travers's people heard of it before us, and are ready to be up with their posters directly the breath is out of the Marquis's body. We must go to work immediately; that's all."

"It will only be for part of a Session," said George.

"Just so," said Mr. Scruby.

"And then there'll be the cost of another election."

"That's true," said Mr. Scruby; "but in such cases we do manage to make it a little cheaper. If you beat Travers now, maybe you'll have a walk-over for the next."

"Have you seen Grimes?" asked George.

"Yes, I have; the blackguard! He is going to open his public house on Travers's side. He came to me as bold as brass, saying that he never liked gentlemen who kept him waiting for money."

"We have not managed it very well, certainly," said Vavasor, looking nastily at the attorney.

"We can't help those little accidents, Mr. Vavasor. You may think yourself lucky that I haven't gone over to Travers myself. He is a Liberal, you know; and it hasn't been for want of an offer, I can tell you."

Vavasor almost repented of his Parliamentary ambition. He would now have to spend at least three thousand pounds of his cousin's money on the chance of being able to sit in Parliament for a few months. He might, to be sure, wait for the general election; but if he allowed a Liberal to win the seat now, that holder of the seat would be almost sure to win it again. He must either fight now, or give up the fight altogether.

"Well, Squire," said Scruby, "how is it to be?" And Vavasor felt that he detected in the man's voice some lessening of respect.

"This lord is not dead yet," said Vavasor.

“No; but we can’t wait. We need every minute we can get. There isn’t any hope for him, I’m told.”

“Will Grimes’s going over make much difference?”

“He’ll take a hundred and fifty votes, I suppose. But that is not much in Chelsea.”

“But the Conservatives will have a candidate.”

“I don’t think they will, not until the general election.”

Vavator found himself compelled to say that he would stand; and Scruby undertook to give orders at once, not waiting even till the Marquis should be dead.

George Vavator, as he left the attorney’s office, said to himself, “If the worst comes to the worst, I can always cut my throat.”

Everything was going wrong with him. His grandfather, who was eighty, would not die; whereas this Marquis, who was not much over fifty, was rushing headlong out of the world, simply to inconvenience George Vavator. As he thought of his grandfather he almost broke his umbrella by vehemently striking it against the pavement. What right could an ignorant old fool like that have to live for ever? If that wretched place in Westmorland could become his now, he might yet ride triumphantly over his difficulties, and refrain from sullyng his hands with more of his cousin’s money till she should become his wife.

Even that thousand pounds had given him much bitter suffering. He had taught himself to look at it lightly before it was done; but he could not think of it lightly now. Kate had been right. It would have been better for him to take her money. In these days, he did not go near Queen Anne Street, trying to persuade himself that he stayed away because of Alice’s coldness to him. But, in truth, he was afraid of seeing her without speaking of her money, and afraid to see her if he were to speak of it.

“Have you seen the papers?” someone said to him as he entered the club.

“Bunratty died in Ireland this morning. I suppose you’ll be up for election in the Chelsea districts?”

CHAPTER 42

Parliament Meets

Parliament opened that year on the twelfth of February, and Mr. Palliser was one of the first members of the House of Commons to take his seat. During the last week, rumour had spread through the country that the present Chancellor of the Exchequer had differed with the Prime Minister over repealing direct taxes, and that he was prepared to leave the Cabinet and launch himself into opposition with his small bodyguard of followers, with all his energy and venom.

There is something very pleasant in the close friendship and bitter animosity of these human gods. If Parliamentary friendships and enmities never changed, the thing would not be nearly so interesting. But these sudden rabid hatreds or devout loves give to the whole thing all the keen interest of a sensational novel.

No doubt this is greatly lessened for those too near the scene of action. The outside Briton who takes a delight in politics – and this should include ninety-nine educated Englishmen out of every hundred – should not desire to peep behind the scenes. No beholder at any theatre should do so. It is good to believe in these friendships and these enmities, and very pleasant to watch their changes.

But although the outer world was so sure that the existing Chancellor of the Exchequer had ceased to exist, when the House of Commons met that gentleman took his seat on the Treasury Bench. Mr. Palliser took his seat on the same side of the House, but low down, near to the cross benches, with Mr. Bott close behind.

Lord Cinquebars moved the Address, and I must confess that he did it very lamely. No one could hear a word that he said. The Address was seconded by Mr. Loftus Fitzhoward, a nephew of the Duke of St. Bungay, who spoke as though he were resolved to out-do poor Lord Cinquebars, so that every word fell from him with the elaborate accuracy of a pistol-shot. He made rhetorical pauses, and even gesticulated in a way that quite disgusted his own party. A young speaker in Parliament should be careful to avoid eloquence. All Mr. Fitzhoward's friends and enemies knew that he had had his chance, and that he had thrown it away.

In the Queen's Speech there had been some very lukewarm allusion to remission of direct taxation. Those words could not have been approved of by the existing Chancellor of the Exchequer. Next there arose a great enemy, an ambitious, fluent man, apparently with deep malice at his heart, though one of the most good-natured fellows in the world. He was quite content, he said, to vote for the Address, as, he believed, would be all the gentlemen on his side of the House. Then he touched lightly and gracefully on many subjects of legislation, promising support, and just hinting that they were totally and manifestly wrong in all things.

But— The tone of his voice changed, and he assumed a well-known look of fury. Members put away the papers they had been reading, and began to listen. But – the existing Government had come into power on the promise of a reduction of taxation, and now they were going to shirk the responsibility of their own promise. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was prepared to carry it out – but was restrained by the timidity and treachery of his colleagues, of whom, of course, the most timid and treacherous was – the great god Jove, who sat blandly smiling on the government side.

It was obvious Jove did not care twopence for what the irate gentleman was saying; and in fact the gentleman was not irate. His look of anger was for the

newspaper reports. But he finished his speech by demanding that Jove should state plainly to the House who was to be the bearer of the purse among the gods.

Then got up smiling, and thanked his enemy. He spoke a good deal about home matters, and foreign matters, proving that everything was right just as easily as his enemy had proved that everything was wrong. When he came to the subject of taxation, he simply repeated the passage from the Queen's Speech, expressing a hope that his right honourable friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, would be able to satisfy the judgement of the House, and the wishes of the people.

But the House was all agog, as was the crowded gallery. The energetic and still existing Chancellor of the Exchequer was divided only by one little thin Secretary of State from Jove himself. Would he get up and declare his purposes? No. He floated in silence, and was inexplicable. Then there was a general debate about money matters, in which the purse-bearer did say a few words, but nothing about the great question.

At last up got Mr. Palliser, towards the close of the evening, and occupied a full hour in explaining what taxes the Government might remit with safety, and what they might not, Mr. Bott prompting him with figures from behind almost too assiduously. The Members went out gradually during this oration; but the newspapers declared, next morning, that his speech had been the speech of the night, and that Mr. Palliser was the coming man.

He returned home to his house in Park Lane quite triumphant, and found Lady Glencora, at about twelve o'clock, sitting alone. She had arrived in town on that day, although he had wished her to stay at Matching Priory till after Easter, with his cousins. But she had said she was unwilling to remain without him, explaining that the cousins might have the home in her absence; and he had given way.

In truth, she had learned to hate her cousin Iphy Palliser with an unreasonable hatred. Lady Glencora knew how her absence from Monkshade had been brought about. Miss Palliser had told her all that had passed in Alice's bedroom on the last night of her stay. Yet Lady Glencora had no anger against Alice. It is hardly too much to say that Lady Glencora looked to Alice to save her. Nevertheless she hated Iphy Palliser for engaging herself in the same business. And it may be doubted whether Lady Glencora did, in truth, wish to be saved.

While she was at Matching, a letter reached her, by what means she never learned, although she suspected her maid of placing it inside her writing-case. The letter had been from Burgo Fitzgerald, and had contained a direct proposal that she should go off with him.

"I am at Matching," the letter said, "at the Inn; but I do not dare to show myself. I walked round the house yesterday, at night, and I know that I saw your room. If you love me still, I ask you to throw aside that fictitious marriage, and give yourself to the man whom, if you love him, you should regard as your husband."

To Lady Glencora the letter had seemed to assure devoted love – that love which, formerly, her friends had told her that Burgo was not capable of feeling. Saying that he would return to Matching after Parliament was met, he begged her to let him know whether her heart was true to him.

She told no one of the letter, but she kept it, and read it over and over again in the silence of her room. She felt that she was guilty in thus reading it; but she determined not to undergo the danger of remaining at Matching while Burgo Fitzgerald was nearby.

She could not analyse her own wishes. She often told herself, as she had told Alice, that it would be better for them all that she should go away. She declared to herself that she loved Burgo with all her heart. She protested that the fault would not

be hers, but theirs, who had forced her to marry the man she did not love. She assured herself that her husband had no affection for her, and that their marriage was damaging to him. She recurred over and over again, in her thoughts, to her own childlessness, and to his extreme desire for an heir.

"If I do sacrifice myself," she would say, "I shall do more good than harm, and I cannot be more wretched than I am now."

Yet she fled to London rather than risk having Burgo Fitzgerald near. She sent no answer to his letter. She made no preparation for going with him. She longed to see Alice and to tell her about that letter. She was like one who, in madness, was resolved to throw herself from a precipice, but to whom some remnant of sanity remained which forced her to seek those who would save her from herself.

Mr. Palliser had not seen her since her arrival in London, and of course, he took her by the hand and kissed her. But it was the embrace of a brother rather than a lover or a husband. Lady Glencora understood this thoroughly.

"I hope you are well?" she said.

"Oh, yes; quite well. And you? A little fatigued with your journey, I suppose?"

"No; not much."

"Well, we have had a debate on the Address. Don't you want to know how it has gone?"

"If it has concerned you particularly, I do, of course."

"It has concerned me certainly."

"They haven't appointed you yet, have they?"

"No; they don't appoint people during debates in the House of Commons. But I fear I shall never make you a politician."

"I'm afraid you never will. But I'm not the less anxious for your success, since you wish it yourself. I don't understand why you should work so very hard; but, as you like it, I'm as anxious as anybody can be that you should triumph."

"Yes; I do like it," he said. "A man must like something, and I don't know what there is to like better. I spoke for a moment to Lord Brock." This was the name of the present Jove.

"And what did Lord Brock say?"

"He didn't say much, but he was very cordial."

"But I thought, Plantagenet, that he could appoint you if he pleased? Doesn't he decide it all?"

"Well, in one sense, he does. But I don't suppose I shall ever make you understand." He tried, however, to do so, and gave her a somewhat longer lecture on the working of the British Constitution than would have been expected from most young husbands to their young wives. Lady Glencora yawned, and tried to hide her yawn in her handkerchief.

"But I see you don't care a bit about it," said he, peevishly.

"Don't be angry, Plantagenet. Indeed I do care about it, but I am so ignorant that I can't understand it all at once. I am rather tired, and I think I'll go to bed now. Shall you be late?"

"No, not very; that is, I shall be rather late. I've a lot of letters I want to write tonight, By-the-by, Mr. Bott is coming to dine tomorrow."

"Mr. Bott!" said Lady Glencora with displeasure.

"Have you any objection?"

"Oh, no. Would you like to dine alone with him?"

“Why should I dine alone with him? Why shouldn’t you eat your dinner with us? I hope you are not going to become fastidious, and to turn up your nose at people. Mrs. Marsham is in town, and I dare say she’ll come if you ask her.”

But this was too much for Lady Glencora. She could not endure to have her two duennas together on the first day of her arrival in London. And Mrs. Marsham would be worse than Mr. Bott, who would be talking to Mr. Palliser most of the evening.

“I thought,” said she, “of asking my cousin, Alice Vavasor, to spend the evening with me.”

“Miss Vavasor!” said the husband. “I must say that I thought Miss Vavasor—” He was going to allude to that unfortunate hour spent among the ruins, but he stopped himself.

“I hope you have nothing to say against my cousin?” said his wife.

“No; I don’t mean to say anything against her. But I would rather that you would ask Mrs. Marsham tomorrow.”

Lady Glencora felt that he was hard on her, and unreasonable, and that he was treating her like a child who should not be allowed her own way in anything. She had tried to please him, and, having failed, was not now disposed to give way.

“As there will be no other ladies here tomorrow evening, Plantagenet, and as I have not yet seen Alice since I have been in town, I wish you would let me have my way in this. I cannot have very much to say to Mrs. Marsham, who is an old woman.”

“I especially want Mrs. Marsham to be your friend,” said he.

“Friendships will not come by ordering, Plantagenet,” said she.

“Very well,” said he. “Of course, you will do as you please. I am sorry that you have refused the first favour I have asked you this year.”

Then he left the room, and she went away to bed.

CHAPTER 43

Mrs. Marsham

But Lady Glencora was not brought to repentance by her husband's words. It seemed to her to be intolerably cruel, this demand that she should pass her first evening in town with an old woman whom she disliked.

She resolved upon rebellion. He had not ordered that she invite Mrs. Marsham, merely requested, and a request does not demand obedience. She would not send for Mrs. Marsham unless he forced her to. Had she not also made a request to him, and had he not refused it? She wrote a line, therefore, to Alice before she went to bed, begging her cousin to come to her early on the following day, so that they might go out together, and then afterwards dine in company with Mr. Bott.

"I know that will be an inducement to you," Lady Glencora said, "because your generous heart will feel how that will help me. Nobody else will be here – unless, indeed, Mrs. Marsham should be asked, unknown to me."

Then she sat down to think about the cruelty of husbands. She had been told in the days before her marriage that Burgo would ill-use her if he became her husband. The Marquis of Auld Reekie had gone so far as to suggest that Burgo might beat her. But what hard treatment could be so unendurable as this total lack of sympathy on her husband's part? As for that matter of beating, she ridiculed the idea. She sat smiling at the absurdity of the thing as she thought of the beauty of Burgo's eyes, of the softness of his touch, of his loving voice. Would it not even be better to be beaten by him than to have politics explained to her at one o'clock at night by Plantagenet Palliser? The British Constitution, indeed!

If she had married Burgo they would have been in sunny Italy, sitting together under the pale moonlight. She might have sat on marble balconies, while the vines clustered over her head, and he would have been at her knee, hardly speaking to her, but making her happy, lapped in the delight of loving.

Poor, wretched, overburdened child, to whom the commonest lessons of life had not yet been taught, and who was now in the hands of one so ill-fitted to teach them! Who would not pity her? Who could say that the fault was hers? The world had laden her with wealth till she could barely move, then turned her loose to run her race!

"Have you written to your cousin?" her husband asked her the next morning, with no anger in his voice.

"Yes; I have asked her to come and drive, and then to stay for dinner."

"Very well," said Mr. Palliser, mildly. After a short pause, he added, "As that is settled, perhaps you would have no objection to ask Mrs. Marsham also?"

"Won't she be engaged?"

"No; I think not," said Mr. Palliser. And then he added, so as to avoid a falsehood, "I know she is not engaged."

"She expects to come, then?" said Lady Glencora.

"I have not asked her. If I had, I should have said so."

"I will write to her, if you wish," said the wife, who felt that she could hardly refuse any longer.

"Do, my dear!" said the husband. So Lady Glencora did write to Mrs. Marsham, who promised to come – as did Alice.

Lady Glencora would, at any rate, have Alice to herself for some hours before dinner. She took comfort in that reflection; but after a while she realised that she

would not know how much to tell Alice. Did she mean to show that letter to her cousin? If she did show it, then – she told herself – she must give up for ever all her dreams about life with Burgo. If she did not show it, then she would leave her husband, and would become – something she did not dare to name even to herself. She declared that so it must be. She knew that she would go with Burgo if he found a way. But if she let Alice know about his letter, Burgo would never have such power.

Alice came, and the greeting between the cousins was very affectionate. Lady Glencora received her as though they had been playmates from early childhood; and Alice, though such impulsive love was not as natural to her, responded to Glencora's warmth. Indeed, had she not promised to love her, at Matching Priors? Although there was much in Lady Glencora that she could not approve – much even that she could not like – still she would keep to her promise.

They sat so long over the fire in the drawing-room that at last they agreed that their drive should be abandoned.

“What's the use of it?” said Lady Glencora. “There's nothing to see, and the wind is as cold as charity. We are much more comfortable here; are we not?”

Alice agreed, having no great desire to be driven through the park on a gloomy February afternoon.

“If I had Dandy and Flirt up here, there would be some fun in it; but Mr. Palliser doesn't wish me to drive in London. He thinks it is unladylike.”

“So it is. If I were a man, I wouldn't like my wife to drive horses about London.”

“Why not? Just because you'd be a tyrant, like other husbands? But Mr. Palliser doesn't care about what I want.”

“Don't say that, Glencora. I believe he would consent to anything that he didn't think wrong.”

“Such as lectures about the British Constitution! But never mind about that. I haven't told you whom you are to meet at dinner.”

“Mr. Bott, you said.”

“But there's another guest, a Mrs. Marsham. I thought I'd got rid of her when I wrote to you; but she's coming.”

“She won't hurt me,” said Alice.

“She'll destroy the pleasure of our evening. I do believe that she hates you, and that she thinks you instigate me to all kinds of wickedness. What fools they all are! It makes me sick when I think that they should be so blind. Alice, I hardly know how much I owe to you; everything, I believe.” Lady Glencora, as she spoke, put her hand into her pocket, and grasped the letter which lay there.

“That's nonsense,” said Alice.

“No; it's not nonsense. Who do you think came to Matching when I was there?”

“If it is the person of whom I am thinking,” said Alice solemnly, “let me implore you not to speak of him.”

“Why should I not speak of him? How are you to be my friend, if I may not speak to you of everything?”

“But you should not think of him.”

“What nonsense! How is one to help one's thoughts? Look here.”

Her hand was on the letter, and it would have been out in a moment, and thrown upon Alice's lap, had not the servant opened the door and announced Mrs. Marsham.

“How do, my dear?” said Mrs. Marsham. “I thought I'd just come across from Norfolk Street and see you, though I am coming to dinner in the evening. It's only just a step, you know. How d'ye do, Miss Vavasor?” and she made a cold salutation to Alice.

Mrs. Marsham was a woman who had many good points. She was poor, and bore her poverty without complaint. She was connected with rich and titled people; but she was no flatterer. She was staunch in her friendships, and staunch in her enmities. She knew well what was going on in the world. She could talk about the last novel, or – if need be – about the Constitution. She had been a true wife, though sometimes too strong-minded, and a painstaking mother, whose children, however, had never loved her as most mothers like to be loved.

The catalogue of her faults was as long as that of her virtues. She was ambitious of power, hardhearted, and unscrupulous. She would not fawn before a title, but she was not above ingratiating herself with those whom she wished to conciliate. She thought evil rather than good. Although she would not invent lies, she would willingly leave false impressions.

She had been a close friend of Mr. Palliser's mother; and she took a special interest in Mr. Palliser's welfare. When he married, she heard the story of Burgo and Lady Glencora, and she was not disposed to think well of the bride. She made up her mind that the young lady would want watching, and felt that no one could do this so well as herself.

She had not openly suggested this to Mr. Palliser; but she had let a word or two drop, hinting that Lady Glencora was very young, and that precaution was, for that reason, more necessary. Mr. Palliser, whose nature was devoid of suspicion, and who knew nothing of the delights and dangers of love, acknowledged that Glencora was young. He especially wished that she should be discreet and matronly; he feared no lovers, but he feared that she might do silly things, not befitting the wife of a Chancellor of the Exchequer. Therefore he submitted Glencora – and, to a certain extent, himself – into the hands of Mrs. Marsham.

Lady Glencora had not been twenty-four hours with this lady before she recognized her as a duenna. She might be very ignorant about some things, but she was no fool. In many things Lady Glencora was much quicker and cleverer than her husband. Though his intelligence was keen, his instincts were dull; he had no understanding of character. He should have been aware that Burgo was a danger; and he should have been aware also that Mrs. Marsham was a duenna not to be employed. When a woman knows that she is guarded by a watch-dog, she is bound to deceive it, if possible.

Alice accepted Mrs. Marsham's greeting as coldly as it had been given, and from that time those two ladies were enemies. Mrs. Marsham partly guessed that Alice had in some way interfered to prevent Lady Glencora's visit to Monkshade, and she resented the interference. She had made up her mind that Alice was not the sort of friend that Lady Glencora should have. Alice recognized and accepted the feud.

"I thought I might find you at home," said Mrs. Marsham, "as I know you are lazy about going out in the cold – unless it be for a foolish midnight ramble," and Mrs. Marsham shook her head.

"The ramble you speak of was very wise, I think," said Lady Glencora; "but I never could see the use of driving about in London in the middle of winter."

"One ought to go out of the house every day," said Mrs. Marsham.

"I hate all those rules. Don't you, Alice?" Alice said nothing.

"My dear Glencora, one must live by rules in this life. You might as well say that you hated sitting down to dinner."

"So I do, very often; almost always when there's company."

"You'll get over that feeling after another season in town," said Mrs. Marsham.

“I don’t think I shall. It seems to get worse instead of better. Mr. Bott is coming to dine here tonight.”

There was no mistaking the meaning of this. Mrs. Marsham had accepted the hand of fellowship from Mr. Bott, not because she especially liked him, but because they both supported Mr. Palliser’s position.

“Mr. Bott is a Member of Parliament, and a very useful friend of Mr. Palliser’s,” said Mrs. Marsham.

“All the same; we do not like Mr. Bott – do we, Alice?”

“I certainly do not like him,” said Alice. “He did annoy me once, but I dare say, will never have an opportunity of doing so again.”

“I don’t know what the annoyance may have been.”

“Of course you don’t, Mrs. Marsham.”

“I shouldn’t have thought it likely that a person so busy as Mr. Bott, and employed on matters of such vast importance, would have gone out of his way to annoy a young lady whom he chanced to meet for a day or two in a country-house.”

“I don’t think that Alice means that he attempted to flirt with her,” said Lady Glencora, laughing. “Fancy Mr. Bott’s flirtation!”

“Perhaps he did not attempt,” said Mrs. Marsham; and her tone was more than Alice was able to bear with equanimity.

“Glencora,” said she, rising, “I think I’ll leave you alone with Mrs. Marsham. I’m not disposed to discuss Mr. Bott’s character, nor to hear his name mentioned in disagreeable connection with my own.”

But Lady Glencora would not let her go. “Nonsense, Alice,” she said. “If you and I can’t fight our little battles against Mr. Bott and Mrs. Marsham without running away, it is odd.”

“I hope, Glencora, you do not count me as your enemy?” said Mrs. Marsham, drawing herself up.

“But I shall, certainly, if you attack Alice, who is the best friend I have in the world.”

“I did not mean to offend Miss Vavasor,” said Mrs. Marsham, looking at her very grimly. Alice merely bowed her head. After that, Mrs. Marsham took herself off, saying that she would be back to dinner. She was angry, but not unhappy. She thought that she could put down Miss Vavasor, and she was prepared to bear a good deal from Lady Glencora – for Mr. Palliser’s sake, as she said to herself.

“She’s a nasty old cat,” said Lady Glencora, as soon as the door was closed; and she said this with so droll a voice and with so much comedy in her grimace, that Alice could only laugh. “It won’t do for you to run away when she spits at you. You must hold your ground, and show your claws.”

“But I don’t want to be a cat myself.”

“She’ll find I’m of the tiger kind, if she persecutes me. Alice, I have made up my mind not to be persecuted. If my husband tells me to do anything, I’ll do it; but I won’t be persecuted.”

“You should remember that she was an old friend of Mr. Palliser’s mother.”

“I do remember. But I won’t be persecuted. If she gives me advice, I shall tell her that it’s not wanted; and if she insults any friend of mine, I shall tell her to stay away.”

After that, Lady Glencora felt no further inclination to show Burgo’s letter to Alice. They sat over the drawing-room fire, talking chiefly of Alice’s affairs, till it was time for them to dress. But Alice said no word about her engagement with

George Vavasor. How could she speak of it, seeing that she had already almost resolved that the engagement should be broken?

When Alice came down to the drawing-room before dinner, she found Mr. Bott there alone.

“I did not expect the pleasure of meeting Miss Vavasor today,” he said, offering his hand. She gave him hers, and then sat down, muttering some word of reply.

“We spent a very pleasant month at Matching together; didn’t you think so?”

“I spent a pleasant month there certainly.”

“You left, if I remember, the morning after that late walk out among the ruins? That was unfortunate, was it not? Poor Lady Glencora! it made her very ill; so that she could not go to Monkshade, as she particularly wished. It was very sad. Lady Glencora is very delicate indeed. We ought always to remember that.”

“I don’t think she is at all delicate. I believe she has very good health. But by delicate I suppose you mean weak and infirm.”

“Oh, dear, no, not in the least – not infirm certainly! What I mean is, not robust, Miss Vavasor.”

Alice was going to protest, when Mr. Palliser entered the room along with Mrs. Marsham.

The two gentlemen shook hands, and then Mr. Palliser turned to Alice. She perceived at once by his face that she was unwelcome, and wished herself away from his house. He just touched her hand, and asked her how she was. Then he turned away, and began talking to Mrs. Marsham on the other side. He spoke no word about Matching, no word about his wife, as he would naturally have done to his wife’s friend.

Alice felt the blood mount into her face, and regretted greatly that she had ever come here. She should have avoided her great relations. What was Lady Glencora to her that she should be treated like a poor companion, dependent on the bounty of her rich connection? Alice was proud. She had nursed her pride till it was very faulty. Why, then, should she submit to such an open lack of courtesy by such a one as Mr. Palliser, who was rolling in wealth and magnificence? She would make Lady Glencora understand that a close friendship was not possible.

“I declare I’m very much ashamed,” said Lady Glencora, as she entered the room late. “I do beg Mrs. Marsham’s pardon.”

Mrs. Marsham was all smiles and forgiveness. Then dinner was announced, and Alice had to walk downstairs by herself, because Mr. Bott stuck manfully to Lady Glencora’s side.

During dinner-time Alice said very little, nor did she have the opportunity of saying much. She thought of her first day at Matching Priory, when she had sat between the Duke of St. Bungay and Jeffrey Palliser, and when everybody had been so civil to her!

Now she had one side of the table to herself, away from the fire, where she felt cold and desolate in the gloom of the large half-lit room. Mr. Palliser occupied himself with Mrs. Marsham, who talked politics to him; and Mr. Bott was constantly trying to make conversation with Lady Glencora, who gave him no encouragement, but did not dare to snub him openly. She frequently said some little word to Alice; but it was of no avail. Alice was dumb. She was not used to being snubbed. But now she felt that the halls of the Pallisers were too cold for her, and that the sooner she escaped from their gloom and discourtesy the better.

Mrs. Marsham, when the three ladies returned to the drawing-room together, was a little triumphant. She felt that she had put Alice down; and with the energetic prudence of a good general, she determined to keep her down.

“Is Miss Vavasor going to walk home?” she asked.

“Walk home – along Oxford Street! Good gracious! no. The carriage will take her.”

“Or a cab,” said Alice. “I am quite used to go about London in a cab by myself.”

“I don’t think they are nice for young ladies after dark,” said Mrs. Marsham. “I was going to offer my servant to walk with her.”

“I’m sure Alice is very much obliged,” said Lady Glencora; “but she will have the carriage.”

“But gentlemen do so dislike having their horses out at night.”

“No gentleman’s horses will be out,” said Lady Glencora, savagely; “and as for mine, it’s what they are there for.” It was not often that Lady Glencora made any allusion to her own property; there she behaved with great reticence and delicacy. But now, when she was twitted by her husband’s friend about her husband’s horses, because she chose to send her own friend home in her own carriage, she did find it hard to bear.

“I dare say it’s all right,” said Mrs. Marsham.

“It is all right,” said Lady Glencora. “Mr. Palliser has given me my horses for my own use, to do as I like with them; and if he thinks I take them out when I ought not, he can tell me so. Nobody else has a right to do it.” Lady Glencora, by this time, was almost in a passion, and showed it.

“My dear Lady Glencora, you have mistaken me,” said Mrs. Marsham. “I did not mean anything of that kind.”

“I am so sorry,” said Alice. “And it is such a pity, as I am quite used to going about in cabs.”

“Of course you are,” said Lady Glencora. “Why shouldn’t you? That’s not the question. Mrs. Marsham understands that.”

“Upon my word, I don’t understand anything,” said that lady.

“I understand this,” said Lady Glencora; “that in all such matters as that, I intend to follow my own pleasure. Come, Alice, let us have some coffee,” and she rang the bell. “What a fuss we have made about a stupid old carriage!”

So Alice was taken home, leaving her cousin still in the hands of Mrs. Marsham.

CHAPTER 44

The Election for the Chelsea Districts

March came, and still the Chancellor of the Exchequer held his position. In early March there was given in the House a parliamentary explanation on the subject, which, however, did not explain very much. Everybody but the Cabinet protested that the Government was going to pieces; and Mr. Bott declared that this kind of thing wouldn't do. Lord Brock must decide. If he chose Mr. Palliser, Mr. Palliser would not be found wanting. But if Lord Brock did not so choose, he must expect that Mr. Palliser and his friends, would – Mr. Bott did not say what they would do; but he was assumed to hint at divisions, and to threaten Lord Brock with the open enmity of Mr. Palliser – and of Mr. Bott himself.

“This kind of thing won't do long, you know,” repeated Mr. Bott, as he stood before the fire at his club, with one or two of his young friends around him.

“I suppose not,” said Calder Jones, the hunting Member of Parliament whom we met at Roebury. “Planty Pall won't stand it, I should say.”

“What can he do?” asked another, an unfledged Member who was not quite sure whom he should follow.

“What can he do?” said Mr. Bott – who, for a moment, could almost feel that he might become a leader of a party himself. “You will very shortly see what he can do. If Lord Brock doesn't look about him, he'll find that Mr. Palliser will be in the Cabinet without his help.”

“You don't mean to say that the Queen will send for Planty Pall!” said the young Member.

“The Queen will send for anyone that the House of Commons may direct her to call upon,” said Mr. Bott. “The Queen has really nothing to do with it.”

“Come, Bott, tone it down,” said Calder Jones, whose loyalty was shocked.

“I shan't,” said Mr. Bott grandly. “All our political offences against civilization have come from that. Why can't Englishmen read and write as Americans do? Why can't they vote as they do even in Imperial France? Why are they less free than serfs in Russia? Because men in power have been toning it down!”

“But you can't set aside Her Majesty like that, you know,” said the young Member.

“I'm no republican,” said Mr. Bott, although he did not know what the word meant. “I mean no disrespect to the throne. But the power of governing this great nation does not rest with the throne. It is contained within the four walls of the House of Commons.”

“And you think Planty Pall will become Prime Minister?” said Calder Jones.

“I haven't said that; but there are more unlikely things. But I certainly think that if Lord Brock doesn't take him into the Cabinet, Lord Brock won't remain there long himself.”

In the meantime the election came on in the Chelsea districts, and south-western London was covered with posters bearing George Vavasor's name.

“Vote for Vavasor and the River Bank.” That was the cry with which he went to the electors; and it was perfectly unintelligible to most of those who read it. He was called Viscount Riverbank by all sides, and was pestered by questions about Father Thames.

It was Mr. Scruby who invented the slogan. There was a call in those days to embank the river from the Houses of Parliament up to Pimlico, and Mr. Scruby recommended Vavasor to pledge that he would have the work carried out.

"You must have a subject," pleaded Mr. Scruby; "and it should be local. It may save you thousands of pounds at future elections."

"It won't save me anything at this one, I take it."

"But it may secure the seat, Mr. Vavasor, and make you the most popular metropolitan Member in the House. Only look at the money that would be spent in the districts if the embankment were done! It would be millions, sir!"

"But it never will be done."

"What does that matter?" said Mr. Scruby. "Get the figures by heart, and as nobody else will do so, nobody can argue with you. Of course it won't be done. But you can always promise it at the hustings, and can demand it in the House."

So Vavasor allowed Mr. Scruby to manage the matter for him, and huge placards saying "Vavasor and the River Bank" were carried about by an army of men. And sides of houses were covered with "Vavasor and the River Bank", until Vavasor declared that he was ashamed to walk down the streets, so conspicuous had his name become.

Grimes the publican ridiculed the cry at first, when he canvassed for the other Liberal candidate. But, after a while, he admitted that Mr. Scruby knew what he was doing.

"He's a sharp 'un, he is," said Grimes; and he almost regretted that he had left the leadership of Mr. Scruby.

George Vavasor actually did study the subject of the River Bank. He got himself introduced to men on the Metropolitan Board, and went manfully into the figures. He was able even to work himself into an apparent heat when told that the thing was out of the question; and soon found that he had disciples who really believed in him. If he could have brought himself to care about the matter, the work would not have been difficult to him. But that was beyond him. He had gone too far in life to be capable of believing in, or of caring for, such things. He was ambitious of having a hand in the government of his country, but he was not capable of caring even for that.

But he worked hard, and spoke vehemently, and promised the men of Chelsea that the path of London westwards had hardly commenced as yet. Squares should arise around the Chelsea barracks, while Belgravia would be deserted. Three and a half million should be spent on the noble street to be constructed; the money to be drawn from – anywhere except Chelsea.

Mr. Scruby was forced to own that his pupil worked the subject well.

"Upon my word, that was uncommon good," he said, almost patting Vavasor on the back after one speech about the future glory of the embankment.

But armies of men carrying placards cost money. Mr. Scruby asked for a further fifteen hundred pounds; and his tone clearly signified that not a placard would be sent through the streets, or a poster put upon a wall, till he had the money. His joviality was absent.

The request came so suddenly that there was no time for George to communicate with Alice through his sister. He resolved, therefore, to apply to Alice himself, and he wrote to her, explaining matters.

The election had come upon him quite suddenly, as she knew, he said. He wanted two thousand pounds instantly, and felt little scruple in asking her for it, as he was aware that the old Squire would readily leave her a legacy for the repayment of this money.

Then he said a word or two about his long absence from Queen Anne Street. He had not visited because he had felt that she would prefer to be left free from the excitement of such interviews. But if he should be triumphant in the election, he should go to her to share his triumph; or, should he fail, he would go to her to console him in his failure.

Within three days he heard from her, saying that the money would be at once placed to his credit. She sent him also her candid good wishes for success, but beyond this her letter said nothing. There was no word of love or welcome, no expression of a desire to see him. Vavator, as he perceived this, felt a triumph in the possession of her money. She was ill-using him by her coldness, and there was comfort in revenge.

“It serves her right,” he said to himself. “She should have married me at once, and then the money would have been mine.”

When Mr. Tombe had communicated with John Grey about this increased demand – which Mr. Tombe regarded as going too far – Grey had telegraphed back that Vavator’s demand, if made through Mr. John Vavator, was to be honoured to the extent of five thousand pounds. Mr. Tombe raised his eyebrows, and reflected that some men were very foolish. But he did as he was asked; and the money was paid to George Vavator’s account.

George told Kate nothing of this. Why should he? He wrote no letters to his sister, though she twice wrote to him offering her own money. He could not reply to these offers without telling her that money had been obtained from Alice, and so he left them unanswered.

In the meantime the battle went on gloriously. Mr. Travers, the other Liberal candidate, spent his money freely, and George cursed his own luck in having no rich backers.

“I don’t call a man a Member when he’s elected like that,” said Mr. Scruby, comforting him. “He can’t do what he likes with his vote. He ain’t independent. Pay for it yourself, Mr. Vavator, and then it’s your own. That’s what I say.”

Mr. Grimes went to work strenuously in the opposite interest, telling all that he knew, and perhaps more, of Vavator’s circumstances. He was at work not only in his own neighbourhood, but among the men on the river bank. The entire Vavatorian army with its placards was entirely upset on more than one occasion, and was once driven into the river mud under the direction of Mr. Grimes. Vavator himself was pelted with dirt from the sinking tide, and he became angry.

“Lord love you, Mr. Vavator,” said Scruby, “that’s nothing! I’ve had a candidate covered with rotten eggs. The smell was something awful. But I brought him in.”

And Mr. Scruby at last did as much for George. At the close of the poll, Vavator’s name stood at the head by a considerable majority.

“You’ve done it very cheap, Mr. Vavator,” said Scruby. “Another thousand, or twelve hundred, will cover everything – say thirteen, perhaps. And when you’ve fought the battle once again, you’ll have paid your footing, and the fellows will let you in almost for nothing after that.”

A further thirteen hundred pounds was wanted at once, and then the whole thing was to be repeated in six months’ time! This was not a comfort. But, nevertheless, it was a triumph which George Vavator was man enough to enjoy. It would be something to have sat in the House of Commons, even if only for half a session.

CHAPTER 45

George Vavasor Takes His Seat

George Vavasor's feeling of triumph was justifiable. It is something to have sat in the House of Commons.

As one enters our great national hall, on the left-hand side are a pair of gilded lamps with a door between them. Between those lamps is the entrance to the House of Commons, and none but Members may go that way! It is the only gate before which I have ever stood filled with envy, sorrowing to think that my steps might never pass under it.

For as my slow steps have led me up that more than royal staircase, to those hallowed passages and halls, I have told myself, in anger and in grief, that to die and not to have won that right of way – not to have passed by the narrow entrance through those lamps – is not to have done that which it most becomes an Englishman to have achieved.

Doubtless, England does not always choose her six hundred and fifty-four best men. The George Vavasors, the Calder Joneses, and the Botts are admitted. Dishonesty, ignorance, and vulgarity do not close the gate of that heaven, though riches open it.

Yet the best of England's Commoners do find their way there. It is the highest pride of an Englishman to have the letters M.P. written after his name. No other membership confers so fair an honour. From within the walls of that House flow the waters of the world's advancing civilization.

George Vavasor, as he went in by the lamps under the guardianship of Mr. Bott, felt all due pride. He was capable, in dreamy moments, of looking at the thing with pure and almost noble eyes; of understanding the ambition of serving faithfully so great a nation.

George Vavasor, I think, might have been a good, and perhaps a great man; whereas Mr. Bott had been born small. Vavasor had educated himself to badness knowingly. He had known what was wrong, and had done it. But poor Mr. Bott had meant to do well, and thought that he had done very well indeed. He was a flatterer and a toady, but he did not know this was wrong. He was both mean and vain, both a bully and a coward, and in politics, I fear, quite unscrupulous; but he believed that he was progressing by the proper means.

Vavasor, in his dreamy moments, would sometimes feel tempted to cut his throat and put an end to himself, because he knew that he had taught himself wrongly. He would sadly ask himself whether it was still too late; and he always answered that it was. Even now, at this moment, as he went in between the lamps with honest pride, he told himself it was too late. What could he do now, hampered by the debt he owed his cousin, and with the knowledge that it must be hugely increased, unless he meant to give up this seat in Parliament almost before he had begun to enjoy it?

But his courage was good, and he resolved to play out his game to the end. He had achieved his seat in the House of Commons. Men were gracious to him now, and those who had not treated him with courtesy began to be very civil. It was a great thing to have the privilege of that entrance between the lamps.

Mr. Bott had the new Member in hand, not because there was any old friendship between them, but because Mr. Bott was on the look-out for followers, and Vavasor was on the look-out for a party. Vavasor, as he passed through the lobby to the door

of the House with Mr. Bott, was very silent. He was not very well pleased by the garrulity of his companion. He believed in his own ability and his own courage; but he did not believe in his own conduct. He feared that he had done – and would in future be driven to do – that which would shut men's ears against his words, and would banish him from high places. No man believes in himself who knows himself to be a rascal.

“Of course you have heard a debate?” said Mr. Bott.

“Yes,” answered Vavasor.

“But you have heard debates from the gallery. Now you'll hear them from the body of the House, and you'll find how very different it is. No man can know what Parliament is who has never had a seat. I felt, very early in life, that that should be my line; and though it's hard work and no pay, I mean to stick to it. How do, Thompson? You know Vavasor? He's just returned for the Chelsea Districts, and I'm taking him up. We shan't divide tonight, shall we? Look! there's Farringcourt just coming out; he's listened to better than any man in the House, but he'll borrow half-a-crown from you if you'll lend him one. How d'ye do, my lord? I hope you are well?” and Bott bowed low to a lord who was shuffling through the lobby. “Of course you know him?”

Vavasor was obliged to say he did not.

“That was Viscount Middlesex; he has got something on tonight about the Irish Church. We'll go in now; but let me give you one bit of advice, my dear fellow – don't think of speaking this session. A Member can do no good by speaking till he has learned the forms of the House. This is Mr. Vavasor, the new Member for the Chelsea Districts.”

Our friend was thus introduced to the doorkeeper, who smiled familiarly, and seemed to wink. Then George Vavasor passed through into the House itself.

Vavasor, as he walked up to the Clerk's table and took the oath and then walked down again, was almost taken aback by the little notice which was taken of him. It was not that he had expected to create a sensation, but the thing which he was doing was so great to him that the total indifference of those around him came as a surprise. After he had taken his seat, a few men came up and shook hands with him; but merely, it seemed, because they were passing that way. He was anxious not to sit next to Mr. Bott, but he was unable to avoid it. So he found himself sitting behind Mr. Palliser, a little to the right, while Mr. Bott occupied the ear of the rising man.

There was a debate in progress. It seemed to Vavasor that it was a dull affair. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was on his legs, and Mr. Palliser was watching him as a cat watches a mouse. The speaker was full of figures; and Mr. Bott, with audible whispers, poured into the ear of his chief his own calculations, most of which went to prove that the Chancellor was altogether wrong. Vavasor thought that Mr. Palliser received more of this assistance than he liked. He would listen, if he did listen, without making any sign that he heard, and would occasionally shake his head impatiently.

But Mr. Bott was not to be repressed. When Mr. Palliser shook his head he became more assiduous than ever, and when Mr. Palliser slightly moved himself to the left, he boldly followed him.

No general debate arose on the subject, and when the Chancellor sat down, Mr. Palliser would not get up, though Mr. Bott counselled him to do so. The matter was over for the night, and the time had arrived for Lord Middlesex. That nobleman got upon his feet, with a roll of papers in his hand, and was proceeding to address the House on matters of church reform, with great energy; but, alas, for him! before he

had got into full swing, the Members were swarming away through the doors like a flock of sheep.

Mr. Palliser got up and went, and was followed at once by Mr. Bott, who succeeded in getting hold of his arm in the lobby. Had not Mr. Palliser been an even-tempered man, with a mind and spirit well under his command, he must have learned to hate Mr. Bott by now.

Away streamed the Members, but still the noble lord went on speaking as though no such exodus were in process. He knew that the newspapers would not report one sentence in twenty of his speech. He knew that he had worked for weeks and months to get up his facts, and realised that he had worked in vain. He had given heart and soul to this affair. He believed in his own subject with a great faith, thinking that he could bring men nearer to their God. Though he shuffled when he walked, and knocked his words together when he talked, he was an earnest man, meaning to do well, seeking no reward other than appreciation. But this was never to be his.

And yet he will work on to the end, either in this House or in the other, labouring wearily, without visible wages of any kind, and, one may say, very sadly. But when he has been taken to his long rest, men will remember that he served a good cause diligently, and not altogether inefficiently. Invisible is the thing he does, and yet it is done.

But on the present occasion there was nothing to soothe his spirit. The Speaker sat, urbane and courteous, with his eyes turned towards the unfortunate orator; but no other ears in the House seemed to listen to him. Vavasor sat it out to the last, as it taught him those forms of the House which Mr. Bott had told him he needed to learn. And at last he did learn the form of a "count-out." Some one from a back seat muttered something, and the Speaker heard and counted the Members in the House. Finding only twenty-three Members, he put an end to the labours of poor Lord Middlesex.

And yet earlier on that same day Farringcourt had spoken in the House – a man to whom no one would lend a shilling, and whose word no one believed; but three hundred men had hung upon his words. When he laughed in his speech, they laughed; when he was indignant, they sat breathless. Whichever way he turned, he carried them with him. Crowds of Members flocked into the House from libraries and smoking-rooms when it was known that this ne'er-do-well was speaking. The reporters filled their pages. And as the Premier was attacked with irony, men declared that he would have to enrol the speaker among his colleagues. A man who could shake the thunderbolts like that must be paid to shake them on the right side. It was this man that Lord Middlesex envied!

Mr. Bott had left the House with Mr. Palliser; and after the count-out Vavasor walked home by himself, thinking of the position which he had achieved. He told himself over and over again that he had won a great thing, and tried to persuade himself that the price was not too dear.

But already there had come upon him some feeling of anti-climax and disappointment. There had been no brilliance in the debate, and the Members had loomed no larger than ordinary men at ordinary clubs. The great men named in the papers had sat silent, gloomy, and apparently idle; as soon as they could, they escaped from the House, as boys might escape from school. Vavasor had spent everything that he had to become a Member of that House, and now, as he went alone to his lodgings, he could not help asking himself whether it was worth the purchase-money.

But his courage was still high. Though he was gloomy, and almost sad, he knew that he would fight the battle to the last. In the morrow he would go to Queen Anne

Street, and would demand sympathy from Alice. With her, at any rate, the glory of his Membership would not be dimmed by any knowledge of the realities. She had only seen the play acted from the boxes; and to her eyes the dresses would still be of silk velvet, and the swords of bright steel.

CHAPTER 46

A Love Gift

When Alice heard of her cousin's success, she resolved that she would be triumphant. She had sacrificed nearly everything to this aim, and now he had achieved the first great step. If she could not rejoice in that, what source of joy would be left for her? She had promised to be his wife because she wished to assist his struggles, and to aid him in his public career. She strove, therefore, to be triumphant, but she knew that she was striving in vain. She had made a mistake, and the days were coming in which she would have admit it to herself, and to repent.

When the news was first brought to her, she sat down at once to write him a word of congratulation. But she found the task more difficult than she had expected, and gave it up. She did not know how to address him.

"I will wait till he comes," she said. "It will be easier to speak than to write." But she wrote to Kate, and managed to put some note of triumph into her letter. Kate had written to her at length, with sincere rejoicing. To Kate in Westmorland, it seemed that her brother had already done everything. He had made the great leap, and had overcome the only obstacle that Fate had placed in his way – the lack of money. In her great joy and enthusiasm she almost forgot where the money had come from.

"I am proud," she wrote. "No other thing would have made me so proud of him. If the Queen had made him an earl, it would have been as nothing compared to this. When I think that he has forced his way into Parliament without any great friend, with nothing to back him but his own wit," – she had, in truth, forgotten Alice's money as she wrote – "I do feel proud of my brother. And, Alice, I hope that you are proud of your lover." Poor girl! She knew nothing of Messrs. Grimes and Scruby, and the River Bank, and could not have learnt how elections are conducted.

"He is not my lover," Alice said to herself. "He understands that, though she may not." And if not your lover, Alice Vavasor, what is he then to you? And what are you to him? She was beginning to understand that she had put herself in the way of utter destruction; that she had walked to the brink of a precipice, and that she must now topple over it. She sat silent and moody, and it took her hours to get her answer written to Kate.

On the same afternoon she saw her father for a moment or two.

"So George has got himself returned," he said.

"Yes, he has been successful. I'm sure you must be glad, papa."

"Upon my word, I'm not. He has bought a seat for three months; and with whose two thousand pounds?"

"Don't let us always speak of money, papa. If as much is wanted for the next election he shall have it."

"Very well, my dear. If you choose to make a beggar of yourself, I cannot help it. Indeed, I shall not complain about him spending all your money, if you do not marry him at last."

Alice said nothing. On that point her father's wishes were fast growing to be identical with her own.

"I tell you what I think," he continued. "Nothing, in my opinion, would be so deplorable and ruinous as such a marriage. You tell me that you have made up your mind to take him, and I know that nothing that I can say will turn you. But I believe that when he has spent all your money he will not take you after all. You can hardly

expect that I should triumph because he has got himself into Parliament with your money!”

When he left, it seemed to Alice that he had been very cruel. There had been nothing of a father’s loving tenderness in his words – although Alice herself had made tenderness on this subject impossible.

On the next morning George went to her. The reader will, perhaps, remember their last interview, when he had asked for a kiss; but she had refused him. She had shuddered, showing him more clearly than any words that she felt none of the love of a woman for him. He had turned from her in anger; and since then, he had borrowed her money twice. How would he address her? He was not a man to forget the treatment he had received.

When he entered the room, Alice looked at him almost furtively. She was afraid of him. But she perceived that the gash on his face was nearly closed; the mark of anger was not there. He had come to her intending to be gentle, if possible.

“George, I am so glad that you have succeeded!” she said. “I wish you joy with my whole heart.”

“Thanks, dearest. But before I say another word, let me acknowledge my debt. Unless you had aided me with your money, I could not have succeeded.”

“Oh, George! pray don’t speak of that!”

“Let me rather speak of it at once, and have done. You know that I must speak of it sooner or later.” He smiled and looked pleasant, as he used to do in those Swiss days. “I hope you have trusted me in giving me the command of your fortune?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I do believe that you have. I could not have stood for this last election without it; and if I had not come forward at this vacancy, I should have stood no chance for the next. You can understand that; eh, Alice?”

“Yes.”

“Even your father would tell you that; though he probably regards my ambition to be a Member of Parliament as a sign of downright madness. But about the money! It is quite possible that I may be forced to ask for another loan when the autumn comes.”

“You shall have it, George.”

“Thanks, Alice. And now I will tell you what I propose. You know that I have been reconciled – in a way – with my grandfather? Well, when the next election is over, I wish to tell him exactly how you and I stand.”

“Do not go into that now, George. Simply be assured that I will help you all I can. I want you to feel the full joy of your success, and you will do so more thoroughly if you will banish money troubles from your mind for a while.”

“They shall, at any rate, be banished while I am with you,” said he. “There; let them go!” And he lifted up his right hand, and blew at the tips of his fingers. “Let them vanish,” said he.

It was a pretty bit of acting; and, upon the whole, I do not know that he could have done better. But Alice saw through it, and he knew that she did so. The whole thing was uncomfortable to him, except the fact that he had the promise of her further money.

But he was not satisfied with this. He must extract from her some show of sympathy or approval, some spark of affection, true or pretended, so that he might speak of the future without open embarrassment.

“I have already taken my seat,” said he.

“Yes; I saw that in the newspapers. My acquaintance among Members of Parliament is very small, but I see that you were introduced by one of the few men that I do know. Is Mr. Bott a friend of yours?”

“No, certainly not. I may have to act with him in public.”

“Ah, that’s just what they said about Mr. Palliser when they felt ashamed of his having him as his guest. I think if I were in public life I should try to act with people that I could like.”

“Then you dislike Mr. Bott?”

“I do not like him.”

“He is a vulgar ass,” said George, “with no more pretensions to rank himself a gentleman than a footman. But he will get on in Parliament, to a certain extent.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand what Parliamentary success requires. Is his ambition, do you suppose, the same as yours?”

“His ambition, I think, does not go beyond a desire to be Parliamentary flunkey to a big man – with wages, if possible.”

“And yours?”

“There are some things, Alice, that a man does not tell to anyone.”

“Are there? They must be very terrible things.”

“The schoolboy, when he sits down to make his rhymes, dares not say, even to his sister, that he hopes to rival Milton; but he nurses such a hope. The preacher, when he preaches his sermon, does not whisper, even to his wife, his belief that thousands may be turned to repentance by his words; but he thinks that it is possible.”

“And you intend to make your thousand converts in politics.”

“I like to hear you laugh at me. It does me good to hear your voice again with some touch of satire in it. It brings back the old days – the days to which I hope we may soon revert without pain. Shall it not be so, dearest?”

Her playful manner at once deserted her. “I do not know,” she said, gloomily.

For a few minutes he sat silent, fingering a small steel paper-knife, of no great value, which was lying on the table. He sat with it, passing it through his fingers, while she went on with her needlework.

“Who gave you this paper-cutter?” he said, suddenly.

“Goodness me, why do you ask in that way?”

“I asked simply because if it is a present to you from any one, I will take up something else.”

“It was given me by Mr. Grey.”

He let it drop from his fingers on to the table with a noise, and then pushed it away, so that it fell off the other side.

“George,” she said, as she stooped and picked it up, “your violence is unreasonable.”

“I beg your pardon. I was simply unfortunate in the article I selected. Who gave you this?” He picked up a little folding ivory ruler.

“No one gave me that; I bought it at a stupid bazaar.”

“Then this will do. You shall give it me as a present, on the renewal of our love.”

“It is too poor a thing to give,” said she, more gloomily than before.

“By no means; nothing is too poor. Anything will do; a ribbon, a glove, a broken sixpence. Will you give me something that I may take, and know that your heart is given with it?”

“Take the ruler, if you please,” she said.

“And the heart?” he asked.

He should have been either more of a rascal, or less. He should have been content with simply acquiring her money. But it was necessary for his comfort that she should say she loved him. "Well, Alice, and what about the heart?" he asked again.

"I would much rather talk about politics, George," said she.

The scar began to make itself very visible in his face, and the debonair manner was fast vanishing. He had fixed his eyes upon her, and inserted his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat.

"Alice, that is not quite fair," he said.

"I do not mean to be unfair."

"I am not so sure. I think you do mean it. You have told me that you intend to become my wife. If, after that, you wilfully make me miserable, will not that be unfair?"

"I am not making you miserable, certainly not wilfully."

"Did that letter which you wrote to me from Westmorland mean anything?"

Alice sat silent, turning her face away, longing that the meeting might be over, and feeling that she had lost her own self-respect.

"Look here, Alice," he said, "I find it very hard to understand you. When I look back over all that has passed between us, and to that other episode in your life, compared to your conduct to me now, I find myself at a loss."

"I fear I cannot help you."

"When you first loved me – for you did love me; I understood that well enough – and when you quarrelled with me, judging my offences somewhat harshly, I understood that also; for it is the custom of women to be hard in their judgement on such sins. When I heard that you had accepted the offer made to you by that gentleman in Cambridgeshire, I thought it was natural that you should seek some cure for your wound. I understood it, and accused myself, not you, in that I had driven you to so fatal a remedy."

Here Alice turned round towards him sharply, as though she were going to interrupt him, but she said nothing.

He went on. "And I understood it well when I heard that this cure had been too much for you. I have not a word to say against him. For many women he would make a model husband, but you are not one of them. And you discovered this yourself. Yes, by heavens! if ever woman had been driven to a mistake, you had been driven to one there."

Here she met his eyes with something of his own fierceness in her face, as though she were preparing to fight with him; but she still said nothing, and he again went on.

"And, Alice, when you again consented to be my wife, I thought that I still understood you. I may have been vain to think so, but surely it was natural. I believed that the old love had come back to you, and warmed your heart. Was that unnatural? Put yourself in my place, and say if you would not have thought so. I told myself that you had acted as a true, and good, and loving woman. I thought of you much, and I saw that your conduct, as a whole, was intelligible and becoming."

The last word grated on Alice's ears, and she showed her anger by tapping her foot upon the floor. Her cousin noticed it, but went on as though he had not.

"But now your behaviour is a riddle. You have said that you would be my wife, and yet you receive me with coldness. What am I to think? How would you have me behave to you? When I was last here I asked you for a kiss." He said this with the wound down his face all wide and purple. I think that, in speaking, a touch of true passion had come upon him; that he had forgotten his rascaldom, and his need of her money, and his wish to punish her.

“I asked you for a kiss. If you are to be my wife you can have no shame in granting me one. What am I to think?” Then he paused again, and she found that she must say something.

“I wonder you cannot understand,” she said, “that I have suffered much.”

“And is that to be my answer?”

“I don’t know what answer you want.”

“Come, Alice; you do know what answer I want. I desire to learn that the woman who is to be my wife loves me.”

Still she said nothing. He held the little ruler as though in doubt what he would do with it. “Well, Alice, am I to hear anything from you?”

“Not now, George; you are angry, and I will not speak to you in your anger.”

“Have I not cause to be angry? Do you not know that you are treating me badly?”

“I know that my head aches, and that I am very wretched. I wish you would leave me.”

“There, then, is your gift,” said he, and he threw the ruler on to the sofa behind her. “And there is the trumpery trinket which I had hoped you would have worn for my sake.” Something which he had taken from his waistcoat-pocket was thrown violently into the fender, beneath the fire-grate. He then walked quickly to the door; but when his hand was on the handle, he turned.

“Alice,” he said, “when I am gone, try to think honestly of your conduct to me.” Then he went, and she remained still, till she heard the front door close.

When she was sure that he was gone, her first movement was to search for the trinket. This was not very dignified; but I think that it was natural. It was not that she had any desire for the jewel, but she had a reluctance that anything of value should be destroyed without a purpose. So she took the shovel, and poked among the ashes, and found the ring which her cousin had thrown there. It was a valuable ring, with a ruby between two small diamonds; but one of the side stones had been knocked out by the violence with which the ring had been flung. She searched for this in vain, before deciding that the diamond should be lost for ever amongst the cinders.

Then she folded the ring up carefully in a sheet of note-paper, and put it in the drawer of her desk. After that she sat down at the table to think; but her head was racked with pain, and she could bring her thoughts to no conclusion.

CHAPTER 47

Mr. Cheesacre's Disappointment

When Mrs. Greenow was left alone in her lodgings, after the little dinner with her two lovers, she sat down to think. There were three paths open before her. She might take Mr. Cheesacre, or she might take Captain Bellfield – or she might take neither. She was going to leave Norwich after Easter, and they knew it. Something had been said about her returning to Yarmouth in the summer. She was a just woman at heart, and felt that each man should know his prospect if she did return.

There was a good deal to be said on Mr. Cheesacre's behalf. Mahogany-furnished bedrooms are very comfortable; and heaps of manure, though not romantic, are useful in farming. Mrs. Greenow by no means despised these things; and as for their owner, though she saw much amiss in his character, she thought that his little foibles were of such a nature that a wife of spirit might be able to repress them, if not to cure them. But she had already married for money once, as she told herself, and she thought that she might now venture on a little love.

Her marriage for money had been successful. The nursing of old Greenow had not been disagreeable, nor had it taken longer than she had anticipated. She had now got her due reward, and she really did feel grateful to his memory. Some of her tears were dropped with sincerity. She was essentially a happy-natured woman, who looked back upon her past life with contentment, and forward to her future life with confidence. She would not be greedy, she said to herself. She did not want more money, and therefore she would have none of Mr. Cheesacre. However, she also resolved that, if possible, the mahogany-furnished bedrooms should be kept in the family, and made over to her niece, Kate Vavasor.

But should she marry Captain Bellfield? Strange to say, his poverty and scampishness and lies almost recommended him to her. She was not afraid of them; she thought that she could cure them – if they needed curing. As for his stories about Inkerman, and his little debts, she cared nothing about that. She also had her Inkermans, and she too had owed money for her gloves and corsets in the ante-Greenow days.

But she was aware of the danger that there might be more behind, of which she had never heard. Another Mrs. Bellfield was not impossible; and what if he should not be a real captain at all! Such things had happened. Her chief security was in this: that Cheesacre had known the man for many years, and would certainly have told anything against him that he knew.

Between nine and ten in the evening, Jeannette brought to her some arrowroot with sherry, which it was her habit to take before retiring for the night.

"Jeannette," she said, as she stirred the bowl, "I'm afraid those two gentlemen have quarrelled."

"Oh, ma'am, of course they have! How was they to help it?"

Jeannette, on these occasions, usually stood by her mistress's chair, chatting with her; and if the chatting was much prolonged, she would gradually sink down upon the corner of a chair herself – and then the two women would be very comfortable together over the fire, Jeannette never forgetting that she was the servant, and Mrs. Greenow never forgetting that she was the mistress.

"Why should they quarrel, Jeannette? It's very foolish."

“I don’t know about being foolish, ma’am; but it’s natural. If I had two beaux as was a-courting me together, I should expect as they would punch each other’s heads.”

“But you don’t suppose that I want beaux, as you call them?”

“That’s as may be, ma’am. But they are; and if they was to blow each other’s brains out in the gig tonight, I shouldn’t be a bit surprised.” As she said this, Jeannette slipped into her chair.

“Why, you silly child, they’re not going home together. Did not the Captain go away first?”

“He did, but I thought perhaps it was to get his pistols ready.”

“They won’t fight, Jeannette. Gentlemen have given over fighting.”

“Dear, dear; I was so sure we should have had the papers full of it, and perhaps one of them stretched upon his bloody bier! I wonder which it would have been? I always made up my mind that the Captain wouldn’t be wounded.”

“But why should they quarrel at all, Jeannette? It is the most foolish thing. I have never said a word to encourage either of them. You know I haven’t, Jeannette.” Mrs. Greenow put her handkerchief to her eyes.

“To be sure, ma’am, no lady could have behaved better than you have done. If gentlemen will make fools of themselves, it isn’t your fault; is it, ma’am?”

“But I’m so sorry that they should have quarrelled. They were such dear friends, you know.”

“When you’ve settled which it’s to be, ma’am, that’ll all come right again.” Then there was a little pause. “I suppose, ma’am, it won’t be Mr. Cheesacre?”

“I shall always regard Mr. Cheesacre as a dear friend; but he’ll never be more than that.”

“Then it’ll be the Captain, ma’am? I’m sure, for my part, I’ve always thought the Captain was the nicer gentleman.”

“He’s nothing to me, girl.”

“And as for money – what’s the good of having more than enough? If he can bring love, you can bring money; can’t you, ma’am?”

“He’s nothing to me, girl,” repeated Mrs. Greenow.

“But he will be?” asked Jeannette.

“Well, I’m sure! What’s the world come to, when you cross-examine your mistress in that way! Get to bed, will you? It’s near ten o’clock. Next week we shall be packing up, and there’ll be all my things to see to.”

So Jeannette departed, and after some further thought about Captain Bellfield, Mrs. Greenow went to her bed.

Mr. Cheesacre, when he drove back to Oileymead alone, had kept himself hot with passion against Bellfield; and his heat had been sustained by his seeing the Captain, with his portmanteau, escaping just as he reached his home. But early on the following morning he thought of Mrs. Greenow, and he remembered some of the hard things which she had said to him.

He had made mistakes in his manner of wooing. He was quite aware of that now, and was determined to put them right. She had rebuked him for saying nothing about his love. He would instantly mend that fault. And she had bidden him not to talk so much about his wealth. Henceforth he would be dumb on that subject. Nevertheless, he said to himself, “She can’t really like a poor beggarly wretch who hasn’t got a shilling.”

He was very far from feeling that the battle was lost. Her last word to him had been an assurance of her friendship. He was, no doubt, becoming tired of courtship, and heartily wished that the work were over; but he was not minded to give it up.

So he prepared himself for another attack, and took himself back to Norwich. On this occasion he dressed himself with considerable care, in knickerbockers, with tight, bright, leather gaiters round his legs, thinking his manly proportions might stand him in good stead. And he put on a new shooting-coat, and a wonderful waistcoat embroidered with foxes' heads. He completed his outfit with a round hat, dog-skin gloves, and a whip.

Thus armed he went forth resolved to conquer or to die. He drove at a great pace into the inn-yard, threw his reins to the ostler, took one glass of cherry-brandy at the bar, and then marched off across the market-place to the Close with decisive steps, pausing only at a pastrycook's where he had another glass of cherry-brandy.

He knocked at the door, and in another second was in the presence of his angel.

"Mr. Cheesacre, whoever expected to see you in Norwich on a Thursday?" said the lady.

He answered boldly. "There's no knowing when I may be in Norwich, Mrs. Greenow. I'm one of those men of whom nobody knows anything certain, except that I pay as I go." Then he remembered that he was not to make any more boasts about his money. "There's one other thing they may all know if they please, but we won't say what that is just at present."

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Cheesacre?"

"Well, thank you, I will sit down for a few minutes. Mrs. Greenow, I'm in such a state of mind that I must put an end to it, or else I shall go mad, and do somebody a damage."

"Dear me! what has happened to you? You're going out shooting soon, are you not?" and Mrs. Greenow looked at his clothes.

"No, Mrs. Greenow, I'm not going shooting. I like to be nice, and all that kind of thing. There are people who think that because a man farms his own land, he must be always in the muck. But it don't matter what a man wears if his heart isn't easy."

"I don't know why you should speak in that way, Mr. Cheesacre; but it's what I have felt every hour since – since Greenow left me."

This allusion to the departed one did not help Mr. Cheesacre. He felt that some decided method of proceeding was required. Little hints at love-making had been all very well earlier on; but now there must be more than little hints. The widow herself had told him that he ought to talk about love; and he had taken two glasses of cherry-brandy, hoping that they might enable him to do so. He was resolved to speak boldly; but how was he to begin? There was the difficulty. He remained silent for a minute or two. Then he jumped up before her.

"Mrs. Greenow," he exclaimed, "dearest Mrs. Greenow; will you be my wife? There! I have said it, and I mean it. Everything that I've got shall be yours. As for love; oh, Arabella, if you only knew me! I don't think there's a man in Norfolk better able to love a woman than I am. Ever since I first saw you at Yarmouth, I've been in love to that extent that I've not known what I'm about. I haven't really."

"Has that been my fault, Mr. Cheesacre?"

"Upon my word it has. I can't move anywhere without thinking about you. My mind's made up; I won't stay at Oileymead unless you will come and be its mistress."

"Not stay at Oileymead?"

"No, indeed. I'll let the place, and go and travel. What's the use of my hanging on there without the woman of my heart? I couldn't do it, Mrs. Greenow. Of course I've got everything there that money can buy – but it's all of no use to a man that's in love. Do you know, I've come quite to despise money and all that sort of thing. I haven't had my banker's book home these last three months. Only think of that now."

“But how can I help you, Mr. Cheesacre?”

“Say you’ll be my wife? I’ll be so good to you. As for your fortune, I don’t care that for it! I’m not like somebody else; it’s yourself I want. You shall be my pet, and my poppet, and my dearest little duck all the days of your life.”

“No, Mr. Cheesacre; it cannot be.”

“And why not? Look here, Arabella!” He rose from his chair, and went down on both knees so close to her that she could not escape. There could be no doubt about the efficacy of the cherry-brandy. There was some little cracking and straining of his gaiters as he knelt. He did not notice this; but Mrs. Greenow was painfully aware that he might not be able to rise with ease.

“Mr. Cheesacre, don’t make a fool of yourself. Get up,” said she.

“Never, till you have told me that you will be mine!”

“Then you’ll remain there for ever, which will be inconvenient. Don’t take my hand, Mr. Cheesacre. I tell you to stop.”

He released her hand, but made no attempt to rise.

“I never saw a man look so much like a fool in my life,” said she. “If you don’t get up, I’ll push you over. Don’t you hear? There’s somebody coming.”

But Cheesacre did not hear. “I’ll never get up,” said he, “till you have bid me hope.”

“Bid you play the fiddle. Get away from my knees. There; he’ll be in the room now before—”

Cheesacre now did hear footsteps, and the door opened while he made his first futile attempt to get back to a standing position. Captain Bellfield entered.

“I beg ten thousand pardons,” said he, “but as I did not see Jeannette, I ventured to come in. May I congratulate my friend Cheesacre on his success?”

In the meantime Cheesacre had risen, with difficulty. “I’ll trouble you to leave the room, Captain Bellfield,” said he.

“Certainly, if Mrs. Greenow wishes me to do so,” said the Captain.

Mrs. Greenow felt herself called upon to speak.

“Captain Bellfield, I must beg you to understand that the position in which you found Mr. Cheesacre was one altogether of his own seeking. It was not with my consent that he was there.”

“I can easily believe that, Mrs. Greenow,” said the Captain.

“Who cares what you believe, sir?” said Mr. Cheesacre.

“Gentlemen! gentlemen! this is really unkind. Captain Bellfield, I think I had better ask you to withdraw.”

“By all means,” said Mr. Cheesacre.

“As it is absolutely necessary that I should give Mr. Cheesacre a definite answer—”

“Of course,” said Captain Bellfield, preparing to go. “Perhaps I might be allowed to come this evening?”

To this Mrs. Greenow half assented with a nod, and the Captain went. As soon as the door was closed, Mr. Cheesacre again prepared to throw himself into his former position, but Mrs. Greenow promptly said, “Mr. Cheesacre, let there be an end to this little farce.”

“Farce!” said he, standing with his hand on his heart.

“It is certainly either a farce or a mistake. If I have been at all to blame, I ask your pardon most sincerely.”

“But you’ll be Mrs. Cheesacre; won’t you?”

“No, Mr. Cheesacre; no. One husband is enough for any woman, and mine lies buried at Birmingham.”

“Oh, damn it!” said he, in utter disgust. It was not courteous; but even Mrs. Greenow herself felt that the poor man had been provoked.

“Let us part friends,” said she, offering him her hand.

But he turned his back upon her, for there was something in his eye that he wanted to hide. I believe that he really did love her.

“Will you not give me your hand,” said she, “to show that there is no anger between us?”

“Do think again! If there’s anything you like to have changed, I’ll change it at once. I’ll give up Oileymead altogether, if you don’t like being so near the farm-yard. Mrs. Greenow, if you only knew how I’ve set my heart upon it!” And now, though his back was turned, the whimpering of his voice told plainly that tears were in his eyes.

She was a little touched. No woman would feel disposed to marry a man simply because he cried, and Mrs. Greenow had seen too much of the world to fall into such a blunder as that; but she was touched.

“My friend,” she said, putting her hand upon his arm, “think no more of it.”

“But I can’t help thinking of it,” said he, almost blubbing.

“No, no, no,” said she. “Why, Mr. Cheesacre, how can you care for an old woman like me, when so many pretty young ladies would give their eyes to get a kind word from you?”

“I don’t want any young lady,” said he.

“There’s Charlie Fairstairs, who would make as good a wife as any girl I know.”

“Psha! Charlie Fairstairs, indeed!”

“Or my niece, Kate Vavasor.”

“She’s nothing to me, Mrs. Greenow.”

“That’s because you never asked her to be anything. If I get her to come back to Yarmouth next summer, will you think about it? You want a wife, and you couldn’t do better if you searched all England. It would be so pleasant for us to be near friends; wouldn’t it?” And again she put her hand upon his arm.

“Mrs. Greenow, at present there’s only one woman in the world that I can think of.”

“And that’s my niece.”

“And that’s yourself. I’m a broken-hearted man – I am, indeed. I hardly know what to do with myself; but I suppose I’d better go back to Oileymead. I shall always hate the place now,” he said.

“That will pass away. You’d be as happy as a king there, if you’d take Kate for your queen.”

“And what’ll you do, Mrs. Greenow?”

“What shall I do? If you marry Kate, I’ll come and stay with you half my time, and nurse the children, as an old grand-aunt should.”

“But –” He hesitated. “You don’t mean to take that man Bellfield, do you?”

“Come, Mr. Cheesacre, that’s jealousy. What right can you have to ask me whether I shall take any man? The chances are that I shall remain as I am till I’m carried to my grave; but I’m not going to give any promise about it to you or to anyone.”

“You don’t know that man, Mrs. Greenow; you don’t, indeed. He hasn’t got a shilling. And for lies, there’s no beating him!”

“Why, then, has he been such a friend of yours?”

“Well, because I’ve been foolish. I took up with him just because he looked pleasant, I suppose.”

“And you want to prevent me from doing the same.”

“If you were to marry him, Mrs. Greenow, it’s my belief I should do him a mischief; I don’t think I could stand it. A mean, skulking beggar! I suppose I’d better go now?”

“Certainly, if that’s the way you choose to talk about my friends.”

“Well, I won’t say any more at present. I suppose if I was to talk for ever it wouldn’t be any good?”

“Come and talk to Kate Vavasor for ever, Mr. Cheesacre.”

To this he made no reply, but left, and drove home to Oileymead, thinking of his disappointment with all the bitterness of a young lover.

“I didn’t think I should ever care so much about anything,” he said, as he took himself to bed that night.

That evening Captain Bellfield did call in the Close, as he had said he would, but he was not admitted.

“Her mistress had a headache,” said Jeannette.

CHAPTER 48

Preparations for Lady Monk's Party

Early in April, Lady Monk gave a grand party in London, at her large town house in Gloucester Square. Lady Monk usually gave two or three such parties in the season, and spent much time and energy ensuring that they would be successful. And she seldom failed.

It was generally acknowledged to be the proper thing to go to Lady Monk's parties. There were certain people who went as a matter of course – people who were by no means close friends with Lady Monk, or with Sir Cosmo, but whom it was proper to invite. The Duchess of St. Bungay was always there, though she hated Lady Monk; and Mrs. Conway Sparkes was generally there, although Lady Monk did not know why Mrs. Conway Sparkes was so favoured by the world; but so the fact was, and she bowed to it.

Then there were another set, who were invited only when it suited. Among these were old family friends of her husband, and scores of young ladies whose mothers and aunts knew Lady Monk's sisters and cousins. They accepted as much of Lady Monk's good things as she offered them, and were thankful.

Then there was another lot again, which was the most numerous of the three. It comprised all those who fought almost tooth and nail to get invitations. If Lady Monk had admitted them all, she would have been swamped; but she did not shut her doors against them altogether. Rather, she yielded to as few as possible.

When she was first told that Mr. Bott wanted to come, she positively refused to have him. When it was hinted that the Duchess of St. Bungay had requested it, she sneered at the Duchess, and did not yield. But when she learnt that Mr. Palliser wished it, and that Mr. Palliser probably would not come himself otherwise, she gave way. She was especially anxious that Lady Glencora should come to her gathering, and Lady Glencora could not be had without Mr. Palliser.

"Burgo," said she to her nephew one morning, "look here." Burgo was staying with her in Gloucester Square, much to the annoyance of Sir Cosmo, who was heartily tired of his nephew. The aunt and the nephew had been closeted together often lately. Now she handed a little note to Burgo, which he read and threw back to her.

"You see that she is not afraid of coming," said Lady Monk.

"I suppose she doesn't think about it much," said Burgo.

"If that's what you really believe, you'd better give it up. Nothing would justify such a step on your part except a conviction that she is attached to you."

Burgo looked at the fireplace, almost savagely, and his aunt looked at him very keenly.

"I think I'd better hang myself," he said.

"Burgo, I will not have you here if you talk that way. I am trying to help you; but if you look like that, and talk like that, I will give it up."

"I think you'd better give it up."

"Are you becoming cowardly?"

"I am not a coward. I'd go out and fight him with the greatest pleasure in the world."

"You know that's nonsense, Burgo."

"I'd take her tomorrow if I could. No one can say that I'm afraid. And I believe she loves me."

"Look here, Burgo," the aunt advised her ruined nephew. "I think you were much wronged in that matter. I thought that you had a right to claim Lady Glencora as your wife. Mr. Palliser, in my mind, behaved very wrongly in stepping in between you and such a fortune as hers. He cannot expect that his wife should have any affection for him. Nobody has a greater horror of anything improper in married women than I have. But if you succeed, I shall always regard the Palliser episode in Lady Glencora's life as a tragic accident. Poor dear! I should think no harm of helping her. If you are to say anything to her, you might have an opportunity at the party."

"I've got no money." The words were growled out rather than spoken, and Burgo did not even look at his aunt.

"You've never got any money," said she.

"How can I help it? I can't make money. If I had a couple of hundred pounds, so that I could take her away, I believe that she would go with me."

"I've got no money for you, Burgo. I have not got five pounds."

"Would Cosmo lend it me?" said he. The Cosmo he meant was not his uncle, but his cousin. Nothing could have induced his uncle, Sir Cosmo, to lend him another shilling. But the son of the house was a rich man.

"I don't know," said Lady Monk. "I never see him. Probably not."

"It is hard," said Burgo. "Fancy that a man should be ruined for two hundred pounds, at such a moment of his life as this! You have jewels, aunt; could you not raise it for me? I would redeem them with the very first money that I got."

Lady Monk stood up in anger when he suggested this, yet before the interview was over she had promised that she would try to get some money for him. He was her favourite nephew. She had quarrelled with one of her own children, and rarely saw the other, a married daughter. Such love as she had to give, she gave to Burgo, and she promised him the money though she knew that she must raise it by some falsehood to her husband.

On the same morning Lady Glencora went to visit Alice, to ask her to go to Lady Monk's party; but Alice would not agree.

"I don't know her," she said.

"My dear," said Lady Glencora, "that's absurd. Half the people there won't know her."

"But they know her friends."

"I should have no trouble in getting a card for you. Indeed I should simply write a note and say I meant to bring you."

"Pray don't do any such thing, for I certainly shall not go. I can't imagine why you wish it."

"Mr. Fitzgerald will be there," said Lady Glencora, speaking in a low tone. She looked at her companion earnestly. "I'm sure that he will be there, though nobody has told me."

"That may be a reason for your staying away," said Alice slowly, "but hardly a reason for my going with you."

Lady Glencora could not bring herself to say that she wanted her friend's protection, though she wished it to be understood. "Ah! I thought you would have gone," said she.

"I never go to people's houses when I don't know them. Pray do not ask me."

“Oh! very well. I won’t press it.” Lady Glencora had put one hand into her pocket, and had grasped a letter; but when Alice said those last cold words, “Pray do not ask me,” she released the grasp, and left the letter where it was.

“I suppose he won’t bite me, at any rate,” she said, with a pretty look of childish drollery.

“He certainly can’t bite you, if you will not let him.”

“Do you know, Alice, though they all say that Plantagenet is one of the wisest men in London, I sometimes think that he is one of the greatest fools. Soon after we came to town I told him that we had better not go to that woman’s house. Of course he understood why. He simply said that he wished that I should do so. ‘I hate anything out of the way,’ he said. ‘There can be no reason why my wife should not go to Lady Monk’s house.’ He insists that I shall go, but he sends my duenna with me. Dear Mrs. Marsham is to be there!”

“She’ll do you no harm, I suppose?”

“I’m not so sure, Alice. In the first place, one doesn’t like to be followed everywhere by a policeman, even though one isn’t going to pick a pocket. And the devil is so strong within me, that I should like to dodge her.”

“Glencora, you make me wretched when you talk like that.”

“Will you go with me, then, so that I may have a policeman of my own choosing? He asked me if I would take Mrs. Marsham with me in my carriage. So I told him I would not; and when he asked why not, I said that I preferred to take a young friend of my own – and I named you or my cousin, Lady Jane.”

“And was he angry?”

“No; he took it very quietly and calmly, saying something about hoping that I should get over a prejudice against one of his earliest and dearest friends. He twits at me because I don’t understand Parliament and the British Constitution, but I know more about them than he does about a woman. You are quite sure you won’t go, then?” Alice hesitated a moment. “Do,” said Lady Glencora.

“Glencora, I am not fit for parties. I sometimes think that I shall never go into society again.”

“That’s nonsense, you know.”

“I suppose it is, but I cannot go now.”

“Oh, very well,” said Lady Glencora. “I suppose I shall get through it. If he asks me to dance, I shall stand up with him, just as though I had never seen him before.” Then she remembered the letter in her pocket, which was a proposition from this man to leave her husband and go off with him. As Alice had refused her request, she was glad that she had not shown it to her.

“Come to me the morning after,” said Lady Glencora, as she went. This Alice promised to do; and then she was left alone.

It was only after Lady Glencora had left that Alice began to understand the subject fully, and to feel that she might have been of use in a great danger. She regretted deeply that she had not consented to go with her cousin. Doubtless she would have been uncomfortable at Lady Monk’s house; but could she not have borne an hour or two of discomfort on her friend’s behalf?

However, it was too late now. She strove to comfort herself with the reflection that a casual meeting at an evening party in London could not be nearly as perilous as a prolonged stay together in a country house.

CHAPTER 49

How Lady Glencora Went to Lady Monk's Party

Lady Monk's house in Gloucester Square was admirably well adapted for parties. The hall was spacious, with the stairs going up the centre; round the top of the stairs there was a broad gallery, with an ornamented railing, and from this opened the doors into the three reception-rooms. The two on the right were connected by an archway; and there was a smaller room, very prettily furnished, which Lady Monk used when alone.

Downstairs was the great dining-room, on which a huge buffet was erected for refreshments, attended by butlers and men in livery; and there was a smaller room looking out into the square, where maids could dispense tea and other good things.

Lady Monk, on these occasions, never came forward to receive her guests. She stayed in that room at the head of the stairs, and they who wished to see her made their way up and spoke their little speeches. She would rise from her chair and take a step towards the door to greet anyone very high in fashionable life, like a Cabinet Minister or a duchess. Of course the doorway of her chamber would become blocked; but a man in livery was employed to go backwards and forwards between his mistress and the outer world.

But ladies would also come into her small room and sit there by the hour, with whom Lady Monk had not the slightest wish to hold conversation. The Duchess of St. Bungay would always be there.

"I shouldn't care a straw about her," Lady Monk had been heard to complain, "if she would talk to anybody. But nobody will talk to her, and she listens to everything."

There had been another word or two between Burgo Fitzgerald and his aunt, which she had spoken with some difficulty. She had the two hundred pounds for which he had asked – obtained with what wiles and lies I need not here describe.

But she was not willing to give this to her nephew without security. How could she bind him to spend it as she wanted it spent? Could she hand it to him as soon as Lady Glencora was in his power? That was not possible; she had no alternative but to entrust him with the bank-notes at once.

"Burgo," she said, "if you deceive me now, I will never trust you again."

"All right," said Burgo, thrusting the money into his breast-pocket.

"It is lent to you for a certain purpose, should you happen to want it," she said, solemnly.

"I do happen to want it very much," he answered. She did not dare to say more; but as her nephew turned away from her with a light step, she almost felt that she was already tricked. There was always something ecstatic to Burgo in the touch of ready money which cured his troubles for the moment.

On the morning of Lady Monk's party a few very uncomfortable words passed between Mr. Palliser and his wife.

"Your cousin Alice is not going, then?" said he.

"No."

"Then you can give Mrs. Marsham a seat in your carriage?"

"Impossible, Plantagenet. I thought I had told you that I had promised my cousin Jane."

"But you can take three."

"Indeed I can't – unless you would like me to sit with the coachman."

There was a touch of what he called vulgarity in this which made him very angry. So he turned away from her, and looked as black as a thundercloud.

“You must know, Plantagenet,” she went on, “that it is impossible for three women in evening dress to fit in one carriage.”

“You need not have asked Lady Jane when Miss Vavasor refused.”

“And I had told you that I liked going with young women, and not with old ones. That’s the long and the short of it.”

“Glencora, I wish you would not use such expressions.”

“What! the long and the short? It’s good English. Quite as good as Mr. Bott’s, when he said in the House the other night that the Government kept their accounts in a higgledy-piggledy way. You see, I have been studying the debates, and you shouldn’t be angry with me.”

“I am not angry with you. You speak like a child to say so. Then, I suppose, the carriage must go for Mrs. Marsham after it has taken you?”

“It shall go before. Jane will not be in a hurry, and I am sure I shall not.”

“She will think you very uncivil; that is all. I told her that she could go with you when I heard that Miss Vavasor was not to be there.”

“Then, Plantagenet, you shouldn’t have told her so. If you give me any orders I’ll obey them – as far as I can. If I can’t I’ll say so. But if I’m left to go by my own judgement, it’s not fair that I should be scolded afterwards.”

“I have never scolded you.”

“Yes, you have. You have told me that I was uncivil.”

“I said that she would think you so.”

“Then, if it’s only what she thinks, I don’t care two straws about it. I don’t like her. My belief is that she follows me about to tell you if she thinks that I do wrong.”

“Glencora!”

“And that odious baboon with the red bristles does the same thing – only he goes to her because he doesn’t dare to go to you.”

Plantagenet Palliser was struck wild with dismay. He understood well whom his wife meant; but that she should have spoken of any man as a baboon with red bristles, was terrible! He was beginning to think that he hardly knew how to manage his wife.

It was true that a word or two about domestic matters had filtered through to him from Mr. Bott, down at Matching Priory, but only in such a way as to enable him to see what advice he should give. As for spying on his wife – no man could despise it more than he did! And now his wife was accusing him of keeping spies.

“Glencora!” he said again; and then he stopped, not knowing what to say to her.

“Well, my dear, it’s better you should know at once what I feel about it. I dare say I’m bad enough, but these people about me won’t make me any better. The duennas don’t make the Spanish ladies worth much.”

“Duennas!”

Lady Glencora sat down, and Mr. Palliser stood for some moments looking at her.

It ended in his making her a long speech, in which he said a good deal of his own justice and forbearance, and something also of her frivolity and childishness. He told her that his only complaint of her was that she was too young, and, as he did so, she made a little grimace to herself, as if to say it was more than that. He did not notice it, or, if he did, it did not stop his eloquence. He assured her that he was far from keeping any watch over her, and declared that she had altogether mistaken Mrs. Marsham’s character. At that, there was another little grimace. He ended by giving her a cold kiss, and saying that he would meet her at Lady Monk’s.

When the evening came, the carriage went first for Mrs. Marsham, and having deposited her at Lady Monk's, went back to Park Lane for Lady Glencora. Then she had herself driven to St. James's Square, to pick up Lady Jane, so that altogether the coachman and horses did not have a good time of it.

"I wish he'd keep a separate carriage for her," Lady Glencora said to her cousin Jane.

"That would be expensive," said Lady Jane.

"Yes, it would," said Lady Glencora, not deigning to remark that her husband's wealth was, in fact, hers. She put on no airs because she was an heiress. She was not softly delicate in all her ways; but she was altogether generous. I do not know that she was at all points a lady, but had Fate so willed it, she would have been a thorough gentleman.

Mrs. Marsham was by no means satisfied with the way she was treated. She would not have cared to go to Lady Monk's party if she had known that she would have to make her entry there alone, without a share of the homage which would certainly have been paid to Lady Glencora. If she resolved to be revenged, such resolution was only natural. When she reached Lady Monk's house, she had to make her way upstairs all alone. She sat down in the front drawing room, and meditated on her injuries.

It was past eleven before Lady Glencora arrived, and Burgo Fitzgerald had begun to think that his evil stars intended that he should never see her again. He had no definite plan in mind. He had attempted to make a plan; but, like all men to whom thinking is unusual, concluded at last that he had better leave it to the course of events.

It was, however, necessary that he should see Lady Glencora before the course of events could do anything for him. He had written to her boldly, and he felt that her silence seemed to show that consent was not impossible. From ten o'clock to past eleven he stood about on the staircase, waiting for the name which he desired yet almost feared to hear.

His aunt once called him into her room, and with a frown told him to go and dance. But he shook his head almost savagely, and went away. Dance! How was he to dance? Even to Burgo Fitzgerald the task of running away with another man's wife had in it something which prevented dancing.

Instead he went down into the dining-room and drank. He took a large beer-glass full of champagne and then another. The drink did not flush his cheeks, but it added a peculiar brightness to his blue eyes. It was by the light of his eyes that men knew when Burgo had been drinking.

At last, while he was in the supper room, he heard Lady Glencora's name announced. He had already seen Mr. Palliser come in and make his way upstairs a quarter of an hour before. When the long-expected name now reached his ears, his heart seemed to jump. What should he do?

He hurried to the dining-room door, just in time to see and be seen as Lady Glencora was passing up the stairs. He looked up at her, and caught her eye, and moved his hand in salutation.

She looked down at him, and her expression altered visibly as her glance met his. She barely bowed to him, but he thought there was, at any rate, no anger in her face.

How beautiful he was as he gazed up at her, leaning against the wall and watching her as she made her slow way up the stairs! She felt that his eyes were on her, and where the stairs turned she could not restrain herself from one other glance. As her eyes fell on his again, his mouth opened, and she fancied that she could hear a

faint sigh. It was a glorious mouth, such as the old sculptors gave to their marble gods! Burgo, though he had not heart enough to love truly, could look as though he loved. At this moment he looked as though he might die of love.

Lady Glencora was met at the top of the stairs by Lady Monk, who came out to her with her sweetest smile. Lady Glencora entered the small room, where sat the Duchess of St. Bungay, with Mr. Bott standing next to her.

There was another lady there, who stood very high in the world, and whom Lady Monk was very glad to welcome – the young Marchioness of Hartletop. Very beautiful she was, and never said silly things, was always gracious, yet was never led away into intimacies, was the best-dressed woman in London, and yet gave herself no airs – and she was exquisitely beautiful. Her smile was loveliness itself. There were, indeed, people who said that it meant nothing; but then, what should the smile of a young married woman mean? Her father had been a country clergyman; but she knew the ways of high life much better than poor Glencora. She would have spoken of no man as a baboon with a bristly beard. She did not wander out on winter nights among the ruins.

She had once, indeed, been approached by a lover after she had been married – Mr. Palliser himself having been the offender – but she had turned the affair to credit, had gained her husband's closest confidence by telling him of it all, and had even dismissed her lover without annoying him. But then Lady Hartletop was a miracle of a woman!

Lady Glencora was no miracle. She was made of ordinary flesh and blood, and as she entered Lady Monk's little room, hardly knew how to recover herself enough to make ordinary conversation.

"Dear Lady Glencora, we were so sorry not to have you at Monkshade. We heard such terrible things about your health." Lady Glencora said that it was only a cold. "Oh, yes; we heard something about moonlight and ruins. So like you. I think you know Lady Hartletop; and the Duchess of St. Bungay." Then Lady Monk was obliged to go to her door again and Lady Glencora found herself standing close to Lady Hartletop.

"We saw Mr. Palliser just pass through," said Lady Hartletop, who was able to speak of the man who had dared to approach her with his love, without the slightest nervousness.

"Yes," said Lady Glencora.

"There's a great crowd," said Lady Hartletop. "I didn't think London was so full."

"Very great." said Lady Glencora, and then they had said to each other all that society required.

"How very well you are looking," said the Duchess. "And I heard you had been so ill."

"How d'ye do, Lady Glencowrer?" sounded in her ear, and there was a great red paw stuck out for her to take. But she was determined that she would not take Mr. Bott's hand.

"How are you, Mr. Bott?" she said. "I think I'll look for Mr. Palliser in the back room."

"Dear Lady Glencora," whispered the Duchess, in an ecstasy of agony. Lady Glencora turned to her. "Do let me go away with you. There's that woman, Mrs. Conway Sparkes, coming, and you know how I hate her."

She had to take the Duchess under her wing, and they passed into the large room together. It is, I think, probable that Mrs. Conway Sparkes had been brought in by Lady Monk as the only way of removing the Duchess.

In the dancing-room Lady Glencora found her husband standing in a corner, looking as though he were making calculations.

“I’m going,” said he, coming up to her. “I only came because I said I would. Will you be late?”

“Oh, no; I suppose not.”

“Shall you dance?”

“Perhaps once, just to show that I’m not an old woman.”

“Don’t heat yourself. Good-bye.” Then he went, and in the crush of the doorway he passed Burgo Fitzgerald, whose eye was intently fixed upon his wife. He looked at Burgo, and some thought of that young man’s former hopes flashed across his mind – some remembrance, too, of a caution that had been whispered to him; but for no moment did he suspect that he ought to stay and guard his wife.

CHAPTER 50

How Lady Glencora Came Back from Lady Monk's Party

Burgo Fitzgerald remained for a minute or two leaning against the wall at the bottom of the staircase; and some thoughts that were almost solemn passed across his mind.

This thing that he was about to attempt – was it good, and would it be good for Glencora? What would her future be if she consented to go with him, and to leave her husband? Of his own future he thought not at all. He had never done so. Even when he had first found himself attracted by her wealth, it simply prompted him, as he might have been prompted to play for a high stake at a gaming-table. But now he did think a little of her. Would she be happy, simply because he loved her, when all regarded her as degraded and dishonoured; when society should be closed against her?

And, under such circumstances, would he continue to love her? Did he not know himself to be the most inconstant and untrustworthy of men? He asked himself these questions with something of true feeling, and almost persuaded himself that he had better wander forth into the streets. If he could drink himself out of the world, it might be an end of things.

But then he remembered his aunt's two hundred pounds, and a certain idea of honour told him that he was bound to do that for which the money had been given. As to telling his aunt that he had changed his mind, and refunding the money – that was impossible! He could not give back two hundred pounds. So he gathered himself up, stretched his hands over his head, uttered a deep sigh, and took himself upstairs.

He looked in at his aunt's room.

"Well, Burgo," she said, with her sweetest smile, "have you been dancing?" He turned away, muttering something about a cold-blooded Jezebel. But she did not hear, and smiled as he went.

Burgo made his way first into the front room and then into the larger room where the dancing was, and there he saw Lady Glencora standing up in a quadrille with the Marquis of Hartleup. Lady Glencora seemed to enjoy neither the dancing nor the society of her partner. She was simply standing up to dance because it was the correct thing to do. Burgo watched her, and at last she became aware of his presence. It made no change in her, except that she became even less animated than before. She would not seem to see him.

"I will go up to her at once, and ask her to waltz," Burgo said to himself. Then the music ceased, and Lord Hartleup took away his partner on his arm into another room. Burgo followed them. The crowd was so great that he could not get near them, but he knew which way they were going.

Five minutes later he again saw her, seated on a cane bench in the gallery, with an old woman standing close to her, talking to her. It was Mrs. Marsham, cautioning her against some petty imprudence, and Lady Glencora was curtly telling that lady that she needed no such advice. Lord Hartleup had left her, feeling that he had done his duty for the night.

Burgo knew nothing of Mrs. Marsham, and was quite unaware that she had any connection with Mr. Palliser. So he made his way up to Lady Glencora through the crowd, and muttering some inaudible word, offered her his hand.

“That will do very well, thank you, Mrs. Marsham,” Lady Glencora said. “Pray, do not trouble yourself,” and then she gave her hand to Fitzgerald.

Mrs. Marsham knew who he was, and all his history. Though Mr. Palliser had never mentioned his name to her, she was well aware that her duty as a duenna meant that she should keep a doubly wary eye upon him.

And there he was, leaning over them, taking the hand of Mr. Palliser’s wife! How Lady Glencora might have behaved at this moment if Mrs. Marsham not been there, it is pointless to guess; but under Mrs. Marsham’s eye, all her resolution was in Burgo’s favour. She looked at him softly and kindly, and though she said nothing, her face seemed to show pleasure.

“Will you waltz?” said Burgo, asking as though it were a commonplace event.

“I don’t think Lady Glencora will waltz tonight,” said Mrs. Marsham, very stiffly. She certainly did not know her business as a duenna, or else she would have been aware that this answer would drive her friend’s wife into open hostility.

“And why not, Mrs. Marsham?” said Lady Glencora, rising from her seat. “Why shouldn’t I waltz tonight? I rather think I shall, especially as Mr. Fitzgerald waltzes very well.” She put her hand upon Burgo’s arm.

Mrs. Marsham laid a hand on Lady Glencora’s left shoulder, looking into her face with all the severity of caution of which she was capable. Lady Glencora shook her off angrily. Whether she would put her fate into Burgo’s hands, she had not yet decided; but she was very sure that Mrs. Marsham should not restrain her.

What could Mrs. Marsham do? Mr. Palliser was gone home. Some whispers had come to her that Fitzgerald still dared to love Lady Glencora. Mrs. Marsham had never believed that Mr. Palliser’s wife would really be false to her vows. It was not in fear of any such catastrophe that she had taken on the duty of duenna: it was merely to mould her into a form appropriate for the wife of Mr. Palliser. It had not occurred to her that she might need to guard Mr. Palliser from positive dishonour; but now she hardly knew what to think. What should she do? To whom should she go? And then she saw Mr. Bott at the top of the staircase.

In the meantime Lady Glencora went off towards the dancers, leaning on Burgo’s arm.

“Who is that woman?” said Burgo. His voice in her ears sounded as it used to sound when their intimacy had been close.

“Oh, such an odious woman!” she said. “Her name is Mrs. Marsham; she is my *bête noire*.” And then they were actually dancing, whirling round the room together, before a word had been said about Burgo’s purpose.

Burgo waltzed excellently, and before her marriage, Lady Glencora had been passionately fond of dancing. She seemed to give herself up to it now as though the old days had come back to her. Lady Monk, creeping from her den to the dancing-room, looked in on them, and then crept back again. Mrs. Marsham and Mr. Bott, standing together just inside the other door, looked on also – in horror.

“He shouldn’t have gone away and left her,” said Mr. Bott, almost hoarsely.

“But who could have thought it?” said Mrs. Marsham. “I’m sure I didn’t.”

“I suppose you’d better tell him?” said Mr. Bott.

“But I don’t know where to find him,” said Mrs. Marsham.

“I didn’t mean now, at once,” said Mr. Bott. “Do you think it is as bad as that?”

“I don’t know what to think,” said Mrs. Marsham.

The waltzers went on till they were stopped by want of breath.

“I am so much out of practice,” said Lady Glencora; “I didn’t think I should have been able – to dance at all.” Then she put up her face, and slightly opened her mouth, and breathed deep.

“You’ll take another turn,” said he.

“Presently,” said she, beginning to wonder whether Mrs. Marsham was watching her. Then there was a little pause, after which he spoke in an altered voice, knowing that he must use this opportunity.

“Does it remind you of old days?”

The words roused her from her sleep at once, and dissipated her dream. The facts all rushed upon her in an instant; the letter in her pocket; the request which she had made to Alice so that she might be guarded from this danger; the words which her husband had spoken to her in the morning, and her anger about Mrs. Marsham! It all came upon her now at the first word of tenderness which Burgo spoke.

It has often been said of woman that she who doubts is lost. But they who have said so have known little of women. Women doubt every day, and many solve their doubts at last on the right side, driven to do so by fear, or conscience, but mostly by that half-unconscious knowledge of what is fitting, useful, and best under the circumstances. Lady Glencora was doubting sorely; but, though doubting, she was not as yet lost.

“Does it remind you of old days?” said Burgo.

“You must not talk of that,” she said, very softly.

“May I not?” And now his tongue was unloosed, so that he began to speak quickly. “May I not? Why not? They were happy days – so happy! Were not you happy when you thought... Ah, dear! I suppose it is best not even to think of them?”

“Much the best.”

“Only it is impossible. I wish I knew the inside of your heart, Cora, so that I could see what it is that you really wish.”

In the old days he had always called her Cora, and now the name came as no surprise. They were standing back, almost in a corner, and Burgo knew his words were audible to none but her whom he addressed.

“You should not have come to me at all,” she said.

“And why not? Who has a better right to come to you? Who has ever loved you as I have done? Cora, did you get my letter?”

“Come and dance,” she said; “I see a pair of eyes looking at us.” The pair of eyes which she saw were Mr. Bott’s. He was standing alone in the doorway, every now and then raising his heels from the ground, so that he might look down upon the sinners from above. Mrs. Marsham had left him, and had gone in Lady Glencora’s own carriage to Park Lane, in order to look there for Mr. Palliser.

“Won’t it be making mischief?” Mrs. Marsham had said when Mr. Bott had suggested this.

“There’ll be worse mischief if you don’t,” Mr. Bott had answered. “He can come back, and then do as he likes. I’ll keep my eyes upon them.” And so he did.

Again they went round the room as though they were enjoying themselves thoroughly, and in all innocence. But there were others besides Mr. Bott who looked on and wondered. The Duchess of St. Bungay saw it, and shook her head sorrowing, for the Duchess was good at heart. Mrs. Conway Sparkes saw it, and drank it down with keen appetite; for Mrs. Conway Sparkes was not good at heart. Lady Hartleup saw it, and just raised her eyebrows. It was nothing to her. She liked to know what was going on; but, as for her heart, what she had was neither good nor bad.

Lady Monk saw it, and a frown gathered on her brow. "The fool!" she said to herself. She knew that Burgo would not help his success by drawing the eyes of all her guests.

"Did you get my letter?" Burgo said again. Glencora did not answer. But, of course, he knew that she had received it. "Let us go out upon the stairs," he said, "for I must speak to you. Oh, if you could know what I suffered when you did not come to Monkshade!"

"I wish I had not come here," she said.

"Because you have seen me? That is not kind of you."

They were now making their way slowly down the stairs, in the crowd, towards the supper-room; for all the world was now intent on food and drink. Lady Glencora glanced upwards, as she stood for a moment wedged upon the stairs, and her eyes met those of Mr. Bott.

"A man that can treat me like that deserves that I should leave him." That was the thought that crossed her mind.

"I'll get you some champagne with water in it," said Burgo. "I know that is what you like."

"Do not get me anything," she said. They had now got into the supper-room, and had escaped Mr. Bott's eyes for the moment. "Mr. Fitzgerald," – and now she whispered – "do what I ask you. For the sake of the old days which can never come again—"

"By G—! they can," said he.

"Never. But you can still do me a kindness. Go away, and leave me. Go to the sideboard, and then do not come back. You are doing me an injury while you remain with me."

"Cora," he said.

But she had now recovered her presence of mind, and understood what was going on. She was no longer in a dream. "I will not have it, Mr. Fitzgerald," she answered, speaking almost passionately. "I will not have it. Do as I bid you. Go and leave me, and do not return. I tell you that we are watched." This was still true, for Mr. Bott had now again got his eyes on them, round the supper-room door.

"Who is watching us?" said Burgo; "and what does it matter? If you are minded to do as I have asked you—"

"But I am not so minded. Do you not know that you insult me by proposing it?"

"If you wish to be my wife instead of his, it is no insult."

"How can I be that?" Her face was not turned to him, and her words were in the lowest whisper, but, nevertheless, he heard them.

"Come with me, abroad, and you shall be my wife. You got my letter? Do what I asked you, then. Come with me – tonight."

"Mr. Fitzgerald," she said, "I asked you to go and leave me. If you do not do so, I must get up and leave you. It will be much more difficult."

"And is that to be all?"

"All; at any rate, now." Oh, Glencora! how could you be so weak? Why did you add that word, "now"? In truth, she added it simply feeling that it was the best way to make him obey.

"I will not go," he said, looking at her sternly and earnestly, utterly indifferent to any watching eyes. "I will not go till you tell me that you will see me again."

"I will," she said in that low whisper.

"When – when?"

Looking up again towards the doorway, in fear of Mr. Bott's eyes, she saw the face of Mr. Palliser as he entered the room. Mr. Bott had tried to clutch his arm; but Mr. Palliser had shaken him off, apparently without noticing him.

Lady Glencora, when she saw her husband, immediately recovered her courage. She would not cower before him, or show herself ashamed of what she had done. For that matter, if he pressed her on the subject, she could bring herself to tell him that she loved Burgo Fitzgerald much more easily than she could whisper it to Burgo himself. Mr. Bott's eyes were odious to her; but her husband's glance she could meet without quailing.

"Here is Mr. Palliser," said she, speaking in her ordinary clear-toned voice. Burgo immediately rose from his seat with a start, and turned quickly towards the door; but Lady Glencora kept her chair.

Mr. Palliser made his way through the crowd up to his wife. He, too, kept his countenance without betraying his secret. There was neither anger nor dismay in his face, nor untoward hurry in his movement. Burgo stood aside as he came up.

Lady Glencora said, "I thought you were gone home hours ago."

"I did go home," he answered, "but I thought I might as well come back for you."

"What a model of a husband! Well; I am ready. Only what shall we do about Jane? Mr. Fitzgerald, I left a scarf in your aunt's room – a little black and yellow scarf – would you mind getting it for me?"

"I will fetch it," said Mr. Palliser; "and I will tell your cousin that the carriage shall come back for her."

"If you will allow me—" said Burgo.

"I will do it," said Mr. Palliser; and away he went, making his slow progress through the crowd, leaving Mr. Bott still watching at the door.

Lady Glencora resolved that she would say nothing to Burgo while her husband was gone. There was a touch of chivalry in his leaving them together. He might have ordered her to leave the scarf behind, and come at once. She had seen, moreover, that he had not spoken to Mr. Bott, and was thankful to him also for that.

Burgo also seemed to have become aware that his chance was over, for the moment.

"I will say good-night," he said.

"Good-night, Mr. Fitzgerald," she answered, giving him her hand. He pressed it, and then turned and went. When Mr. Palliser came back he was no more to be seen.

Lady Glencora was at the dining-room door, near Mr. Bott, when her husband returned. Mr. Bott had spoken to her, but she made no reply.

"And what shall we do about Mrs. Marsham?" she said, out loud, as she put her hand on her husband's arm. "I had forgotten her."

"Mrs. Marsham has gone home," he replied.

"Have you seen her?"

"Yes."

"When did you see her?"

"She came to Park Lane."

"What made her do that?"

These questions were asked and answered as he was putting her into the carriage. She got in just as she asked the last, and he, as he took his seat, did not answer.

But she repeated, "What made Mrs. Marsham go to you at Park Lane?" Mr. Palliser sat silent, not having made up his mind what he would say on the subject. "I suppose she went," continued Lady Glencora, "to tell you that I was dancing with Mr. Fitzgerald. Was that it?"

“I think, Glencora, we had better not discuss it now.”

“I don’t mean to discuss it now, or ever. If you did not wish me to see Mr. Fitzgerald you should not have sent me to Lady Monk’s. But, Plantagenet, I hope you will forgive me if I say that no consideration shall induce me to receive again as a guest, in my own house, either Mrs. Marsham or Mr. Bott.”

Mr. Palliser did not reply. Thus the evening of Lady Monk’s party came to an end.

CHAPTER 51

Bold Speculations on Murder

George Vavasor was not in a very happy mood when he left Queen Anne Street after flinging his ring in the fireplace. Indeed there was much to make him unhappy. Alice was engaged to be his wife, but she had treated him in a way which made him long to throw her promise in her teeth. He was a man to whom any personal slight from a woman was unendurable.

“I will marry you,” Alice’s behaviour had said to him, “for certain reasons of my own, which make that arrangement convenient; but pray understand that there is no love mixed up with this. There is another man whom I love; only I do not care to marry him.” It was thus that he read Alice’s treatment of him, and he could not endure it.

But though he could throw his ring under the fire-grate in his passion, he could not so dispose of her. He would have done so had his hands been free. And he would have been clever enough to do so in a way that would have been exquisitely painful to Alice, willing as she might be to be released from her engagement.

But he had borrowed money from her, money which he could not repay – and he intended to borrow more immediately. As he walked away, he did say to himself that he would have no more of it. He would not be indebted to her for another shilling. But before long he had reminded himself that everything depended on a further advance. He was in Parliament: having sacrificed so much for his position, should he let it all fall from him now? That wretched old man in Westmorland – why could he not die and surrender his paltry acres to one who could use them?

He turned into Hanover Square, considering how good it would be if some accident should befall the old man. How he would rejoice if he were to hear that a tree had fallen on the “obstinate old idiot!” I will not say that he meditated the murder of his grandfather. But he told himself that if he chose to, he would certainly be able to do it without detection. He would have courage enough to make his way into the old man’s room and strangle him; and he worked out how he would find an entrance into the house by a window, and how he could cause the old man to die as though from apoplexy.

All this he considered very fully, walking rapidly round Hanover Square. And then he went to Mr. Scruby’s office in Great Marlborough Street, not having yet decided what he would do about Alice’s money.

But he soon found himself talking to Mr. Scruby as though there were no doubts about the forthcoming funds for the next election. And Mr. Scruby said plainly that those funds must be forthcoming soon.

“Of course I’ve my outstanding bills for the last affair.” said Mr. Scruby. “That’s no fault of yours. But if you’ll put me in funds for what I’ll need to pay in June, I’ll lump the two bills together when it’s all over.”

In this discussion, Mr. Scruby unwisely mentioned the name of Mr. Tombe. He had become aware that the money was being managed through an agency that was unknown to his client. Mr. Tombe’s name escaped from him, and Vavasor immediately questioned him. Scruby, who did not often make such blunders, shook his head, and declared that he had meant a different man.

Vavasor accepted the excuse, and said nothing more about Mr. Tombe. But he had heard the name before. John Grey had spoken of Mr. Tombe to Alice, and his

name had filtered through Alice and her cousin Kate to George Vavasor. Now George remembered that Mr. Tombe was John Grey's lawyer.

Out in the street he tried to put all these things together, and resolved that he would go to Mr. Tombe. What if there should be an understanding between John Grey and Alice, and Mr. Tombe should be arranging his money matters for him! He could endure to borrow money from Alice, though it was difficult after her treatment of him; but he could not endure to be the recipient of John Grey's money. By heavens, no!

As he got into a cab, and was driven off to Doctors' Commons, he gave himself credit for much fine manly feeling. Mr. Tombe's chambers were found without difficulty, and, as it happened, Mr. Tombe was there.

The lawyer rose from his chair as Vavasor entered, and meekly asked his visitor to sit down.

"Mr. Vavasor; oh, yes. He had heard the name. Yes; he was in the habit of acting for his very old friend Mr. John Grey. He and his partner had acted for Mr. John Grey, and for Mr. John Grey's father, for about half a century." At every new sentence Mr. Tombe bowed his meek old head, and rubbed his hands together, and wheezed apologetically, and seemed to ask pardon of his visitor. But Mr. Tombe was a sly old fox, and was considering all this time how much he should tell Mr. Vavasor, and how much he should conceal.

"The fat had got into the fire," as he told his old wife that evening. But while he was wheezing, and coughing, and apologizing, he made up his mind that if George Vavasor were to ask him certain questions, it would be best that he should answer them truly. Lying would not put the fat back into the frying pan. He would tell as little as he could; but he decided he could not lie with any chance of benefiting his client.

"Can you tell me, Mr. Tombe, whether you have anything to do with the payment of certain sums to my credit at Messrs. Hock and Block's?"

"The bankers in Lombard Street?" said Mr. Tombe, taking a little more time. "A most respectable house."

"Has any money been paid there to my credit by you, Mr. Tombe?"

"May I ask you why you put the question to me, Mr. Vavasor?"

"Well, I don't think you may. If you have had no hand in any such payment, there is an end of it, and I need not take up any more of your time."

"Well – upon my word, you've taken me a little by surprise. Let me see. Pinkle – Pinkle!" Pinkle was a clerk who sat in an inner room, and who now came in. "Pinkle, didn't we pay some money into Hock and Block's a few weeks since, to the credit of Mr. George Vavasor?"

"Did we, sir?" said Pinkle, who knew that his employer was an old fox, and who, perhaps, had caught something of the fox nature himself.

"I think we did. Just look, Pinkle, and see the date, and let me know all about it. It's fine bright weather for this time of year, Mr. Vavasor; but these easterly winds!" Mr. Tombe began to cough and wheeze. "Ugh – ugh – ugh!"

Vavasor found himself sitting for interminable minutes in Mr. Tombe's dingy chamber, being coughed and wheezed at, till he began to be tired of it; and he showed his impatience.

"Perhaps you'll let us write you a line when we have looked into the matter?" suggested Mr. Tombe.

“I’d rather know at once,” said Vavasor. “I don’t suppose it can take you very long to find out whether you have paid money to my account, by order of Mr. Grey. At any rate, I must know before I go away.”

“Pinkle, Pinkle!” screamed the old man through his coughing; and again Pinkle came in. “Well, Pinkle, was anything of the kind done, or is my memory deceiving me?”

“I was going to look,” said Pinkle; and he went away again.

“I’m sorry to give your clerk so much trouble,” said Vavasor angrily; “and I think it must be unnecessary. Surely you know whether Mr. Grey has commissioned you to pay money for me?”

“We have so many things to do, Mr. Vavasor; and so many clients. We have, indeed. But I think there was something done.”

“What is Mr. John Grey’s address?” asked Vavasor, very sharply.

“Number 5, Suffolk Street, Pall Mall East,” said Mr. Tombe. Herein he foolishly committed himself. Vavasor had known of Nethercoats, but he had not known John Grey’s London address – or that John Grey was in London now.

“Number 5, Suffolk Street,” said Vavasor, writing it down. “Perhaps it will be better that I should go to him, as you do not seem inclined to give me any information.” Then he took up his hat, and hardly bowing, left the room.

“Pinkle, Pinkle,” wheezed Mr. Tombe. “Never mind.” Pinkle didn’t mind; and he had never minded; for up to that moment he had taken no steps towards carrying out the order which had been given him.

CHAPTER 52

What Occurred in Suffolk Street, Pall Mall

Mr. Tombe had gained nothing by his crafty silence. George Vavasor felt perfectly certain, as he walked out, that the money had come through the hands of John Grey. He did not care to speculate whether the payments had been made from his rival's personal funds, or whether his rival had been dispensing Alice's fortune. In either case, his position was bitter enough.

The truth never for a moment occurred to him. He never dreamed that there might be a conspiracy in the matter, of which Alice was as ignorant as he himself. It seemed certain to him that Alice and Mr. Grey were in league; and if they were in league, what must he think of Alice, and of her engagement with himself!

There are men who rarely think well of any woman. They put their mothers and sisters into the background – as though they belonged to some race apart – and then declare that all women are false; that no woman can be trusted unless her ugliness protects her; and that every woman may be attacked as fairly as a deer on a mountain. There had been periods of Vavasor's life when he had believed implicitly in his cousin Alice; but then there had been other moments in which he had ridiculed himself for believing in any woman. As he had grown older the moments of his belief had become more rare.

Every man tries to believe in the honesty of his future wife; and, therefore, Vavasor had tried, and had in his way, believed. He had flattered himself, too, that Alice's heart had leaned towards him more than to that other suitor. He thought that she had found her feelings for Grey were too cold, and had therefore returned where she had truly loved. Vavasor, though he did not love much himself, was willing enough to be the object of love.

This idea had been greatly shaken by Alice's treatment of him; but still he had not thought that she was false to him. Now, what could he believe of her? As he walked out into St. Paul's Churchyard he called her by every name which is most offensive to a woman's ears. He hated her just then even more bitterly than John Grey. She must have deceived him with unparalleled hypocrisy, and have lied to him and to his sister Kate as hardly any woman had ever lied before. Or could it be that Kate, also, was lying to him? If so, Kate also should be included in the punishment.

But why should they have conspired to give him money? There had been no deceit about the pounds which Scruby had already swallowed. They had been supplied; and he had no doubt that more would be supplied if he kept quiet. As he walked, he tried to persuade himself that he should hide his anger till after payment had been made for the next election. It was still troubling to think that he should owe anything to John Grey; but what would he gain by stopping now?

He walked quickly along Fleet Street and the Strand, and was near Pall Mall East before he had decided what to do. At the corner of Suffolk Street he met John Grey.

"Mr. Grey," he said, "I was this moment going to call on you at your lodgings."

"Were you? Shall I return with you?"

"If you please," said Vavasor, leading the way up Suffolk Street. There was no other greeting between them. Mr. Grey himself, though a courteous man generally, would probably have passed Vavasor in the street with no more than the barest greeting; but Vavasor had spoken to him with a civil appearance, as if he did not intend to be offensive.

Mr. Grey unlocked the door of his house, and Vavasor followed him upstairs. Mr. Grey felt almost angry with himself for admitting his enemy. He was sure that no good could come of it. There they were, however, together in the sitting-room.

“Will you take a chair, Mr. Vavasor?” he said.

“No,” said Vavasor; “I will stand.”

And he stood up, holding his hat behind his back, and looked full into Grey’s face; and the great scar seemed to open itself and become purple with fresh blood stains.

“I have come here from Mr. Tombe’s office in the City,” said Vavasor, “to ask you how you have been interfering in my money matters?”

Mr. Grey could not answer this unexpected question very quickly. He did not know what Mr. Tombe had said; and he needed to consider how much of the truth he was bound to tell in answer.

“Do you say that you have come from Mr. Tombe?” he asked.

“You heard me say so. I have come here direct from his chambers. He is your lawyer, I believe?”

“He is.”

“And I have come to ask you what interference you have lately taken in my money matters. When you have answered that, I shall have other questions to ask you.”

“But, Mr. Vavasor, has it occurred to you that I may not be disposed to answer questions so asked?”

“It has not occurred to me that you will prevaricate. If there has been no such interference, I will ask your pardon, and go away; but if there has been such interference on your part, I have a right to demand that you shall explain it to me.”

Grey had now made up his mind that it would be better for all concerned that he should tell the whole story. The angry man evidently knew something, and it would be better that he should know the truth.

“There has been such interference, Mr. Vavasor, if you choose to call it so. Money, to the extent of two thousand pounds, I think, has by my directions been paid to your credit by Mr. Tombe.”

“Well,” said Vavasor, tapping the table with his fingers impatiently.

“I hardly know how to explain all the circumstances under which this has been done.”

“Nevertheless, you must explain them.”

Grey was a tranquil man, who would take trouble to avoid a quarrel; but his courage was quite as high as his opponent’s. It was clear that Vavasor intended to bully him, and he made up his mind at once that he was ready for a quarrel.

“My difficulty in explaining it comes from consideration for you,” he said.

“Then I beg you to have no consideration for me. I intend to have no consideration for you. Now, let me know why you have meddled.”

“I might, perhaps, better refer you to your uncle.”

“No, sir; Mr. Tombe is not my uncle’s lawyer.”

“But it was by agreement with your uncle that I commissioned Mr. Tombe to raise the money you wished to borrow from your cousin. We thought it better that her fortune should not be for the moment disturbed.”

“But what had you to do with it? Why should you have done it? In the first place, I don’t believe it; it is altogether improbable. But why should he come to you of all men to raise money on his daughter’s behalf?”

“Unless you can behave yourself with more discretion, Mr. Vavasor, you must leave the room,” said Mr. Grey. Then, as Vavasor simply sneered at him, but said nothing, he went on. “It was I who suggested to your uncle that this arrangement should be made. I did not wish to see Miss Vavasor’s fortune squandered.”

“And what was her fortune to you, sir? Are you aware that she is engaged to me as my wife?”

“I decline to discuss with you Miss Vavasor’s present or future position.”

“By heavens, then, you shall hear me discuss it! She was engaged to you, and she has given you your dismissal. If you had understood anything of the conduct which is usual among gentlemen, or if you had had any particle of pride, sir, you would have left her and never mentioned her name again. I now find you meddling with her money matters, so as to get a hold upon her fortune.”

“I have no hold upon her fortune.”

“Yes, sir, you have. You do not advance two thousand pounds without knowing that you have security. She has rejected you; and in order that you may be revenged, or that you may have some further hold upon her, you have contrived this rascally pettifogging way of obtaining power over her income. The money shall be repaid at once; and if I find you interfering again, I will expose you.”

“Mr. Vavasor,” said Grey very slowly, in a low voice, but very much in earnest, “you have used words in your anger which I cannot allow to pass. You must recall them.”

“What were the words? I said that you were a pettifogging rascal. I now repeat that.” As he spoke he put on his hat, so as to leave both his hands ready for action if required.

Grey was much the larger and the stronger man. It may be doubted whether he knew the extent of his own strength, but he resolved that he must now use it.

“There is no help for it,” he said, as he opened the door. As he did so he became conscious that his mouth was full of blood from a sharp blow upon his face. Vavasor had struck him with his fist.

Then there came a scramble, and Grey was soon aware that he had his opponent in his hands. I doubt whether he had attempted to strike a blow. Vavasor had struck him repeatedly, but he was unconscious of the blows that had fallen on him. He had only one object now in his mind, and that object was to kick Vavasor down the stairs. Now he had a hold of the smaller man by the nape of his neck. He forced him through the door, and succeeded in pushing him down the first flight of steps. He had the satisfaction of seeing him sprawling on the landing.

Vavasor, when he raised himself, prepared to make another rush at the room, but before he could do so a man from below, hearing the noise, came out and interrupted him.

“Mr. Jones,” said Grey from above, “if that gentleman does not leave the house, I must get you to search for a policeman.”

Vavasor, though the lodging-house man had hold of his collar of his coat, made no attempt to turn upon him. All his energies were bent on John Grey.

“What’s it all about, sir?” said Jones, who was a tailor, and something of a fighting man himself.

“That man has ill-used me, and I’ve punished him; that’s all,” said Vavasor.

“I don’t know much about punishing,” said the tailor. “It seems to me he pitched you down pretty clean out of the room above. I think the best thing you can do now is to walk yourself off.”

It was the only thing that Vavasor could do, and he did walk himself off. He went home to his lodgings in Cecil Street, to smooth his feathers after the encounter before he went down to Westminster to take his seat in the House of Commons. I do not think that he was comfortable when he got there, or that he felt himself very well able to fight another battle that night on behalf of the River Bank. He had not been hurt, but he had been worsted. He had probably hurt Grey; but Grey had succeeded in throwing him out.

He might have got over the annoyance of this feeling had he not been overwhelmed by a consciousness that everything was going badly with him. He was already beginning to hate his seat in Parliament. What good had it done for him? He found himself associated with Mr. Bott, and others of the same class – men whom he despised; and even they did not admit him without a show of superiority. Though he told himself that he would go on with the thing which he had begun – that he would persevere in Parliament till he had become successful – he could not believe in the promises which he had made to himself.

He had looked forward to his entrance into that Chamber as the hour of his triumph; but he had entered it with Mr. Bott, and there had been no triumph in that. He had had no time to speak in Parliament yet; but he had been there long enough to learn to fancy that there was no glory in attempting. This art of speaking in Parliament, which had appeared to him to be so grand, seemed already to be a humdrum, dull affair. No one seemed to listen much to what was said. Mr. Palliser had once spoken for two hours together, and all the House had treated his speech with respect – had declared that it was useful, solid, conscientious, and what not; but more than half the House had been asleep during it.

Vavasor's chance of brilliance seemed to be further from him, and still further. He had already spent two thousand pounds of his own money, and two thousand more of Alice's – or Mr. Grey's. He must spend two thousand more to prolong his career; and how was he to get that after what had taken place today?

He would get it. That was his resolve as he walked into Westminster between the two august lamps. He would get it; as long as Alice had a pound, he would get it, even if it came through John Grey's hands – and even if it might destroy his cousin Alice and ruin his sister Kate. He had gone too far to stick at any scruples. He would go to Alice and demand the money from her with threats, and with that violence in his eyes which he knew so well how to assume.

That wretched old man in Westmorland! If only he would die! He walked about the lobbies of the House, thinking of all this as he went from room to room, sitting now for ten minutes in the gallery, and then wandering again out into the lobby.

Nor was Mr. Grey much happier. The memory of the fight itself did not trouble Vavasor much; but John Grey was made wretched by reflecting on it. He had never been involved in physical violence before. When ordering that his money might be spent to save Alice from her cousin, he had never felt a moment's regret; but now he was almost driven to reproach.

“Oh, Alice! that this should have come upon me through your fault!”

Once Vavasor had gone, Grey retired into his bedroom to wash his face. Then he began to think about Vavasor's accusation, that he had advanced money on Alice's behalf in order to obtain some power over her, and revenge himself for her treatment of him. Nothing could be more damnably false than this accusation. But might it not appear to be true? If people heard of this affair, how many would guess the truth?

While he was in this wretched state of mind, Mr. Jones, his landlord, came up to him. Mr. Jones had known him for some years, and had a most profound respect for him.

“Dear, dear, sir, this is a terrible affair!” he said, as he entered the room. “Was the gentleman known to you?”

“Yes.”

“Any quarrel, sir?”

“Well, yes. I should not have pushed him downstairs otherwise.”

“We can have the police after him if you wish it, sir?”

“I don’t wish it at all.”

“Or we might manage to polish him off in any other way, you know.”

It was some time before Mr. Grey could get rid of the tailor, but he did so without telling any part of the story to that worthy and very anxious man.

CHAPTER 53

The Last Will of the Old Squire

In the meantime Kate Vavasor was living in Westmorland with her grandfather, and did not have a very pleasant life. George thought of the old man as being as strong as a tower, and full of life. But, in fact, the embers of the Squire's life were burning low.

He was, indeed, very weak with age, and tottering with unsteady steps on the brink of his grave, though he would still creep about the garden and into the farmyard. He would still sit down to dinner, and drink his allotted portion of port wine. The doctor did not try to rob him of his last luxury; but he recommended certain changes in the taking of it. The old Squire indignantly rebelled, and scolded Kate when she attempted to enforce the doctor's orders.

"What does it matter," the old man said one evening, "whether I am dead or alive? Unless George would turn you out of the house directly he gets it."

"I was not thinking of anyone but you, sir," said Kate, with a tear in her eye.

"You won't be troubled to think of me much longer," said the Squire; and he gulped down the rest of his wine.

Kate was, in truth, very good to him. She was true and loyal to her friends, though she could be false on their behalf. She tended to the old man with good-humour, not contradicting him when he abused his grandson, but saying little things to mitigate his anger.

"You'll learn his character some day," the Squire told her. "You'll live to be robbed by him, and turned out as naked as you were born." Then Kate fired up and declared that she fully trusted her brother. Whatever faults he might have, he had been true to her. So she said, and the old man sneered at her for saying so.

One morning, when she brought his porridge up to his bedroom, he told her to sit down, and began to talk to her about the property.

"I know you are a fool," he said, "about all matters of business." To this Kate acceded with a little smile. "I want to see Gogram," he said. "Write and tell him to come here today – and send it at once by Peter." Gogram was an attorney at Penrith, who was never summoned to Vavasor Hall unless the Squire had something to say about his will.

"Don't you think you'd better put it off till you are a little stronger?" said Kate.

The Squire fired such a volley of oaths at her that she sprang up and wrote at once to Mr. Gogram. She gave the note to Peter, and saw Peter depart on the pony to Penrith, before she dared to return to her grandfather's bedside.

"What should you do with the estate if I left it you?" the Squire said to her.

She could not answer instantly. She stood by his bedside thinking, and holding her grandfather's hand. "I think I should give it to my brother," she said.

"Then I'm d— if I'll leave it to you," said he.

"If I were you, grandfather," she said softly, "I would not trust myself to alter family arrangements whilst I was ill. I'm sure you would advise anyone else against doing so."

"And if I were to leave it to Alice, she'd give it to him too," he said. "What you see in him, I never could guess. He has never done anything to show himself a clever fellow. Kate, give me some of that medicine." Kate handed him his medicine, and then stood again by his bedside.

“Where did he get the money to pay for his election?” the Squire asked.

“I don’t know,” said Kate, lying.

“He has not had yours, has he?”

“He would not take it, sir.”

“And you offered it to him?”

“Yes, sir. It was my own,” said Kate stoutly.

“You’re the biggest idiot that ever I heard of. Go away now, and let me know when Gogram comes.”

She went away, and sat down alone in the dingy old dining-room, to think what had better be done. The carpet of the room was worn out, as were the chair-covers and the horsehair sofa by the wall. It was not a comfortable house. In the last twenty years no money had been spent on furniture, and for the last ten years there had been no painting, either inside or out. The Squire was not a miser. In some respects, he had behaved generously to Kate and others, and he had kept up the timber and fences on the property. But the house had become wretched in its dirty, sombre darkness.

What ought she to do? She believed that her grandfather’s last days were coming, and she knew that other relatives should be with him when he died. But for whom should she send? Her brother was the natural heir, and would be the head of the family. But George’s presence at Vavasor Hall might do more harm than good to his own interests. It would make some unfavourable change in the old man’s will more probable. George would not become soft and mild-spoken even by a death-bed side.

She might send for her uncle John; but if she did so without telling George she would be treating George unfairly. Her aunt Greenow, she thought, would come to her, and her presence would not influence the Squire.

So she made up her mind to ask her aunt to come to Vavasor, and to tell George all that she could, leaving him to come or stay as he thought best. Alice would, no doubt, learn the facts from him, and her uncle John would hear them from Alice. Then they could do as they pleased. As soon as Mr. Gogram had been there she would write her letters, and send them off the following morning.

Mr. Gogram came to see the Squire, and the doctor also came. The doctor, shaking his head, told her that her grandfather was sinking lower every hour. He would probably live a week, possibly a fortnight – perhaps a month, if he would be obedient. Gogram went away without seeing Kate; and Kate did not know whether her grandfather had done anything with the will. But, in truth, the will had been made and signed, and witnessed by the parish clerk and one of the tenants.

That evening at dusk the Squire came into the dining-room, after shuffling about the drive outside for a quarter of an hour. The day was cold and the wind bleak, but still he would go out, and Kate had wrapped him up carefully in mufflers and great-coats. Now he came in to dinner, and Kate sat down with him. He attempted to swallow a little soup, but failed; and had the decanter put before him.

“I can’t eat, so I will take my wine at once,” he said.

“But you should eat something, sir; will you have a bit of toast to sop in your wine?”

The word “sop” was badly chosen, and made the old Squire angry. “Sopped toast! why spoil the only thing I can enjoy?”

“But the wine would do you more good if you would take something with it.”

“Nothing will do me any good any more. What’s the use of bothering me?” Then he filled his second glass, and paused before he put it to his lips. He never exceeded four glasses, but the four he was determined to have, as long as he could lift them to his mouth.

Kate quickly finished her dinner. Then she poked the fire, and brushed up the hearth, and closed the old curtains, moving about silently. When she came past his chair, he put out his rough hand, and laid it upon one of hers with a tenderness that was unusual for him.

“You are a good girl, Kate. I wish you had been a boy, that’s all.”

“If I had, I shouldn’t have been here to take care of you,” she said, smiling.

“No; you’d have been like your brother, no doubt. Though there could not have been two so bad as he is.”

“Oh, grandfather, if he has offended you, you should try to forgive him.”

“Forgive him! How often have I forgiven him? Why did he come down here the other day, and insult me? Why didn’t he keep away, as I had told him?”

“But you gave him leave to see you, sir.”

“I didn’t give him leave to treat me like that. Never mind; he will find that, old as I am, I can punish an insult.”

“You haven’t done anything, sir, to injure him?” said Kate.

“I have made another will, that’s all. If I left him the whole property it would be gone in two years’ time. What’s the use of doing it?”

“But for his life, sir! You had promised him that he should have it for his life.”

“How dare you tell me that? I never promised him. As my heir, he would have had it all, if he had behaved with common decency. Even though I disliked him, he should have had it.”

“And you have taken it from him altogether?”

“I shall answer no questions about it, Kate.” Then a fit of coughing came upon him, and there was no further talk.

During the evening Kate read a chapter of the Bible out loud. But the Squire was very impatient. “There isn’t any good in so much of it, all at once.” For many weeks Kate had begged her uncle to allow the clergyman of Vavasor to come to him; but he had declined. The vicar was a young man who had begun his career by giving instant offence to the Squire. He had established an afternoon service, and then rebuked the Squire for saying that it was trash and nonsense. Since then the Squire had never been inside the church, except on Christmas Day. Kate’s task was, therefore, difficult.

When the reading was finished, the old man dozed in his chair for half an hour, refusing to go up to bed yet. Sleep in his chair he would and did. Then he woke, and after a fit of coughing, was induced to go up to his room. Kate had never seen him so weak. He was hardly able, even with her help and that of the old servant, to get up the broad stairs. But once in his room, he berated Kate and the old woman loudly, because his slippers were not in the proper place.

“Grandfather,” said Kate, “would you like me to stay in the room with you tonight?”

He berated her again for this, and then he was got into bed and left alone.

Kate went to her own room and wrote her letters. The one to her aunt Greenow was easily written. Kate simply stated her belief that her grandfather’s last day was near, and begged her aunt to come and pay him a visit.

“It will be a great comfort to me in my distress,” she said; “and it will be a satisfaction to you to have seen your father again.” She knew that her aunt would come.

But her letter to her brother was much more difficult. What should she tell him, and what should she not? She began by describing her grandfather’s state. She told him that she had asked her aunt to come to her; “because,” she said, “I feel the loneliness of the house will be too much for me at such a time. I must leave it for you

to decide whether you had better be here. If anything should happen, I will send you a message, and no doubt you would come at once.”

Then came the question of the will. If she was silent, she feared her brother might misconstrue her motives, even though she was willing to sacrifice so much on his behalf; and therefore she resolved to tell him all that she knew.

The letter became long in the telling. “I write with a heavy heart,” she said, “because I know it will be a great blow to you. He gave me to understand that in this will he left everything away from you. I cannot declare that he said so directly; but that was the impression he gave. I have no idea what he put into his will. But now I have told you all that I know.” The letter was not finished till late.

Early the next morning she crept silently into her grandfather’s room; but he was apparently sleeping. The old servant told her that the Squire had been awake at four, and had called for her, but then he had seemed to go to sleep. Four or five times during the morning Kate went into the room, but her grandfather did not notice her until she put her hand upon his shoulder. He then gently touched her hand with his. She offered him food and wine, but he would take nothing.

At twelve o’clock a letter arrived for her. She saw that it was from Alice, and was very long. At that moment she could not read it, although she saw words in it that made her wish to know its contents as quickly as possible. But she could not leave her grandfather then.

At two o’clock the doctor came, and remained till evening. At eight o’clock the old man was dead.

CHAPTER 54

Showing How Alice Was Punished

Poor Kate's condition that night was very sad. Death is always a sorrow, even though it may cause no agony of grief. The old man had lived his span; both he and Kate had expected his death. But death close to one is always sad and solemn.

And she was quite alone at Vavasor Hall. She had no acquaintance within miles. Her aunt and brother would probably both come, but they could take a day or two, and during that time she needed to give orders which were disagreeable for a woman.

The servants were hardly fit to assist her much. There was an old butler who had lived at the Hall for more than fifty years, but he was crippled with rheumatism, and was simply an additional burden on the others. There was a boy who had lately done all the work, and he was now Kate's best minister in her distress. There was the old nurse – but she had been good only for nursing; and there were two rough Westmorland girls who called themselves cook and housemaid.

On that evening of the day on which her grandfather had died, Kate would have been more comfortable if she had found something that she could do. But there was nothing. She hovered for an hour or two around the room, conscious of the letter from Alice in her pocket, wishing to read it, but restrained by a feeling that at the moment she ought to think only of the dead.

It was late at night before Kate took out her letter and read it. It had been written with great struggles, and with many tears, and Kate, as she read it, almost forgot that her grandfather was lying dead in the room above her.

Queen Anne Street, April, 186—.

Dearest Kate,

I hardly know how to write what I have to tell, and yet I must tell it; but I shall never repeat the story to anyone else. I would have written yesterday, when it occurred, but I was so ill that I felt unable to. Indeed, at one time, after your brother had left me, I almost doubted whether I should ever be able to collect my thoughts again. My dismay was so great that my reason for a time deserted me, and I could only sit and cry like an idiot.

Dear Kate, I hope you will not be angry with me for telling you. I have tried to think about it as calmly as I can, and I believe that I have no alternative. The fact that your brother has quarrelled with me cannot be concealed from you, and I must not leave him to tell you about it.

He came to me yesterday in great anger; although his anger then was nothing to what it became afterwards. He stood before me, and asked me how it had come to pass that I had sent him my money through the hands of Mr. Grey. Of course I had not done this, and so I told him. I had spoken of the matter to no one but papa, and he had managed it for me. Even now I know nothing of it, and as I have not yet spoken to papa I cannot understand it. George at once told me that he disbelieved me, and when I sat quiet, he used harsher words, and said that I had conspired to lower him before the world.

He then asked me whether I loved him. Oh, Kate, I must tell it you all, though it is dreadful to write it. You remember what happened when we were in Westmorland together at Christmas? Do not think that I am blaming you, but I was very rash then in the answer I made to him. I thought that I could be useful to him as his wife, and I

thought it would be good that I should be of use in some way. When he asked me that question yesterday, I sat silent. Indeed, how could I have answered “yes”, when he had just used such language to me – while he was standing there looking so enraged?

Then he demanded that I should at once send back to Mr. Grey all presents of his which I had kept, and he threw across the table a little paper knife which Mr. Grey once gave me. I could not allow myself to be so ordered by him; so I said nothing, but put the knife back upon the table. He then took it again and threw it beneath the grate.

“I have a right to regard you as my wife,” he said, “and I will not allow you to keep that man’s things.”

I think I told him then that I should never become his wife, but though I remember many of his words, I remember none of my own. He swore, I know, with a great oath, that if I went back a second time from my word he would leave me no peace – he would punish me fearfully. Oh, Kate, I cannot tell you what he looked like. He had come quite close to me, and I trembled as though he were going to strike me. I said nothing. What could I say to him?

Then, as far as I can remember it, he sat down and began to talk about money. I forget what he said at first, but I know that I assured him that he might take what he wanted so long as enough was left to prevent my being absolutely a burden on papa.

“That, madam, is a matter of course,” he said. I remember those words so well. Then he explained that after what had passed between us, I had no right to ruin him by keeping back money which had been promised to him, and which was essential to his success. In this, dear Kate, I think he was mainly right. But he could not have been right in saying it in that hard, cruel manner, especially as I had never refused any money that he had asked of me. The money he may have while it lasts; but then there must be an end of it all between us, even though he should have the power of punishing me, as he says he will do. What punishment can be so hard as that which he has already inflicted?

He then desired me to write a letter which he might show to the lawyer in order that money might be raised to pay back what Mr. Grey had advanced, and give him what he now required. I think he said it was to be five thousand pounds. When he asked this I was unable to move. Then he spoke very loud, and swore at me again, and brought me pen and ink, demanding that I should write the letter. I was so frightened that I thought of running to the door to escape, and I would have done so if I had felt able. Had it been to save my life I could not have written the letter. I believe I was now crying – at any rate I covered my face with my hands.

Then he came and sat by me, and took hold of my arms. Oh, Kate; I cannot tell it you all. He put his mouth close to my ear, and said words which were terrible. He was threatening me with his anger if I did not obey him. Before he left me, I believe I found my voice to tell him that he should certainly have the money. And so he shall. I will go to Mr. Round myself, and insist on its being done. But I hope that I may never be made to see my cousin again.

I will not pretend to express any opinion as to the cause of all this. It is very possible that you will not believe all I say – that you will think that I am mad and deluded. Of course your heart will prompt you to accuse me rather than him. If it is so, my grief will be greatly increased; but I cannot help it. I cannot keep all this back from you. He has cruelly ill-used me and insulted me. He has treated me as I should have thought no man could have treated a woman. As regards money, I did all that I could do to show that I trusted him thoroughly, and my confidence has only led to suspicion.

I do not know whether he understands that everything must be over between us; but, if not, I must ask you to tell him so. And I must ask you to explain to him that he must not come again to Queen Anne Street. If he does, nothing shall induce me to see him. Tell him that the money that he wants shall be sent to him as soon as I can manage it.

Dearest Kate, good-bye. I hope you will feel for me. If you do not answer me I shall presume that you think yourself bound to support his side, and to believe me to have been wrong. It will make me very unhappy; but I shall remember that you are his sister, and I shall not be angry with you.

Yours always affectionately,
Alice Vavasor.

Kate, as she read her letter through, at first quickly, and then very slowly, almost forgot that death was in the house. Her mind and heart were filled with thoughts of Alice and her brother, and at last she found herself walking the room with quick, impetuous steps, while her blood was hot with indignation.

All her sympathies were with Alice. It never occurred to her to disbelieve a word, or to suggest that it had been exaggerated. She knew that Alice was true. And, moreover, much as she loved her brother, she did not trust him. She believed in his intellect; but she had ceased to have belief in his conduct. She feared everything that he might do, and was conscious that though she was willing to connect all her own fortunes with his, it might ruin her.

Her sin had been in seeking to subject Alice to the same danger; she had plotted to bring about the thing she wished for, and to separate Alice from Mr. Grey. In her excuse, she had hoped a marriage between Alice and her brother would change much in George that was wrong. Might not she and Alice together so work upon him, that he should cease to stand always on the brink of some half-seen precipice? To risk herself for her brother was noble. But inducing her cousin to share that risk was ignoble. She knew this as she walked up and down the old dining-room at midnight, holding her cousin's letter in her hand.

Her cheeks became tinged with shame as she thought of the scene which Alice had described – the knife thrown beneath the grate, the loud curses, the whispered threats, more terrible than curses, the demand for money, made with a cut-throat's violence, the strong man's hand placed upon the woman's arm in rage, those eyes glaring, and the gaping horror of that scar as he pressed his face close to his victim's! Not for a moment did she think of defending him. He had demanded money from the girl whom he intended to marry!

To Kate, nothing could excuse this sin. Alice had written that the demand was reasonable; even now, after his ill-usage, she had declared that the money should be given to the man who had treated her so shamefully. Kate felt very differently. She would tell her brother that his conduct was mean and unmanly. Kate was no coward. She declared to herself that she would do this even though he should threaten her with all his fury.

One o'clock, and two o'clock, still found her in the sombre parlour. The fire had gone out, and she began to feel the cold. But she would not go to bed before she had written a line to Alice. To her brother, and her aunt, a message by telegraph would be sent the next morning. But to Alice she must write a line. Cold as she was, she found her pens and paper, and wrote:

“Dear Alice, today I received your letter, and today our poor old grandfather died. Tell my uncle John, with my love, of his father's death. You will understand

that I cannot write much now about that other matter; but I must tell you, even at such a moment as this, that there shall be no quarrel between you and me. There shall be none at least on my side. I cannot say more till a few days shall have passed by. He is lying upstairs, a corpse. I have telegraphed to George, and I suppose he will come here. I think my aunt Greenow will come also, as I asked her earlier. Uncle John will of course come or not as he thinks fitting. I should be very glad to see him. The lawyer is to see about the funeral. Nothing, I suppose, will be done till George comes.

“Your own cousin and friend, Kate Vavasor.”

And then she added a line below, “My own Alice, if you will let me, you shall be my sister, and be the nearest to me and the dearest.”

Alice, when she received this, was at first so surprised by the news of her grandfather’s death, that she was forced to think chiefly about that event. She went to her father and handed him Kate’s letter.

“Papa,” she said, “there is bad news from Westmorland.”

“My father is dead,” said John Vavasor; and he read the letter. “Of course I shall go,” he said, as he came to that part in which Kate had spoken of him. “Does she think I shall not go to my father’s funeral? What does she mean by saying that there shall be no quarrel between you and her?”

“I will explain another time,” said Alice. John Vavasor asked no further questions, but declared that he would go to Westmorland by the mail train that evening.

“It will be very disagreeable,” he said, “but I ought to be there when the will is opened.” Little more was said on the subject till the evening. But after dinner, as he went up to pack, Alice followed him.

“Papa,” she said, “I think I ought to tell you before you go that everything is over between me and George.”

“Have you quarrelled with him too?” said her father, with surprise.

“I should perhaps say that he has quarrelled with me. But, dear papa, pray do not question me at present. I will tell you all when you come back, but I thought it right that you should know this before you went.”

“And John Grey?”

“There is nothing different in regard to him.”

“I’ll be shot if I can understand you. George, you know, has had two thousand pounds of your money – of yours or somebody else’s. Well, we can’t talk about it now, as I must be off. I’m glad of it, that’s all.” Then he went, and Alice was left alone.

George Vavasor had also received the message, and he took the same train as his uncle. Walking along the platform, looking for a seat, he peered into a carriage and met his uncle’s eye. The two saw each other, but did not speak, and George passed on to another carriage.

On the following morning, before daybreak, they met again in the refreshment room at Lancaster Station.

“So my father has gone, George,” said the uncle, feeling that it would be better that they should be on speaking terms.

“Yes,” said George; “he has gone at last. I wonder what we shall find to have been his latest act of injustice.” The reader will remember that Kate had written to him about the Squire’s altered will.

John Vavasor turned away disgusted. He expected nothing from the will himself, and did not begrudge his nephew the inheritance. At this moment he was thinking of

the old Squire as a father who had always been kind to him. So he turned away, but said nothing.

George followed him saying, "We shan't get any transport at Shap. Hadn't we better go over in a chaise from Kendal?"

To this the uncle assented, and so they finished their journey together. George smoked all the time in the carriage, and very few words were spoken. As they drove up to the old house, they found that Mrs. Greenow had arrived in some vehicle from the Shap station, having travelled from Norwich to Manchester, where she had joined the same train.

CHAPTER 55

The Will

The coming of Mrs. Greenow was a great comfort to Kate. Without her she would hardly have known how to talk to her uncle and brother. As it was, they were all restrained by the courtesy which strangers are bound to show each other, for George had not seen his aunt since he was a child.

“So you are George,” said Mrs. Greenow, putting out her hand and smiling.

“Yes; I’m George,” said he.

“And a Member of Parliament!” said Mrs. Greenow. “It’s quite an honour to the family. I felt so proud when I heard it!” She said this pleasantly, and then turned to her brother. “Papa’s time was fully come,” she said, “though, to tell the truth, I had no idea that he was so weak.”

“Nor I,” said John Vavasor. “He went to church with us here on Christmas Day.”

“Dear, dear! He seems at last to have gone off just like poor Greenow.” She put her handkerchief up to her face. “Ah, well! we can’t keep everything in this life for ever.”

It may, perhaps, be as well to explain that before she left Norwich, Mrs. Greenow had told Captain Bellfield that if he behaved himself well, there might possibly be hope. Whereupon Captain Bellfield had immediately gone to the best tailor in that city, had told the man of his coming marriage, and had given an extensive order. But the tailor had not yet supplied the goods, waiting for more credible evidence of the Captain’s good fortune.

“We’re all grass of the field,” said Mrs. Greenow, lightly brushing a tear from her eye, “and must be cut down in our turn.” Her brother uttered a slight sympathetic groan, and then said that he would go out and look around the place.

George, in the meantime, had asked his sister to show him his room, and the two were already upstairs.

Kate had made up her mind to say nothing about Alice, if it could be avoided, till after the funeral. She led the way upstairs, almost trembling with fear, for she knew that the will would also cause trouble.

“What has brought that woman here?” was the first question that George asked.

“I asked her to come,” said Kate.

“And why did you ask her to come here?” said George, angrily. Kate immediately felt that he was speaking as though he were master of the house, and also as though he intended to be master of her. She had no objection to the first idea. She wished that he might be the master. But she had already decided that she must not submit herself to his masterdom. She had gradually so taught herself since he had compelled her to write the first letter in which Alice had been asked for money.

“I asked her, George, before my poor grandfather’s death, when I thought that he might linger for weeks. My life here alone with him, without any other woman in the house beside the servants, was very melancholy.”

“Why did you not ask Alice to come to you?”

“Alice could not have come,” said Kate, after a short pause.

“I don’t know why not. I won’t have that woman about the place. She disgraced herself by marrying a blacksmith—.”

“Why, George, you advised me to go and stay with her.”

“That’s a very different thing. Now that he’s dead, and she’s got his money, it’s all very well that you should go to her occasionally; but I won’t have her here.”

“It’s natural that she should come to her father’s death-bed.”

“I hate to be told that things are natural. It always means humbug. I don’t suppose she cared for the old man any more than I did – or than she cared for the old man who married her. People are such intense hypocrites. There’s my uncle John, pulling a long face; and yet for the last twenty years he has hated going to see his father. When are they going to bury him?”

“On Saturday, the day after tomorrow.”

“Why couldn’t they do it tomorrow, so that we could get away before Sunday?”

“He only died on Monday, George,” said Kate solemnly.

“Psha! Who has got the will?”

“Mr. Gogram. He was here yesterday, and told me to tell you and uncle John that he would have it with him when he came back from the funeral.”

“What has my uncle John to do with it?” said George, sharply. “I shall go over to Penrith this afternoon and make Gogram give it up to me.”

“I don’t think he’ll do that, George.”

“What right has he to keep it? How do I know that he has really got the old man’s last will? Where did my grandfather keep his papers?”

“In that old secretary, as he used to call it, in the dining-room. It is sealed up.”

“Who sealed it?”

“Mr. Gogram did, and I assisted him.”

“What the deuce made you meddle with it?”

“I believe it is usual in such cases.”

“Balderdash! You are thinking of some old trumpery of former days. Till I know to the contrary, everything here belongs to me as heir, and I do not mean to allow any interference till I know for certain that my rights have been taken from me. And I won’t accept a death-bed will. What a man chooses to write when his fingers will hardly hold the pen goes for nothing.”

“You can’t suppose that I wish to interfere with your rights?”

“I hope not.”

“Oh, George!”

“I know there are those who would. Do you think my uncle John would not interfere with me if he could? By —! if he does, I’ll drag him through the courts.”

A message was now brought up by the nurse, saying that Mrs. Greenow and Mr. Vavasor were going into the room where the old Squire was lying. “Would Miss Kate and Mr. George go with them?”

“Mr. Vavasor!” shouted George, making the old woman jump. She did not understand his meaning.

“Yes, sir; the old Squire,” she said.

“Will you come, George?” Kate asked.

“No. Why should I pretend an interest in the dead body of a man whom I hated and whose very last act may have been an attempt to rob me?”

Kate went, and was glad to get away from her brother. Every hour the idea was becoming stronger in her mind that she must somehow separate herself from him. There had come upon him of late a hard ferocity which made him unendurable. He allowed himself to be controlled by none of the ordinary bonds of society. She had felt this before, with a nervous consciousness that she was doing wrong in trying to bring about a marriage between him and Alice; but this manner had now grown so much that Kate began to feel thankful that Alice had been saved.

With her uncle and aunt, Kate saw the face of her grandfather for the last time.

“Poor, dear old man!” said Mrs. Greenow, as the easy tears ran down her face. “Do you remember, John, how he used to scold me, and say that I should never come to good. He has said the same thing to you, Kate, I dare say?”

“He has been very kind to me,” said Kate.

“He was a fine old gentleman,” said John Vavasor. “I don’t know that he ever did an unjust or ungenerous act to anyone. Come, Kate, we may as well go down.”

George did not go into Penrith, nor did he see Mr. Gogram till the attorney came to Vavasor Hall on the morning of the funeral. The two days before the funeral were very wretched for all, except, perhaps, Mrs. Greenow, who pretended not to understand that her nephew was in a bad humour. She called him “poor George,” and treated all his incivility as though it were the effect of grief.

At last the hour of the funeral came. There were the doctor and Gogram, and the uncle and the nephew, to follow the corpse – the nephew ostentatiously taking the foremost place.

“I’m told that you have got my grandfather’s will,” George said to the attorney as soon as he saw him.

“I have it in my pocket,” said Mr. Gogram, “and intend to read it after we return from church.”

“Is it usual to take a will away from a man’s house in that way?” George asked.

“Quite usual,” said the attorney; “and in this case it was done at the express desire of the testator.”

“I think it is the common practice,” said John Vavasor.

George upon this turned round at his uncle as though about to attack him, showing his teeth.

The funeral was very plain, and George spoke not a word during the journey there and back. John Vavasor asked a few questions of the doctor about the last weeks of his father’s life; and it was mentioned by both the doctor and the attorney that the old Squire’s intellect had remained unimpaired up to the last moment.

When they returned to the hall Mrs. Greenow met them; they all went to the dining-room, and drank a glass of sherry. George took two or three glasses. The doctor then left.

“Shall we go into the other room now?” said the attorney.

The three gentlemen went across to the drawing-room, George leading the way. The attorney followed him, and John Vavasor closed the door behind them. If an observer had been watching, he might have seen by the faces of the two latter that they expected an unpleasant meeting.

Mr. Gogram held a document in his hand as he took a chair. John Vavasor stood behind one of the chairs which had been placed at the table, and leaned upon it, looking across the room. George stood on the rug before the fire, with his hands in his trouser pockets.

“Gentlemen, will you sit down?” said Mr. Gogram. John Vavasor immediately sat down.

“I prefer to stand here,” said George.

Mr. Gogram then opened the document.

“Before that paper is read,” said George, “I think it right to say a few words. I don’t know what it contains, but I believe it to have been executed by my grandfather only an hour or two before his death.”

“Early on the day before he died,” said the attorney.

“Well, it is the same thing – while he was dying. He never got out of bed afterwards.”

“He was not in bed at the time, Mr. Vavasor. Not that it would have mattered if he had been. And he came down to dinner on that day. I don’t understand, however, why you make these observations.”

“I make them because I deny my grandfather’s fitness to make a will in the last moments of his existence, and at such an age. I saw him a few weeks ago, and he was not fit to be trusted with the management of property then.”

“I do not think this is the time, George, to put forward such objections,” said the uncle.

“I think it is,” said George. “I believe that paper purports to villainously defraud me. Therefore I protest against it, and shall question it at law. You can read it now, if you please.”

“Oh, yes, I shall read it,” said Mr. Gogram; “and I say that it is as valid a will as ever a man signed.”

“And I say it’s not.”

The will was read amidst angry interruptions from George, which it is not necessary to repeat. Nor need I trouble my readers with the will at length. It began by expressing the testator’s great desire that his property might descend in his own family, and that the house might be inhabited by someone bearing the name of Vavasor.

The testator then declared that he felt himself obliged to pass over his natural heir, believing that the property would not be safe in his hands; he therefore left it in trust to his son John Vavasor, whom he appointed sole executor of his will. It would go to George’s eldest son – should George ever marry and have a son – as soon as he might reach the age of twenty-five. In the meantime the property should remain in the hands of John Vavasor for his use and benefit, with five hundred a year out of it to be paid annually to his granddaughter Kate.

In the event of George having no son, the property was to go to the eldest son of Kate, or failing that to the eldest son of his other granddaughter who might take the name of Vavasor. All his personal effects he left to his son, John Vavasor.

“And, Mr. Vavasor,” said the attorney, addressing John Vavasor as he finished his reading, “you will, I fear, get very little by that last clause. The estate now owes nothing; but I doubt whether the Squire had fifty pounds in the bank when he died, and the value of the personal property about the place is very small. He was unwilling to spend anything during the last ten years, but paid off every shilling that the property owed.”

“It is as I supposed,” said George. His voice was very unpleasant, and so was the ghastly rage of his scarred face. “The old man has tried to rob me of everything because I would not obey him in his wickedness when I was here with him a short while before he died. Such a will as that can stand nowhere.”

“As to that I have nothing to say at present,” said the attorney.

“Where is his other will – the one he made before that?”

“If I remember rightly we executed two before this.”

“And where are they?”

“It is not my business to know, Mr. Vavasor. I believe that I saw him destroy one, but I have no absolute knowledge. As to the other, I can say nothing.”

“And what do you mean to do?” said George, turning to his uncle.

“Do! I shall carry out the will. I have no alternative. Your sister is the person chiefly interested under it. She gets five hundred a year for her life; and if she has a son and you don’t, her son will have the whole property.”

George stood for a few moments thinking. Might it not be possible that by means of Alice and Kate together – by marrying the former – he might still get hold of the property? But he wanted the property at once – he wanted the power of raising money upon it instantly. The will had been so framed as to make that impossible. Kate’s share in it had not been left to her unconditionally, but was to be received through the hands of her uncle John. Such a will shut him out from all his hopes.

“It is a piece of d— roguery,” he said.

“What do you mean by that, sir?” said Gogram.

“I mean exactly what I say. Who was in the room when that thing was written?”

“The signature was witnessed by—”

“I don’t ask about the signature. Who was in the room when the thing was written?”

“I was here with your grandfather.”

“And no one else?”

“No one else. The presence of anyone else at such a time would be very unusual.”

“Then I regard the document simply as waste paper.” With this, George Vavator left the room, and slammed the door after him.

“I never was insulted in such a way before,” said the attorney, almost with tears in his eyes.

“He is a disappointed and I fear a ruined man,” said John Vavator. “I do not think you need regard what he says.”

“But he should not insult me. I have only done my duty. I did not even advise his grandfather. It is mean and unmanly. If he comes in my way again I shall tell him so.”

“He probably will not put himself in your way again, Mr. Gogram.”

Then the attorney left, having suggested to Mr. Vavator that he should instruct his attorney in London to take steps towards proving the will. “It’s as good a will as ever was made,” said Mr. Gogram.

Who was to tell Kate? That was John Vavator’s first thought when he was alone. And how was he to get back to London without further quarrelling with his nephew? And what was he to do at once about his duties as executor?

It was by no means improbable, as he thought, that George might assume the position of master of the house; that he might demand the keys, for instance, which no doubt were in Kate’s hands at present, and that he would take possession with violence. What should he do in such circumstances? It was clear that he could not run away and get back to his club. He had duties at the Hall which made him almost regret the position in which his father’s will had placed him. Eventually he would gain some increase to his means, but the immediate effect would be terribly troublesome.

In the dining-room he found his sister alone.

“Well, John,” said she. “How is it left?”

“Where is Kate?”

“She has gone out to walk with her brother.”

“Then I suppose he will tell her,” said John Vavator. He explained the circumstances of the will to Mrs. Greenow.

“Bravo,” exclaimed the widow. “I’m delighted. I love Kate dearly: and now she can marry almost whom she pleases.”

CHAPTER 56

Another Walk on the Fells

When George had left the room in which he had insulted the lawyer, he went immediately to the parlour where his aunt and sister were sitting.

“Kate,” said he, “put on your hat and come and walk with me. That business is over.” They were out of the house together within a minute.

They walked down the carriage-road, through the desolate grounds to the gate, before either of them spoke a word. Kate did not dare to ask about the will. George intended to tell her, but not without some preparation.

“Which way shall we go?” said Kate, as soon as they had passed through the old rickety gate.

“Up across the fell,” said George; “the day is fine, and I want to get away from my uncle for a while.”

So she led the way to the wood through which she and Alice had walked across to Haweswater. They had reached the top of the beacon hill, and were out upon the Fell, before George began his story.

“Well,” he said as they paused a moment at the boundary of the wood: “don’t you want to know what that dear old man has done for you?” Then he looked into her face very steadfastly. “But perhaps you know already.” He had come out determined not to quarrel with his sister. He had resolved that his best hope for the present was to keep on good terms with her, at any rate till he had decided what to do. But he was, in truth, so sore with anger and disappointment that he could not refrain himself from bitter words. He was as one driven by the Furies, and was no longer able to control them.

“I know nothing of it,” said Kate. “If I had known I should have told you. Your question is unjust.”

“I am beginning to doubt,” said he, “whether a man can be safe in trusting anyone. My grandfather has done his best to rob me of the property altogether.”

“I told you that I feared he would do so.”

“And he has made you his heir.”

“Me?”

“Yes; you.”

“He told me distinctly that he would not do that.”

“But he has, I tell you.”

“Then, George, I shall do what I told him I should do if he made such a will; for he asked me the question. I told him I should restore the estate to you, and upon that he swore that he would not leave it to me.”

“And what a fool you were,” said he, stopping her in the path. “What an ass! Why did you tell him that? You knew that meant he would not do justice to me.”

“He asked me, George.”

“Psha! now you have ruined me, and you might have saved me.”

“But I will save you still, if he has left the estate to me. I do not desire to take it from you. As God in heaven sees me, I have never ceased to protect your interests here at Vavasor. I will sign anything necessary to make over my right in the property to you.”

Then they walked on over the Fell for some minutes without speaking. They were on the same path which Kate and Alice had taken in the winter, and now poor

Kate could not avoid thinking of all that she had said that day on George's behalf. It had all been in vain. At this very moment of her own trouble Kate thought of John Grey, and repented of what she had done.

She could no longer worship her brother. But, as regarded the property, if she could give it to him, she would. "If the will is as you say, George, I will make over my right to you."

"You can make over nothing," he answered. "The old robber has been too cunning for that; he has left it all in the hands of my uncle John. D— them both."

"George! he is dead now."

"I wish he had been dead ten years ago. Do you suppose I am to forgive him because he is dead? I'll heap his grave with curses. And my uncle John shall have such a life of it for the next year or two that he shall bitterly regret the hour in which he has stepped between me and my rights."

"I do not believe that he has done so."

"Not done so! Why was he down here at Christmas? Do you pretend to think that that make-believe will was concocted without his knowledge?"

"I'm sure that he knew nothing of it. I don't think my grandfather's mind was made up a week before he died."

"You'll have to swear that, remember, in a court. I'm not going to let the matter rest, I can tell you. How long is it since he asked you what you would do with the estate if he left it to you?"

Kate thought for a moment before she answered. "It was two days before he died, if I remember rightly."

"But you must remember rightly. You'll have to swear to it. And now tell me this honestly; do you believe, in your heart, that he was in a condition fit for making a will?"

"I advised him not to make it."

"Why? What reason did you give?"

"I told him that I thought no man should alter family arrangements when he was so ill."

"Exactly. And what did he say?"

"He was very angry, and made me send for Mr. Gogram."

"Now, Kate, think a little before you answer me again. If ever you are to do me a good turn, you must do it now. And remember this, I don't at all want to take anything away from you. Whatever you think is fair you shall have."

He was a fool not to have known her better than that.

"I want nothing," she said, stopping. "George, you don't understand what it is to be honest."

He smiled, with a slight provoking smile that passed rapidly from his face. The meaning of the smile was to be read, had Kate been calm enough to read it: "I can't say that I do," was what it meant.

"Never mind about that," said he; "you advised my grandfather not to make his will, thinking, no doubt, that his mind was not clear enough?"

She paused a moment again before she answered him. "His mind was clear," she said; "but I thought that he should not trust his judgement while he was so weak."

"Look here, Kate; I believe that you have no wish to assist in this robbery. That it is a robbery you can't doubt. He has left the estate to my uncle John."

"Why tell me, then, what was untrue?"

"Are you disappointed?"

"Of course I am; uncle John won't give it you. George, I don't understand you."

“Listen to me. The estate is left in the hands of John Vavasor; but he has left you five hundred a year out of it till somebody is twenty-five years old who is not yet born, and probably never will be born. The will itself shows the old fool to have been mad.”

“He was no more mad than you are, George.”

“Listen to me, I tell you. I don’t mean that he was a raging maniac. Now, you had advised him not to make any new will because you thought he was not in a fit condition?”

“Yes; I did.”

“You can swear to that?”

“I hope I may not be called on to do so. But if I am asked the question I must swear it.”

“Exactly. Now listen till you understand what it is I mean. That will, if it stands, gives all the power over the estate to John Vavasor. It renders you quite powerless to give me any assistance. But, nevertheless, your interest under the will is greater than his, for your son would inherit if I have no son. Do you understand?”

“Yes; I think so.”

“And your testimony about the invalidity of the will would be conclusive against all the world.”

“I would say in a court what I have told you, if that will do any good.”

“It will not be enough. Look here, Kate; you must be steadfast here; everything depends on you. How often have you told me that you will stick to me throughout life? Now you will be tried.”

Kate felt that her repugnance towards him was growing stronger at every word he spoke. She was becoming gradually aware that he desired her to do something which she could not and would not do, and she was aware also that in refusing him she would incur all his anger. She set her teeth firmly together, and clenched her little fist. If a fight was necessary, she would fight him. Her love for him was almost turned to hatred.

“You advised him not to make the will because you thought his intellect was impaired!”

“No; not so.”

“Stop, Kate, stop. If you will think of it, it was so. What is the meaning of his judgement being weak?”

“I didn’t say his judgement was weak.”

“But that was what you meant when you advised him not to trust it!”

“Look here, George; if anybody asks me if his mind was gone, or his intellect deranged, I cannot say that there was anything of the kind.”

“You will not?”

“Certainly not. It would be untrue.”

“Then you are determined to throw me over and claim the property for yourself.” Again he turned towards and looked at her threateningly. “And I am to count you also among my enemies? You had better take care, Kate.”

They were now more than three miles away from the Hall; and Kate, as she looked round, saw that they were all alone. Not a cottage – not a sign of humanity was within sight. She thought again of her resolution to fight him, if any fight were necessary; to tell him that she would separate herself from him and defy him. She would not fear him, let his words and face be ever so terrible! Surely her own brother would do her no bodily harm. And even if he did, still she would fight him. Her blood was the same as his, and he should know that her courage was, at any rate, as high.

And, indeed, when she looked at him, she had cause to fear. He intended her to fear. He intended her to dread what he might do to her. He had not decided what he would do; but a Fury was driving him, and he almost wished to be driven to some act of frenzy. Everything in the world had gone against him, and he desired to expend his rage on some one.

“Kate,” said he, “we will have this out here, if you please. You have made many promises to me, and I have believed them. You can now keep them all, by simply saying what you know to be the truth – that that old man was a drivelling idiot when he made this will. Are you prepared to do me that justice? Think before you answer me, for, by G—, if I cannot have justice, I will have revenge.” And he put his hand upon her chest near to her throat.

“Take your hand down, George,” said she. “I’m not such a fool that you can frighten me in that way.”

“Answer me!” he said, and shook her.

“Oh, George, that I should live to be so ashamed of my brother!”

“Answer me,” he said again; and again he shook her.

“I have answered you. I will say nothing of the kind that you want me to say. My grandfather, up to the latest moment that I saw him, knew what he was doing. He was not an idiot. He was, I believe, only carrying out a purpose fixed long before. You will not make me change what I say by looking at me like that, nor by shaking me. You don’t know me, George, if you think you can frighten me like a child.”

He still kept his hand upon her, and held her by her cloak; but the violence of his grasp had relaxed.

“Oh,” said he, when she had done, “That’s it; is it? That’s your idea of honesty. The idea of the money being your own has been too much for you. I wonder whether you and my uncle had contrived it all between you beforehand?”

“You will not dare to ask him, because he is a man,” said Kate, her eyes brimming with tears, not through fear, but in very vexation at the charge.

“Shall I not? You will see what I dare do. As for you, with all your promises – Kate, say that you will do as I wish, or I will be the death of you.”

“Do you mean that you will murder me?” said she.

“Murder you! yes; why not? Why should I not murder you – and Alice, too, seeing how you have betrayed me?”

“Poor Alice!” As she spoke she looked straight into his eyes.

“Poor Alice, indeed! D— hypocrite! A pair of cursed, whining, false, intriguing hypocrites. There; go and tell your uncle and that old woman there that I threatened to murder you. Tell the judge so, when you’re brought into court to swear me out of my property. You false liar!” Then he pushed her from him with great violence, so that she fell heavily on the stony ground.

He did not stop to help her up, or even to look at her as she lay, but walked away across the heath, neither taking the track on towards Haweswater, nor returning by the path to the Hall. He went away northwards across the wild fell; and Kate, having sat up, watched him as he descended the slope till he was out of sight. He did not run, but he moved rapidly, and he never once turned round to look at her. He went away down the hill, and presently the curve of the ground hid him from her view.

Her thoughts were all of him. She had feared no personal injury, even when she had asked whether he would murder her. Her heart had been full of defiance; but now she thought of his misery, and his disgrace. That he was gone for ever, utterly ruined, was now certain to her. And this was the brother in whom she had believed; for whom she had not only been willing to sacrifice herself, but also her cousin! What

would he do now? As he passed out of her sight, it seemed to her as though he were rushing straight into some hell from which there could be no escape.

She knew that her arm had been hurt in the fall, but for a while she would not move it, being resolved to take no account of what might have happened to herself. But after some ten minutes, she rose to her feet, and finding that her right arm was powerless, she put up her left hand and became aware that the bone was broken below the elbow.

Her first thought was whether to tell him of this, when she should meet him at the house. How should she mention the accident to him? Should she lie, and say that she had fallen as she came down the hill alone? Of course he would not believe her, but still some such excuse as that might make the matter easier. It did not occur to her that she might not see him again at all that day; and that, as far as he was concerned, there might be no need for a lie.

She started to walk home, holding her right arm steadily against her body with her left hand. Of course she must give some account of herself when she got to the house; but she thought chiefly of the account to be given to him. As to the others, "Here I am; my arm is broken; you had better send for a doctor" – that would be enough.

When she got into the wood the path was very dark. The heavens were overcast, and a few drops began to fall. Then the rain fell faster and faster, and before she had gone a quarter of a mile, the shower had become a storm of water. Suffering as she was, she stood up for a few moments under a large tree, taking the excuse to make up her mind what she would say.

Then it occurred to her that she might meet him again before she reached the house; and she began for the first time to fear him. Would he come out from the trees and really kill her? Had he made his way round, when he got out of her sight, in order to attack her suddenly?

As the idea came upon her, she made a little attempt to run, but she found that running was impossible with the pain the movement caused her. Then she walked on through the hard rain, steadily holding her arm against her side, but still looking every moment through the trees for George. But no one came near her. George had gone away altogether, across the fells towards Bampton, and was at this moment vainly buttoning his coat against the wet. The Fury was driving him on, and he himself was not aware whither he was driven.

Dinner at the Hall had been ordered at five. It was just five when Kate reached the front door. She opened it with her left hand, and turning into the dining-room, found her uncle and her aunt standing before the fire.

"Dinner is ready," said John Vavasor; "where is George?"

"You are wet, Kate," said Aunt Greenow.

"Yes, I am very wet," said Kate. "I must go upstairs. Perhaps you'll come with me, aunt?"

"Of course I will." Aunt Greenow had seen at once that something was amiss.

"Where's George?" said John Vavasor. "Has he come back with you, or are we to wait for him?"

Kate sat down in a chair. "I don't quite know where he is," she said. Her aunt hastened to her side just in time to catch her as she was falling from her chair. "My arm," said Kate, very gently; "my arm!" Then she slipped down against her aunt, and fainted.

"He has done her a mischief," said Mrs. Greenow, looking at her brother.

John Vavasor stood confounded, wishing himself back in Queen Anne Street.

CHAPTER 57

Showing How the Wild Beast Got Himself Back from the Mountains

About eleven o'clock that night, there came a gentle knock at Kate's bedroom door. Her aunt was sitting by her bedside, and the doctor, who had been summoned from Penrith and who had set her broken arm, was still in the house, talking over the accident with John Vavasor in the dining-room.

"She will do very well," said the doctor. "It's only a simple fracture. I'll see her the day after tomorrow."

"Is it not odd that such an accident should come from a fall whilst walking?" asked Mr. Vavasor.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "One never can say how anything may happen. Good night, Mr. Vavasor. Don't trouble her with questions till she has had some sleep."

Then the doctor went, and John Vavasor was left alone in the dining-room. There had been so much confusion in the house since Kate had fainted that he had not yet had time to make up his mind about the nature of the accident. Mrs. Greenow had found that the bone was broken, and the doctor had been sent for, reaching the Hall a little before ten o'clock. In the meantime, as soon as Kate had recovered her senses, she gave her account of what had occurred.

She said that her brother had quarrelled with her about the will, and had left her abruptly on the mountain. She had fallen as she turned from him, and had found that she had hurt herself. But she had been too angry with him to let him know it; and, indeed, she had not known the extent herself till he had passed out of her sight.

This was her story; and there was nothing in it that was literally false. It was true, in one sense, that she had fallen, and had not known how severe had been the injury till he had gone. But she repressed all mention of his violence, and declined to speak further about the quarrel.

Neither her uncle nor her aunt believed her, and she knew it. George's absence, their recent experience of his moods, and the violence by which her arm must have been broken, made them certain that Kate had more to tell. But in her present condition they could not question her. Mrs. Greenow did ask whether George was likely to return.

"I can only tell you," said Kate, "that he went away in the direction of Bampton. Perhaps he has gone on to Penrith. He was very angry with us all; and he has probably resolved not to stay another night under this roof. But who can say? He is not in his senses when he is angered."

John Vavasor, as he stood alone after the doctor's departure, thought, "There is more to this. But how to prove it? and would there be any good in proving it? Poor girl! Will it not be better for her to let it pass as though we believed her story?" Then he began to long that he was back at his club; and he went up to his bed.

In the meantime a messenger came knocking at Kate's bedroom door. One of the girls of the house handed a scrap of paper to Mrs. Greenow, saying that a boy had brought it over with a cart from Shap, and that it was for Miss Vavasor. The note was open; it was written on a crumpled scrap of paper, and read as follows:

"Send me my clothes by the bearer. I shall not return to the house."

Mrs. Greenow took it to Kate, and then went away to see her nephew's things duly packed up. They were sent away in the cart, and Mr. Vavasor, as he went upstairs, was told what had been done.

Neither on that night or on the following day did Mrs. Greenow ask any further questions; but on the morning after that, when the doctor had left them with a good account of the broken limb, her curiosity and indignation urged her on. She was less selfish than her brother. If George had ill-treated his sister, she would have sacrificed much to bring him to punishment.

"Kate," she said, when the doctor was gone, "I expect that you will tell me the whole truth about this accident."

"I have told you the truth."

"But not the whole truth."

"All the truth I mean to tell, aunt. You don't suppose that I am going to give an exact account of our quarrel? We were both wrong, probably, and so let there be an end of it."

"Was he violent to you?"

"When he is angry he is always violent in his language."

"But did he strike you?"

"Dear aunt, don't be angry, but I would rather answer no more questions about it."

Mrs. Greenow was quite sure now that Kate had not broken her arm by a simple fall. She was certain that the injury had come from positive violence, or Kate would have denied it indignantly.

"Have it your own way," said Mrs. Greenow; "but let me tell you that your brother George had better keep out of my path."

"He probably will," said Kate.

Kate found much difficulty in planning her own future behaviour towards her brother. Must she divide herself from him entirely? and must she see him ruined by lack of money, while she had been made rich by her grandfather's will? It will be remembered that her life had until now been devoted to him; all her schemes were for his success; she had taught herself to consider it her duty to sacrifice everything to his welfare. It is very hard to tear out from one's heart and fling away the only love that one has cherished!

And what was she to say to Alice about all this – to Alice, whom she had cheated of a worthy husband, to allure her into the arms of one so utterly unworthy? Luckily for Kate, her broken arm meant that writing to Alice was out of the question.

But what woman can bear a blow from a man, and afterwards return to him with love? A wife may have to bear it and to return. The man is the father of her children, and earns the bread which they eat. Habit and the ways of the world require that she should live with him in what amity is possible to them. But as for love – a blow given to the defenceless crushes it. A woman may forgive deceit, treachery, desertion; but I do not think that a woman can forget a blow. It is not the blow itself that she cannot forgive, but the meanness of spirit that made it possible.

Kate told herself that everything in life was over for her. She had long feared her brother's nature as hard and heartless; but still she had hoped that success would soften him, and then all might be right. But now all was wrong. When he had compelled her to write to Alice for money, his meanness had shocked her. But now he had asked her to perjure herself, and had threatened to murder her, and had hit her because she had refused to obey. And he had accused her of treachery – of deceit in obtaining the property for herself!

“But he does not believe it,” thought Kate. “He said that to vex me; but I know he does not think it.” She had watched her brother longing for money all his life. How often had she offered to give him every shilling that she had in the world! At this moment she never wished to see him again; but even now, if she could, she would have made over to him all her interest in the Vavasor estate.

But any such making over was impossible. John Vavasor remained in Westmorland for a week, and during that time many discussions were held about the property. Mr. Round came from London, met Mr. Gogram and said there was no doubt about the validity of the will. It was agreed that the old Hall should be let in six months. In the meantime Kate was to remain there till her arm should mend, and she could make her plans for the future.

Aunt Greenow promised to remain at the Hall, as though she were quite forgetful of Captain Bellfield. Of Mr. Cheesacre she was not forgetful, for she continued to speak of him as though he were Kate’s suitor. But she did not press the acceptance of Mr. Cheesacre’s hand upon her niece. Kate was mistress of a considerable fortune now, and such a marriage was no longer necessary. Mrs. Greenow pointed out how easily he might be managed; but she no longer spoke of Kate’s chances in the marriage market as desperate.

“A young woman with six hundred a year, my dear, may do pretty nearly what she pleases,” said aunt Greenow.

Kate hoped that Alice would come to her for a while in Westmorland, and her uncle promised to carry this message to Alice. Then Mr. Vavasor went away, leaving the aunt and niece together at the Hall.

“What on earth shall we do if that wild beast suddenly appears?” Mrs. Greenow had asked her brother.

He could only say that he hoped the wild beast would keep his distance. And the wild beast did keep his distance, at any rate as long as Mrs. Greenow remained at the Hall.

We will now go back to him, and tell how he walked across the mountains, in the rain, to Bampton, a village at the foot of Haweswater. It will be remembered that after he had struck his sister, he turned away and walked quickly down the mountain-side. He had found himself to be without any power of persuasion over her. The more he threatened her, the steadier she had been. She had looked into his eye and defied him, and he had felt himself to be worsted. What was he to do?

In truth, there was nothing for him to do. He had told her that he would murder her; but what could he gain by murdering her out on the mountain-side? Nothing but a hanging! If, indeed, he had murdered that old man – if he could have poisoned the old man’s cup before that last will had been made – that might have been something! But nothing was to be got by killing his sister. So he walked away from her down the mountain.

The rain soon came on, and he buttoned his coat, and strode on till he reached the valley, and found that the track had become a road. He had never known these mountains as Kate knew them, and was not aware of where he was going. He had simply made up his mind that he would not return to the house. He thought that he would hurry back to London, and grasp at whatever money he could get from Alice. He was still, at this moment, a Member of Parliament; and as the rain drenched him through, he tried to get consolation from remembering that fact.

As he got near the village he overtook a shepherd boy coming down from the hills, and learned here he was. “Baampton,” said the boy.

When Vavator asked whether a gig were kept there, the boy simply stared at him. At last, however, he was made to understand, and said that "John Applethwaite, up at the Craigs yon, had got a mickle cart." Vavator, hoping that he might find a speedier conveyance than John Applethwaite's mickle cart, went on to the public-house in the village.

But neither there, nor from John Applethwaite, to whom at last an application was sent, could he get any vehicle; and between six and seven he started off again, through the rain, to make his weary way on foot to Shap. The distance was about five miles, and the paths were sticky and almost glutinous with pale, chalky mud. Before he started he took a glass of hot rum-and-water, but the effect of that soon passed away, and he became colder and weaker than he had been before.

Wearily and wretchedly he plodded on. A man may be very weary in such a walk as that, and yet be by no means wretched, if his heart is light. But George Vavator was wretched as well as weary, and he stopped from time to time, leaning on the loose walls, and cursing his misfortune.

He cursed his grandfather, his uncle, his sister, his cousin, and himself. He cursed the place in which his forefathers had lived, and he cursed the whole county. He cursed the rain, and the wind, and his town-made boots, which would not keep out the wet slush. He cursed the light as it faded, and the darkness as it came. Over and over again he cursed the will that had robbed him, and the attorney that had made it. He cursed the House of Commons, which had cost him so much, and the greedy electors who would not send him there without his paying for it. He cursed John Grey with double curses. Thus, cursing everything, he made his way at last up to the inn at Shap.

It was nearly nine when he got there. He ordered supper and brandy-and-water, and, as we know, sent off a messenger for his clothes. But it was past midnight before he got his possessions. During all this time he had not ceased from cursing, but continued it over his broiled ham and brandy-and-water. He swore aloud, so that the servant could not help hearing, that those thieves at the Hall intended to rob him of his clothes. He could not restrain himself, though he knew that every word he uttered would injure his cause. He knew that he had been mad to strike his sister, and cursed himself for his madness. Yet he could not restrain himself. He thought of poison for himself, and of his pistols. He thought of an express train, and of the instant annihilation which it would produce.

But he would not go alone. No, indeed! why should he go alone, leaving those pistols ready loaded in his desk? Was he a man to pardon his enemies when he could take them with him, down, down, down? With bloodshot eyes, half drunk, and driven by the Fury, he took himself off to bed, cursing the poor servant as he went.

CHAPTER 58

The Pallisers at Breakfast

Gentle reader, do you remember Lady Monk's party, and how it ended? Mr. Palliser went away early, and Mrs. Marsham followed him to his house in Park Lane and told her tale. He returned to his wife, found her sitting with Burgo in the dining-room, under the eye of Mr. Bott, and bore her away home. Burgo disappeared, and Mr. Bott comforted himself with champagne, and then walked off to his lodgings. Lady Monk saw that the game was up, and thought with regret of the loss of her two hundred pounds. Such was the ending of her party.

Lady Glencora, on her journey home in the carriage with her husband, had declared her resolution never again to see either Mrs. Marsham or Mr. Bott in her own house. This she said with more defiance in her tone than Mr. Palliser had ever heard. He was by nature less ready with words than her, and did not answer. Indeed, during that drive very few words were spoken.

"I will breakfast with you tomorrow," he said, as she prepared to go upstairs. "I have work still to do tonight, and I will not disturb you by coming to your room."

"You won't want me to be very early?" said his wife.

"No," said he, with more anger in his voice than he had yet shown. "What hour will suit you? I must say something about tonight before I leave you tomorrow."

"I don't know what you can have to say, but I'll be down by half-past eleven, if that will do?"

Mr. Palliser said that it would, and then they parted.

Lady Glencora had played her part very well before her husband. She had declined to be frightened by him, and had boldly declared her enmity to Mrs. Marsham and Mr. Bott. She felt some triumph in her own strength; and as she wished him good night on the staircase, and slowly walked up to her room, this consciousness of triumph still supported her. But when she was left alone all her triumph departed from her.

She bade her maid go, and then she sat close over the fire, with her slippers on the fender, her elbows on her knees, and her face resting on her hands. In this position she remained for an hour, with her eyes fixed on the coals. Her thoughts were anything but triumphant. She had forgotten Mr. Bott and Mrs. Marsham altogether. It was of her husband and of Burgo that she was thinking – weighing them one against the other, and connecting her own existence with theirs, not expecting joy or the comfort of love from either, but with a conviction that on either side there must be misery for her.

But of that shame before all the world, if she should break her vows and live with a man who was not her husband, she thought hardly at all. It was almost nothing to her. For herself, she had been sacrificed; and – as she bitterly told herself – through her own weakness.

But that was done. Whatever way she might go, she was lost. They had married her to a man who cared nothing for a wife, nothing for any woman – so she declared to herself – but who had needed a wife so that he might have an heir. If she had had a child, she thought that she might have been happy enough. But there was nothing in her home to give her comfort.

"He sees me as the cause of his misfortune," she said to herself. Of her husband's rank, of the future of his title and his estates, she thought much. But of her own

wealth she thought nothing. It did not occur to her that she had given him enough wealth to make his marriage a comfort to him. She took it for granted that the marriage was now distasteful to him, as it was to herself, and that he would eventually be the gainer if she led it to be dissolved.

As for Burgo, she knew well enough that he was a man much less worthy than her husband. She knew that he was an idle spendthrift – that he drank, gambled, and lived the life of the loosest man about town. She knew also that she could not redeem him if she went to him as his mistress, abandoning her husband and all her duties. Burgo Fitzgerald would not be influenced for good by such a woman as she would then be. She told herself no lies about this.

But, as I have said before, she did not count herself for much. What though she were ruined? What though Burgo were untrustworthy? She loved him, and he was the only man she had ever loved! Lower and lower she crouched before the fire; and then, when the coals were no longer glowing, she crept into bed. As to what she should say to her husband on the following morning, she had not yet begun to think of that.

Exactly at half-past eleven she entered the pretty little breakfast parlour which looked out over the park. Mr. Palliser was there already, sitting with the morning paper in his hand. He rose when she entered, and, coming up to her, just touched her with his lips. She put her cheek up to him, and then took her place at the breakfast table.

“Have you any headache this morning?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” she said. Then he took his tea and toast, spoke a word about the fineness of the weather, told her some scraps of news, and soon returned to the absorbing interest of a speech made by the leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords. The speech was very interesting to Mr. Palliser, because in it the noble lord alluded to a break-up in the present Cabinet, about which rumours were rife. Mr. Palliser had heard no official news of such a rupture; but if one were to take place, it must be in his favour. He felt himself to be near the object of his ambition, to have affairs upon his hands which required all his attention.

Did he really need to refer again to the incidents of last night? Doing so would be odious to him. He did not believe that his wife was in any serious danger. He was not jealous; he was indeed incapable of jealousy. He knew what it would be to be dishonoured, and he knew that under certain circumstances the world would expect him to exert himself in a certain way

But the thing that he had now to do was a great trouble to him. He would rather address the House of Commons with ten columns of figures than utter a word of remonstrance to his wife. But she had defied him by saying that she would see his friends no more; and it was this that made him feel that he could not pass over it in silence.

Nevertheless, he went on pretending to read. Every now and then he said some word to her of what he was reading, trying to use his usual tone of voice. But there was a certain hesitation – a sign of effort – of which he was himself conscious, and which she understood with perfect accuracy. He was putting off the evil moment. She, therefore, was the first to begin the conversation.

“Plantagenet,” she said, “you told me last night that you had something to say about Lady Monk’s party.”

He put down the newspaper slowly, and turned towards her. “Yes, my dear.”

“If you think anything, pray say it,” said Glencora.

“It is not always easy for a man to show what he thinks by what he says,” he replied. “My fear is that you should suppose me to think more than I do. And it was for that reason that I determined to sleep on it before I spoke to you.”

“If anybody is angry with me I’d much rather they should have it out with me while their anger is hot. I hate cold anger.”

“But I am not angry.”

“That’s what husbands always say when they’re going to scold.”

“But I am not going to scold. I am only going to advise you.”

“I’d sooner be scolded. Advice is to anger just what cold anger is to hot.”

“But, my dear Glencora, surely if I find it necessary to speak—”

“I don’t want to stop you, Plantagenet. Pray, go on. Only it will be so nice to have it over.”

He was now more than ever averse to the task before him. There are some works that won’t bear a preface, and this work of marital fault-finding is one of them.

“Glencora,” he said, “I wish you to be serious with me.”

“I am very serious,” she replied with an air of mockery, while her eyes and mouth were bright and eloquent with a spirit which her husband did not love to see.

“You ought to be serious. Do you know why Mrs. Marsham came here from Lady Monk’s last night?”

“Of course I do. She came to tell you that I was waltzing with Burgo Fitzgerald. You might as well ask me whether I knew why Mr. Bott was standing at all the doors, glaring at me.”

“I don’t know anything about Mr. Bott. I am speaking of Mrs. Marsham.”

“You should speak of them together as they hunt in couples.”

“Glencora, will you listen to me? If you say that you will not, I shall know what to do.”

“I don’t think you would, Plantagenet.” And she nodded her little head at him, as she spoke. “But I will listen to you.”

“Mrs. Marsham came here, not simply to tell me that you were waltzing with Mr. Fitzgerald – and I wish that when you mention his name you would call him Mr. Fitzgerald.”

“So I do.”

“You generally use his Christian name, which it would be much better that you should omit.”

“I will try,” she said, very gently; “but it’s hard to drop an old habit. Before you married me you knew that I had learned to call him Burgo.”

“Let me go on,” said Mr. Palliser. “It was not simply to tell me that you were waltzing that Mrs. Marsham came here.”

“And it was not simply to see me waltzing that Mr. Bott stood in the doorways, for he followed me about, and came after me to the supper-room.”

“Glencora, will you oblige me by not speaking of Mr. Bott?”

“I wish you would oblige me by not speaking of Mrs. Marsham.”

Mr. Palliser rose quickly from his chair with a gesture of anger, stood upright for half a minute, and then sat down again.

“I beg your pardon, Plantagenet,” she said. “I’ll hold my tongue till you bid me speak.”

“Mrs. Marsham came here because she saw that everyone in the room was regarding you with wonder.” Lady Glencora twisted herself in her chair, but she said nothing. “She saw that you were not only dancing with Mr. Fitzgerald, but that you were dancing with him – what shall I say?”

“Upon my word I can’t tell you.”

“Recklessly.”

“Oh! recklessly, was I? What was I reckless of?”

“Reckless of what people might say; reckless of what I might feel about it; reckless of your own position. I think she was right to come to me.”

“Of course. What’s the good of having spies, if they don’t run and tell as soon as they see anything, especially anything reckless.”

“Glencora, you are determined to make me angry. I am angry now, very angry. I have employed no spies. When rumours have reached me, not from spies, as you choose to call them, but through your dearest friends and mine—”

“What do you mean by rumours from my dearest friends?”

“Never mind. Let me go on.”

“No; not when you say my dear friends have spread rumours about me. Tell me who they are. Do you mean Alice Vavasor?”

“It does not matter. But when I was warned that you had better not go to any house in which you could meet that man, I would not listen to it. I said that you were my wife, and that as such I could trust you anywhere, everywhere, with any person. Others might distrust you, but I would not do so. When I wished you to go to Monkshade, were there to be any spies there? When I left you last night at Lady Monk’s, do you believe in your heart that I trusted to Mrs. Marsham’s eyes rather than to your own truth? Do you think that I have lived in fear of Mr. Fitzgerald?”

“No, Plantagenet; I do not think so.”

“Do you believe that I have commissioned Mr. Bott to watch your conduct? Answer me, Glencora.”

She paused a moment, thinking what actually was her true belief on that subject. “He does watch me, certainly,” she said.

“That does not answer my question. Do you believe that I have commissioned him to do so?”

“No; I do not.”

“Then it is ignoble in you to talk to me of spies. I have employed no spies. If it were ever to come to that, it would be all over with me.”

There was something of feeling in his voice as he said this, which touched his wife’s heart. She knew that she had in truth listened to words of love from her former lover. She had received a letter from this man, in which he asked her to elope with him. She had by no means resolved that she would not do it. She had been false to her husband; and as her husband spoke of his confidence in her, her own spirit rebelled against her own deceit.

“I know that I have never made you happy,” she said. “I know that I never can make you happy.”

He looked at her, struck by her altered tone, and saw that her whole manner was changed. “I do not understand what you mean,” he said. “I have never complained. You have not made me unhappy.”

He was one of those men to whom this was enough. If his wife caused him no uneasiness, what more was he to expect from her? No doubt she might have given him an heir. But he was a just man, and knew that was his misfortune, and not her fault.

But now her heart was loosed. She spoke out, at first slowly, but with all the quietness of strong passion. “No, Plantagenet; I shall never make you happy. You have never loved me, nor I you. We have never loved each other for a single moment. I have been wrong to talk to you about spies; I was wrong to go to Lady Monk’s; I

have been wrong in everything that I have done; but never so wrong as when I let them persuade me to be your wife!”

“Glencora!”

“Let me speak now, Plantagenet. It is better that I should tell you everything; and I will. I do love Burgo Fitzgerald. I do! I do! How can I help it? Have I not loved him from the first, before I had seen you? Did you not know that it was so? I do love Burgo Fitzgerald, and when I went to Lady Monk’s last night, I had almost made up my mind that I must tell him so, and that I must go away with him and hide myself. But when he came to speak to me—”

“He has asked you to go with him, then?” said the husband.

Glencora was immediately reminded that though she might tell her own secrets, she ought not to tell those of her lover. “What need is there of asking, do you think, when people have loved each other as we have done?”

“You wanted to go with him, then?”

“Would it not have been the best for you? Plantagenet, I do not love you as women love their husbands. But, before God, my first wish is to free you from the misfortune that I have brought on you.” As she said this she started up from her chair, and coming close to him, took him by the coat. He was startled, but did not speak; and he stood looking at her as she went on.

“What matters it whether I drown myself, or throw myself away by going with such a one as him, so that you might marry again, and have a child? I’d die willingly. How I wish I could die! Plantagenet, I would kill myself if I dared.”

He was a tall man and she was short, so that he stood over her, and now she was looking up into his face with all her eyes. “I would,” she said. “I would! What is there left for me that I should wish to live?”

Softly, slowly, very gradually, as though he were afraid of what he was doing, he put his arm round her waist. “You are wrong in one thing,” he said. “I do love you.”

She shook her head, touching his breast with her hair as she did so.

“I do love you,” he repeated. “If you mean that I am not apt at telling you so, it is true, I know. My mind is running on other things.”

“Yes,” she said; “your mind is running on other things.”

“But I do love you. If you cannot love me, it is a great misfortune to us both. But we need not therefore be disgraced. As for that other thing – our having, as yet, no child” – and in saying this he pressed her somewhat closer with his arm – “you allow yourself to think too much of it; much more of it than I do. I have made no complaints on that head, even to myself.”

“I know what your thoughts are, Plantagenet.”

“Believe me. Of course I have been anxious, and have, perhaps, shown my anxiety by the struggle I have made to hide it. I have never told you what is false, Glencora.”

“No; you are not false!”

“I would rather have you for my wife, childless – if you will try to love me – than any other woman, though another might give me an heir. Will you try to love me?”

She was silent. At this moment, after her confession, she could not bring herself to say that she would even try. Had she said so, she would have seemed to have accepted his forgiveness too easily.

“I think, dear,” he said, still holding her by her waist, “that we had better leave England for a while. I will give up politics for this season. Should you like to go to Switzerland for the summer, or perhaps to the German spas, and then to Italy when

the weather is cold enough?" Still she was silent. "Perhaps your friend, Miss Vavasor, would go with us?"

He was killing her by his goodness. She could not speak to him yet; but now, as he mentioned Alice's name, she gently put up her hand and rested it on the back of his.

At that moment there came a knock at the door – a sharp knock, which was repeated.

"Come in," said Mr. Palliser, dropping his arm from his wife's waist, and standing away from her.

CHAPTER 59

The Duke of St. Bungay in Search of a Minister

It was the butler who had knocked. "If you please, sir, the Duke of St. Bungay is here."

"The Duke of St. Bungay!" said Mr. Palliser, becoming rather red.

"Yes, sir, his grace is in the library. He says that he particularly wants to see you; so I told him that you were with my lady."

"Quite right; tell his grace that I will be with him in two minutes." The butler retired. "I must go now, my dear," said Mr. Palliser; "and perhaps I shall not see you again till the evening."

"Don't let me put you out in any way," she answered.

"You won't. You will be dressing for dinner, I suppose, about nine."

"I did not mean that," she said. "You must not think any more of Italy. He has come to tell you that you are wanted in the Cabinet."

Again he turned very red. "It may be so," he answered, "but though I am wanted, I need not go. But I must not keep the duke waiting. Good-bye." And he turned to the door.

She followed him and took hold of him, so that he was forced to turn to her once again. She managed to get hold of both his hands, and pressed them closely, looking up with her eyes laden with tears. He smiled at her gently, returned the pressure of the hands, and then left her – without kissing her. He did not think that the occasion required it.

"He says that he loves me," said Lady Glencora to herself, "but he does not know what love means."

But she was quite aware that he had behaved to her with genuine, true nobility. As soon as she was alone, she took out Burgo's letter from her pocket, and tearing it into very small fragments, threw the pieces on the fire. As she did so, she resolved that she would think no more of Burgo Fitzgerald as her future master.

I think, however, that she had already decided it, when she had had courage enough to tell her husband about it. She was neither bold enough nor wicked enough to do the thing. As she had said of her own idea of destroying herself, she did not dare. Therefore she tore up the letter that she had carried so long, and burnt it in the fire.

She had in truth told him everything, believing that she was delivering her own death-warrant regarding her future position in his house. She had done this, not hoping for any escape, but simply because deceit had been grievous to her, and had become unbearable as soon as he showed any kindness.

But her confession had no sooner been made than her fault had been forgiven. She had told him that she did not love him. She had told him, even, that she had thought of leaving him. But the immediate result was that he had been more tender to her than ever before. She knew that he had conquered her. However cold and heartless his home might be to her, it must be her home now. There could be no further thought of leaving him. She had tilted with him, and he had been the victor.

Mr. Palliser had not time for much thought before he found himself closeted with the Duke; but as he went upstairs, a thought or two did pass quickly across his mind. He did not feel quite sure that he had been right to forgive her, but he did feel quite sure that the thing had been done. He recognized that no more was to be said about

the past. There were to be no reproaches, and Mrs. Marsham's close attendance must abate. As for Mr. Bott – he had begun to hate Mr. Bott.

And he had offered to go abroad, and leave his politics, and his ambition, and his coming honours. He had persisted in his offer, even after his wife had suggested to him that the Duke of St. Bungay was in the house to offer him that very thing for which he had so longed! As he thought of this his heart became heavy. Such chances – so he told himself – do not come twice in a man's way. When he returned from abroad he would be nobody in politics. He would have lost everything for which he had been working all his life. But he was a man of his word, and as he opened the library door he thought that he could be resolute in keeping to his promise.

“Duke,” he said, “I'm afraid I have kept you waiting.” And they shook hands.

The Duke was in a glow of delight. “I suppose you guess why I'm come?” he said. “He has resigned at last. What was said in the Lords last night made it necessary that he should do so. I can tell you everything now. You know that I don't like Finespun in the Cabinet. I admire his character and his genius, but I think him the most dangerous man in England as a statesman. He has high principles, but they are too exalted to be of any use for everyday purposes. He has no instinct in politics, but reaches his conclusions by calculation. I would sooner trust to instinct. I think he may know how England ought to be governed three centuries hence, but not the proper way to govern now. Brock likes his eloquence; but he fears his restlessness, and thoroughly dislikes his philosophy. At any rate, Finespun has left us, and I am here to ask you to take his place.”

The Duke was almost jovial. He was thoroughly satisfied with the arrangement which he was proposing. He regarded Mr. Palliser as a steady, practical man, and in some respects, his own pupil. He had been the first to declare aloud that Plantagenet Palliser was the future Chancellor of the Exchequer; and everything had now gone as he wished.

“And who leaves with him?” asked Mr. Palliser, putting off the evil moment of his own decision; but before the Duke could answer, he had reminded himself that he had no right to ask such a question. “It does not matter,” he said; “I am afraid I must decline the offer.”

“Decline it!”

“I fear I must.”

The Duke had now risen from his chair, and was standing with both his hands upon the table. All his joviality had vanished. His fine round face had become almost ludicrously long; his eyes and mouth expressed reproach and vexation. Ever since Parliament had met he had been whispering Mr. Palliser's name into the Prime Minister's ear, and now—

But he could not believe it. “Nonsense, Palliser,” he said. “There can be no possible reason why you should not join us. You certainly intended to join us a month ago, if the opportunity offered.”

“It is true, Duke. I must ask you to listen to me now, and I must tell you what I would not willingly tell to any man.” As Mr. Palliser said this a look of agony came over his face. He was not a man who could talk easily of inmost matters; but it was essential to justify himself.

“Upon my word,” said the Duke, “I can't understand that there should be any reason strong enough to make you throw your party over.”

“I have promised to take my wife abroad, at once.”

“Then you have made a promise which it behoves you to break. I am sure Lady Glencora will see it in that light.”

“You do not quite understand me.” A certain stiffness of manner came upon him as he said this. “My wife has told me something, this morning, which makes me feel that absence from England is necessary for her present comfort. I have just promised her that she should go.”

“But, Palliser, think of it. If this were a small matter, I would not press you; but a man in your position owes his service to his country.”

“When a man has given his word, it cannot be right that he should go back from that.”

“Of course not. But a man may be absolved from a promise. Lady Glencora—”

“My wife would, of course, absolve me. It is not that. Her happiness demands it, and it is partly my fault that it is so. I cannot explain to you more fully why it is that I must give up the great object for which I have striven with all my strength.”

“If you are sure that it is imperative—”

“It is imperative.”

“I could give you twenty-four hours, you know.”

Mr. Palliser did not answer at once, and the Duke thought that he saw some sign of hesitation. “I suppose it would not be possible that I should speak to Lady Glencora?”

“It could be of no avail, Duke. She would declare that she would remain in London; but it would still be my duty to take her abroad.”

“Well; I can’t say. Such an opportunity may not come twice in a man’s life. You are throwing away the finest political position that the world can offer. No one as young as you has had such a chance within my memory. That a man under thirty should be thought fit to be Chancellor of the Exchequer, and should refuse it – because he wants to take his wife abroad! Palliser, if she were dying, you should remain under such an emergency as this. She might go, but you should remain.”

Mr. Palliser remained silent for a moment or two; he then rose and walked towards the window.

“There are things worse than death,” he said, when his back was turned. His voice was very low, and there was a tear in his eye as he spoke. The Duke felt that he could not press him any more on the subject.

“And must this be final?”

“I think it must. But your visit here has come so quickly after my resolution to go abroad, that I believe I ought to ask for some of those twenty-four hours which you have offered me. May I come to you this evening, say at eight? If the House is up in the Lords I will go to you in St. James’s Square.”

“We shall be sitting after eight, I think.”

“Then I will see you there. And, Duke, I must ask you to think of me in this matter as a friend should think, and not as though we were bound together only by party feeling.”

“I will.”

“I have told you what I shall never whisper to anyone else.”

“You are safe with me.”

“I am sure of it. And, Duke, I can tell you that the sacrifice will be almost more than I can bear. The post that you have offered me today is the only thing that I have ever coveted. I have thought of it and worked for it, have hoped and despaired, and have been wretched for weeks together because I have told myself that it was utterly beyond me.”

“As to that, neither Brock nor I have any doubt. Finespun himself says that you are the man.”

“I am much obliged. But I say this simply so that you may understand how imperative is the duty which requires me to refuse the offer.”

“But you haven’t refused yet,” said the Duke. “I shall wait at the House for you, Try to join us. Do the best you can. Remember what a man like you owes to his country.” Then the Duke went, and Mr. Palliser was alone.

He had not been alone since the revelation which had been made to him by his wife, and the words she had spoken were still sounding in his ears. “I do love Burgo Fitzgerald; I do! I do!”

They were not pleasant words for a young husband to hear. Plantagenet Palliser was a calm man, without strong passion; and he was essentially unsuspecting. Never for a moment had he thought, even while those words were hissing in his ears, that his wife had betrayed his honour. Nevertheless, the memory of those words made him feel that the world was almost too heavy for him. For the first quarter of an hour after the Duke’s departure he thought more of his wife and of Burgo Fitzgerald than he did of Lord Brock and Mr. Finespun. But he was aware that he had forgiven his wife; and she, mutely, with her eyes, had promised him that she would do her best for him.

Then something of an idea of love came across his heart, and he acknowledged to himself that he had married without loving or without requiring love. Much of all this had been his own fault. But now – now he loved her. He felt that he could not bear to part with her. He had been torn inwardly by that assertion that she loved another man. She had got at his heart-strings at last.

When the Duke had been gone about an hour, he took his hat and walked out. He made his way across Hyde Park, and into Kensington Gardens, and there he remained for an hour, walking up and down beneath the elms. He had not been there long before he had resolved that no ministerial career was at present open to him.

“It has been my own fault,” he said, as he returned to his house, “and with God’s help I will mend it, if it be possible.”

But he was a slow man, and he did not go off instantly to the Duke. He had given himself till eight o’clock, and he took the full time. He could not go down to the House of Commons because men would make inquiries of him which he would find it difficult to answer. So he dined at home, alone, and thought it all over. That seat in the Cabinet and Chancellorship of the Exchequer, which he had so infinitely desired, were already done with. There was no doubt about that. It might have been better for him not to have married; but now that he was married, he knew that his wife’s safety was his first duty.

“We will go through Switzerland,” he said to himself, “to Baden, and then on to Florence and to Rome. She has seen nothing of all these things yet, and the new life will make a change in her. She shall have her friend with her.” Then he went down to the House of Lords, and saw the Duke.

“Well, Palliser,” said the Duke, when he had listened to him, “I can only say that I am very sorry. Indeed, it half breaks my heart.” The Duke’s voice was very sad. In truth he disliked Mr. Finespun strongly, and had attached himself to Mr. Palliser almost as strongly. It was a thousand pities! “I must go to Brock at once,” he said, “and tell him. God knows what we must do now. Goodbye! No; I’m not angry. But I am very sorry.” In this way the two politicians parted.

The Duke saw Lord Brock that night, and another noble Lord, a man of great experience. These three discussed the matter, and on the following day Lord Brock got up in the House, and made a strong speech in defence of his colleague, Mr. Finespun. Till the end of the Session, at any rate, Mr. Finespun kept his position in the Exchequer.

In the meantime Mr. Palliser had returned to his wife, and told her of his resolution to tour abroad. "We may as well start at once," said he. "There is nothing on my side to hinder us."

CHAPTER 60

Alice Vavasor's Name Gets into the Money Market

Some ten or twelve days after George Vavasor's return to London he appeared at Mr. Scruby's offices with four small slips of paper in his hand.

Mr. Scruby, as usual, was pressing for money. The third election was coming on, and money was already being spent very freely among the men of the River Bank. So, at least, Mr. Scruby declared.

"It is very hard to realize money," said George, "immediately after a death, when all the property left is real property."

"Very hard indeed," said Mr. Scruby, who had heard all about the old Squire's will. Vavasor cursed him inwardly, and suggested to himself that some day he might murder Mr. Scruby as well as John Grey – and perhaps also a few more of his enemies. Two days later, he again called, and gave Mr. Scruby the four slips of paper which have been mentioned.

Before we learn Mr Scruby's judgment of those scraps of paper, we must go back to their earlier history. As they were still in their infancy, we shall not have to go back far.

One morning the parlour-maid came up to Alice, as she sat alone in the drawing-room in Queen Anne Street, and told her there was a "gentleman" waiting in the hall. We all know the tone in which servants announce a gentleman when they know that he is not a gentleman.

"What sort of a gentleman?"

"Well, miss, I don't think he's just of our sort."

Alice Vavasor was aware that the gentleman could not be her cousin George, and therefore she said, "Let him come up."

Jane let him in, announcing Mr. Levy. At this time John Vavasor was in his dressing-room.

Alice got up to receive her visitor, and at once understood the tone of her maid's voice. Mr. Levy was a little dark man, with sharp close-set eyes, a beaked nose, and a black moustache. Alice did not like the look of him, but she asked him to sit down.

"Is papa dressed yet?" Alice asked the servant, purely to let Mr. Levy know that there was a gentleman in the house with her.

"I don't think so, miss."

"I've called about a little bit of business," said Mr. Levy, when they were alone. "Nothing as you need disturb yourself about. You'll find it all square, I think." Then he produced a note, which he handed to her. Alice took the note, and saw immediately that it was addressed to her by her cousin George. "I am Mr. Vavasor's clerk, miss."

George Vavasor's letter was as follows:

Dear Alice,

After what passed between us when I last saw you, I thought that on my return from Westmorland I should learn that you had paid in at my bankers' the money that I require. But I find that this is not so; and of course I excuse you, because women so seldom know how to do what business demands of them. You have, no doubt, heard of the injustice which my grandfather has done me, and will probably feel as

indignant as I do. I only mention this, because the nature of his will makes it more than ever necessary that you should be true to your pledge to me.

Till there shall be some ground for a better understanding between us, I think it wiser not to call on you myself. I therefore send my clerk with four bills, each of five hundred pounds, drawn at fourteen days' date, across which I will get you to write your name. Mr. Levy will show you how this should be done. Your name must come under the word "accepted," and just above the name of Messrs. Drummonds, where the money must be lying not later than Monday fortnight. Indeed, the money must be there some time on the Saturday. Drummonds bank will not object if you call on the Saturday afternoon, and ask if it is all right.

I have certainly been inconvenienced by not finding the money as I expected on my return to town. If these bills are not properly provided for, the result will be disastrous to me. I feel, however, sure that this will be done, both for your own sake and for mine.

Affectionately yours,
George Vavasor.

The unparalleled impudence of this letter had the effect which the writer had intended. It made Alice think immediately of her own remissness, rather than of the enormity of his claim upon her. She believed that she had no alternative but to give him the money. She had told him that he should have it. She should not have forced him into the necessity of demanding it.

But the idea of signing four bills was terrible to her, and she felt sure that she ought not to put her name to orders for so large an amount and then entrust them to such a man as Mr. Levy. Her father was in the house, and she thought of asking him.

But it occurred to her that if she were to speak to her father about this advancing of money, he would prevent her, if he could, from keeping the promise made to her cousin. She was resolved that George should have the money; but her father might be able to delay the gift. If she signed the bills, the money must be forthcoming.

Mr. Levy had taken out the four bills and had placed them on the table.

"If you will just write your name across them, here, I need not detain you by staying any longer," he said. Mr. Levy was anxious to make his visit as short as possible, since he had heard that Mr. John Vavasor was in the house.

But Alice hesitated. Two thousand pounds is a very serious sum of money. What if this man, of whom she had never before heard, should steal the bills after she had signed them? She looked again at her cousin's letter, chiefly with the object of gaining time.

"It's all right, miss," said Mr. Levy.

"Could you not leave them with me?" said Alice.

"Well; not very well, miss. The fact is, Mr. Vavasor must have them this afternoon. He has got a heavy sum to put down about this here election."

"But, sir, the money will not be payable today. If I understand it, they are not cheques."

"No, miss, they are not cheques. But your name, miss, at fourteen days, is the same as ready money."

While she paused, he handed her a pen, and then she signed the four bills quickly. These were the four bits of paper which George Vavasor offered to Mr. Scruby, in the manner of a grand capitalist.

"You insisted on ready money, with your d— suspicions," said he; "and there it is. You're not afraid of fourteen days, I dare say."

“Fourteen days is neither here nor there,” said Mr. Scruby. “I’ll send one of my men down to Grimes, and tell him I can’t see him, till” and he looked at one of the bills, “till the 15th.”

But this was not what George Vavasor wanted. He wished that the bills should be immediately turned into money, but not by him.

“You will want a thousand, you say?” he said.

“A thousand to begin with.”

“Then you had better keep two of them.”

“Well, no! I don’t see the use of that. You had better collect them through your own banker, and let me have a cheque on the 15th or 16th.”

“How cursed suspicious you are, Scruby.”

“No, I ain’t. I don’t deal in such articles; that’s all. The truth is, Mr. Vavasor, that bills with ladies’ names on them ain’t just what people like. You take them into the City, and see if the bankers don’t tell you the same. They may be done, of course, upon your name.”

“I can explain to you the nature of the family arrangement, but I can’t do that to a stranger. However, I don’t mind.”

“Of course not. The time is so short that it does not signify. Have them collected through your own bankers, and then send me a cheque for a thousand pounds when the time is up.”

Then Mr. Scruby turned to some papers as though the interview had been long enough. Vavasor looked at him angrily, cursing him inwardly, but Mr. Scruby ignored him. So Vavasor got up and went away.

As he walked along the unalluring streets which surround Soho, to the Strand and his own lodgings, he continued to think of some wide scheme of revenge – in which Mr. Scruby might be included. Some impatience and familiarity in Mr. Scruby’s manner made him feel that he had fallen in the attorney’s esteem. The man was like a rat, and knew a falling house by instinct. So George Vavasor cursed Mr. Scruby, and calculated some method of murdering him without detection.

The reader is not to suppose that the Member for the Chelsea Districts had, in truth, any intention to become a murderer. But he received a secret satisfaction in allowing his mind to dwell upon the subject. He reflected that it would not do to knock off Scruby and John Grey at the same time, as it would be known that he was connected with both of them; unless, indeed, he was to kill himself too.

As he needed instant money, Mr. Scruby’s proposition that he should leave the four bills at his own bankers’, to be collected when they came to maturity, did not suit him. He doubted much whether at the end of the fourteen days the money would be forthcoming. Alice would have to tell her father, and John Vavasor would probably prevent the payment. He must take the bills into the City, and do the best there that he could with them. He was too late for this today, so he went down to the House. There he sat all night with his hat over his eyes, plotting his murders.

“You have heard the news; haven’t you?” said Mr. Bott, whispering in his ear.

“I haven’t heard any news.”

“Finespun has resigned, and Palliser is at this moment with the Duke of St. Bungay in the Lords’ library.”

“They may both be at the bottom of the Lords’ fishpond, for all I care,” said Vavasor.

“That’s nonsense, you know,” said Bott. “What a lucky fellow you are to have such a chance come to you directly you get in. As soon as he takes his seat down there, of course we shall go up behind him.”

“We shall have another election in a month’s time,” said George.

“I’m safe enough,” said Bott. “It never hurts a man at elections to be closely connected with the Government.”

George Vavasor was in the City early the next morning, but he found that the City did not look with favourable eyes on his four bills. The City took them up distrustfully, and repeated the name Alice Vavasor, and suggested that as the time was so short, the holder of the bills would be wise to hold them till he could collect the amount. It was very clear that the City suspected something wrong in the transaction.

George Vavasor cursed the City, and made his calculation about murdering it. Might not a river of strychnine be turned on the Exchange at luncheon time? At last he left three of the bills with his own bankers for collection, and kept the fourth in his pocket. The next day he descended with it into the lower depths of the money market, and found a capitalist who was willing to advance him two hundred pounds, keeping that fourth bill as security. The capitalist was to have forty pounds for the transaction, and George cursed him as he took his cheque. He knew that a man must be in a very bad condition when he consents to pay forty pounds for the use of two hundred for fourteen days. He cursed the City. He cursed the House of Commons. He cursed his cousin Alice and his sister Kate. He cursed the memory of his grandfather. And he cursed himself.

Mr. Levy had hardly left the house in Queen Anne Street, before Alice had told her father what she had done.

“The money must be forthcoming,” said Alice. “Papa, will you see that it is done?” To this her father made no reply, but sat looking at the fire and shaking his head, feeling it to be very hard upon him. “Papa, if you will not promise, I must go to Mr. Round myself, and find a broker to sell out for me.”

“You will be ruined,” said he, “and for such a rascal as that!”

“Never mind whether he is a rascal or not, papa. You must admit that he has been treated harshly by his grandfather.”

“I think that will was the wisest thing my father ever did. If he had left the estate to George, there wouldn’t have been an acre of it left in the family in six months’ time.”

“At any rate, papa, he must have this two thousand pounds.”

“And then he will want more.”

“No; I do not think he will ask for more. At any rate, I do not think that I am bound to give him all that I have.”

“I should think not. Why are you bound to give him anything?”

“Because I promised it. I have signed the bills now, and it must be done.”

“I don’t know that Mr. Round can do it. Your money is chiefly on mortgage.” He paused for a moment. “I never heard of such a thing. Four thousand pounds given away to such a man as that, in three months! And you say you do not intend to marry him.”

“Certainly not; all that is over.”

“And does he know that it is over?”

“I suppose he does.”

“You suppose so! Things of that sort are so often over with you!” This was very cruel. The blow struck her with such force that she staggered under it. Tears came into her eyes, and she could hardly speak lest she should betray herself by sobbing.

“I know that I have behaved badly,” she said at last; “but I am punished, and you might spare me now!”

“I didn’t want to punish you,” he said, getting up and walking about the room.
“But I don’t want to see you ruined!”

At last he made a compromise with her. He would take a day to think whether he would help her get the money, and would tell her his decision on the following morning.

CHAPTER 61

The Bills Are Made All Right

Mr. Vavasor was at his wits' end about his daughter. She had put her name to four bills for five hundred pounds each, and had demanded his aid in obtaining money to meet them. And she might put her name to any other number of bills!

"I don't want her money," the father said to himself; "and if she had none, I would make her as comfortable as I could with my own income. But to see her throw her money away like this is enough to break a man's heart."

He sent a note to Mr. Round, the lawyer, and the answer to the note came in the person of Mr. Grey. John Grey had acquired a habit of calling at Mr. Vavasor's office to talk to the father about his daughter.

He had never despaired about Alice. And though he acknowledged that she had been very foolish – or rather, that her judgement had failed her – he had never been angry with her. He had looked upon her rejection of himself, and her promise to her cousin, as the effects of a mental hallucination, very much to be lamented, but curable – a disease which might leave her altogether. And just as he would still have clung to his love if she had been attacked by any ordinary illness, so would he cling to her now that she was attacked by a malady which had no name. He had heard from Mr. Vavasor that Alice had discovered it was impossible that she should marry her cousin, and, in his quiet, patient way was beginning to feel confident that he would, at last, carry her off with him to Nethercoats.

Mr. Vavasor's office was in a dismal set of chambers, on one of the quiet, dingy side-streets off Chancery Lane. The ugly stone building, which was called the Accountant-General's Record Office, was entered by a dark hall; and, having an open door at either end, this had become a thoroughfare. But the passers through it were few, and the hall was dark, damp, and smelt of mildew.

From this hall, up the gloomy stone stairs, John Grey passed to Mr. Vavasor's room. Pausing in the silent passage outside the door, he could just hear the heavy breathing of a man within.

He entered and found Mr. Vavasor sitting in an arm-chair by the fire, resting amidst his labours. It was a large, dull room, with the view through the window of the black wall of another building. A pile of papers lay on a large mahogany table. There were three or four chairs round the wall, the arm-chair on the hearth-rug, and an old Turkey carpet on the floor. Other furniture there was none. Can it be any surprise that Mr. Vavasor preferred his club?

He was not quite alone in this deathlike dungeon. Attached to his own large room there was a small closet in which sat his clerk, a youth who spent most of his time doodling on the blotting-paper.

"Come in!" Mr. Vavasor cried. "I'm glad to see you. Sit down. Did you ever see such a wretched fire? It's the coldest building I ever put my foot in. Sometimes in winter I have to sit here in a great-coat."

"How is Alice?" said Grey.

Mr. Vavasor sighed. "She is well enough."

"Is anything the matter?"

"You'll hardly believe it when I tell you; and, indeed, I hardly know whether I ought to tell you."

"I think that you ought to tell me anything that concerns her."

“It’s about her money. Do you know, Grey, I’m beginning to think that I’ve been wrong in allowing you to advance money on her account?”

“Why?”

“Because I foresee difficulty about the repayment.”

“If she becomes my wife there will be no management wanted.”

“But what if she never becomes your wife? I’m beginning to think she’ll never do anything like any other woman. She told me the other day, as you know, that she was going to have nothing more to do with her cousin—”

“Has she become friends with him again?” said Grey, in strong anxiety.

“No – certainly not in the way you mean. I think that she is learning that he is a rascal. But would you believe it – she has given him her name to bills for two thousand pounds, payable at two weeks? Two thousand pounds!”

“But we expected that, you know,” said Grey, with composure.

“Expected it? After she had quarrelled with him?”

“She had promised him her money, and as it seems that he will be content with that, let her keep her promise.”

“And give him everything! Not if I can help it. I’ll expose the rascal, I will indeed!”

“You will do nothing, Mr. Vavator, that will injure your daughter. I’m sure of that.”

“But it’s sheer robbery!” Then Mr. Vavator described the whole transaction, and told how Alice had declared she would go to Mr. Round the lawyer, if her father would not procure the money for her. “If she would take my advice, she would leave the bills, and let them be dishonoured. I think I shall call at Drummonds bank, and explain it.”

“You must not do that,” said Grey. “I will call at Drummonds, instead, and see that the money is all right for the bills. Let him have his plunder.”

“And what if she won’t take you, Grey? My belief is she’ll never get married.”

“The money won’t be missed by me if I never get married,” said Grey, with a smile.

“No, by George! that won’t do,” said Vavator.

“Then as soon as I am certain that she can never become my wife, I will take back my money.”

So it was settled; and next morning the father informed the daughter that he had done her bidding, and that the money would be in the bank before the bills came due. On that Saturday which her cousin had named in his letter, she trudged down to Drummonds, and was informed by a very courteous senior clerk that due preparation for the bills had been made.

So far, I think we may say that Mr. George Vavator was fortunate.

CHAPTER 62 Going Abroad

One morning in May, before Alice's visit to the bank, a servant in grand livery got out of a cab in Queen Anne Street, and sent up a note for Miss Vavasor, declaring that he would wait for her answer. He had come from Lady Glencora, for Mr. Palliser had arranged his plans with his wife that morning.

"Do come – instantly if you can," the note said. "I have so much to tell you, and so much to ask of you." Alice sent back a note, saying that she would be in Park Lane as soon as she could put on her bonnet and walk down.

Alice found her friend in the small breakfast-room upstairs, sitting by the window. They had not met since the evening of Lady Monk's party, nor had Lady Glencora seen Alice in the mourning which she now wore for her grandfather.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I never thought of your being in black."

"I don't know what you want, but shan't I do in mourning as well as I would in colours?"

"You'll do in anything, dear. But I have so much to tell you. Do take your bonnet off, for I shall be hours in doing it."

"Hours in telling me!"

"Yes; and in getting your consent to what I want you to do. But I think I'll tell you that first. I'm to be taken abroad immediately."

"Who is to take you?"

"Ah, you may well ask. If you could know what questions I have asked myself on that head! But you are to be one of the party."

"I!"

"Yes; you. So of course you will understand that my husband is to take us."

"But Mr. Palliser can't leave London at this time of the year!"

"That's just it. He is to leave London. Don't look like that, for it's all settled. Whether you come or not, I've got to go in one week from now, on Tuesday evening, if you can make yourself ready. We shall breakfast in Paris on Wednesday morning, and we shall be in a new world. Mr. Palliser will walk up and down the Louvre, with you on his left arm, and I on his right, and it will be the most proper thing that ever was seen. Then we shall go on to Basle" – Alice shuddered, thinking of the balcony over the river – "and so to Lucerne. But no; that was the first plan, and Mr. Palliser altered it. He spent a whole day with maps and guide-books, and scolded me because I didn't care whether we went first to Baden or somewhere else. How could I care? I told him I would go anywhere he chose to take me. Then he told me I was heartless; and I agreed. 'I am heartless,' I said. 'Tell me something I don't know.'"

"Oh, Cora, why did you say that?"

"I didn't choose to contradict my husband. Besides, it's true. Then he threw the guide-book away, and all the maps flew about. So I picked them up again, and said we'd go to Switzerland first. If he had said Jericho, it would have been all the same to me. Wouldn't you like to go to Jericho?"

"I should have no special objection to Jericho."

"But you are to go to Baden instead."

"I've not agreed yet. But you have not told me half your story. Why is Mr. Palliser going abroad in the middle of Parliament?"

“Ah; now I must go back to the beginning. And indeed, Alice, I scarcely know how to tell you. You can hardly guess what he is giving up. You must swear that you won’t repeat what I’m going to say?”

“I don’t tell secrets.”

“Well, they have asked Mr. Palliser to be Chancellor of the Exchequer, and he has – refused. Think of that!”

“But why?”

“Because of me, and my folly, and wickedness. Because he has been fool enough to plague himself with a wife. Oh, he has been so good! If you knew how he has longed for the position – how he has worked for it day and night, wearing his eyes out when everybody else has been asleep, shutting himself up with such creatures as Mr. Bott. He has been a slave to it for years, in order that he might sit in the Cabinet, and be Chancellor of the Exchequer. This has been his excitement – what racing and gambling are to other men. At last, the place was open, and they offered it to him. They begged him to take it. The Duke of St. Bungay was here one morning about it; but Mr. Palliser refused. It’s all over now, and the other man is to remain in.”

“But why did he refuse it?”

“I keep telling you – because of me. He found that I wanted looking after, and that Mrs. Marsham and Mr. Bott between them couldn’t do it.”

“Oh, Cora! how can you talk in that way?”

“If you had gone to Lady Monk’s ball, Mr. Palliser would now be Chancellor of the Exchequer! But though you did not go, other people did who ought to have remained at home. I, for one – and you know who for another.”

“What difference could that make to you?” said Alice, angrily.

“It might have made a great deal of difference. Mr. Palliser was there too, but, of course, he went away immediately. Mrs. Marsham and Mr. Bott were watching me the whole evening; and, of course, I resolved that I would not be put down by them. So I stood up to dance with Burgo Fitzgerald.”

“Oh, Cora!”

“Why shouldn’t I? I waltzed with him for half an hour. Alice, I never will waltz again; I have done with dancing now. I knew that everybody was looking at me. I felt desperate, mad, like a wild woman. There I was, going round and round and round with the only man for whom I ever cared two straws. Ah! how well I remember the first time I danced with him. I thought he was a god.”

“Cora! I cannot bear to hear you talk like that.”

“I know well enough now that he is no god, but he was like Apollo to me then. Did you ever see anyone so beautiful as he is?”

“I never saw him at all.”

“I wish you could have seen him; but you will some day.”

Alice thought of John Grey, who was the handsomest man that she knew, but she made no answer.

“When I saw him the other night,” Lady Glencora went on, “he was just as handsome as ever – the same look, half wild and half tame, like an animal you cannot catch, but which you think would love you so if you could catch him. It was just like the old time, and I decided to care nothing for the people looking at me. Why should they care who I danced with?”

“That is nonsense, dear. If you were to see a woman misbehaving herself in public, would you not look on and make your comments?”

“You are very severe, Alice. Misbehaving in public!”

“Yes, Cora.”

Lady Glencora got up from her chair and walked away towards the fireplace.

“How am I to talk to you, then?” said Alice. “You would not have me tell you a lie?”

“Of all things in the world, I hate a prude the most,” said Lady Glencora.

“Cora, look here. If you consider it prudery to disapprove of your waltzing with Mr. Fitzgerald in the way you have described, we must differ so totally about the nature of things that we had better part.”

“Alice, you are as cold as stone. I sometimes think that you can have no heart.”

“I don’t mind your saying that; but I won’t be called a prude. You know you were wrong to dance with that man. What has come of it? In order to preserve you from misery and destruction, Mr. Palliser has given up all his dearest hopes. He has had to sacrifice himself to save you. That, I take it, is about the truth of it – and yet you tell me that you have done no wrong.”

“I never said so.” Now she had come back to her chair again. “Of course I was wrong. I have been so wrong throughout that I have never been right yet. Let me tell it on to the end, and then you can go away if you like, and tell me that I am too wicked for your friendship.”

“Have I ever said anything like that, Cora?”

“But you will, I dare say, when I have done. Well; what do you think my senior duenna did? She set off after Mr. Palliser as hard as she could. Of course Mr. Palliser came after me. He came there, and behaved so well – so much like a perfect gentleman. Of course I went home, and I was prepared to tell him everything, if he spoke a word to me – that I intended to leave him!”

“To leave him, Cora!”

“Yes, and go with that other man. I had a letter from him in my pocket asking me to go. He asked me a dozen times that night. I cannot think how it was that I did not consent.”

“That you did not consent to your own ruin and disgrace?”

“Of course it would have been my destruction. I know that. Do you suppose I have never thought of it? When once I had done it I should hate and despise myself. I should feel myself to be loathsome. But why did they not let me marry him, instead of driving me to this? And though I might have destroyed myself, I should have saved my husband. Do you know, I told him all that – told him that if I had gone away with Burgo Fitzgerald he would have another wife, and would have children?”

“You told your husband that you had thought of leaving him?”

“Yes; I told him everything.”

“And what did he say?”

“I cannot tell you what he said, only that we are all to go to Baden together, and then to Italy. But he did not seem a bit angry; he very seldom is angry. And when I told him that he might have another wife and a child, he put his arm round me and told me that he did not care so much about it as I had imagined. I felt more like loving him at that moment than I had ever done before.”

“He must be an angel.”

“‘We’ll go abroad,’ he said, and before I could say a word, he added, ‘and you shall get your cousin Alice to go with us.’ That touched me more than anything. Only think if he had proposed Mrs. Marsham!”

“But he does not like me.”

“You’re wrong there, Alice. When you went out flirting among the ruins with Jeffrey Palliser—”

“I never flirted with Jeffrey Palliser.”

“He flirted with you, which is the same thing. And when Plantagenet knew about that – for, of course, Mr. Bott told him – but he has got over that now. Come, Alice; as he has held out his hand to you, you should take it.”

“I will take his hand willingly.”

“And for my sake you will go with us? There is a spirit of wisdom about you that will suit him, and a spirit of folly that will suit me. I can manage to put myself on a par with a girl who has played such a wild game with her lovers as you have done.”

Alice would give no promise then. She said she had promised to go to Westmorland and comfort Kate in the affliction of her broken arm. But she acknowledged that she had not intended to stay more than a week in Westmorland, and it was at last decided that the Pallisers should postpone their journey for four or five days, and that Alice should go with them immediately upon her return from Vavasor Hall.

“I have no objection;” said her father, speaking with that resigned voice which men use when they are resolved to consider themselves injured. “I can get along in lodgings. I suppose we had better leave the house, as you have given away so much of your own fortune?” Alice did not think it worth her while to point out to him that her contribution to their housekeeping would remain the same as ever. She knew that she would find her father in the old house when she returned from her travels.

The absence from London would be as useful to her as to Lady Glencora. She had already begun to feel the impossibility of staying quietly at home. She was half afraid to show her face among her friends, and wept grievously over her own follies. Those cruel words of her father rang in her ears constantly: “Things of that sort are so often over with you.” The reproach, though cruel, was true, and what more galling reproach could be uttered? It would be well that she should leave her home for a while.

Mr. Palliser would not allow his wife to remain in London for the ten or twelve days before they started, so he took her down to Matching Priory, having obtained leave to be absent from the House for the remainder of the Session. That week down at Matching, as she afterwards told Alice, was very terrible. He never spoke a word to rebuke her. He treated her with perfect respect, and indeed with more signs of affection than usual.

“But,” as Lady Glencora said afterwards, “he was always looking after me. I believe he thought that Burgo Fitzgerald had hidden himself among the ruins.”

In this she very nearly hit the truth. Mr. Palliser had resolved that he would neither suspect his wife, nor treat her as though he suspected her. But it was his imperative duty to save her from that pitfall into which she had been so ready to fall.

So he went with his wife hither and thither, allowing himself to be driven about behind Dandy and Flirt. He himself proposed these little excursions. They were tedious to him, but doubly tedious to his wife, who now found it more difficult than ever to talk to him. They both struggled. He sat with her in the mornings, and he sat with her in the evenings; he breakfasted with her, lunched with her, and dined with her. He went to bed early, having no figures which now claimed his attention. And so the week at last wore itself away.

CHAPTER 63

Mr. John Grey in Queen Anne Street

Alice was resolved to visit Westmorland before she set out with the Pallisers. Kate had written to her three lines with her left hand, begging her to come. Alice had learned something of the truth about the accident from her father; or, rather, had heard her father's surmises. She had heard, too, how her cousin George had behaved when the will was read, and how he had afterwards disappeared. On her return from Westmorland she was to go at once to Park Lane for two nights before the departure of the Pallisers.

On the day before she started for Westmorland, her father told her that John Grey was going to dine with him in Queen Anne Street that evening.

"Today, papa?" she asked.

"Yes. Why not?"

"Perhaps, papa, you and Mr. Grey had better dine alone, without me, as two men generally like to do."

"If I wanted that I should have asked him to dine at the club," said Mr. Vavasor. "If you mean to say that you object to meet Mr. Grey, I can only tell you it's nonsense. There can be no reason why you shouldn't receive him."

"It will look as though he were asked as my guest."

"I saw him yesterday, and I asked him to come. He's not such a fool as to suppose that you asked him. And if you run away you'll only make more of the thing than it's worth. Of course I can't make you dine with me if you don't like."

Alice did not like it, but she saw her father's point. She was going to leave the country for some six or eight months, and it might be as well that she should have an opportunity of telling her plans to Mr. Grey. She did not doubt that her father had told him everything. She knew what her father's wishes still were; but she declared to herself that any attempts on his part would be thrown away.

She dressed very plainly, simply changing one black frock for another, and then sat in her drawing-room awaiting the two gentlemen. Her father came up first, and then the visitor was announced.

As Mr. Grey entered the room Alice knew that she was flurried, but she managed to carry herself with dignity. His bearing was perfect, as always. He came up to her with his usual quiet smile, and took her hand; but there was no squeezing, no special pressure. And when he called her Alice, it was simply as a matter of course. There was no tell-tale hesitation in his voice.

"I hear you are going abroad," he said, "with your cousin, Lady Glencora Palliser."

"Yes," said Alice. "We shall not return, I fancy, till the end of next winter."

"Plans of that sort are easily broken," said her father. "I advise you not to count too surely upon getting further than Baden."

"If Mr. Palliser changes his mind of course I shall come home," said Alice, with an attempt at a smile.

"I should think him a man not prone to changes," said Grey. "But all London is talking about his change of mind at this moment. They say he might have been in the Cabinet, but that he has taken up this idea of going abroad."

"It's his wife's doing, I presume," said Mr. Vavasor.

“That’s the worst of being in Parliament,” said Grey. “A man can’t do anything without giving a reason for it. There must be men in public life, of course; but, upon my word, I think we ought to be very much obliged to them.”

Alice, as she took her old lover’s arm, and walked down with him to dinner, thought of all her former quarrels with him on this very subject. On this very point she had left him. He had never argued the matter with her. Had he done so, she thought that she would have tried to think as he thought. But she could not become unambitious, tranquil, and fond of retirement, without an argument on the matter.

“If only he had deigned to discuss it with me!” Alice had often said. “But, no; he will read his books, and I am to fetch him his slippers, and make his tea.” All this came upon her again now; and with it there came a consciousness that it had driven her into the terrible engagement with her cousin. That was now over. There was no longer any question of her marrying George Vavasor; but merely thinking about such a marriage had been enough to ruin her.

But all her misery had been brought about by Grey’s scornful superiority to the ordinary pursuits of the world – this looking down upon humanity.

“It seems to me,” she said, very quietly, while her hand was on his arm, “that your pity is hardly needed. I should think that nobody can be happier than those public men.”

“Ah!” said he, “that is our old quarrel.” He said it as though the quarrel had simply been an argument between friends; not as though it had separated for life two people who had loved each other dearly. “It’s the old story of the town mouse and the country mouse. Mice may be civil for a while, but when they come to speak their minds freely, each likes his own life best.”

She said nothing more, and the three sat down to their small dinner-table. It was astonishing to Alice that he should be able to talk in this way, to allude to their former hopes, without a quiver in his voice, and, as far as she could tell, without any feeling in his heart.

“Alice,” said her father, “I can’t compliment your cook upon her soup.”

“Papa, you only told me at two o’clock today.”

“If a cook can’t make soup between two and seven, she can’t make it in a week.”

“I hope Mr. Grey will excuse it,” said Alice.

“Isn’t it good?” said he. “I should not have found out anything against it myself.”

“Where do you usually dine, now you are in London?” Mr. Vavasor asked.

“At the old club, at the corner of Suffolk Street.”

“They give you better soup than ours?” said Alice.

“You’ve an excellent cook,” said Mr. Vavasor, with great gravity.

The little dinner went on quietly and easily. Mr. Vavasor found fault with nearly everything. But Alice was indifferent to her father’s censures. The thing needed was that she and Mr. Grey should be able to sit together at the same table without apparent consciousness of their former ties. Alice felt that she was succeeding fairly well while she was putting in little mock defences for the cook. And as for John Grey, he succeeded so well that his success almost made Alice angry with him.

“If he can forget all that has passed, so much the better,” she said to herself when she went alone into the drawing-room.

Then she sat down on the sofa, and cried. Oh! what had she not lost! Had any woman ever been so mad, so reckless, so heartless as she had been! And she had done it, knowing that she loved him! She cried bitterly, and then went away to wash her eyes, so that she might be ready to give him his coffee when he should come upstairs.

“She does not look well,” said Grey as soon as she had left the room.

“How can she look well after what she has gone through? I think, that of all the people I ever knew, she has been the most foolish. But, of course, it is not for me to say anything against my own child; especially to you.”

“Nothing that you could say would make any difference to me. I sometimes fancy that I know her better than you do.”

“And you think that she’ll still come round again?”

“I do not know. No one can say whether such wounds as hers may be cured. But if she is not cured, it shall not be from lack of perseverance on my part.”

“Upon my word, Grey, I don’t know how to thank you enough. Take another glass of wine. I feel responsible, and yet what could I do? Alice is her own mistress. When she told me she was going to marry that horrible miscreant, my nephew, what could I do?”

“That’s over now, and we need not talk about it.”

“It’s very kind of you to say so. I believe she’s a good girl, in spite of it all.”

“I’ve no doubt of that. I don’t think you have ever understood how much all this has been a matter of conscience with her.”

“Conscience!” said the angry father. “I hate such conscience. I like the conscience that makes a girl keep her word, and not bring disgrace upon those she belongs to.”

“I shall not think that I am disgraced,” said Grey quietly, “if she will be my wife. She has meant to do right, and has tried to take care of other people’s happiness rather than her own.”

“She has taken very little care of mine,” said Mr. Vavasor.

“I shall not be afraid to trust mine to her – if she will let me. But she has been wounded sorely, and it must take time.”

“And, in the meantime, what are we to do when Mr. George Vavasor wants another payment?”

“Let us hope that he has had enough.”

“Enough! Did such a man ever have enough?”

“Let us hope, then, that she thinks he has had enough. May I go upstairs?”

“Oh, yes. I’ll follow you. She’ll think that I mean something if I leave you together.”

From all this it will be seen that Alice’s father and her lover were on confidential terms.

“And you really start tomorrow?” said Grey, as he stood close to Alice’s work-table. Mr. Vavasor had seated himself in an easy-chair on the other side of the fire, and although Grey did not whisper, he spoke in a low voice, inaudible to her father.

“I start for Westmorland tomorrow. We leave London for the continent at the end of next week. I shall not come back to Queen Anne Street.”

“And you will be away for many months?”

“Mr. Palliser talked of returning next Easter.”

“What should you say if you met me somewhere in your travels?” He had now gently seated himself on the sofa beside her, but not too close.

“I don’t think that will be very likely,” she replied, not knowing what to say.

“I think it is very likely. For myself, I hate surprises. I could not bring myself to fall in your way unawares. I shall go abroad in the late autumn, when the summer heats are gone – and I shall try to find you.”

“To find me, Mr. Grey!” There was a quivering in her voice, which she could not prevent. “I do not think that will be quite fair.”

“It will not be unfair, I think, if I give you notice of my approach. I will not fall upon you and your friends unexpectedly.”

“I was not thinking of them. They would be glad to meet you, of course.”

“But you will not be glad to see me? That’s what you mean?”

“I mean that we had better not meet more than we can help.”

“I think differently, Alice. The more we meet the better, that is what I think. But I will not stay to trouble you now. Good night!” Then he got up and went away, and her father went to his club.

CHAPTER 64

The Rocks and Valleys

During these days Mrs. Greenow was mistress of the old Hall down in Westmorland, and was nursing Kate. The aunt and the niece had confided much in each other. Kate had acknowledged that her brother had behaved badly; and the aunt had confessed to the niece that she regarded Captain Bellfield as a fit subject for compassion.

“And he broke your arm? I always knew he was violent,” Mrs. Greenow had said.

But this Kate had denied. “No, that was an accident. And if he had broken both my arms, I could have forgiven him that.” What she could not forgive was the fault which she had herself committed. For his sake she had tried to separate Alice and John Grey, and George had shown himself to be unworthy. “I would give all I have in the world to bring them together again,” Kate said.

“They’ll come together fast enough if they like each other,” said Mrs. Greenow. “Alice is young still, and they tell me she’s as good looking as ever. A girl with her money won’t have to seek far for a husband.”

“You don’t know Alice, aunt.”

“No, I don’t. But I know what young women are, and I know what young men are. A man like Mr. Grey won’t care about all that nonsense with her cousin George – especially if she tells him all about it.”

But Kate preferred the subject of the Captain, and so, I think, did Mrs. Greenow herself.

“Of course, my dear,” she would say, “as for love, that has been all over for me since poor Greenow died. ‘Captain Bellfield,’ I said to him, ‘if you were to kneel at my feet for years, it would not make me love you.’”

“And what did he say?”

“He talked nonsense about my beauty, as all the men do. If a woman were hump-backed, and had only one eye, they wouldn’t be ashamed to tell her she was a Venus.”

“But, aunt, you are a handsome woman, you know.”

“Laws, my dear, it isn’t beauty as makes men run after a woman – and it isn’t money altogether. I’ve seen women who had plenty of both, and not a man dared come near them, they were so hard and stiff. You know you’re a little that way yourself, Kate.”

“I’m afraid I’m too old to mend, aunt.”

“Not at all, if you’ll only try. You’ve plenty of money now, and you’re good-looking enough, when you take the trouble. But, as I said before, that’s not important. There’s a stand-off about some women: they look as though marriage itself were improper, and as if they believed that little babies were found in the hedges and ditches. They talk of women being forward! There are some a deal too backward, according to my way of thinking. You remember the song? ‘The poker and tongs to each other belongs.’ So they do, and that should be the way with men and women.”

“But the poker and tongs have a bad life of it sometimes.”

“Not so often as people say, my dear. Men and women don’t melt because the water is sometimes warm. Now, if I do take Bellfield – and I really think I shall; but I know he’ll give me a deal of trouble. He’ll always be wanting my money, and, of

course, he'll get more than he ought. And he'll smoke too many cigars, and perhaps drink more brandy-and-water than he should. And he'll be making eyes, too, at the girls who are fools enough to let him."

"Dear me, aunt, if I thought that ill of him, I wouldn't marry him – especially as you say you don't love him."

"As for love, my dear, that's gone!" Mrs. Greenow put up her handkerchief to her eyes. "Some women can love twice, but I am not one of them." Then her solemn tone changed as she went on. "But my dear, marriage is a comfortable thing. And I don't doubt that I shall get the upper hand with the Captain at last. I shan't stop his cigars and brandy-and-water. Why shouldn't a man enjoy himself? And then," she added tenderly, "I do think he's fond of me – I do, indeed."

"So is Mr. Cheesacre, for that matter."

"Poor Cheesy! I believe he was, though he did talk so much about money. But there was no poetry about Cheesy. I don't care about saying it now, as you've made up your mind not to have him."

"Quite, aunt."

"Your grandfather's will does make a difference. But, as I was saying, I do like a little romance – just a sniff, as I call it, of the rocks and valleys. One knows that it doesn't mean much; but it's like artificial flowers – it gives a little colour, and takes off the dowdiness. Thanks to dear Greenow, I shall never want. Of course I shan't let any of the money go into the Captain's hands. But, lord love you! I've enough for him and me. What's the good of a woman's wanting to keep it all to herself?"

"And you think you'll really take him, aunt?"

"Well, yes; I think I will." Then Mrs. Greenow whispered to Kate her belief that Captain Bellfield might possibly travel to Westmorland.

"There would be no harm in offering him a bed, would there?" she asked. "The inn at Shap is a long way off for morning calls."

Kate did not like the idea of having Captain Bellfield as a visitor. "If he must come, at least let him not come till after Alice's visit."

But there seemed to be no way of stopping him. "I don't know where he is, my dear, and as for writing to him, I shouldn't know how to begin." Although Mrs. Greenow declared that she had not positively invited the Captain, Kate did not entirely believe her.

Alice arrived, and, for a day or two, the three ladies lived very pleasantly together. Kate wore her arm in a sling; but she was able to walk out, and would take long walks in spite of the doctor's advice. Of course, they went up on the mountains. They walked up the beacon hill, and reached the spot where Kate had met with her accident.

"It was here I fell," she said; "and the last I saw of him was his back, as he went down into the valley. I stood here ever so long, holding my arm, and watching him; but he never once turned to look back at me. Do you know, Alice, I fancy that I shall never see him again."

"Do you suppose that he means to quarrel with you altogether?"

"I hardly know! He seemed to me to be going away from me, as though into another world. Of course, I thought that he would return to the Hall. At one time I almost feared that he would come upon me through the woods, as I went back. But still, I had a feeling that I should never see him again."

"He has never written?"

“Not a word. You must remember that he did not know that I had hurt myself. I am sure he will not write. If he wanted money I would send it to him, but I will not write to him.”

“I fear he will always want money, Kate.”

“I fear he will. If you could know what I suffered when he made me write that letter to you! Of course, I ought not to have written it. It was a mean letter. The whole thing was mean! He should have starved in the street before he took your money. It was that which first turned my heart against him. I began to fear that he was not such a man as I had always thought him, and spoken of him.”

“I had judged him for myself,” said Alice.

“Of course you did. But I had tried to make you judge kindly. Alice, dear! we have both suffered for him. I, too, have given up everything for him. My whole life has been at his service. He made me do things that I knew were wrong, and yet I almost worshipped him. Even now, if he came back, I believe that I should forgive him everything.”

“I should forgive him, but I could never do more.”

“But he will never come back. He will never ask us to forgive him, or even wish it. He has no heart. And yet how tender he could be when he chose! Do you remember Switzerland? Do you remember that balcony at Basle, and the night we sat there?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“So do I! Alice, I would give all I have in the world, if I could undo that journey to Switzerland, for your sake.”

“Kate, what happened with Mr. Grey would have happened just the same, whether I had gone abroad or remained at home.”

“Would it, dear?”

“Just the same.”

There was nothing more than this said about Mr. Grey. Alice could not bring herself to talk freely about him. She would never allow herself to think, for a moment, that she had been persuaded by others to treat him as she had. She had acted on her own convictions.

They walked back to the Hall mostly in silence. As they came out of the wood, they were arrested by the sight of a man standing with a cigar in his mouth, swinging a little cane, and looking around. He wore a jaunty little straw-hat, a jacket with brass buttons, and white trousers. It was now nearly the middle of May, but the summer does not come to Westmorland so early as that, and the man seemed to be cold and uncomfortable. He had not yet seen the two girls.

“Who is it?” whispered Alice.

“Captain Bellfield,” said Kate, dismayed. “I have been fearing this. What on earth are we to do with him? Look at him. That’s what aunt Greenow calls a sniff of the rocks and valleys.”

The Captain had finished his cigar, and as he threw it away among the shrubs his eye fell upon the two ladies. He uttered an exclamation, came forward, and saluted them.

“Miss Vavasor, I am delighted,” he said. “Miss Alice Vavasor, if I am not mistaken? I have been asked by my dear friend Mrs. Greenow to go out and seek you.”

Kate introduced her cousin to the Captain, who strove to bear himself as though he were comfortably at home. But he failed. He was not the Bellfield who had conquered Mr. Cheesacre on the sands at Yarmouth, though he wore the same jacket

and waistcoat. Here he was not at his ease. Kate instantly saw this, and wickedly resolved that she would make no effort to help him. She expressed her surprise at seeing him so far north.

“Well,” said he; “I am a little surprised myself. But your aunt had so often talked to me of the beauties of this place that I thought I’d take the liberty of paying you a flying visit. I didn’t mean to intrude in the way of sleeping; I didn’t indeed, Miss Vavasor; only Mrs. Greenow has been so kind as to say—”

“We are so very far out of the world, Captain Bellfield, that we always give our visitors beds.”

“I didn’t intend it, indeed, miss!” Poor Captain Bellfield was becoming very uneasy. “I did just put my bag, with a change of things, into the gig, not knowing quite where I might go on to.”

“We won’t send you any further today, at any rate,” said Kate.

“Mrs. Greenow has been very kind. She has asked me to stay till – Saturday!”

Kate bit her lips in a momentary fit of anger. The house was not her aunt’s. But she remembered that her aunt had been kind to her, and she allowed this feeling to die away. “We shall be very glad to see you,” she said, “though I’m afraid you will find us rather dull.”

“Oh dear, no – dull with you! That would be impossible!”

“And how have you left your friend, Mr. Cheesacre?”

“Quite well, thank you. That is to say, I haven’t seen him much lately. He and I did have a bit of a breeze, you know.”

“I can’t say that I did know, Captain Bellfield.”

“I thought, perhaps, you had heard. He seemed to think that I was too particular in a certain quarter! Ha – ha – ha! That’s only my joke, ladies.”

They went into the house, and the Captain straggled in after them. Mrs. Greenow, who had been somewhat discomposed by the manner of her lover’s arrival – even though she had expected it – had retired to her room.

“Have you seen your room, Captain?” Kate asked him.

“Yes – yes. Mrs. Greenow was kind enough to show me. Very nice indeed, thank you. I shan’t stay long, Miss Vavasor – only a night or so; but I did want to see your aunt again – and you, too, upon my word.”

“My aunt is the attraction, Captain Bellfield. We all know that.”

He actually simpered like a young girl. He fidgeted, and shifted from one leg to the other. Perhaps he was remembering that he had not money enough left to take him back to Norwich.

The two girls left him. “I will go to my aunt at once,” said Kate, “and find out what is to be done.”

“I suppose she means to marry him?”

“Oh, yes. I knew this was coming, but I did hope it would not be while you were here.”

Kate boldly knocked at her aunt’s door.

“Here I am, aunt; and, what is more to the purpose, there is Captain Bellfield in the drawing-room.”

“Stupid man! I told him to take himself away till dinner-time. I’ve half a mind to send him back to Shap at once. He is such an oaf.”

“But you do mean to – to marry him, aunt; don’t you?”

“Well, Kate, I really think I do. Why shouldn’t I? It’s a lonely sort of life being by myself; and I don’t think there’s very much harm in him.”

“I am not saying anything against him; only in that case you can’t very well turn him out of the house.”

“Couldn’t I, though? I could in a minute.”

“The rocks and valleys would not allow that, aunt.”

“It’s all very well for you to laugh, my dear. I might have had Cheesacre if I liked, who could have kept a carriage for me; but it was the rocks and valleys that prevented that; – and perhaps a feeling that I might do some good to a poor fellow who has nobody in the world to look after him.”

“I’m sure I hope you’ll be happy, aunt.”

“If he makes me unhappy he shall pay for it;” and Mrs. Greenow shook her head, as though she meant it.

At dinner they were not very comfortable. The Captain had laid aside the jacket with the brass buttons, and had dressed himself for dinner very soberly. And he behaved himself with an amazing sobriety, very unlike the Captain of Mrs. Greenow’s picnic. After dinner he swallowed only two glasses of the old Squire’s port wine before he sauntered out into the garden to join the ladies; and when pressed by Kate to light a cigar, he declined.

On the following morning Mrs. Greenow had recovered her composure, but Captain Bellfield was still in a rather disturbed state of mind. He now knew that his efforts were to be crowned with success, but he did not know how the preliminary difficulties were to be overcome, and he did not know what to do with himself at the Hall. After breakfast he fidgeted about in the parlour, and was flummoxed when the widow asked him what he meant to do before dinner.

“I suppose I’d better take a walk,” he said; “and perhaps the young ladies—”

“I’m afraid my nieces are busy,” said Mrs. Greenow. “But if I’m not too old to walk with you—”

The Captain assured her that she was just the proper age for a walking companion, and then attempted some apology, at which the three women laughed.

“Never mind, Captain,” said Mrs. Greenow. “We’ll have our walk, and won’t mind those young girls. Come along.”

They started at a gentle pace, as beseemed their years, along the road towards Shap. The Captain politely opened the gate for the widow, and then carefully closed it again, not allowing it to swing, as he would have done at Yarmouth. Then he offered her his arm, which she declined, and they walked on slowly in silence. What on earth was he to say to her?

“Well, Captain Bellfield,” said she. “So I suppose I’m to be good-natured; am I?”

“Arabella, you’ll make me the happiest man in the world.”

“That’s all fudge.”

“Upon my word, you will.”

“I hope I shall make you respectable?”

“Oh, yes; certainly. I quite intend that.”

“It is the great thing that you should intend. Of course I am going to make a fool of myself.”

“No, no; don’t say that.”

“If I don’t say it, all my friends will say it for me. It’s lucky for you that I don’t much care what people say.”

“I know that I’m lucky. The very first day I saw you I thought what a lucky fellow I was to meet you. Then, of course, I was only thinking of your beauty.”

“Get along with you!”

“Upon my word, yes. Come, Arabella, as we are to be man and wife, you might as well.” At this moment he had got very close to her, and had recovered something of his usual manner; but she would not allow him even to put his arm round her waist.

“Out in the high road!” she said. “How can you be so impertinent – and so foolish?”

“You might as well, you know.”

“Captain Bellfield, I brought you out here not for such fooling as that, but in order that we might have a little chat about business. If we are to be man and wife, as you say, we ought to understand on what footing we are to begin together. I’m afraid your own private means are not considerable?”

“Well, no; they are not, Mrs. Greenow.”

“Have you anything?” The Captain hesitated, and poked the ground with his cane. “Come, Captain Bellfield, let us have the truth at once, and then we shall understand each other. You must have had something to live upon, I suppose.”

Then the Captain told his story. He had a married sister from whom a guinea a week was allowed to him. That was all. He had been obliged to sell out of the army, because he was unable to live on his pay as a lieutenant. The price of his commission had gone to pay his debts, and now he was in debt again. He owed ninety pounds to Cheesacre, thirty-two pounds ten to a tailor at Yarmouth, and seventeen pounds at his lodgings in Norwich. At the present moment he had less than thirty shillings in his pocket. The tailor at Yarmouth had lent him three pounds to make his journey into Westmorland, and perhaps to get a rich wife.

Thus Mrs. Greenow got much information out of him; and then, when she was satisfied that she had learned at least some of the truth, she forgave him his offences.

“And now you will give a fellow a kiss,” said the ecstatic Captain.

“Hush!” said the widow, “there’s a carriage coming close to us.”

CHAPTER 65

The First Kiss

Mrs. Greenow, as she spoke, drew back from the Captain's arms. They were on the high road to Shap, and as she was still dressed in mourning, and as neither of them were under forty, perhaps it was as well to escape the vigilant eyes of a new visitor. Round the corner of the road, at a sharp trot, came the Shap post-horse, with the Shap gig behind him – and seated in the gig, looming large, and staring around, was – Mr. Cheesacre.

It was a sight terrible to Captain Bellfield, and by no means welcome to Mrs. Greenow. Her annoyance was chiefly because of Alice. How was she to account for this second lover? Kate, of course, knew all about it; but how could Alice be made aware that Mrs. Greenow was not to blame? She had told this ardent gentleman that there was no hope for him.

And if Mrs. Greenow was dismayed, what were the Captain's feelings? For he was aware that Cheesacre knew things about him which he had not told. Now he wished ardently that he had sailed nearer to the truth in listing his debts to Mrs. Greenow.

"That man's wanted by the police," said Cheesacre, speaking while the gig was still in motion; and he stood up in the gig and pointed at Bellfield. The gig stopped suddenly, and he fell back into his seat. "He's wanted by the police," he shouted out again.

Mrs. Greenow turned pale. What might not her Captain have done? He might have ordered things from shops on false pretences; he might have committed forgery.

"Oh, my!" she said.

"It's false," said Bellfield.

"It's true," said Cheesacre.

"I'll sue you for slander, my friend," said Bellfield.

"Pay me the money you owe me," said Cheesacre. "You're a swindler!"

Mrs. Greenow cared little about her lover being a swindler in Mr. Cheesacre's eyes. She had heard such accusations from him before. But she did care very much about the police.

"What is this I hear, Captain Bellfield?" she said.

"It's a lie and a slander. He merely wants to make a quarrel between us. What police are after me, Mr. Cheesacre?"

"It's the sheriff's officer, or something of the kind," said Cheesacre.

"Oh, the sheriff's officers!" exclaimed Mrs. Greenow, in a tone of relief. "Mr. Cheesacre, you shouldn't come and say such things. Sheriff's officers can be paid, and there's an end of them."

"I'll sue him for libel – I will," said Bellfield.

"Nonsense," said the widow. "Don't you make a fool of yourself. When men can't pay their way they must put up with having things like that said about them. Mr. Cheesacre, where were you going?"

"I was going to Vavasor Hall, to warn you."

"It's too late," said Mrs. Greenow, sinking behind her veil.

"Why, you haven't been and married him since yesterday? He only had twenty-four hours' start of me! Oh, Mrs. Greenow!"

He got out of the gig, and the three walked back towards the Hall together, while the boy drove on with Mr. Cheesacre's carpetbag.

"I hardly know," said Mrs. Greenow, "whether we can welcome you. There are other visitors, and the house is full."

"I'm not one to intrude where I'm not wanted. I can pay for my supper. That's more than some people can say. I wonder when you're going to pay me what you owe me, Lieutenant Bellfield?"

Nevertheless, the widow had managed to reconcile the two men before she reached the Hall. They had actually shaken hands.

Cheesacre, moreover, had whispered into the widow's ears the true extent of his errand into Westmorland – but not in Bellfield's hearing. When Mrs. Greenow ascertained that there was something to be said, she sent her betrothed away into the house.

There, Bellfield found Alice and Kate surveying the newly arrived carpet bag.

"It belongs to your old friend, Mr. Cheesacre," said Bellfield to Kate.

"Has he come too?" said Kate.

The Captain shrugged his shoulders, and admitted that it was hard. "And it's not the slightest use," said he. "He never had a chance."

In the meantime Cheesacre was telling his story. He first asked, in a melancholy tone, whether it was really necessary that he must abandon all his hopes. He wasn't going to say anything against the Captain, he told Mrs. Greenow, if things were really fixed.

"Things are really fixed," said Mrs. Greenow.

He could, however, not keep himself from hinting that Bellfield had not as much as a straw mattress to lie upon. Mrs. Greenow answered, so much more reason why someone should provide the poor man with a mattress.

"If you look at it in that light, of course it's true," said Cheesacre; "and as to the bit of money he owes me, I must give him his time about it, I suppose."

Mrs. Greenow offered to pay it at once if he needed it, but he answered contemptuously that he was never in distress for money.

After this he did not get on to his next subject quite so easily as he wished; and it must be admitted that there was a difficulty. As he could not have Mrs. Greenow he would be content to put up with Kate for his wife. That was his next subject. Rumours about the old Squire's will had reached him, and he had decided that the time had come when he ought to marry. He had told his friends in Norfolk that Kate Vavasor had thrown herself at his head, and very probably he had thought it true. And the aunt had always told him what an excellent wife her niece would make.

"You know you put it into my head your own self," pleaded Mr. Cheesacre.

"But things are different now," said the widow.

"How different? I ain't different."

"My niece has inherited property."

"And is that to make a change? Oh! Mrs. Greenow, how mercenary! Is she going to fling a man over because of that?"

Mrs. Greenow tried to explain to him that her niece could hardly be said to have flung him over, and at last pretended to become angry. "Why, Mr. Cheesacre, I am quite sure she never gave you a word of encouragement."

"But you always told me I might have her for the asking."

"And now I tell you that you mayn't. It's of no use your asking her, for she will only send you away with an answer you won't like. Look here, Mr. Cheesacre; you

want to get married, and there's my dear friend Charlie Fairstairs. How could you get a better wife than Charlie?"

"Charlie Fairstairs!" said Cheesacre in disgust. "She hasn't got a penny."

"Who's mercenary now, Mr. Cheesacre? Go home and think about it; and if you'll marry Charlie, I'll go to your wedding."

They were now at the gate, and Cheesacre paused. "Do you think there's no chance at all for me, then?" said he.

"I know there's none."

"Somebody else, perhaps, is the happy man?"

"I can't say anything about that, but I know she wouldn't take you."

"Then I'll go. Perhaps you'll tell the boy with the gig to come after me? That's six pound ten it will have cost me to come here and go back. Bellfield did it cheaper, of course; he travelled second class."

"The expense does not matter to you, Mr. Cheesacre."

He agreed, and then took his leave, offering his hand to Mrs. Greenow almost with humility. Before he left he invited her to bring the Captain to Oileymead when she was married, and begged her to tell Miss Vavasor how happy he should be to receive her.

"And Mr. Cheesacre," said the widow, as he walked away, "don't forget dear Charlie Fairstairs."

She entered the house, and told her nieces and the Captain, "He has gone." Bellfield was so relieved that he took off his little straw hat and threw it in the air.

Kate's satisfaction was almost as intense. "I am so glad," said she. "What on earth should we have done with him?"

"I never was so disappointed in my life," said Alice. "I have heard so much of Mr. Cheesacre, but have never seen him." Kate suggested that she should get into the gig and drive after him.

This little episode did more than anything else to put Captain Bellfield at his ease. It created a little fund of merriment between the whole party, which was very much needed. Now, when the Captain found himself alone for a quarter of an hour with Alice, he had plenty of small-talk.

"Yes, indeed. Old Cheesacre is not a bad fellow at bottom; awfully fond of his money, you know, Miss Vavasor, and always boasting about it."

"That's not pleasant," said Alice.

"No, the most unpleasant thing in the world. I think that when a man has lots of money, let him make the best use he can of it, and say nothing about it. Nobody ever heard me talking about my money."

In this way the afternoon went very pleasantly. For an hour before dinner Captain Bellfield was talked to by his widow; but he had known that this was necessary. She scolded him soundly about those sheriff's officers. Why had he not told her?

"As long as there's anything kept back, I won't have you," said she. "I won't become your wife till I'm quite sure there's not a penny owing that is not in the list."

Then I think he did tell her all – or nearly all. It was not so very much. Three or four hundred pounds would make him a new man, and what was such a sum as that to his wealthy widow! Indeed, for a woman wanting a husband of that sort, Captain Bellfield was a safer bet than someone of the standing of Burgo Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's creditors would have swallowed up every shilling that Mrs. Greenow possessed; but with Captain Bellfield she was comparatively safe.

She had chosen with prudence. Bellfield was no forger, or thief. He was simply an idle scamp, who had hung about the world for forty years, doing nothing. But he

was moderate in his greediness, with an appreciation of a daily dinner, which might keep him from straying very far as long as his intended wife could keep the purse-strings in her hands.

“I am thinking of taking this house,” said she, “and of living here.”

“What, in Westmorland!” said the Captain, with some dismay. What on earth would he do with himself in that gloomy place!

“Yes. Why not in Westmorland as well as anywhere else? If you don’t like it, it’s not too late, you know.” To which the poor Captain was obliged to declare that he had no objection whatever to Westmorland.

“I’ve been talking to my niece about it,” continued Mrs. Greenow, “and I find that such an arrangement can be made very conveniently. The property is left between her and her uncle, and neither of them want to live here.”

“But won’t you be rather dull, my dear?”

“We could go to Yarmouth in the autumn.” Then the Captain’s face brightened somewhat. “And perhaps, if you are not extravagant, we could manage a month or so in London during the winter, just to see the plays and do a little shopping.” Then the Captain’s face became very bright.

“That will be delightful,” said he.

“And as for being dull,” said the widow, “when people grow old they must be dull. Dancing can’t go on for ever.” In answer to this he assured this widow that she was not at all old; and now, on this occasion, his attempt to kiss her was successful.

“There goes my cap,” said she. “What a goose you are! What will Jeannette say?”

“Bother Jeannette,” said the Captain in his bliss. Then the ceremony was repeated.

Upon the whole the Captain’s visit was satisfactory – at any rate to the Captain. Everything was settled. He was to go away on Saturday morning, and remain in lodgings at Penrith till the wedding, which they agreed to have celebrated at Vavasor Church. Kate promised to be the solitary bridesmaid. The Captain was to be allowed to come over from Penrith twice a week before his marriage. I wonder how he felt when Mrs. Greenow gave him his first five-pound note, and told him that he must make it do for a fortnight? whether it was all joy, or whether there was any touch of manly regret?

“Captain Bellfield, of Vavasor Hall. It don’t sound badly,” he said to himself, as he travelled away on his first journey to Penrith.

CHAPTER 66

Lady Monk's Plan

On the night of Lady Monk's party, Burgo Fitzgerald disappeared; and when the guests were gone, his aunt inquired for him in vain. The old butler said that he thought Mr. Burgo had left the house. Lady Monk went to her nephew's door, and saw the careless debris of his dressing about the room. But he was gone.

"Perhaps, after all, he has arranged it," she said to herself.

But Burgo, as we know, had not "arranged it." It may be remembered that when Mr. Palliser came back to his wife in the supper-room, bringing her scarf, Burgo was no longer with her. He had become aware that he had no chance left, at any rate for that night. The poor fool, acting on his aunt's implied advice, had hired a post-chaise, and stationed it in Bruton Street, five minutes' walk away. And he had bought feminine cloaks and things that he thought might be necessary for his companion. He had booked rooms at the hotel near the Dover Station, from where a train was to start on the following morning to catch the boat for Boulogne. There was a dressing-bag there for which he had paid twenty-five guineas of his aunt's money, and there were other things – slippers, collars, stockings, handkerchiefs, and what else he thought might be most necessary. Poor thoughtful, thoughtless fool!

The butler was right. He did leave the house. He saw Lady Glencora taken to her carriage, and then slipped out, and slowly made his way down to Bruton Street. There was the carriage ready; and the driver emerged from the nearby public-house.

"I shan't want you tonight," said Burgo, hoarsely.

"And what about the things, your honour?"

"Take them to the devil. No; stop. Take them back with you, and ask somebody to keep them till I send for them. I shall want them and another carriage in a day or two." Then he gave the man half a sovereign, and went away.

From there Burgo went back into Grosvenor Square, and down Park Street, and through a narrow passage and a mews into Park Lane. He walked along the rails of the Park, till he found himself opposite the Palliser house. Then he stood there, leaning on the railings, and looking up at Lady Glencora's windows. What did he expect to see? He was not impelled by love. He felt a mixed, feverish desire, which he took no trouble to analyse. He wanted money. He wanted the thing of which this Palliser had robbed him. He wanted revenge. And he wanted the woman's beauty. He wanted to kiss her again as he had once kissed her, and to feel that she was soft and loving.

But in his unreasoning folly he did not know what step to take. He stood there with an undefined feeling that she might see him from the window, and come to him; in the way that if you lie under a tree long enough, a plum may drop into your mouth. He stood and looked, and cursed his ill-luck, though with none of the bitterness of George Vavasor's oaths. Burgo had one honest feeling – a feeling that it served him right, and that he had perhaps better go to the devil at once, and give nobody any more trouble. If he loved no one sincerely, neither did he hate anyone. When he cursed his fate, he only did so because cursing is so easy.

There he stood till he was cold, and then, as the plum did not drop into his mouth, he moved on. He went up into Oxford Street, and walked along to the corner of Bond Street. There a girl took hold of him, and looked up into his face.

"Ah!" she said, "I saw you once before."

“Then you saw the most miserable devil alive,” said Burgo.

“You can’t be miserable,” said the girl. “You’ve plenty of money.”

“I wish I had,” said Burgo.

“You gave me supper one night when I was starving. I ain’t hungry now. Will you give me a kiss?”

“I’ll give you a shilling, and that’s better,” said Burgo.

“But give me a kiss too,” said the girl. He gave her first the kiss, and then the shilling, and then he left her and passed on.

He made his way into the house in Grosvenor Square, by some means unknown to his aunt. He emptied his pockets as he got into bed, and counted a roll of notes in one of them. There were still a hundred and thirty pounds left. Lady Glencora had promised that she would see him again. But what use would that be if all his money should then be gone? He knew that keeping money was impossible for him.

Then he thought of his aunt. What should he say to her the next day? Might it not be as well to avoid her altogether?

He breakfasted in his bedroom, reading a French novel. He was still there when his aunt’s maid came to him, saying that his aunt wished to see him.

“Tell me, Lucy,” said he, “how is the old girl?”

“She’s as cross as cross, Mr. Burgo.”

Burgo applied himself to his toilet, from time to time reading a few pages of the French novel, and also taking small doses from a bottle of curaçao liqueur. He had by no means made up his mind to go to his aunt. Why should he? She would only scold him. She might, perhaps, turn him out of the house if he did not obey her, or if he contradicted her. So he resolved to escape to his club without attending to her summons.

But his aunt out-manœuvred him. He crept down the back stairs; but he was forced to emerge into the hall, and here his aunt pounced upon him.

“Did not Lucy tell you that I wanted to see you?” Lady Monk asked severely.

Burgo replied, with perfect ease, that he was going out just to have his hair washed. He would have been back in twenty minutes. Lady Monk did not believe him; but she let it pass.

“Never mind your hair now,” she said. “I want to speak to you. Come in here for a few minutes.”

As there was no way of escape, he followed his aunt into the breakfast-parlour.

“Burgo,” she said, “I don’t think you will ever do any good.”

“I don’t think I shall, aunt.”

“What do you mean, then, to do with yourself?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I haven’t thought much about it.”

“You can’t stay here. Sir Cosmo was speaking to me about you only yesterday morning.”

“I shall be quite willing to go down to Monkshade, if Sir Cosmo likes it better.”

“He won’t have you at Monkshade. He won’t let you go there again. And he won’t have you here. You are the most ungrateful, heartless creature I ever met. You must make up your mind to leave this house at once.”

“Where does Sir Cosmo mean that I should go, then?”

“To the workhouse, if you like. He doesn’t care.”

“I don’t suppose he does,” said Burgo.

But Lady Monk did not intend to turn Burgo out of the house. She knew that he would hang on there till the season was over. After that he must not be allowed to

return again, unless he succeeded in his enterprise. She wished to learn whether there was any possible remaining chance of success.

“What a fool you made of yourself last night, Burgo!” she said. “Why did you go on waltzing in that way when every pair of eyes in the room was watching you?”

“I couldn’t help it, if she liked it.”

“Oh, yes, say it was her fault. That’s so like a man!”

“Look here, aunt, I’m not going to sit here and be abused. I couldn’t take her in my arms, and fly away with her.”

“Who wants you to fly away with her?”

“You do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, then, I do.”

“You! you haven’t spirit to do that, or anything else. You simply disgraced yourself last night, and me too.”

“I had a plan all ready; only he came back.”

“Of course he came back, when they sent him word how you and she were going on. And now he will have forgiven her, and the thing will be all over.”

“I tell you what, aunt; she would go if she knew how. She promised to see me again. And as for being idle, and not doing anything; why, I was out in Park Lane last night, after you were in bed.”

“What good did that do?”

“It didn’t do any good, as it happened. But a fellow can only try.”

Lady Monk sat silent for a few moments, and then she said in a low voice, “What exactly did she say to you when you were parting?”

“She said she would see me again. She promised it twice.”

“Had she said that she would go with you?”

“I had asked her half a dozen times, and she did not once refuse. I know she means it, if she knew how to get away. She hates him; I’m sure of it. A woman, you know, wouldn’t absolutely say that she would go, till she was gone.”

“If she really meant it, she would tell you.”

“I don’t think she could have told me plainer.”

Again Lady Monk sat silent. She had a plan in her head, that night, she thought, give her nephew one more chance. But she hesitated before she could bring herself to explain it in detail.

At first she had lent a little aid to this desired abduction of Mr. Palliser’s wife. She had succeeded in getting Lady Glencora to her house in London, and had taken care that Burgo should meet her there. Then Lady Glencora had been asked to Monkshade. Lady Glencora, as we know, did not go to Monkshade, and Lady Monk had been baffled. But she did not therefore give up the game.

Now she must arrange it herself, and have a scheme of her own, or else the thing must fail. Yet she was almost reluctant to speak out plainly to her nephew.

“I will try and help you,” she said at last, speaking hoarsely, almost in a whisper, “if you have courage to make an attempt yourself.”

“Courage!” said he. “What do you think I am afraid of? Mr. Palliser? I’d fight him, if it would do any good.”

“There’s no fighting wanted, as you know well enough! If you can get her to call here, say on Thursday, at three o’clock, I will be here to receive her; and instead of going back into her carriage, you can have a cab for her somewhere near. She can come, as it were, to make a morning call.”

“And where shall we go?”

“There is a train to Southampton at four, and the boat sails for Jersey at half-past six; you will be in Jersey the next morning, and there is a boat goes on to St. Malo, almost at once.” Who will say that Lady Monk was not a devoted aunt?

“That would do excellently well,” said the enraptured Burgo.

“She had better tell her coachman to drive somewhere else to pick someone up. Then she can leave me, and go out on foot, to where you have the cab. She can tell the hall-porter that she will walk to her carriage. Do you understand?” Burgo declared that he did understand.

“You must call on her, and make your way in, and see her, and arrange all this. It must be a Thursday, because of the boats.” Then she asked about his money, and took the banknotes from him, promising to return them with something added, on the Thursday morning; but he asked, with a little whine, for a five-pound note, and got it. Burgo then told her about the travelling-bags and the stockings, and they were quite pleasant and confidential.

“Bid her come in a travelling-dress,” said Lady Monk. “She can wear some lace or something over it, so that the servants won’t observe it. I will take no notice of it.” Was there ever such an aunt?

After this, Burgo left her, and went away to his club, in a state of most happy excitement.

CHAPTER 67

The Last Kiss

Alice, on her return from Westmorland, went direct to Park Lane, where Lady Glencora and Mr. Palliser were. She was to stay with them in London one full day, and on the morning after that they were to start for Paris.

She found Mr. Palliser in close attendance upon his wife. Nothing in his manner implied that he was keeping watch over her; but it was very different from what Alice had seen at Matching Priory!

On her arrival Mr. Palliser received her in the hall, and took her up to his wife.

“We are so much obliged to you, Miss Vavasor,” he said. “I feel it quite as deeply as Glencora.”

“Oh, no,” she said; “it is I that am under an obligation to you for taking me.”

He merely smiled, and shook his head. On the stairs he said one other thing: “You must forgive me if I was cross to you that night she went out among the ruins.”

Alice muttered some little fib of courtesy as to the matter having been forgotten; and then they went on to Lady Glencora’s room. It seemed to Alice that he was not so big or so much to be dreaded as when she had seen him at Matching. His descent from an expectant Chancellor of the Exchequer, down to a simple, attentive husband, seemed to affect his demeanour.

“Dear Alice, this is so good of you! I am in the midst of packing, and Plantagenet is helping me.” Plantagenet winced a little under this. His wife’s voice held the slightest hint of mockery, which he perhaps thought she might have spared.

“I will help you,” said Alice.

“But we have very nearly finished. I think we shall have to start again, or we shall have nothing to do tomorrow. We couldn’t set off tomorrow, could we, Plantagenet?”

“Not very well, as your rooms are ordered in Paris for the next day.”

“As if we couldn’t find rooms at every inn on the road. Now, in travelling I should like never to book rooms – never to know where I was going. And I would never travel among Christians. Christians are so slow, and they wear chimney-pot hats everywhere. The further one goes from London among Christians, the more they wear chimney-pot hats. I want Plantagenet to take us to see the Kurds, but he won’t.”

“I don’t think that would be fair to Miss Vavasor,” said Mr. Palliser.

“Wouldn’t you like to see a live Kurd, Alice?”

“I don’t exactly know where they live,” said Alice.

“Nor I. I have not the remotest idea of the way to the Kurds. But one knows that they are Eastern, and the East is such a grand idea!”

“I think we’ll content ourselves with Rome, or perhaps Naples, on this occasion,” said Mr. Palliser.

Lady Glencora went flitting about from room to room, declaring that this thing must be taken, and that other, till Alice was astonished at the extent of the preparations. Lady Glencora was taking her own carriage.

“Not that I shall ever use it,” she said to Alice, “but he insists upon it, to show that I am not supposed to be taken away in disgrace. He is so good; isn’t he?”

“Very good,” said Alice. “I know no one better.”

“And so dull!” said Lady Glencora. “But I fancy that all husbands are dull. If I were a young woman’s husband, I shouldn’t know what to say to her that wasn’t dull.”

Two women and two men servants were to be taken. Both Lady Glencora’s servants spoke French, and as Alice’s did not, Lady Glencora said, “You shall have one all to yourself.”

She then explained Mr. Palliser’s kindness to Alice. “You see, my dear, I have told him everything. I always do tell everything. Nobody can say I am not candid. He knows about your not letting me come to your house in the old days. And I told him all that you said – about you know what. I have had nothing else to do but make confessions for the last ten days, and when a woman once begins, the more she confesses the better. And I told him that you refused Jeffrey.”

“You didn’t?”

“I did indeed, and he likes you the better for that. I think he’d let Jeffrey marry you now if you both wished it – and then supposing that you had a son and we adopted it?”

“Cora, if you go on in that way I will not stay with you.”

“But you must, my dear. You can’t escape now. You shouldn’t grudge me my little naughtinesses. I have been so proper for the last ten days.”

On the following morning they breakfasted early, because Mr. Palliser said that early hours would be good for them. After breakfast they all three went to work to do nothing. It was almost painful to see Mr. Palliser wandering about and counting the boxes, as though he could do any good by that. He, whose application to his figures had been so unremitting, could apply himself now to nothing. His world had been brought to an abrupt end, and he was awkward at making a new beginning.

They were all reading novels before one o’clock. Lady Glencora and Alice had decided that they would not leave the house. There was, however, no need for Mr. Palliser to remain with them; and at about three he prepared for a solitary walk. He would not go down to the House. All interest in the House was over with him for the present. Nor would he call on anyone. All his friends believed that he had left town. Therefore Mr. Palliser prepared to take a walk under the elms in Kensington Gardens.

He was in the hall putting on his hat and gloves when there came a knock at the front door. The hall-porter opened the door, and revealed Burgo Fitzgerald standing on the step.

“Is Lady Glencora at home?” asked Burgo, before he had seen the husband.

John turned a dismayed face upon his master, as though he knew that the comer ought not to be there, and made no instant reply.

“I am not sure,” said Mr. Palliser, making his way out as he had intended. “The servant will find out for you.” Then he went on his way across Park Lane and into the Park, never once turning back to see whether Burgo had entered the house. Nor did he return a minute earlier than he would otherwise have done. After all, there was something chivalrous about the man.

“Yes; Lady Glencora was at home,” said the porter. Burgo was therefore admitted and shown direct up into the room in which Lady Glencora was sitting.

As chance would have it, she was alone, sitting on a footstool with her face between her hands. She was thinking of Burgo, and of what the world might have been to her had she been allowed to marry him.

She rose quickly. “Ask Miss Vavasor to come to me,” she said, as the servant left the room; and then she came forward to greet her lover.

“Cora,” he said, dashing at once into his subject. “Cora, I have come to ask you to go with me.”

“I will not go with you,” said she.

“Do not answer me in that way, without a moment’s thought. Everything is arranged—”

“Yes, everything is arranged,” she said. “Mr. Fitzgerald, let me ask you to leave me alone, and to behave to me with generosity. Everything is arranged. You can see that my boxes are all prepared for going. Mr. Palliser and I, and my friend, are starting tomorrow. Wish me God-speed and go, and be generous.”

“And is this to be the end of everything? Give me your hand, Cora,” he said.

“No; I will never give you my hand again. You should be generous to me and go. This is to be the end of everything. Go, when I ask you.”

“Cora; did you ever love me?”

“Yes; I did love you. But we were separated, and there was no room for love left between us.”

“You are dearer to me than ever you were. Do not look at me like that. Did you not tell me when we last parted that I might come to you again? Are we children, that others should come separate us like that?”

“Yes, Burgo; we are children. Here is my cousin coming. You must leave me now.” As she spoke the door was opened and Alice entered the room.

“Miss Vavasor, Mr. Fitzgerald,” said Lady Glencora. “I have told him to go and leave me. Now that you have come, Alice, he will perhaps obey me.”

Alice was dumbfounded; but she stood with her eyes riveted on the face of the man of whom she had heard so much. Yes; certainly he was very beautiful. She found it quite impossible to speak a word to him, but she acknowledged the introduction with a slight nod, and then stood silent, as though waiting for him to go.

“Mr. Fitzgerald, why do you not leave me?” said Lady Glencora.

Poor Burgo also found it difficult enough to speak. What could he say?

“I had hoped to talk to you alone for a few minutes.”

“No, Mr. Fitzgerald. I sent for my cousin because I did not choose to be alone with you. I have asked you to go—”

“You perhaps have not understood me?”

“I understand you well enough.”

“Then, Mr. Fitzgerald,” said Alice, “why do you not do as Lady Glencora has asked you? You must know that you ought not to be here.”

“I know nothing of the kind,” said he, still standing his ground.

“Alice,” said Lady Glencora, “we will leave Mr. Fitzgerald here, since he drives us from the room.”

Burgo knew then that he must go – must skulk away as best he might. “No, Lady Glencora,” he said, “I will not drive you from the room. I did think that you would at any rate have been less hard to me.” He then turned to go.

He was on the threshold before Glencora’s voice recalled him.

“Oh my God!” she said. “I am hard – harder than flint. I am cruel. Burgo!” And he was back with her in a moment, and had taken her by the hand.

“Glencora,” said Alice, “pray – pray let him go. Mr. Fitzgerald, if you are a man, do not take advantage of her folly.”

“I will speak to him,” said Lady Glencora. “I will speak to him, and then he shall leave me.” She was holding him by the hand now. “Burgo,” she said, with all the passion that she could throw into the word, “Burgo, no good can come of this. Now, you must go. I shall stay with my husband as I am bound to do. Because I have

wronged you, I will not wrong him also. I loved you." She still held him by the hand, and was now gazing up into his face, while the tears were streaming from her eyes.

"Sir," said Alice, "if you have any feeling of honour in you, you will leave her."

"I will never leave her, while she tells me that she loves me!"

"Yes, Burgo, you will; you must! I shall never tell you that again, never. Go, and leave us; but I could not bear that you should tell me that I was hard."

"You are hard and cruel, as you said yourself."

"Am I? May God forgive you for saying that!"

"Then why do you send me away?"

"Because I am a man's wife, and because I care for his honour, if not for my own. Alice, let us go."

He still held her, and before she could pull away he kissed her lips. Then he left her, and making his way out of the room, and down the stairs, got himself out into the street.

"Thank God that he is gone!" said Alice.

"You may say so," said Lady Glencora, "for you have lost nothing!"

"And you have gained everything!"

"Have I? I did not know that I had ever gained anything, as yet. The only human being to whom I have ever yet given my whole heart – the only thing that I have ever really loved – has just gone from me for ever, and you bid me thank God that I have lost him. There is no room for thankfulness. It is all wretchedness from first to last!"

"At any rate, he understands now that you meant it when you told him to leave you."

"Of course I meant it. I am beginning to know myself by degrees. As for running away with him, I have not the courage to do it. I can think of it, but as for doing it, that is beyond me. Mr. Palliser is quite safe."

Alice came and sat by her, and tried to sooth her by smoothing her hair, and nursing her like a child.

"Of course I know that I ought to stay where I am," she said, breaking out almost with rage. "I am not such a fool as to mistake what I should be if I left my husband, and went to live with that man as his mistress. But why have I been brought to such a pass as this? And, as for female purity! Ah! What was their idea of purity when they forced me to marry a man for whom they knew I never cared? If I had eloped with that man who ought to have been my husband, whom would a just God have punished worst – me, or those two old women and my uncle, who tortured me into this marriage?"

"Come, Cora, be silent."

"I won't be silent! You have done what you liked, and no one has interfered with you. You have suffered, too; but at any rate you can respect yourself."

"And so can you, Cora – thoroughly, now."

"How; when he kissed me, and I could hardly restrain myself from giving him back his kiss tenfold? But it is all sin. I sin towards my husband, pretending that I love him; and I sin in loving that other man, who should have been my husband. There; I hear Mr. Palliser at the door. Come away with me; or rather, stay, for he will come up here, and you can keep him talking while I try to recover myself."

Mr. Palliser came upstairs as soon as he had deposited his hat in the hall. Alice was, in fact, in doubt about whether she should mention Mr. Fitzgerald's name. But Mr. Palliser at once put an end to her doubts.

"You have had a visitor here?" said he.

"Yes," said Alice.

“I saw him as I went out,” said Mr. Palliser. “Indeed, I met him at the hall door. He was, of course, wrong to come here.”

“He has been punished, I think,” said Alice.

“But as for Glencora,” continued Mr. Palliser, without any apparent notice of what Alice had said, “I thought it better that she should see him or not, as she should herself decide.”

“She had no choice in the matter. As it turned out, he was shown up here at once. She sent for me, and I think she was right to do that.”

“Glencora was alone when he came in?”

“For a minute or two, till I could get to her.”

“I have no questions to ask about it,” said Mr. Palliser, after waiting for a few moments. “I am very glad that you were within reach of her, as otherwise her position might have been painful. Perhaps it may be as well that he has been here. I am forced to suppose him to be a villain. What a man does when driven by passion, I can forgive; but that he should deliberately plan schemes to ruin both her and me, is what I can hardly understand.” As he made this little speech I wonder whether his conscience said anything to him about Lady Dumbello, and a certain evening in his own life.

The little party of three dined together very quietly, and after dinner they all read their novels. Before long Alice saw that Mr. Palliser was yawning, and she began to understand how much he had given up in order that his wife might be secure. When he left the room for a few minutes to wake himself up by walking about the house, Glencora told Alice of his yawning down at Matching. “I used to think that he would fall in pieces. What are we to do about it?”

“Pretend not to notice it,” said Alice.

“That’s all very well; but he’ll set us off yawning too, and then he’ll notice it. He has given himself up to politics, till nothing else has any salt in it left for him. I cannot think why such a man wanted a wife at all.”

“You are very hard upon him, Cora.”

“I wish you were his wife. But, of course, I know why he got married. And I ought to feel for him as he has been so grievously disappointed.” Then Mr. Palliser returned to the room, and the remainder of the evening was passed in tranquillity.

Burgo Fitzgerald, when he left the house, turned back as far as his uncle’s door, and then, having paused there for a moment, hurried on. For half an hour, or thereabouts, something like true feeling was at work within his heart. He had once more pressed to his bosom the woman he thought that he had loved. He had kissed her, and her voice was still ringing in his ears. He comforted himself for a minute with the conviction that she loved him. He felt – for a moment – that he could live on such consolation as that! But in truth, there was hardly a man less capable of living on such consolation.

He would not go in and tell his aunt at once of his failure. Indeed, he thought he would not tell his aunt at all. So he turned back from Grosvenor Square, and went to his club in St. James’s Street, feeling that billiards and brandy-and-water might be the best restorative. He blamed himself greatly for letting Lady Monk take those banknotes from him. When he entered his club his mind had left Lady Glencora, and was considering how he might best get that spoil out of his aunt’s possession.

CHAPTER 68

From London to Baden

On the following morning Mr. Palliser yawned no more. There is some life in starting a long journey, and the life is the stronger and fuller if the things and people to be carried are numerous and troublesome. Lady Glencora was a little troublesome, and would not come down to breakfast in time. When rebuked, she asserted that the next train would do just as well; and when Mr. Palliser proved to her, with much trouble, that the next train could not enable them to reach Paris on that day, she declared that it would be much more comfortable to take a week in going than to hurry. There was nothing she wanted so much as to see Folkestone.

“If that is the case, why did not you tell me so before?” said Mr. Palliser, in his gravest voice. “Richard and the carriage went down yesterday, and are already on board the packet.”

“If Richard and the carriage are already on board the packet,” said Lady Glencora, “of course we must follow them. Alice, haven’t you observed that, in travelling, you are always driven on by some Richard or some carriage, till you feel that you are a slave?”

All this was trying to Mr. Palliser; but I think that he enjoyed it, nevertheless, and was happy when he did get his freight off from Pimlico Station in the proper train.

Of course Lady Glencora and Alice were very ill crossing the Channel; of course the two maids were worse than their mistresses; of course the men-servants drank brandy-and-water with the steward downstairs; and of course Lady Glencora declared that she would not go beyond Boulogne that day; but, nevertheless, they did get on to Paris. Had Mr. Palliser become Chancellor of the Exchequer, he could hardly have worked harder. It was he who found out which carriage had been reserved for them, and who put the ladies’ dressing-cases and cloaks on to the seats, who laid out the novels, and made preparations as though this stage of their journey was to take them a week, instead of five hours and a half.

“Oh, dear! how I have slept!” said Lady Glencora, as they approached Paris.

“I think you’ve been tolerably comfortable,” said Mr. Palliser joyfully.

“Since we got out of that horrid boat I have done pretty well. Why do they make the boats so nasty? I’m sure they do it on purpose.”

“It is the sea that makes them uncomfortable,” said Mr. Palliser.

“Never mind; we shan’t have any more of it for twelve months, at any rate. We can get to the Kurds, Alice, without getting into a boat again. That is the great comfort of the Continent. One can go everywhere without being seasick.”

Mr. Palliser said nothing, but he sighed as he thought of being absent for a whole year. He had said that such was his intention. But how was he to live for twelve months out of the House of Commons? What was he to do with himself, with his intellect and his energy, during all these coming dreary days? And he might have been Chancellor of the Exchequer! He might at this very moment have been upon his feet, making a financial statement of six hours’ duration, to the delight of one-half of the House, and the bewilderment of the other half, instead of dragging cloaks across that dingy, dirty waiting-room at the Paris Station.

Alice thought of the last time in which she had been in that waiting-room, when George and Kate had been with her. But she was now travelling with great people,

who never spoke of their wealth, but who showed their consciousness of it at every turn of their lives.

“After all,” she said to herself, “I wonder whether the burden is not greater than the pleasure.”

They stayed in Paris for a week, and during that time Alice got to know Mr. Palliser well. At Matching she had seen little of him. Now she began to understand his character, and learned how to talk to him. She allowed him to tell her things in which Lady Glencora resolutely took no interest. She delighted him by writing down in a little pocket-book the number of eggs that were consumed in Paris every day, whereas Glencora protested that the information was worthless unless her husband could tell her how many of the eggs were good, and how many bad. And Alice was glad to find that a hundred and fifty thousand female operatives were employed in Paris, while Lady Glencora said it was a great shame, and that they ought to have husbands.

“I do so wish you had married him!” Glencora said to Alice that evening. “You would always have had a pocket-book ready to write down the figures, and you would have pretended to care about the eggs, and the rest of it. I can’t do it. If I see a hungry woman, I can give her my money; or if she is a sick woman, I can nurse her; but I cannot take up poverty and crime in the lump. I never believe it all. My mind isn’t big enough.”

They went into no society at Paris, and at the end of a week were glad to leave.

“I don’t know that Baden will be any better,” Lady Glencora said; “but we can leave again after a bit – and get nearer to the Kurds.”

Mr. Palliser demurred. “I think we had better stay a month at Baden. I like to have a plan.”

“And so do I,” said his wife, “if only for the sake of not keeping it.”

“There’s nothing I hate so much as not carrying out my intentions,” said Mr. Palliser.

Upon this, Lady Glencora shrugged her shoulders, and made a mock grimace to her cousin. All this her husband bore meekly for a while; he behaved very well. But, then, he had his own way in everything. Lady Glencora did not behave very well – contradicting her husband, and not considering the sacrifice he was making on her behalf. But, then, she had her own way in nothing.

On one point she did conquer her husband. He intended to go from Paris back to Cologne, and down the Rhine to Baden. Lady Glencora declared that she hated the Rhine, and that she would be wretched if she were taken that way. Mr. Palliser referred the matter to Alice; and she, who had last been upon the Rhine with Kate and George Vavasor, voted for going to Baden by way of Strasbourg.

“We will go by Strasbourg, then,” said Mr. Palliser gallantly.

“Not that I want to see that horrid church again,” said Glencora.

“Everything is horrid to you, I think,” said her husband. “You are determined not to be contented, so that it matters very little which way we go.”

“That’s the truth,” said his wife. “It does matter very little.”

They got to Baden, and found half a hotel prepared for their reception. Here the carriage was brought into use for the first time, and Glencora talked of sending home for Dandy and Flirt. Mr. Palliser calmly assured his wife that the horses would not bear the journey.

“They would be so out of condition,” he said, “as not to be worth anything for two or three months.”

“I only meant to ask for them if they could come in a balloon,” said Lady Glencora.

This angered Mr. Palliser, who had really thought of pacifying his wife by sending for the horses.

“Alice,” she asked, one morning, “how many eggs are eaten in Baden every day before ten o’clock?”

Mr. Palliser, who at the moment was eating one, threw down his spoon, and pushed his plate from him.

“What’s the matter, Plantagenet?” she asked.

“The matter!” he said. “But never mind; I am a fool to care about it.”

“I declare I didn’t know that I had done anything wrong,” said Lady Glencora. “Alice, do you understand what it is?”

Alice said that she understood very well.

“Of course she understands,” said Mr. Palliser. “How can she help it? And, indeed, Miss Vavasor, I am more unhappy than I can express, to think that your comfort should be disturbed in this way.”

“I think Alice is doing very well,” said Lady Glencora. “What is there to hurt her comfort? Nobody scolds her. Nobody tells her that she is a fool. She never jokes, or does anything wicked, and, of course, she isn’t punished.”

Mr. Palliser, as he wandered that day alone through the gambling-rooms at the great Assembly House, thought that, after all, it might have been better for him to have remained in London, to have become Chancellor of the Exchequer, and to have run all risks.

“I wonder whether it would be any harm if I were to put a few pieces of money on the table, just once?” Lady Glencora said to her cousin that evening, in one of those gambling salons. There had been some music in one side of the building, and afterwards the ladies had strayed away into the other apartments.

“The greatest harm in the world!” said Alice; “and what on earth could you gain by it?”

“Something to live for – some excitement. Is it not a shame that I see around me so many people getting amusement, and that I can get none? I’d go and sit out there, and drink beer and hear the music, only Plantagenet wouldn’t let me. I think I’ll throw one piece on to the table to see what becomes of it.”

“I shall leave you if you do,” said Alice.

“You are such a prude! You look after me quite as carefully as Mr. Bott and Mrs. Marsham ever did; but as I chose you myself, I can’t very well complain, and I can’t very well get rid of you.”

“Do you want to get rid of me, Cora?”

“Sometimes. Do you know, there are moments when I almost make up my mind to go headlong to the devil – when I think it is the best thing to be done. It’s a hard thing for a woman to do, because she gets so despised. A man can take to drinking, and gambling and all the rest of it, and nobody despises him a bit. All he needs is money, and he goes away and has his fling. Now I have plenty of money, and I never got my fling yet. I do feel so tempted to rebel, and go ahead, and care for nothing.”

“Throwing one piece on to the table wouldn’t satisfy that longing.”

“You think I should be like the wild beast that has tasted blood, and can’t be controlled? Look at all these people here. There are husbands gambling, and their wives don’t know it; and wives gambling, and their husbands don’t know it. I wonder whether Plantagenet ever has a fling? What a joke it would be to come and catch him!”

“I don’t think you need be afraid of that.”

“Afraid! I should like him all the better for it. If he came to me some morning, and told me that he had lost a hundred thousand pounds, I should be so much more at my ease with him.”

“No chance of that, I’m quite sure.”

“None the least. He’d make a calculation that the chances were nine to seven against him, and then the speculation would seem madness.”

“I don’t suppose he’d wish to try, even if he were sure of winning.”

“Of course not. Look – there’s an opening there. I’ll just put on one napoleon.”

“You shall not. If you do, I’ll leave you at once. Look at the women who are playing. Those men are bad enough, but the women look like fiends.”

“You’re not going to frighten me in that hobgoblin way, you know. I don’t see anything the matter with any of the people.”

“What do you think of that young woman who has just got a handful of money from the man next to her?”

“I think she is very happy. I never get money given to me by handfuls, and the man to whom I belong gives me no encouragement when I want to amuse myself.”

They were now standing near one end of the table, and suddenly there came to be an opening through the crowd. Lady Glencora at once stepped up and placed a piece of gold on one of the marked compartments.

She retreated again with flushed face, and took hold of Alice’s arm.

“There,” she said, “I have done it.”

Alice, in her dismay, did not know what to do. She could not scold her friend, as many eyes were turned upon them, nor could she, of course, leave her, as she had threatened.

Lady Glencora laughed with her peculiar little low laughter. “I was determined you shouldn’t frighten me out of it,” she said.

One of the croupiers at the table had in the meantime called the game; and another had gently pushed three or four more pieces of gold up to that which Lady Glencora had flung down, and had then cunningly caught her eye, and had pushed them further towards her. She had supposed herself to be unknown in the salon, but no doubt all the croupiers and half the company knew well enough who she was. Someone motioned to her to come and take up the money which she had won. She hesitated, and then the croupier asked her, in a low, indifferent voice, whether she desired that her money should remain. She nodded and he drew the money back to the spot on which she had placed the first napoleon.

Again the cards were turned up softly, again the game was called, and again she won. The money was dealt out to her – between twenty and thirty napoleons. Her face had flushed before, but now it became very red. She caught hold of Alice, who was literally trembling beside her, and tried to laugh again. But there was that in her eye which told Alice that she was really frightened.

Someone placed a chair for her at the table, and in her confusion, not knowing what to do, she seated herself.

“Come away,” said Alice. “You must come away!”

“I must get rid of that money,” said Glencora, trying to whisper, “and then I will come away.” The croupier again asked her if the money was to remain, and she again nodded. Everybody at the table was now looking at her. The women especially were staring at her with hard, shameless eyes; their white gloves had been removed to show dirty hands. Alice saw it all, and trembled.

Again she won.

“Leave it,” said Alice, “and come away.”

“I can’t leave it,” said Glencora. “If I do, there’ll be a fuss. I’ll go the next time.” What she said was, of course, in English, but it was easy to see that she was troubled, and, of course, those around her looked at her more because of her trouble. Again that little question and answer went on between her and the croupier, and the money was piled up on the compartment – a heap of gold.

Alice had now both her hands on the back of the chair, needing support. If the devil should persist, and increase that stock of gold again, she must go and seek for Mr. Palliser. She knew not what else to do.

“Come away at once, and leave it,” she said, “or I shall go.” At that moment the croupier raked it all up, and carried it all away; but Alice did not see this. A hand had been placed on her shoulder, and as she turned round her face her eyes met those of Mr. Palliser.

“It is all gone,” said Glencora, laughing. And now she, turning round, also saw her husband.

“I am so glad that you are come,” said Alice.

“Why did you bring her here?” said Mr. Palliser. There was anger in his tone, and in his eye. He took his wife’s arm, and walked away quickly, while Alice followed them alone. He went down the front steps of the building, towards the hotel. What he said to his wife, Alice did not hear; but her heart was swelling. Though she might have to go back alone to England, she would tell him that he was ill-treating her. She followed him on, up into their drawing-room, and there he stood with the door open, while Lady Glencora threw herself upon a sofa, and burst out into affected laughter.

“Here’s a piece of work,” she said, “about a little accident.”

“An accident!” said Mr. Palliser.

“Yes, an accident. You don’t suppose that I sat down there meaning to win all that money?” Whereupon he looked at her with scorn.

“Mr. Palliser,” said Alice, “you have treated me this evening in a manner I did not expect from you. It is clear that you blame me.”

“I have not said a word, Miss Vavasor.”

“No; you know well how to show your anger without speaking. As I do not choose to undergo your displeasure, I will return to England by myself.”

“Alice! Alice!” said Glencora, jumping up, “that is nonsense! What is all this trumpery thing about? Leave me, because he chooses to be angry about nothing?”

“Is it nothing that I find my wife seated and playing at a common gambling-table, surrounded by all that is wretched and vile?”

“You wrong me, Plantagenet,” said Glencora. “There was only one heap, and that did not remain long. Did it, Alice?”

“It is impossible to make you ashamed of anything,” he said.

“I certainly don’t like being ashamed,” she answered; “and don’t feel any necessity on this occasion.”

“If you don’t object, Mr. Palliser,” said Alice, “I will go to bed. Good night, Glencora.” Then she took her candle, and marched off to her own room, with all the dignity of which she was capable.

CHAPTER 69

From Baden to Lucerne

The second week in July saw Mr. Palliser's party established at Lucerne, in Switzerland, safe beyond the reach of the German gambling tables. Alice Vavasor was still with them; for the quarrel about Lady Glencora's wickedness had been settled amicably.

However, for many days Alice's anger against Mr. Palliser had not been removed, and her intimacy with him had been much checked. It was now a month since that little scene in the salon at Baden, which was described in the last chapter. Mr. Palliser had made no apology to her; but Alice had become aware that he intended to apologize by his conduct, and she had been content to accept this conduct in lieu of any spoken request for pardon. The acknowledgement of a mistake and the asking for forgiveness is almost too much for any woman to expect from such a man as Mr. Palliser.

Early on the morning after the scene in question, Lady Glencora had gone into Alice's bedroom, and had found her cousin packing up her things.

"You are not such a fool," she said, "as to think anything of what happened yesterday?"

Alice assured her that, whether fool or not, she did think a great deal of it.

"In fact," she said, "I can't stand it. He expects me to take care of you, and is offended if you don't do just what he thinks proper; while, as you know well enough, I have not the slightest influence over you."

Lady Glencora contradicted this vigorously. Mr. Palliser had been anxious.

"And you how know how stiff, and hard, and unpleasant he can be without meaning it," said his wife.

"There is no reason why I should bear his unpleasantness," said Alice.

"Yes, there is – friendship. And as for my not doing what you tell me, you know that's not true."

"Did I not beg you to keep away from the table?"

"Of course you did, and of course I was naughty; but that was only once. Alice, I want you more than I ever wanted you before. I cannot tell you more now, but you must stay with me."

Alice consented to come down to breakfast without continuing her packing, and at last, of course, she stayed. When she entered the breakfast-room Mr. Palliser came up and offered her his hand. She had no alternative but to take it. There was an intended apology in the manner in which he offered her toast and butter; and he treated her with special courtesy when he handed her to the carriage for their drive. So by degrees Mr. Palliser and Miss Vavasor were again friends.

But Alice never knew how the matter was settled between Mr. Palliser and his wife, or whether there was any such settling.

"Of course, he knows that I don't want to gamble," Lady Glencora had said. All the same, none of them went to the Assembly Rooms again before their departure.

Before establishing themselves at Lucerne they made a little tour by the Falls of the Rhine and Zurich. Alice had made a struggle, but in vain, to avoid a passage through Basle. It was clear that Mr. Palliser was determined to go by Basle, and she could not bring herself to say that she had unpleasant memories connected with that

place. She was very averse to talking about herself and her own affairs, even with her cousin.

Of course Lady Glencora knew the whole story of Mr. John Grey and George Vavasor. And, of course, like all Alice's friends, she hated George Vavasor, and was prepared to receive Mr. John Grey with open arms, if there were any possibility that her cousin would open her arms to him also. But Alice was so stubborn about her own affairs that her friend found it almost impossible to speak of them.

"It is all over and done," Alice once said; "and though I know that I have behaved badly, yet I believe everything has been for the best. I am inclined to think that I can live alone, or perhaps with my cousin Kate, more happily than I could with any husband."

"That is such nonsense."

"Perhaps; but, at any rate, I mean to try. We Vavasors don't seem to be good at marrying."

"You want someone to break your heart for you," said Lady Glencora. She understood little of the state of her friend's heart; for with all the tears that Lady Glencora had shed about her lost lover, and her continual thinking of the matter, she had never loved Burgo Fitzgerald as Alice Vavasor had loved Mr. Grey.

But her nature was altogether different to Alice's. Love with her had in it a gleam of poetry, a spice of fun, something even of hero-worship; but with it all there was a dash of devilry, and almost wickedness. She knew Burgo Fitzgerald to be a scapegrace, and she liked him the better on that account. She despised her husband because he had no vices. She would have given everything she had to Burgo; but in all that she might have done for him, there would have been no thoughtfulness – no true care.

And now that she was married there was no thoughtfulness or care either for herself or for her husband. She was ready to sacrifice herself for him, if necessary. She believed herself to be unfit for him, and would have submitted to be divorced. But she had never for a moment set herself the task of thinking what conduct on her part might be best for his welfare.

Alice's love had been altogether of another kind – and it lacked romance. There was certainly in it neither fun nor wickedness; nor was there, I fear, so much hero-worship as there should be in a girl's heart when she gives it away. But in all the troubles of her love, she had thought more of others than of herself; and, indeed, those troubles had chiefly come from that. She had left John Grey because she feared that she would do him no good as his wife; and she had betrothed herself for a second time to her cousin, because she believed that she could help him by marrying him. Of course she had been wrong on both counts. She knew it, was undergoing bitter repentance. But she said little of all this to her cousin.

They went through Basle, and stayed at the big hotel with the balcony over the Rhine, which Alice remembered so well. On the first evening of her arrival she found herself again looking down upon the river.

Here, on one of these balconies, was brought to her a letter from her cousin Kate, which was filled with news about her cousin George. Mr. Palliser brought it, and she had no alternative but to read it in his presence.

"George has lost his election," the letter began. For one moment Alice thought of her money, and the vain struggle in which it had been wasted. She felt a fleeting regret for the futility of the effort. But it passed away at once. "It was worth our while to try it," she said to herself, and then went on with her letter.

“I and Aunt Greenow are up in London,” the letter said, “and have just heard the news. Though I have been here for three days, and have twice sent word to him, he has not been near me. Perhaps it is best that he should stay away, as I do not know how any pleasant words could pass between us. He lost by a large majority. There were five candidates altogether for the two seats, and he was the last of the five. I continue to hear news about him – or rather, my aunt hears and tells me – which fills me with fear about his future career. I believe that he has abandoned his business, and has no source of income. I would willingly share what I have with him; or I would give him all my share of the income out of the estate. But I cannot do this while we are presumed to be enemies. I am in London to see a lawyer about some steps which George is taking to upset grandpapa’s will. The lawyer says that it is all nonsense, and that George’s lawyer is not really in earnest; but I cannot do anything till the matter is settled.

“Dear Alice, though so much of your money is gone, I must congratulate you on your escape. You will understand what I feel in writing this, after all that I did to bring you and him together – after all my hopes and ambitions. The money shall be repaid. I think you will forgive me the injury I have done you; and I know that you will pity me.

“Aunt Greenow is buying her wedding clothes, and Captain Bellfield is in lodgings near to us, also buying his trousseau; or, I should say, having it bought for him. I am hardly in a mood for mirth, but it is impossible not to laugh inwardly when she discusses the state of his wardrobe, and proposes economies – greatly to his disgust. She holds him very tightly in hand, and makes him account for all his hours as well as all his money.

“‘Of course, he’ll run wild directly he’s married,’ she said to me, yesterday; ‘but the more I tame him now, the less wild he’ll be by-and-by. And though I shall scold him sometimes, I shall never quarrel with him.’ I have no doubt all that is true; but what a fool she is to trouble herself with such a man. She says she does it for an occupation. I took courage to tell her once that a caged tiger would give her as much to do; and she answered me very sharply. I had tried my hand on a tiger, she said, and had felt his claws. She chose to sacrifice herself when some good result might be possible. I had nothing further to say; and since then we have been on the pleasantest terms about the Captain.

“They have arranged with your father to take Vavasor Hall for three years, and I suppose I shall stay with them till your return. What I may do then will depend entirely upon your doings. I feel myself to be a desolate, solitary being, without any tie. I never thought that I should feel the death of my grandfather to be such a loss. Apart from you, I have nothing left to me; and I have the unpleasant feeling that I have for years been trying to do you the worst possible injury, and that you must regard me as an enemy from whom you have escaped, but not without terrible wounds.”

It was undoubtedly true that if Alice had neither seen nor heard from Kate during John Grey’s courtship, John Grey would not have lost his wife. But Alice protested against this truth within her own breast. She had been weak and foolish; but she would not admit that any other woman had persuaded her to such weakness.

“She mistakes me,” Alice thought. “She is not the enemy who has wounded me.”

While Alice had been reading, Mr. Palliser had almost buried himself in newspapers which held news about the elections. He was now completely hidden behind a sheet of the Times, and had not spoken a word since he had begun reading. Lady Glencora had also received letters.

“Sophy tells me that you are returned for Silverbridge,” she said at last.

“What? yes; I’m returned,” said Mr. Palliser, speaking with something like disdain about the possibility of anything else in his own family borough. The house of Omnium had been very great in carrying out the Reform Bill. It had given up much, and had retained for family use simply the single seat at Silverbridge. But that that seat should be seriously disputed hardly suggested itself as possible to the mind of any Palliser.

“I’m sorry to see, Miss Vavasor, that your cousin has not been so fortunate,” he said.

“So I find,” said Alice. “It will be a great misfortune to him.”

“Those Metropolitan elections cost so much trouble and money, and are so doubtful. A man is never sure there till he has fought for his seat three or four times.”

“This has been the third time with him,” said Alice, “and he is a poor man.”

“Dear, dear,” said Mr. Palliser, who knew nothing of such misfortunes. “I have always thought that those seats should be left to rich commercial men who can afford to spend money upon them. Instead of that, they are generally contested by men of moderate means. Another of my friends in the House has been thrown out.”

“Who?” asked Lady Glencora.

“Mr. Bott,” said the unthinking husband.

“Mr. Bott out!” exclaimed Lady Glencora. “I am so glad. Alice, are you not glad? The red-haired man, that used to stand about, you know, at Matching. I suppose he’ll go and stand about somewhere in Lancashire, now.”

“I did not know,” said Mr. Palliser stiffly, “that my friend Mr. Bott and Miss Vavasor were enemies.”

“Enemies! I don’t suppose they were enemies,” said Glencora. “But he was a man whom no one could help disliking.”

“He was a man I specially disliked,” said Alice, with great courage. “He may be very well in Parliament; but I never met a man who could make himself so disagreeable in society. I really did feel myself constrained to be his enemy.”

“Bravo, Alice!” said Lady Glencora.

“I hope he did nothing at Matching, to – to –” began Mr. Palliser.

“Nothing especially to offend me, Mr. Palliser – except that he had an unpleasant way of trying to make little secret confidences. I felt certain that he was trying to do mischief,” said Alice.

“Of course he was,” said Lady Glencora; “and he had a habit of rubbing his head against the wallpaper, and leaving a mark that was quite unpardonable.”

Mr. Palliser felt himself forced to abandon his political ally. Perhaps this was easier now that Mr. Bott had lost his seat.

It was evening, and while they were still sitting among their letters and newspapers, there came a shout along the water, and the noise of voices from the bridge. Suddenly, there shot down before them in the swift running stream the heads of many swimmers in the river, alongside boats carrying their clothes. They went by almost like a glance of light upon the waters, so rapid was the current.

“Oh, how I wish I could do that!” said Lady Glencora.

“It seems to be very dangerous,” said Mr. Palliser. “I don’t know how they can stop themselves.”

“Why should they want to stop themselves?” said Lady Glencora. “Think how cool the water must be, and how beautiful to be carried along so quickly!” She stood leaning on the rail of the balcony, and looking enviously down upon the water. Alice

was, of course, thinking of that other evening, when George Vavasor was with her – and when she made up her mind to separate herself from Mr. Grey.

The next day, Mr. Palliser and his party went on to Lucerne, making that journey by slow stages via Schaffhausen and Zurich. At Lucerne, they stayed for some time in the great hotel which overlooks the lake. Here there came to them a visitor.

CHAPTER 70

At Lucerne

Mr. Palliser did not much enjoy this part of his tour abroad. When he first reached Lucerne there was no one with whom he could associate pleasantly, nor had he any occupation to pass his time. He did not care for scenery. Close at his elbow was the finest to be had in Europe; but it was nothing to him. Had he been simply journeying through Lucerne when the business of Parliament was over, for a little change of air, he could have enjoyed the thing in a moderate way. But he had no passion for mountains and lakes. His mind was always in the House of Commons, or the Cabinet, and in the meetings of which he read from week to week.

He took short, solitary walks about the town, making to himself the speeches which he would have made to full houses, had not his wife brought ruin upon all his hopes. And as he pictured to himself the glorious successes which probably never would have been his, so did he prophesy an absolute downfall from all political power as the result of his absence – having, in truth, no cause for such despair. He was barely thirty, and if he had been able to judge his own case as keenly as he could have judged the case of another, he would have known that a short absence might raise his value rather than lower it. But his personal annoyance was too great to allow him to make such calculations aright. So he became fretful and unhappy; and though he spoke no word of rebuke to his wife, he made her conscious that she had brought him to this miserable condition.

Lady Glencora herself had a love for the mountains and lakes, but it was a love of that kind which needs to be stimulated by society, and which is keenest among cold chickens, picnic-pies, and the flying of champagne corks. When they first entered Switzerland she was very enthusiastic, and declared her intention of climbing up all the mountains, and going through all the passes. But Mr. Palliser did not share her aspirations, and Lady Glencora soon lost her enthusiasm. By the time that they were settled at Lucerne she had voted the mountains to be bores, and had almost learned to hate the lake, which she declared always made her wet through when she got into a small boat, and sea-sick in a large one.

At Lucerne they made no acquaintances, Mr. Palliser being a man not apt to make new friendships. They did not even dine at the public table, because Mr. Palliser did not like it, and of course Lady Glencora gave way. There were, moreover, some marital passages which were not pleasant to a third person. They did not scold each other; but Lady Glencora would purposely irritate her husband by her flippant tone, and then Mr. Palliser would become fretful, and would look as though the cares of the world were too many for him. I cannot, therefore, say that Alice had much enjoyment at this time.

But when they had been there about a fortnight, a stranger arrived, whose coming at any rate lent some excitement to their lives. They usually breakfasted at nine, and then Mr. Palliser would read till three. At that hour he would walk forth by himself, after handing the two ladies into their carriage, and they would be driven about for two hours.

“How I hate this carriage,” Lady Glencora said one day. “I wonder whether the Swiss people think that we are going to be driven about here for ever.” At some moments, it seemed that Lady Glencora had something to tell her cousin. Alice, however, would not press her for her secret.

"If you have anything to tell, why don't you tell it?" Alice once said.

"You are so hard," said Lady Glencora.

"So you say very often," Alice replied. "But hard or soft, I won't beg for your confidence." Then Lady Glencora said something savage, and the subject was dropped for a while.

But we must go back to the stranger. One day Mr. Palliser had put the ladies into their carriage, and was standing by the front door of the hotel, wondering whether to walk up the hill to the left or turn into the town on the right, when he was accosted by an English gentleman, who, raising his hat, said that he believed that he spoke to Mr. Palliser.

"I am Mr. Palliser," said our friend, very courteously. But though he smiled and raised his hat, there was something in his look and voice which would not have encouraged any ordinary stranger to persevere.

"My name is John Grey," said the stranger.

Then the smile was dropped, the tone of Mr. Palliser's voice was altered, and he put out his hand. He knew enough of Mr. John Grey's history to be aware that he was a man with whom he might permit himself to become acquainted. After exchanging a few words, the two men started off for a walk together.

They went through the town, and up the river, where they would not meet the ladies' carriage, and when Mr. Palliser returned, he was alone. The three dined together, and nothing was said. Together they sauntered out in the evening, and came in and drank their tea; but still nothing was said. At last, Alice and her cousin took their candles and left the sitting-room for the night.

"Alice," said Lady Glencora, as soon as they were in the passage together, "I have been dying to say something. Let us go into your room at once. Who do you think is here, at Lucerne, in this hotel, at this very moment?"

Alice knew, immediately, that Mr. Grey had followed her, though she had heard no word since that day on which he had told her that they would meet abroad.

"Who is it, Glencora?" she asked calmly.

"Whom in all the world would you best like to see?" said Glencora.

"My cousin Kate," said Alice.

"It is not your cousin Kate. And I don't believe you. It is a gentleman, of course. Why don't you show a little excitement? When Plantagenet told me, just before dinner, I almost jumped out of my shoes. He was going to tell you himself after dinner, but I thought it best to save you from that. Who has come, do you suppose?"

"Of course I know now," said Alice, very calmly, "that Mr. John Grey has come."

"Yes, he is in this house; or, more probably, waiting outside by the lake till he shall see a light in your bedroom." Then Lady Glencora paused. But Alice said nothing. "Well?" said Lady Glencora.

"Well?" said Alice.

"Have you nothing to say?"

"I am quite aware of the importance of Mr. Grey's arrival, and shall probably lie awake all night thinking about it; but I don't feel that I have much to say about it."

"I wish I had let Mr. Palliser tell you before all the servants. I do indeed."

"It would not have made much difference."

"Not the least, I believe. I wonder whether you ever did care for anybody in your life – except your cousin Kate. Still waters run deep; and sometimes I think your waters run too deep for me to fathom. I suppose I may go now, if you have got nothing more to say?"

“What do you want me to say? He told me he would come.”

“And you never said a word about it.”

“I thought it better not to. He might change his mind, or anything might happen. I told him not to come; and it would have been much better if he had stayed away.”

“Why?”

“Because his being here will do no good to anyone.”

“No good! Look here, Alice. If you do not make it up with him before tomorrow evening, I shall believe you to be utterly heartless. I’ll go now, and leave you to lie awake.” Then she left the room, but returned in a moment to ask, “What is Plantagenet to say to him about seeing you tomorrow? Of course he has asked permission to come and call.”

“He may come if he pleases. I haven’t quarrelled with him.”

“And may we ask him to dine with us?”

“Oh, yes.”

“In fact, he is to be regarded as an ordinary person. Well; good night. I don’t understand you, that’s all.”

It may be doubted whether Alice understood herself. As soon as her friend was gone, she put out her candle and sat at the open window of her room, looking out upon the moonlight as it played upon the lake. Would he be there, thinking of her, as Glencora had hinted? If it were so, he should not see her, so she drew the curtain.

It was a pity that he should have come, as his coming could lead to no good result; and yet she loved him dearly for coming. Now that she was alone, her heart was full of love towards this man; and yet she felt that she ought not to marry him, even though he might still be willing to take her. There could be no doubt that he was still willing. Why else had he followed her to Switzerland? Why should it not be as he wished?

She asked herself the question, and did not answer it; but she felt she had no right to such happiness after the evil that she had done. She had been driven by a frenzy to do something which she herself could not pardon; and she could not bring herself to accept a reward. If she had simply refused his hand, she could have brought herself to ask him to forgive her. But she had done so much more than this, and so much worse! She had affianced herself to another man. What must he not think of her, and what not suspect?

Then she remembered those interviews with George Vavasor in Queen Anne Street. She had shrunk from him. There had been no caress, no kiss. But it was impossible that the nature of that mad engagement between her and her cousin George should ever be made known to Mr. Grey. She sat there wiping the tears from her eyes as she looked for his figure among the figures by the lake-side; but she promised herself no happiness from his coming. Oh! reader, can you forgive her for sinning against the softness of her feminine nature? I think that she may be forgiven, in that she never thought lightly of her own fault.

If he were there, by the lake-side, she did not see him. John Grey was not a man to console himself by looking up at his lady’s candle. He had come to Lucerne with a purpose, which, if possible, he meant to carry out; but he was already in bed, tired with long travel, before Lady Glencora had left Alice’s room.

At breakfast the next morning, Mr. Palliser ventured to speak.

“Glencora has told you, I think, that Mr. Grey is here? He is an old friend of yours, I believe?”

Alice, remaining as composed as she could, said Mr. Grey was a very dear friend of hers.

“I shall be glad to see him – if you will allow me?” she added.

“Glencora suggests that we should ask him to dinner,” said Mr. Palliser.

But Mr. Grey did not wait till dinner-time to see Alice. Early in the morning his card was brought up, and Lady Glencora, as soon as she saw the name, ran away. Mr. Grey, when he was shown into her ladyship’s sitting-room, saw the skirt of her ladyship’s dress as she whisked herself off to her husband.

“I told you I should come,” he said, with his ordinary sweet smile. “And here I am.”

He took her hand, and held it, pressing it warmly. She hardly knew how to address him, or how to get her hand back.

“I am very glad to see you – as an old friend,” she said; “but I hope—”

“You hope what?”

“I hope you have had some better cause for travelling than a desire to see me?”

“No, dearest; no. I have had no better cause. I have come on purpose to see you; and if Mr. Palliser had taken you off to Africa, I should have felt compelled to follow. You know why?”

“Hardly,” said she – not finding any other word to say.

“Because I love you. I want you to be my wife; and they say that perseverance is the best way when a man has such a want as that.”

“You ought not to want it,” she said, whispering.

“But I do, you see. And why should I not want it?”

“I am not fit to be your wife.”

“I am the best judge of that, Alice. You have to make up your mind whether I am fit to be your husband.”

“You would be disgraced if you were to take me, after what I have done. What would other men say of you when they knew the story?”

“Other men, I hope, would say that when I had made up my mind, I was tolerably constant in keeping to it. I do not think they could say much worse of me than that.”

“They would say that you had been jilted, and had forgiven the jilt.”

“As far as the forgiveness goes, they would tell the truth. But, indeed, Alice, I don’t very much care what men do say of me.”

“But I care, Mr. Grey; and though you may forgive me, I cannot forgive myself. Indeed I know now, as I have known all along, that I am not fit to be your wife. I am not good enough. And I have done that which makes me feel that I have no right to marry anyone.” She said this, jerking out the sentences almost in convulsions; the tears were streaming down her cheeks. “I have thought about it, and I will not. I will not. After what has passed, I know that it will be better – that I should remain as I am.”

Soon after that she left him; not, however, till she had begged him to treat her simply as a friend. “In spite of everything, I hope that we may always be dear friends,” she said.

“I hope we may,” he answered; “the very dearest.”

In the afternoon he again met Mr. Palliser, and resolved to tell his whole story to his new acquaintance – not in order to ask for advice, but so that he might get some assistance. So the two men walked off together, and Mr. Palliser felt the comfort of having a companion.

“I have always liked her,” said Mr. Palliser, “though, to tell the truth, I have twice been very angry with her.”

“I have never been angry with her,” said the lover.

“And my anger was unjust both times. You may imagine how great is my confidence in her, when I have thought she was the best companion my wife could have for a long journey, under circumstances that were – but I need not trouble you with that.”

So great had been the desolation of Mr. Palliser’s life since his banishment from London that he almost felt tempted to tell the story of his troubles to this absolute stranger. But he thought of the blood of the Pallisers, and refrained.

“About her character I have no doubt in the world,” said Grey. “In all that she has done I think that I have seen her motives; and though I have not approved of them, I have always known them to be pure and unselfish. She has done nothing that I did not forgive as soon as it was done. If she had married that man, I should have forgiven her even that – though I should have known that all her future life was destroyed, and much of mine also. I think I can make her happy if she will marry me, but she must first be taught to forgive herself. Just now, she may, perhaps, be more under your influence and your wife’s than she can be under mine.”

Mr. Palliser promised that he would do what he could.

“I think she loves me,” said Mr. Grey.

Mr. Palliser said that he was sure she did, though he had no way of knowing, and said it merely to be civil.

The little dinner-party that evening was pleasant enough, and nothing was said about love. Lady Glencora talked nonsense to Mr. Grey, and Mr. Palliser contradicted all the nonsense which his wife talked. But this was done in such a way that the evening passed away pleasantly. It was tacitly admitted among them that Mr. Grey was to be allowed to come among them as a friend, and Lady Glencora managed to say one word to him aside, in which she promised to give him her most cordial cooperation.



CHAPTER 71

Showing How George Vavasor Received a Visit

We must go back for a few pages to scenes which happened in London during the summer, before Mr. Grey went to Lucerne. He had another quarrel with George Vavasor.

Vavasor lost his election for the Chelsea Districts despite all the money he had spent. Out of the bills which Alice had signed, he had paid one thousand pounds at once to Mr. Scruby, towards the expenses of his election; and when the polling day arrived he had in his hands five hundred pounds. Where he was to get more when this was gone, he did not know. If he were successful, then he would be grandly indifferent to any debts. There might be pickings in the way of a Member of Parliament of his calibre. Companies would be glad to have him as a director, paying a guinea a day, or perhaps more, for his hour's attendance; and in the City he might turn that "M.P." to good account in various ways.

But what was he to do if he lost the election? No sooner had Mr. Scruby got the thousand pounds than he pressed for still more money, insisting that eight hundred would make the thing quite secure. But Vavasor swore to himself that he would not part with another shilling.

"It's no use," he said to Mr. Scruby. "I cannot make another payment before the election." Mr. Scruby shrugged his shoulders, and said that he would do his best. But George Vavasor soon knew that the man was not doing his best – that the man had, in truth, abandoned his cause. The landlord of the *Handsome Man* jeered when he went there canvassing, and Vavasor knew that his chance was gone. Mr. Scruby would be absent when he called. It was easy to see that Mr. Scruby no longer regarded him as a successful man, and the day of the poll showed very plainly how right Mr. Scruby had been.

George Vavasor was rejected, but he still had his five hundred pounds in his pocket, if little or nothing else that he could call his own. What was he to do with himself?

After pledging to stand again at the next election, he went home to his lodgings in Cecil Street, and tried to consider calmly his position in the world. He had lost his inheritance. He had abandoned one profession after another. His ambition had betrayed him, and he had no more hopes of politics. He had estranged from himself every friend that he possessed. He had driven from him with violence even his devoted sister. He had robbed the girl whom he intended to marry, and had so insulted her that affection between them was impossible. He thought over it all with outer calmness, as he sat there in his arm-chair.

From the moment in which he had first realised that the election would go against him, he had resolved that he would be calm amidst his ruin. Sometimes he assumed a little smile, as though he were laughing at his own position. Mr. Bott's day of rejection had come before his own, and he had written Mr. Bott a droll note of consolation and mock sympathy. To all who accosted him, he replied in a bantering tone.

And now, as he sat down to consider his future, he smiled in the same way, though there was no one there to see the smile. He even jumped up and laughed audibly, as he tried to persuade himself that he regarded the world and all that belonged to it as a bubble.

But suddenly there was a change, and his eyes became fierce, and the scar that marred his face grew red and ghastly. He showed his teeth and clenched his fists within his pockets.

“Curse him!” he said out loud. “Curse him, now and for ever!” He was thinking of that old man who had opposed him during his life, and had ruined him at his death. His assumed tranquillity deserted him. He kicked a chair; then he took the chair in his hands, and threw it across the room. What should he do? Where should he go? From where might he find comfort to support him?

Vavator turned to a bottle of brandy which stood near, half filled a tumbler, and swallowed it greedily. “By —!” he said, “I believe it is the best thing a man can do.”

Then he went to a high desk in one corner of the room, and unlocking it, took out a revolver. He turned it over, and tried the lock, and snapped it without caps, to see that the barrel went round fairly.

“It’s a beggarly thing to do,” he said, and put the pistol down again. “If I do it, I’ll use it first for another purpose.” Then he poured himself more brandy-and-water, and having drunk it, he threw himself upon the sofa, and seemed to sleep.

But he did not sleep, and by-and-by there came a slight knock at the door.

“Who’s there?” he said. Then the door handle turned. But the door had been locked. “Who’s there?” he asked again, in a loud, angry voice.

“It is I,” said a woman’s voice.

“D—ation!” said George Vavator.

The woman heard him, but she simply remained standing where she was. She knew the man well, and knew that she must wait. She was very patient – and for the time was meek, though it might be that there would come an end to her meekness. Vavator, lying on the sofa, had another idea flash across his mind about the pistol. Why should he let the intruder in, and have a disagreeable interview, if the end of all things might save him from such trouble?

There he lay for ten minutes thinking, and then the low single knock was heard again. He jumped to his feet, with his eyes full of fire. He knew that it was useless to bid her go. She would sit there all night. Should he open the door and strangle her, and go out with the pistol and never come back any more?

He walked gently up to the door, and undid the lock. Then he walked back to the sofa and threw himself on it again. As he did so, he passed his hand across the table to pull the pistol nearer.

The woman paused a moment, and then she made her way into the room. He did not speak. She closed the door very gently, and came up to the foot of the sofa. As he still said nothing, but lay there looking at her, she was the first to speak.

“George,” she said, “what am I to do?”

She was a woman of about thirty, dressed poorly in old garments, but still with decency, and with some attempt at prettiness. There were faded flowers in her bonnet. She had long black ringlets on each cheek, which to some degree hid the hollowness of her jaws. Her eyes had a peculiar brightness, and her face was delicate; and in the days when things had gone well with her, she had possessed a soft and mirthful grace. All the softness which remained was that softness which continual sadness gives to suffering women.

She wore a light shawl over her shabby dress. When she had left her home this afternoon, she had struggled hard to dress herself so that some charm might be left to her; but she had known her own failure at every point. With long tedious care she had mended her old gloves. She had carefully hidden the rags of her sleeves. She had washed her little shrivelled collar, and had smoothed it out painfully. It had been a

grief to her that she could find no cuffs to put round her wrists; and yet she knew that cuffs could not have helped her. Nothing could help her now. She expected nothing from her visit; yet she had come forth anxiously.

“George,” she said, “what am I to do?”

As he lay there, he saw and appreciated the little struggles she had made to create some reminiscence of her former self. He saw the shining coarseness of the long ringlets which had once been softer than silk. He saw the sixpenny brooch on her bosom where he had once placed a jewel. He saw it all and lay there for a while, silently reading it.

“Don’t let me stand here,” she said, “without speaking a word to me.”

“I don’t want you to stand there,” he said.

“I know that. I know you don’t want to see me ever again.”

“Never.”

“Of course I know it. But what am I to do? Where am I to go for money? Even you would not wish that I should starve?”

“I would not wish it. I should be delighted to hear that you had plenty to eat and drink, and plenty of clothes to wear. I believe that’s what you care for the most, after all.”

“It was only for your sake – because you liked it.”

“Well; I did like it; but that has come to an end, as have all my other likings. You know very well that I can do nothing more for you. What good do you do by coming here to annoy me? Have I not told you over and over again never to come here?”

“Where else was I to find you?”

“I don’t want you to find me. I shall not give you a penny. When I put you into business I told you that we were to see no more of each other.”

“Business!” she said. “I could never make enough out of the shop to feed a bird.”

“That wasn’t my fault. Putting you there cost me over a hundred pounds, and you consented to it.”

“I didn’t consent. I was obliged to go there because you took my home away from me.”

“Have it as you like, my dear. That was all I could do for you; and more than most men would have done.” Then he got up from the sofa, and stood on the hearthrug. “At any rate, Jane, I shall do nothing more. You shall get nothing by coming here.”

“I have come here because I am starving.”

“I have nothing for you. Now go.” He pointed to the door. For more than three years of his life this woman had been his closest companion and his nearest friend. He had loved her according to his fashion, and certainly she had loved him. “Go,” he repeated angrily, “or it will be the worse for you.”

“Will you give me a sovereign?”

“I will give you nothing.”

“Then I will not go.” She down upon a chair. “I will not go till you have given me something to buy food. If you put me out of the room, I will lie at the top of the stairs. And if you put me out of the house, I will sit upon the door-step.”

“If you play that game, my poor girl, the police will take you.”

“Let them. I care nothing for that. I will not go till you give me money.”

And for this she had dressed herself with so much care, mending her gloves, and darning her little fragments of finery! He stood looking at her, and thinking what he had better do to rid himself of her presence. If he quite resolved to take his final journey with the pistol’s aid, why should he not go out and leave her here? Or, for

that matter, why not give her the remainder of his wealth? What he still had left was enough to place her in a seventh heaven. He cared little for her, and was angry with her; but there was no one for whom he cared more, and no friend with whom he was less angry.

But his mind was not quite made up as to that final journey. So he wanted to get rid of her.

“Jane,” he said, with that assumed tranquillity, “you talk of starving and of being ruined.”

“I am starving. I have not a shilling in the world.”

“I am as badly off as you are. I won’t say that I am starving; but I am utterly ruined. My property – what should have been mine – has been left away from me. I have lost the trumpery seat in Parliament for which I paid so much. All my relations have turned their backs upon me—”

“Are you not going to be married?” she said.

“Married! No – but I am going to blow my brains out. Look at that pistol, my girl. I am in earnest.”

“Oh! George, you won’t do that?”

“There is nothing else left for me to do. You and I, Jane, have not played our cards very well. We have staked all that we had, and we’ve been beaten. It’s no good whimpering after what’s lost. We’d better go somewhere else and begin a new game.”

“Go where?”

“Ah! – I can’t tell you.”

“George,” she said, “I’ll go anywhere with you. If you’re not going to be married, and will let me come to you, I will work for you like a slave. I will indeed. I know I’m poorly looking now—”

“My girl, where I’m going, I shall not want any slave.”

“But, George, where are you going?”

“Wherever people go when they have knocked out their own brains.”

“George,” – she came up to him, and took hold of the front of his coat – “George, say that you will not do that!”

“But I am saying that I shall.”

“Are you not afraid of God’s anger? You and I have been very wicked.”

“I have, my poor girl. I don’t know much about your wickedness. But what’s the good of whimpering when it’s over?”

“It isn’t over; at any rate for you.”

“I wish I knew how I could begin again. But all this is nonsense, Jane, and you must go.”

“You must tell me, first, that you are not going to kill yourself.”

“I don’t suppose I shall do it tonight. I may allow myself a week, so your staying here can do no good.”

“And you are not going to be married?”

“No.”

“And I must go now?”

“Yes.”

Then she rose and went. His bantering manner had worked. She felt that his threats of self-destruction were probably unreal; and she was persuaded to go away in peace.

CHAPTER 72

Showing How George Vavasor Paid a Visit

It was nearly seven in the evening when the woman left Vavasor's room. Now he needed to do something. He must dine, unless he meant to shoot himself at once. But he had no such intention – not for that evening at least, and he locked the pistol away again.

Then he took up some leaflets about steam packets which were lying on his table. They listed ships of various lines that went to New York, or carried emigrants to New Zealand and Australia.

“That's a good line,” said he, as he read one. “They generally go to the bottom, and save a man from any further trouble.” Then he dressed, and went out to his club for dinner.

London was still fairly full, and the dining-room at the club was crowded. Men came up to him condoling with him, telling him that he was well rid of a nuisance, or that there would be another election in a year or two. To all these little speeches he made cheerful replies. Calder Jones came over and talked about hunting, and Vavasor said he intended being at Roebury in November.

He remained in the smoking-room till nearly eleven; then he went home, and stayed up half the night destroying papers. Every compartment of his desk was emptied out, and the contents thrown into the flames; he did not even bother to look at many of them. Then he selected some clothes, and packed up two portmanteaus, folding his coats with care. Next he took out a bag of sovereigns, and, pouring them out upon the table, he counted them into parcels of twenty-five each. Rolling them up in paper, he divided them among the two portmanteaus, a dressing-bag and a travelling desk, which he filled with paper and pens, but no documents. He carefully looked through his linen, and anything that had been marked with more than his initials he rejected. Then he took out a bundle of printed cards, on which was inscribed the name of Gregory Vance.

When all was finished, he stood contemplating his work with satisfaction. Then he went to bed.

He was up early the next morning, and spoke to his landlady. He was going that very day, he said. He paid her what he owed her; for he had never been so foolish as to owe debts where he lived.

“There will be some things left here, Mrs. Bunsby,” he said, “and I will get you to keep them till I send for them.” Mrs. Bunsby said that she would. After that interview she never saw him again.

When he was alone he put on a morning coat, and taking up the pistol, placed it in his pocket, and sallied forth. He went West, across Trafalgar Square to Pall Mall East, and then turned up Suffolk Street. He walked up the street till he reached the house of Mr. Jones, the tailor, where John Grey lodged.

Vavasor rang the bell, and as soon as the servant came he pushed past her into the house.

“Mr. Grey is at home,” he said. “I will go up to him.” He went ahead of her up the stairs, entered Mr. Grey's room and closed the door behind him.

Grey was sitting near the open window, in a dressing-gown, reading, with the breakfast things on the table. As soon as he saw George Vavasor, he rose from his chair quickly.

“Mr. Vavasor,” he said, “I hardly expected to see you in my lodgings again!”

“I dare say not,” said Vavasor; “but, nevertheless, here I am.” He kept his right hand in the pocket which held the pistol.

“May I ask why you have come?” said Grey.

“I have come to declare that you are a blackguard – to spit in your face, and defy you.” And he did what he said, though without any serious result. “I have come here to see if you are man enough to resent any insult that I can offer you; but I doubt whether you are.”

“Nothing that you can say to me, Mr. Vavasor, will have any effect – except, of course, to annoy me.”

“And I mean to annoy you, too, before I have done. Will you fight me?”

“Fight a duel with you – with pistols? Certainly not.”

“Then you are a coward, as I supposed.”

“I should be a fool if I were to do such a thing.”

“Look here, Mr. Grey. You managed to worm yourself into intimacy with my cousin, Miss Vavasor, and to become engaged to her. When she found out what you were, how paltry, mean, and vile, she changed her mind, and bade you leave her.”

“Are you here at her request?”

“I am here as her representative.”

“Self-appointed, I think.”

“I am her affianced husband; and I find that, in spite of all that she has said to you, you still persecute her by going to her house, and forcing yourself upon her presence. Now, I give you two alternatives. You shall either give me your written promise never to go near her again, or you shall fight me.”

“I shall do neither, as you know very well.”

“If you have courage enough to fight me, I will meet you in any country. I will fight you here in London, or, if you are afraid of that, I will go over to France.”

“I don’t want to have anything to do with you.”

“Then you are a coward.”

“Perhaps I am; but your saying so will not make me one.”

“You are a coward, and a liar, and a blackguard. I have given you the option of behaving like a gentleman, and you have refused it. Now, look here. I have come here with arms, and I do not intend to leave this room without using them, unless you will promise to fight me.” And he took the pistol out of his pocket.

“Do you mean that you are going to murder me?” Grey asked. He was at a distance from the bell, and his visitor was standing between him and the door. He had to think what he might best do, and act upon his decision instantly. He was not timid, and he did not think, even now, that this disappointed, ruined man had come with any intention of killing him. But he knew that a pistol in the hands of an angry man is dangerous.

“You shall not leave this room alive unless you promise to meet me, and fight it out.”

Upon hearing this, Grey turned towards the bell.

“If you move a step, I will fire at you,” said Vavasor. Grey paused a moment, and looked him full in the face. “I will,” said Vavasor again.

“That would be murder,” said Grey.

“Don’t think that you will frighten me by ugly words,” said Vavasor. “I am beyond that.”

Grey had stopped for a moment; and then he went on to the bell. He had thought of rushing across the room at his adversary, calculating that a shot might miss him. But his chief object was to avoid any conflict. So he moved towards the bell.

Although he trusted that Vavasor would not fire at him, he was aware that his fatal hour might have come, and that eternity could be close upon him. Something of the spirit of a prayer flashed across his mind as he moved. Then he heard the click of the pistol's hammer as it fell, felt something in the air, and knew that the pistol had been fired – but he did not know whether the shot had struck him. His hand was on the bell-handle, and he had pulled it, before he was sure that he was unharmed.

“D—ation!” exclaimed the murderer. But he did not pull the trigger again, forgetting, in his excitement, that there were five other barrels. He turned, hurried down the stairs, and made his way out into the street, passing the girl on his way.

Grey turned to look for the bullet or its mark. He soon found the little hole in the window-shutter. The shot must have passed close beneath his ear. He remembered to have heard the click of the hammer, but he could not remember the sound of the shot, and when the girl entered the room, he saw from her manner that she was unaware that firearms had been used.

“Has that gentleman left the house?” Grey asked. The girl said that he had. “Don't admit him again,” said he; “if you can avoid it, for I believe he is not in his right senses.” Then he asked for Mr. Jones, his landlord, and in a few minutes the tailor was with him.

During those few minutes he had to resolve what he would do now. Would he put the police at once upon the track of the murderer – the cousin of the woman whom he wished to make his wife? That cross-examination which he would have to undergo at the police-office, and again probably in court, was very vivid to his imagination. Yet he needed to do something in case Vavasor made some attempt again. But he need not now say anything about the pistol to the tailor.

“Mr. Jones,” he said, “that man whom I had to put out of the room once before, has been here. We must take some steps to prevent his getting in again, if we can.”

Jones offered to go at once to the police. However, Mr. Grey said that he himself would seek assistance from some magistrate. Jones promised to be very vigilant about watching the door; and then John Grey sat down to his breakfast. The more he thought about what had happened, the more strongly he was convinced that he could not allow it to pass without some precaution.

At eleven o'clock he went to Scotland Yard, and saw a senior officer, and told him all the circumstances, confidentially. The officer recommended an equally confidential magistrate; and towards evening a very confidential policeman in plain clothes paid a visit to Vavasor's lodgings in Cecil Street.

But Vavasor lodged there no longer. Mrs. Bunsby stated that he had left her house in a cab at ten o'clock that morning, with his luggage, and that she thought he was gone for good.

He had gone for good, and at that moment he was leaning over the side of an American steamer which weighed her anchor in the Mersey, at Liverpool. He had boarded at six o'clock, and it was not till the next day that the cabman was traced who had carried him to Euston Square Station. Once it was known that he had set sail for America, it was not thought worthwhile to take any further steps towards arresting him.

So now George Vavasor vanishes from our pages, and will be heard of no more. His disappearance was a nine days' wonder, but Mr. Grey told the story to no one, till he told it to Mr. Palliser at Lucerne. Kate received no news of her brother, and her

stay in London with her aunt had nearly ended before she knew that he was gone. The rumour reached her through Captain Bellfield, and she learned what few facts she knew from Mrs. Bunsby.

“He was always mysterious,” said Mrs. Greenow, “and now he has vanished. I think it will be much better that he should not come back again.” Perhaps Kate was of the same opinion, but, if so, she kept it to herself.

CHAPTER 73

In Which Come Tidings of Great Moment to All Pallisers

It was not till they had been together for a day or two at Lucerne that Mr. Grey told Mr. Palliser the story of George Vavasor's visit to him. Having begun the history of his connection with Alice, he found himself obliged to go on with it to the end.

"And he tried to murder you!" said Mr. Palliser. "He should be caught and – and—"

"It is better as it is," said Grey.

"He actually walked into your rooms and fired a pistol as you were sitting at your breakfast!"

"Just so," said Grey.

Mr. Palliser began to think that something ought to be done to make life safer in the metropolis of the world. "And he has got your money too!" he said. "He is simply the greatest criminal I ever heard of. The wonder is that Miss Vavasor should ever have brought herself to – to like him."

Then Mr. Grey apologized for Alice, explaining that her love for her cousin had come from her early years; that the man himself was clever and could assume pleasant ways, and had not been wholly bad till ruin had come upon him. "He attempted public life and made himself miserable by failing, as most men do who make the attempt," he said.

Mr. Palliser could not allow that statement to pass without comment. Whereupon the two men got away from George Vavasor, and went on seriously discussing the merits of public life as a parliamentarian.

"The end of it all is," said Grey at last, "that public men in England should be rich like you, and not poor like that miserable wretch, who has now lost everything."

They continued to live at Lucerne in this way for a fortnight. Mr. Grey, though he was often alone with Alice, did not plead his suit, but continued to live with her on terms of close and easy friendship. He had told her that her cousin had gone to America immediately after his disappointment over the seat in Parliament, and that he would probably not return.

"Poor George!" Alice had said; "he is very much to be pitied."

"He is," Grey had replied. And nothing more was said between them about George Vavasor.

From Lady Glencora Alice did hear something; but Lady Glencora herself had not heard the whole story.

"I believe he misbehaved himself, my dear," Lady Glencora said; "I believe that he saw Mr. Grey and insulted him. Perhaps you had better not ask anything about it till by-and-by. You'll be able to get anything out of him then." In answer to this Alice made her usual protest, and Lady Glencora told her that she was a fool.

I am inclined to think that Mr. Grey knew what he was doing, although Lady Glencora once scolded him for not bringing the affair to a conclusion.

"We shall be going to Italy before it's settled," she said to him; "and if you don't settle it, it will be put off for another year or two, and you are both as old as Adam and Eve already."

"We ancient people are never impatient," said Grey, laughing.

"If you were to scold her, she would come to reason."

"Suppose you try that, Lady Glencora!"

“I can’t. It’s she that always scolds me, as you will scold her when she’s your wife.”

But Lady Glencora was wrong. Alice would, no doubt, have submitted patiently to her lover’s rebukes, and would have confessed her own sins towards him; but she would not, on that account, have been more willing to obey him in that one point of marriage. He understood that she must be taught to forgive herself before she could be induced to return to her old allegiance to him.

Thus they passed quiet, idle days at Lucerne, with some pretence of reading, a considerable amount of letter-writing, and with boat and pony excursions, till the pony excursions came to a sudden end because of a violent edict.

During these days of the boats and the ponies, Mr. Palliser received political letters from England which made him very fidgety. Parliament was not sitting, and the Government would remain intact till next February. Might it not be possible that when a gap came in the Cabinet, he might yet be present at its filling?

Although he continued to plan travelling till Easter, he was sighing for Westminster – till suddenly there came tidings which upset all his plans, which made the Alps impassable and the railways dangerous, which drove Burgo Fitzgerald out of Mr. Palliser’s head, and so confused him that he could no longer calculate the blunders of the present Chancellor of the Exchequer. All the Palliser world was about to be moved from its lowest depths, to the summits of its highest mountains. Lady Glencora had whispered into her husband’s ear that she thought it probable; – she wasn’t sure; – she didn’t know. And then she burst into tears.

He was beside himself when he left her, meaning to telegraph to London for half a dozen leading physicians. He went out by the lake side, and walked there alone for ten minutes in a state of almost unconscious exaltation. He did not quite remember where he was, or what he was doing. The one thing in the world which he had lacked – the one joy which he had wanted so much, and which is so common among men – was coming to him also. In a few minutes it was to him as though each hand already rested on the fair head of a little male Palliser, of whom one should rule in the halls at Gatherum, and the other be eloquent among the Commons of England.

He had not had wit enough to hide his grief from his wife; but he had wished to do it. He had never rebuked her for his disappointment; and now he had already forgiven everything. Burgo Fitzgerald was a myth. Mrs. Marsham should never again come near her. If only those saddle-ponies of Lucerne had not come across his wife’s path! He went at once into the yard and ordered that the ponies should be abolished.

He then remembered that he had promised to send Alice up to his wife, and he hurried back into the house. She was alone in the breakfast-room, for Mr. Grey seldom saw them before eleven or twelve o’clock. When the expectant father of embryo dukes entered the room, Alice perceived at once that something was astir. His manner was altogether changed, and he was unusually eager.

“Alice,” he said, “would you mind going up to Glencora’s room? She wishes to speak to you.” He had never called her Alice before, and as soon as he said it, he blushed.

“She isn’t ill, I hope?” said Alice.

“No; she isn’t ill. At least I think she had better not get up quite yet. Don’t let her excite herself, if you can help it.”

“I’ll go to her at once,” said Alice rising.

“I’m so much obliged to you; – but, Miss Vavasor—”

“You called me Alice just now, Mr. Palliser, and I took it as a great compliment.”

He blushed again. "Did I? Very well. But, if you please, do be as calm with her as you can. She is so easily excited, you know. Of course, if there's anything she fancies, we'll take care to get it for her; but she must be kept quiet."

Alice left him with his thoughts, which were all of himself, and the good things that were coming to him – of the new world of interest that was being opened for him. Could it be possible that this foreign tour had produced this good fortune? If so, how luckily had things turned out! He would remember even that ball at Lady Monk's with gratitude. Perhaps residence abroad would be best for Lady Glencora at this particular period of her life. Before resolving, however, on anything, he thought that he might consult those six first-rate London physicians.

In the meantime Alice had gone up to Glencora's bedroom.

"Oh, Alice, I'm so glad you've come," said Lady Glencora. "I do so want to hear your voice." Then Alice knelt beside her, and asked her if she were ill.

"He hasn't told you? But of course he wouldn't. How could he? But, Alice, how did he look? Was he pleased?"

"I think he was pleased. But what is it? He called me Alice. And seemed to be quite unlike himself. What is it? He told me that I was to come to you instantly."

"Oh, Alice, can't you guess?" Then suddenly Alice did guess the secret, and whispered into Lady Glencora's ear.

"I suppose so," said Lady Glencora. "I know what they'll do. They'll fuss over me so. If I could go about my work like a washerwoman, I should be all right."

"I am so happy," she said, some two or three hours afterwards. "I won't deny that I am very happy. I used to wish myself dead so often. I shan't wish myself dead now."

"We shall all have to go home, I suppose?" said Alice.

"He says so; but he seems to think that I oughtn't to travel more than a mile and a half a day. When I talked of going down the Rhine in one of the steamers, I thought he would have gone into a fit."

On that afternoon, as they were walking together, Mr. Palliser told the important secret to his new friend, Mr. Grey. He could not deny himself the pleasure of talking about it.

"It is a matter, you see, of such immense importance to me," Mr. Palliser said.

"Indeed, it is," said Grey. "Every man feels that when a child is to be born to him." But this did not satisfy Mr. Palliser.

"Yes," said he. "Naturally. It is an important thing to everybody, no doubt. But, when a man has a title – he's no better or happier than other men, of course – but a son is of more importance than it is to most men. One feels that all one does is done for one's own son."

It may be seen that Mr. Palliser and Mr. Grey had become good friends. Had chance brought them together in London they might have met a score of times before Mr. Palliser would have thought of doing more than bowing. But things of that kind progress more quickly abroad than they do at home.

For some time after this Lady Glencora's conduct was frequently so indiscreet as to drive her husband almost to frenzy. On the very day after he learnt the news, she proposed a picnic!

"What is the matter, now, Plantagenet?" said she.

"Nothing," said he; "nothing. Never mind."

"And shall we go up to the chapel?"

The chapel was far up the lake; a journey in a steam-boat would have been necessary.

“No!” said he, shouting his refusal. “We will not.”

“You needn’t be angry about it,” said she.

On another occasion she returned from an evening walk, appearing a little tired.

“Good G——! Glencora,” said he, “do you mean to kill yourself?”

He wanted her to eat six or seven times a day; and always told her that she was eating too much, remembering some ancient proverb about little and often. He watched her closely; and she knew that he was doing so. She continually proposed to do things which she knew he would not permit, in order to enjoy the fun of seeing his agony and amazement. But though this was fun to her at the moment, it produced anything but fun as its general result.

“Upon my word, Alice, I think this will kill me,” she said. “I am not to stir out of the house now, unless I go in the carriage, or he is with me.”

“It won’t last long.”

“I don’t know what you call long. As for walking with him, it’s out of the question. He goes about a mile an hour. I had no idea that he would be such an old coddle.”

“The coddling will all be given to someone else, very soon.”

“No baby could possibly live through it, if you mean that. I shall take that matter into my own hands. He can do what he pleases with me; but I shan’t let him or anybody else do what they please with my baby. I know what I’m about in such matters a great deal better than he does. I’ve no doubt he’s a very clever man in Parliament; but he doesn’t seem to me to understand anything else. Mr. Grey wouldn’t make himself so troublesome, I’m quite sure.”

Alice held her tongue.

About a fortnight after the first consternation of the news, arrangements were made for their return to England. Mr. Palliser had written to the Duke of Omnium, and had this short reply:

My dear Plantagenet,

Give my kind love to Glencora. If it’s a boy, of course I will be one of the godfathers. The Prince, who is very kind, will perhaps oblige me by being the other. I should advise you to return as soon as convenient.

Your affectionate uncle,
Omnium.

Short as it was, it was probably the longest letter that Mr. Palliser had ever received from the Duke.

There was great trouble about the mode of their return.

“Oh, what nonsense,” said Glencora. “Let us get an express train, and go right through to London.” Mr. Palliser looked at her with a countenance full of rebuke and sorrow. He was always so looking at her now. “If you mean, Plantagenet, that we are to be dragged all across the Continent in that horrible carriage, and be a thousand days on the road, I for one won’t submit to it.”

Mr. Palliser did at last consent to take the joint opinion of a Swiss doctor and an English one at Berne. They suggested the railway; and it was agreed, at last, that thus they should return, but stopping at various halting-places for a day. The first was Basle, and from Basle they were to go on to Baden.

“I particularly want to see Baden again,” Lady Glencora said; “and perhaps I may be able to get back my napoleon.”

CHAPTER 74

Showing What Happened in the Churchyard

These arrangements for the return of Mr. Palliser's party to London did not, of course, include Mr. Grey.

"I suppose we shall see you in England before long?" said Mr. Palliser.

"I shall be able to tell you that before you go," said Grey. "In any event I shall return to England before winter."

"Then come to us at Matching," said Mr. Palliser. "We shall be most happy to have you. Say that you'll come for the first fortnight in December. After that we always go to the Duke, in Bassetshire – though I don't suppose we shall go anywhere this year." Mr. Palliser reflected that, under the circumstances, it might be improper to have any guests at Matching in December. But he had become very fond of Mr. Grey, and now, as on several occasions, pressed him warmly to make an attempt at Parliament. "It isn't nearly so difficult as you think," said he. "Look at Mr. Vavasor. Even he got a seat."

"But he had to pay for it very dearly."

"You might easily find some quiet little borough."

"Quiet little boroughs have usually got their own quiet little Members," said Grey.

"They're fond of change; and if you like to spend a thousand pounds, the thing isn't difficult. I'll put you in the way of it."

But Mr. Grey still declined. He was not a man to be talked out of his own way of life, and the very fact that George Vavasor had been in Parliament deterred him from making any attempt himself.

Alice had also wanted him to go into public life, but he had put aside her request without giving it consideration. It was this immobility on his part – this absolute lack of any of the weakness of indecision, which had frightened her, and driven her away from him. He was partly aware of this; but if he had not done it at her suggestion, he certainly would not do on the advice of anyone else. If he changed his mind, what terrible acknowledgements of his own faults must he not have made before Alice?

"I suppose books, then, will be your object in life?" said Mr. Palliser.

"I hope they will be my aids," Grey answered. "I almost doubt whether any object is necessary for life. It seems to me that if a man can live honestly and die fearlessly, he has done about as much as is necessary."

"He has done a great deal, certainly," said Mr. Palliser, who would have been ready enough to carry on the argument if he had more time. He knew that he himself was working for others, and not for himself; and he was aware that good men struggle as they do in order that others, besides themselves, may live honestly and die fearlessly. The recluse of Nethercoats had thought much more about all this than the rising star of the House of Commons; but the rising star had the better philosophy of the two, though he was a less brilliant man.

"I don't see why a man should not live honestly and be a Member of Parliament as well," continued Mr. Palliser.

"Nor I either," said Grey. "I am sure that there are such men, and that the country is under great obligation to them. But they have temptations which a prudent man may do well to avoid." But though he spoke with an assured tone, he was shaken, and almost regretted that he did not accept the aid which was offered to him.

What he now wished for was a renewal of his engagement with Alice, and he felt that he must obtain an answer from her before they left Lucerne. If she still persisted in refusing to give him her hand, it would not be consistent with his dignity to continue his immediate pursuit of her any longer. In that case he must leave her, and see what the future might bring. If Alice were to remain single, he might try again, after a year or two. But if he failed now, then for that year or two he would see her no more.

Having resolved this, he asked her one evening whether she would walk with him on the following morning – the morning of her last day at Lucerne. As she agreed she knew well what was to come. She said nothing to Lady Glencora about it, but that night, when she was alone, she tried to decide what she would do.

She knew that she loved the man. She knew that he was as true to her as the sun is true to the earth. She knew that she would be safe in his hands. She knew that Lady Glencora would be delighted, and her father gratified. She knew that by such a marriage she would gain all that women generally look to gain when they give themselves away.

But, nevertheless, as far as she could decide at all, she decided against her lover. She had no right to be taken back after the evil that she had done, and she did not choose to be taken back as an object of pity and forgiveness.

“Where are you going?” said her cousin, when she came in with her hat on, soon after breakfast.

“I am going to walk with Mr. Grey. He asked me yesterday to walk with him this morning, and I could not very well refuse him.”

“Why should you have wished to refuse him?”

“I think it would have been pleasanter for us to have parted without any need for special words.”

“Alice, you are such a fool!”

“So you tell me very often.”

“Of course he is now going to say the very thing that he has come all this way for. He has been wonderfully slow about it; but you are slower. If you don’t make up with him now, I really shall think you are very wicked. I can’t understand it. I know you want to be his wife, and I know he wants to be your husband, and the only thing that keeps you apart is your obstinacy. You may be sure of this, Alice; if you refuse him now, it’ll be for the last time.”

“You are making me very unhappy, Glencora,” she said.

“I wish I could break you down with unhappiness,” Lady Glencora answered, “so that he might find you less stiff, and hard, and unmanageable.” Just then he came in, looking as though he had no business on hand more exciting than his ordinary morning’s tranquil employments.

“So you and Alice are going to make your adieux,” said Lady Glencora.

“It must be done sooner or later,” said Mr. Grey; and off they went.

The church by Lake Lucerne is one of the prettiest spots in that land of beauty. Up here, into the cloisters, Alice and John Grey went together.

“We will go in here for a few minutes,” he said. “It is a lovely spot, and we don’t know when we may see it again.” The place was deserted as they went in, and sat down on one of the embrasures that open over the lake.

“Probably never again,” said Alice. “And yet I have been here now two years running.” She shuddered as she remembered the time when George Vavasor had been with her; and she hated herself. No woman had a clearer idea of feminine constancy

than she had, and no woman had sinned against that idea more deeply. He gave her time to think of all this as he sat looking down upon the water.

“And yet I would sooner live in Cambridgeshire,” he said.

“Why so?”

“Partly because such beauty and romance should not make up the staple of one’s life. Romance, if it is to come at all, should always come by fits and starts.”

“I should like to live in a pretty country.”

“And would like to live a romantic life; but all those things lose their charm if they are made common. When a man has to go to Vienna or St. Petersburg two or three times a month, you don’t suppose he enjoys travelling?”

“All the same, I should like to live in a pretty country,” said Alice.

“And I want you to come and live in a very ugly country.” Then he paused for a minute or two, not looking at her, but gazing still on the mountain opposite. “I don’t think,” he went on, “that you would let that stand in your way, if on other grounds you were willing to become my wife.”

“Prettiness would have nothing to do with it,” said Alice.

“Will you come, then? Will you come and be my wife, and help me to be happy amidst all that ugliness? Will you come and be my one beautiful thing, my treasure, my joy, my comfort, my counsellor?”

“You need no counsellor, Mr. Grey.”

“No man ever needed one more. Alice, this has been a bad year to me, and I do not think that it has been a happy one for you.”

“Indeed, no.”

“Let us forget it – or rather, let us treat it as though it were forgotten. Twelve months ago you were mine – enough mine, at least, that I had a right to boast of my possession among my friends.”

“It was a poor boast.”

“They did not seem to think so. And no man was ever better contented with his bargain than I was with mine. Let us go back to it, and the last twelve months shall be as though they had never been.”

“That cannot be, Mr. Grey – because I cannot forgive myself what I have done, and you ought not to forgive me.”

“But I do. I think you have been foolish, misguided – led away by a vain ambition, and that in your difficulty, you tried to force yourself to do something which you then found to be contrary to your nature.” As he spoke, she turned her eyes upon him, wondering that he should have read her heart so accurately. “I never believed that you would marry your cousin. When I was told of it, I knew that trouble had blinded you for a while. You had driven yourself to revolt against me, and your heart misgave you, and you said to yourself that it did not matter then how you might throw away all your sweetness.

“But the storm passes over the tree and does not tear it up by the roots. Alice, when the winds were shaking you, and you were torn and buffeted, I never thought your destruction was at hand. There may be some who will forgive you slowly. Your own self-forgiveness will be slow. But I, who have known you better than any one, I have forgiven you everything, have forgiven you instantly. Come to me, Alice, and comfort me. Come to me, for I want you sorely.”

She sat quite still, looking at the lake and the mountain beyond, but she said nothing. What could she say to him?

“My need of you is much greater now,” he went on to say, “than when I first asked you. Then I could have borne to lose you, as I had never pictured to myself the

life that might be mine if you were with me. But since that day I have had no other hope but this. Am I to plead in vain?"

"You do not know me," she said; "how vile I have been! You do not think what it is, for a woman to have promised herself to one man while she loved another."

"But it was me you loved. I can forgive that. Alice, you should scold me for my vanity, for I have believed all through that you loved me. Come to me, dear, and tell me that it is so, and the past shall be only as a dream."

"I am dreaming it always," said Alice.

"They will cease to be bitter dreams if your head be upon my shoulder. You will cease to reproach yourself when you know that you have made me happy."

"I shall never cease to reproach myself. I have done that which no woman can do and honour herself afterwards. I have been – a jilt."

"The noblest jilt that ever yet halted between two minds! There has been no touch of selfishness in your fickleness. I think I could be hard enough upon a woman who had left me for greater wealth, or higher rank. It has not been so with you."

"Yes, it has. I thought you were too firm in your own will, and—"

"And you think so still. Is that it?"

"It does not matter what I think now. I no longer have a right to such thoughts. It will be better for us both that you should leave me – and forget me. There are things which, if a woman does them, she should never permit herself to forget."

"And am I to be punished, then, because of your fault? Is that your sense of justice?" He stood and looked down upon her. "Alice, if you tell me that you do not love me, I will believe you, and will trouble you no more. I know that you will say nothing that is false. But if you love me, I have a right to demand your hand. My happiness requires it, and I have a right to expect your compliance. I do demand it. If you love me, Alice, I tell you that you dare not refuse me. If you do so, you will fail hereafter to reconcile it to your conscience before God."

Then he waited; but Alice sat silent, with her eyes turned upon the tombstones. Of course she had no choice but to yield. He had left her no alternative but to be happy. But there still clung to her what I fear we must call a perverseness of obstinacy, a desire to keep the resolution she had made – to undergo the punishment she had deserved. She was as a prisoner who would fain cling to his prison after pardon has reached him, because he is conscious that the pardon is undeserved.

And it may be that she still felt some remnant of the rebellion which his masterful spirit had always produced in her. He was so imperious in his tranquillity – he argued with such a manifest weight of right on his side, that she had always felt that to yield to him would be to confess the omnipotence of his power. She knew now that she must yield to him.

Nevertheless, the word which she had to speak still remained unspoken, and he stood waiting for her answer. Then slowly he sat down beside her, and gradually he put his arm round her waist. She shrank from him, against the stonework, but she could not shrink away from his grasp. She put up her hand to impede his, but his hand, like his character and his words, would not be impeded.

"Alice," he said, as he pressed her close with his arm, "the battle is over now, and I have won it."

"You win everything – always," she said, whispering to him, as she still shrank from his embrace.

"In winning you I have won everything." Then he pressed his lips to hers.

CHAPTER 75

Rouge et Noir

Alice insisted on being left up in the churchyard, urging that she wanted to “think about it all,” but, in truth, fearing that she might not be able to carry herself well, if she were to walk with her lover to the hotel.

To this he made no objection. On reaching the inn, he met Mr. Palliser in the hall, inspecting some large trunks which had been brought downstairs. Mr. Palliser had a nervous need to be busy, so he was checking the cording of the trunks.

“Good morning! good morning!” he said to Grey. “I am going up to the station to see about a carriage for tomorrow. Perhaps you’ll come with me.”

Mr. Grey agreed to this. Then, in a few words, he told him about his own morning’s work. He hated secrets, and as the Pallisers knew well what had brought him here, he thought they should know that he had been successful. Mr. Palliser congratulated him very cordially, and then, running upstairs for his gloves, he told his wife that Alice had yielded at last.

“Of course she has,” said Lady Glencora.

“I really didn’t think she would,” said he.

“That’s because you don’t understand things of that sort,” said his wife. Then Mr. Palliser cautioned her to be careful, kissed her, and went off on his mission about the carriage. In the course of their walk Mr. Palliser suggested that, as things were settled so pleasantly, Mr. Grey might as well return with them to England, and Mr. Grey agreed.

Alice remained alone for nearly an hour, looking out upon Mount Pilate. No one disturbed her in the churchyard. She was left in perfect solitude to think of the past, and form her plans of the future. She was happy, though she was slow to confess her happiness to herself. She was resolute that she would now do all she could to make him happy also.

And there must now, she acknowledged, be an end to her pride: to that pride which had made her think that she could more wisely follow her own guidance than that of any others. Now she must follow his guidance. She had found her master, and she laughed to herself a little as she confessed that it was so. She had taken her fling at having her own will, and see what had come of it! She had assumed the command of the ship, and had thrown it upon the rocks, and she felt that she never ought to take the captain’s place again. It was well for her that her captain was one whom she respected as thoroughly as she loved him.

She would write to her father at once, and to Lady Macleod, and would confess everything. As to Lady Midlothian, she would do nothing – unless, indeed, Mr. Grey should order it. Then she again laughed at herself inwardly, and rising from her seat, walked down the hill to the hotel.

“Vanquished at last!” said Lady Glencora, as Alice entered the room.

“Yes, vanquished; if you like to call it so,” said Alice.

“It is not what I call it, but what you feel it,” said the other. “I know you well enough to be sure that you regard yourself now as an unfortunate prisoner – a captive taken in war. I know that it is quite a misery to you that you should be made a happy woman of at last. I understand it all, my dear, and my heart bleeds for you.”

“Of course; I knew that was the way you would treat me.”

“In what way would you have me treat you? If I were to hug you with joy, and tell you how good he is, and how fortunate you are, you would put on a long face, and tell me that it would be much better that the thing shouldn’t be. But I do wish you joy all the same, and you may say what you please. He has got you in his power now, and I don’t think even you can go back.”

“No; I shall not go back again.”

“I am so glad. I was afraid to the last – you are so hard and so proud. I don’t mean hard to me, dear. But you are hard to yourself, and, upon my word, you have been hard to him. What a deal you will have to make up to him!”

“I feel that I ought to stand before him as a penitent, in a white sheet.”

“He will like it better, I dare say, if you sit upon his knee. And how happy you will be!”

They sat together the whole morning, and by degrees Alice began to enjoy her happiness.

“I’ll tell you what, Alice,” said her friend; “you shall come and be married at Matching, in August, or perhaps September. That’s the only way in which I can be present; and if we can arrange some sun, we’ll have the wedding breakfast out in the ruins.”

On the following morning they all started together, a first-class compartment having been taken for the Palliser family, and a second-class compartment for the servants. Mr. Palliser, as he handed his wife in, was a triumphant man; as was also Mr. Grey, as he handed in his lady-love.

We may say that both the gentlemen had been very fortunate while at Lucerne. Mr. Palliser had come abroad feeling that all the world had been cut from under his feet. A change was needed for his wife, and he had yielded everything to that necessity. He certainly had his reward now.

The terrible troubles which had afflicted him seemed to have disappeared. When he thought of Burgo Fitzgerald he remembered him only as a poor, unfortunate fellow; and he had in his pocket a letter which he had that morning received from the Duke of St. Bungay, marked private and confidential, in which he was told that Lord Brock and Mr. Finespun were totally at variance, and that no one knew what the consequence would be. Here might be another chance! Mr. Palliser, as he took his place opposite his wife, was very triumphant.

And Mr. Grey was triumphant, as he placed himself opposite Alice. He was quiet and subdued in his joy, but not the less triumphant. From the day on which he had first resolved to make his offer to Alice, he had never been stirred from his purpose. When she told him that she intended to marry her cousin, he silently declined to believe that the marriage would ever take place. He had never given her up for a day, and he had been proved right.

They stopped a night at Basle, and again Alice stood upon the balcony. Mr. Grey was close to her – so close that she was able to take his hand and press it.

“You are thinking of something, Alice,” he said. “What is it?”

“It was here,” she said, “on this very balcony, that I first rebelled against you, and now that you have brought me here I confess and submit. How am I to thank you for forgiving me?”

On the following morning they went on to Baden-Baden, and there they stopped for a couple of days.

“I’ve a particular favour to ask of you,” Lady Glencora said to her husband, as soon as they were alone together in their rooms at Baden. Mr. Palliser declared that

he would grant her any favour, provided that it did not involve his wife exerting herself.

“I wish I were a milkmaid,” said Lady Glencora.

“But you are not a milkmaid, my dear.”

But what was the favour? If she would only ask for jewels, he would get them for her. There was no expenditure that he would not willingly incur for her. But when she asked for a favour, he was always afraid of an imprudence. Very possibly she might want to drink beer in an open garden.

And her request was, at last, this: “I want you to take me up to the gambling-rooms!” said she.

“The gambling-rooms!” said Mr. Palliser in dismay.

“Yes, Plantagenet; the gambling-rooms. If you had been with me before, I should not have made a fool of myself by putting my money on the table. I want to see the place; but then I saw nothing, because I was so frightened when I found that I was winning.”

Mr. Palliser was aware that all the world of Baden assembles itself in those salons. Maybe he himself was curious to see how men looked when they lost their own money, or won that of others. He knew how a Minister looked when he lost or gained a tax. He was familiar with tens of millions in a committee of the House. But he had never seen a poor man stake his last napoleon, and rake from off the table a small hatful of gold. He agreed therefore that, on their second evening at Baden, they would all walk up and see the play.

“Perhaps I shall get back my napoleon,” said Glencora to Alice.

“And perhaps I shall be forgiven when somebody sees how difficult it is to manage you,” said Alice.

“She doesn’t mean it,” said Mr. Palliser.

“I don’t know that,” said Lady Glencora.

They went in together, Mr. Palliser with his wife, and Mr. Grey with Alice on his arm, and walked through the different rooms, whispering to each other their comments on the people that they saw, and listening to the quick, low words of the croupiers as they presided over the games. Each table was closely surrounded by its own crowd.

“Let us stand here a moment,” said Lady Glencora to her husband, halting at a corner of the table which had the greatest crowd. “We shall be able to see in a few minutes.”

So they stood there, and in a minute or two an opening was made in the crowd, so that they could all see money lying about, and the rakes on the table, and the croupier skilfully dealing his cards, and – more interesting than all the rest – the faces of those who were playing. Grey and Palliser watched the croupiers; but Alice and Glencora glanced round upon the gamblers.

It was a long table, and at the opposite and furthest corner to them sat a young man who riveted Alice’s attention. He was leaning, at first listlessly, over the table, with his hat far over his eyes, so that she could not fully see his face. But then he threw back his hat, and taking some pieces of gold which lay upon the table, pushed three or four of them on to one of the divisions marked on the cloth. He seemed not to care which spot they should occupy. Alice could see that his eyes were bloodshot, and his hair was rough and dishevelled; but his face was still one which no woman could see and not admire. On this occasion he won, and Alice saw him drag his money in as lazily as he had pushed it out.

“Do you see that little Frenchman?” said Lady Glencora. “He has just made half a napoleon, and walked off with it. Isn’t it interesting?” Then she turned round to whisper something to her husband, and Alice’s eyes again fell on the face of the man at the other end of the table. After he had won his money, he had allowed the game to go on for a turn without taking part. But then he roused himself, and as far as Alice could see, pushed his whole stock forward with the rake – again leaving its position to chance. One piece had got beyond its boundary, and the croupier made some inquiry about it.

“All right,” said a voice in English. Then Lady Glencora started and clutched Alice’s arm. Mr. Palliser was explaining something about German finance to Mr. Grey, behind them, and did not hear the voice, or see his wife’s reaction. I need hardly tell the reader that the gambler was Burgo Fitzgerald.

But Lady Glencora said not a word. She looked forward very gently, but eagerly, till she could just see his face. He was watching the croupier anxiously as he dealt the cards. After a certain number and a certain colour was called, he made an exclamation. And then another croupier put down by him rolls of gold done up in paper, and also some loose napoleons.

“Why doesn’t he take it?” said Lady Glencora.

“He is taking it,” said Alice, not knowing the cause of her cousin’s anxiety.

Burgo had paused a moment, and then prepared to rake the money to him; but he changed his mind, and pushed it all back again, this time being very careful to place it on its former spot. Both Alice and Glencora could see that a man at his elbow was trying to dissuade him. But Burgo shook him off roughly. The croupier went on quickly with his cards, and in two minutes the fate of Burgo’s wealth was decided. It was all drawn back by the croupier’s unimpassioned rake.

Burgo looked up and smiled round the table. By this time most of those who stood around were looking at him, and he knew it. Therefore he smiled faintly before getting up, and, putting his hands in his trouser pockets, whistled as he walked away. His companion followed him, and laid a hand upon his shoulder; but Burgo shook him off, and walked on, whistling, the whole length of the salon.

“Alice,” said Lady Glencora, “it is Burgo Fitzgerald.” Mr. Palliser had noticed nothing. “Alice, what can we do for him? It is Burgo.”

Many eyes were now watching him. He was not successful in his attempt to show indifference to his loss. His gait and his whistling told the tale. Even the unemotional croupiers furtively cast an eye after him, and a very big Guard seemed to be interested by his movements. If there is to be a tragedy at these places, it is always as well that the tragic scene should be as far removed as possible from the salons, away from the public eye.

Lady Glencora and Alice had shrunk back behind a pillar.

“What can I do?” said Glencora. “Look at him, Alice. If he were to destroy himself, what should I do then?”

Burgo, conscious of all eyes, turned round upon his heel and again walked the length of the salon, still whistling. His companion had slunk away from him.

“What shall I do, Alice?” said Lady Glencora, her eyes still fixed on him.

“Tell Mr. Palliser,” whispered Alice.

Lady Glencora ran up to her husband, and took him away from Mr. Grey. She told her story so rapidly that Mr. Palliser could hardly get in a word. “Do something for him; do, do. Unless I know that something is done, I shall die. You needn’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” said Mr. Palliser.

Lady Glencora took her husband's hand, and caressed it. "You are so good," said she. "Don't let him out of your sight. There; he is going. I will go home with Mr. Grey. I will be ever so good; I will, indeed. You know what he'll want, and for my sake you'll let him have it. But don't let him gamble. If you could only get him home to England. You owe him something, Plantagenet; do you not?"

"If money can do anything, he shall have it."

"God bless you, dearest! I shall never see him again; but if you could save him! There – he is going now." She pushed him forward, and then retreating, put her arm within Mr. Grey's.

Burgo, at the door leading out of the salon, had paused a moment, and had encountered the big Guard close to him.

"Well, old Buffer, what do you want?" said he. The Guard simply walked on through the door, and said nothing. Then Burgo also walked out, and Mr. Palliser quickly went after him.

They were now in the large front salon, from where the main door of the building opened

out upon the steps. Through this door Burgo went, and Mr. Palliser followed. They both walked to the end of the street, and then Burgo turned into a little path which led up through the trees to the hills. That hillside among the trees is a popular resort at Baden, but now, at nine in the evening, it was deserted. Palliser followed Burgo till he threw himself on the grass beneath a tree.

"You are in trouble, I fear, Mr. Fitzgerald," said Mr. Palliser, as soon as he drew close.

"We will go home. Mr. Palliser has something to do," said Lady Glencora to Mr. Grey, after the two men had disappeared from her sight.

"Is that a friend of Mr. Palliser?" said Mr. Grey.

"Yes; that is, he knows him. Alice, shall we go home? Oh! Mr. Grey, you must not ask any questions. Mr. Palliser will tell you everything when he sees you – if there is anything to tell."

Then they all went home, and soon separated for the night.

"Of course I shall sit up for him," said Lady Glencora to Alice, "but in my own room. You can tell Mr. Grey, if you like."

But Alice told nothing to Mr. Grey, nor did Mr. Grey ask any questions.

CHAPTER 76

The Landlord's Bill

"You are in trouble, Mr. Fitzgerald, I fear," said Mr. Palliser, standing over Burgo as he lay upon the ground. They were now beyond the gas-lights, and the evening was dark.

"Who is that?" said Burgo.

"Perhaps I have been wrong in following you," said Mr. Palliser, "but I thought you were in distress, and that I might help you. My name is Palliser."

"Plantagenet Palliser?" said Burgo, jumping to his feet and looking close into the other's face. "By heavens! it is Plantagenet Palliser! Well, Mr. Palliser, what do you want?"

"I want to be of some use to you, if I can. I and my wife saw you leave the gaming-table just now."

"Is she here too?"

"Yes. We are going home, but chance brought us up to the salon. She seemed to think that you are in distress, and that I could help you. I will, if you will let me."

Mr. Palliser felt that he could afford to be generous. He had no lingering dread of this poor creature who stood before him. All that feeling was over, though it was hardly four months since he had been sent back by Mrs. Marsham to Lady Monk's house to save his wife, if saving her were possible.

"So she saw me when I staked my last chance? I should have had over twenty thousand francs now, if the cards had stood to me."

"The cards never do stand to any one, Mr. Fitzgerald."

"Never!" said Burgo. "At any rate, they never did to me."

"If you want twenty thousand francs – that's eight hundred pounds, I think – I can let you have it without any trouble."

"The devil you can!"

"Oh, yes. As I am travelling with my family, I have been obliged to carry large bills with me, and I can accommodate you without any difficulty."

There was something pleasant in this, which made Burgo Fitzgerald laugh. Mr. Palliser, the husband of Lady Glencora M'Cluskie, and the heir of the Duke of Omnium, happening to have money with him! As if Mr. Palliser could not bring down showers of money in any part of the globe by simply holding up his hand.

"I do not doubt your ability to raise the money," said he; "but how would you propose to get it back again?"

"That would be at your convenience," said Mr. Palliser, who hardly knew how to put himself on a proper footing with his companion.

"I never have any such convenience," said Burgo. "Who were those women whose tubs always had holes at the bottom of them? My tub always has such a hole."

"You mean the daughters of Danaus," said Mr. Palliser.

"I don't know whose daughters they were, but you might just as well lend them all eight hundred pounds apiece."

"There were too many of them," said Mr. Palliser, trying a little joke. "But as you are only one I shall be most happy, as I said before, to be of service."

They were now walking slowly together up towards the hills, when they heard a step. Upon this, Burgo turned round.

“Do you see that fellow?” said he. “I don’t know his name, but they have sent him out from the hotel with me, to see what I do. I owe them six or seven hundred francs, and they want to turn me out of the house without my things.”

“That would be very uncomfortable,” said Mr. Palliser.

“Yes, but if they keep my things they shall keep me. They think I’m going to blow my brains out. The man lets me go far enough off to do that – so long as it’s nowhere near the hotel.”

“I hope you’re not thinking of such a thing?”

“As long as I can help it, Mr. Palliser, I never think of anything.”

The stranger was now standing near to them, and Burgo walked up to him. In bad French, he asked him to leave. “Don’t you see I have a friend with me?”

“Oh! a friend,” said the man, in bad English. “Perhaps de friend can advance moneys?”

“Never mind what he can do,” said Burgo. “You leave me.”

Then the gentleman from the hotel retreated, but Mr. Palliser, during the rest of the interview, fancied that he heard the man’s footfall at no great distance.

They continued to walk on up the hill very slowly, and Mr. Palliser repeated his offer.

“So Lady Glencora is here?” Burgo said again.

“Yes. It was she who asked me to come to you.” They both walked on a few steps in silence.

“By George! isn’t it odd,” said Burgo, at last, “that you and I, of all men in the world, should be walking together here at Baden? It’s not only that you’re the richest man in London, and that I’m the poorest, but – there are other things, you know, which make it so funny.”

“There have been things which make me and my wife very anxious to give you aid.”

“And have you considered, Mr. Palliser, that those things make you the very man in the world from whom I can’t take aid? I would have taken it all if I could – and I tried hard.”

“I know you have been disappointed, Mr. Fitzgerald.”

“Disappointed! By G—! yes. I did love her, Mr. Palliser. Nay, by heavens! I do love her. I dare to say it even to you. I shall never try to see her again. All that is over, of course. I’ve been a fool about her as I have been about everything. But I did love her.”

“I believe it, Mr. Fitzgerald.”

“It was not altogether her money. But think what it would have been to me, Mr. Palliser. Think what a chance I had, and what a chance I lost. There would have been enough money to have saved me. And then I might have done something good instead of crawling about almost in fear of that beast who is watching us.”

“It has been ordered otherwise,” said Mr. Palliser, not knowing what to say.

“Yes; it seems to have been ordered that I’m to go to the devil; but I don’t know who gave the orders, and I don’t know why.”

Mr. Palliser did not wish to talk more than could be helped about his own wife.

“There is something of truth in what you say. You have been disappointed,” he said, “and I, perhaps, of all men am the most bound to come to your assistance.”

“How can I take it from you?” said Burgo, almost crying.

“You shall take it from her!”

“No; that would be twenty times worse. What! take her money, when she would not give me herself!”

“I do not see why you should not borrow her money.”

“No; I won’t have it.”

“Then what will you do?”

“Ah! That’s the question. I don’t know.”

“Will you let me call on you tomorrow?”

“I don’t see what good it will do. I shan’t get up till late, for fear they should shut the room against me. I think I shall say I’m ill, and keep to my bed.”

“Will you take a few napoleons?”

“No; not from you. You are the first man from whom I ever refused to borrow money.”

“What else can I offer?” said Mr. Palliser.

“You can offer nothing. Say to your wife from me that I bade her adieu; that is all you can do for me. Good night, Mr. Palliser.”

Mr. Palliser shook Burgo’s hand, and then walked quickly down the hill. As he did so he passed the man who had been dodging them.

“Misther, Misther!” whispered the man.

“What do you want of me?” asked Mr. Palliser, in French.

The man replied in French. “Have you given him any money?”

“I have not,” said Mr. Palliser, not quite knowing what he had better do or say.

“Then he will have a bad time of it,” said the man. “And he might have carried away two thousand francs just now! Dear, dear, dear! Has he got any friends, sir?”

“Yes, he has friends.”

“But what shall we do? Perhaps with his own hand he will kill himself. For five weeks he owes; and for wine, oh so much! There came through Baden a lord, and then I think he got money. But he went and played.”

“Are you the hotelkeeper?”

“I am the head Commissionaire. I look after the gentlemen who sometimes are not all – not all–” exactly what they should be, he intended to explain; and Mr. Palliser understood him. The interview ended with Mr. Palliser taking the name of the hotel, and promising to call before Mr. Fitzgerald should be up in the morning.

Lady Glencora received her husband that night with infinite anxiety, and was by no means satisfied with what had been done. He described to her as accurately as he could his interview with Burgo, and also his other interview with the head commissioner.

“He will; he will,” said Lady Glencora; when she heard the man’s guess that Burgo might destroy himself. “And if he does, how shall I bear it?”

Mr. Palliser tried to soothe her by telling her of his promise to visit the landlord; and Lady Glencora, accepting this, strove to persuade her husband to spend lavishly on Burgo’s behalf. He assured her that his money should be forthcoming, if possible.

On the following morning he went down to the hotel, and saw the landlord. He found him to be a reasonable, tranquil, good-natured man, whose chief anxiety seemed to arise from the great difficulty of doing anything with the gentleman who was now lying in his bed upstairs.

“Has he had any breakfast?” Mr. Palliser asked.

“Oh yes;” and the landlord laughed. Burgo had desired his cutlets to be dressed in a particular way, with cayenne pepper, and had ordered a bottle of Sauterne; but the landlord had thought that an ordinary wine would do as well. It had just that moment been sent upstairs.

Then Mr. Palliser sat down in the landlord’s little room, and had Burgo Fitzgerald’s bill brought to him. “I think I might venture to pay it,” he said.

“As monsieur pleases,” said the landlord, but with a sparkle in his eye.

Mr. Palliser did not know whether, in the eyes of the world, he ought to pay it, or leave it. Then he thought of his wife. He could not go back to her without having done something; so he paid the bill.

“And to whom should the receipt be given?” asked the landlord.

Mr. Palliser thought that the landlord had better keep it himself for a while. He knew that he must do something more. He could not simply pay the bill and go away. That would not satisfy his wife.

At last he let the landlord into his confidence. He did not tell the whole of Burgo’s past history, or that part which referred to Lady Glencora. But he did make the landlord understand that he was willing to give money to Mr. Fitzgerald, if only it could be given judiciously.

“You can’t keep him out of the gambling salon, you know, sir, if he has a franc in his pocket,” the landlord assured him.

It was at last arranged that the landlord was to tell Burgo that his bill did not signify at present, and that the use of the hotel was to be at his command for the next three months. At the end of that time he was to have notice to quit. No money was to be advanced to him; but the landlord, even in this respect, had discretion.

“When I get home, I will see what can be done with his relations there,” said Mr. Palliser. Then he went home and told his wife.

“But he’ll have no clothes,” said Lady Glencora.

Mr. Palliser said that the judicious landlord would manage that also; and in that way Lady Glencora was appeased, till something could be done for the young man on Mr. Palliser’s return home.

Poor Burgo! He must now be made to end his career as far as these pages are concerned. The discreet landlord would tell him nothing but that his bill did not signify yet, but no doubt Burgo must have guessed the truth. He resolved to write an indignant letter to Mr. Palliser; but the letter did not get written.

When in England, Mr. Palliser saw Sir Cosmo Monk, and with many apologies, told him what he had done.

“I regret it,” said Sir Cosmo, in anger at Burgo. The amount expended was, however, repaid to Mr. Palliser, and an arrangement was made for sending a weekly sum of fifteen pounds to Burgo, as long as he should remain at a certain small German town in which there was no gambling-table.

Here we must say farewell to poor Burgo Fitzgerald; although I doubt whether he lived long in comfort on his allowance.

CHAPTER 77

The Travellers Return Home

The Pallisers did not remain long in Baden after the payment of Burgo's bill. They hurried away to Strasbourg the same day.

The journey home from there was uneventful. Gradually Mr. Palliser became a little more lenient to his wife and slightly less oppressive in his caution. By the time that they reached Dover he had become so used to his wife's condition that he made only a little fluttering as she walked out of the boat by the narrow gangway.

During their journey home Mr. Palliser had soon found that it was easier to talk to Mr. Grey than to his wife, and, consequently, the two ladies were much together, as were the two gentlemen. What the ladies discussed may be imagined. One was about to become a wife and the other a mother, after each had made up her mind that neither thing would happen. It may, however, be presumed that for every word that Alice spoke Lady Glencora spoke ten.

The two men were intent upon politics. Mr. Palliser was eager in recommending public life to his new friend.

"Your argument would be very well," said Mr. Grey, "for a man who felt that he could do good to others by going into public life. But it is wholly ineffective if it recommends public life simply because a man may gratify his own ambition by public services."

"Of course there is personal gratification, and of course there is good done," said Mr. Palliser. "The two things go together. The chief gratification comes from the feeling that you are of use."

"But if you feel that you would not be of use?"

We need not follow the argument any further. We all know its nature. But the effect was partly that which the weaker man of the two desired – the weaker in being less gifted, though art had in some respects made him stronger. Mr. Grey was shaken in his philosophy, and startled and delighted Alice by what he said as he walked with her in the courts of the Louvre.

"It's all hollow here," he said, speaking of French politics.

"Very hollow," said Alice.

"Of all modes of governing this seems to me to be the surest of coming to a downfall. Men are told that they are wise enough to talk, but not wise enough to have any power of action."

"It's so odd to hear you talk politics," said Alice, laughing.

After this he dropped the subject for a while, as though he were ashamed of it, but in a few minutes he returned to it manfully. "Mr. Palliser wants me to go into Parliament."

Alice said nothing. She was afraid to speak. After all that had passed she felt that it would not become her to show much outward joy on hearing this, and yet she could not speak without some sign of exultation in her voice. So she walked on without speaking, and was conscious that her fingers trembled on his arm.

"What do you say about it?" he asked.

"Oh, John, what right can I have to say anything?"

"No one else can have so much right. He asked me whether I could afford it. I believe that I could, if I could get a seat that was not very expensive at the first outset.

He could help me there. Living in London for four or five months in the year might be managed. But as to the mode of life!”

Then Alice was unable to hold her tongue, and spoke her thoughts. No doubt he combated them. He seldom allowed outspoken enthusiasm to pass by him without some opposition. But he was not so perverse as to be driven from his new views by the fact that Alice approved them, and she was able to think that the only flaw in his character was in the process of being cured.

When they reached London they all separated. Mr. Palliser intended to take his wife down to Matching with as little delay as possible. London was nearly empty; it was now the first week of August, and Parliament had not been sitting for nearly two months. Lady Glencora was to stay only one day in Park Lane, and she and Alice would not see each other.

“How odd it is parting in this way, when people have been together so long,” said Lady Glencora. “It seems as though the time had a separate little life of its own which is now brought to a close.”

“Alice,” said Mr. Palliser, as he gave her his hand, “give my compliments to your father, and tell him that I shall invite him to come down to Matching for the shooting in September, and that I shall expect him to bring you. You may tell him also that he will have to stay to see you off after your marriage, but that he will not be allowed to take you away.” Lady Glencora thought that this was very prettily put, and so she told her husband on their way home.

Alice insisted on going to Queen Anne Street in a cab by herself. She wished to be alone when she first received her father’s congratulations. But when she reached Queen Anne Street, the house was desolate. She found a letter waiting for her which made her forget everything else. Lady Macleod, at Cheltenham, was very ill, and wished to see her niece before she died.

“I have got your letter,” said the kind old woman, “and am now quite happy, because my girl will be happy at last. Will she forgive me if I say that I have forgiven her?” The letter then went on to beg Alice to come to Cheltenham at once. “It is not that I am dying now,” said Lady Macleod, “though you will find me much altered and keeping my bed. But the doctor says he fears the first cold weather. I know what that means, my dear; and if I don’t see you now, before your marriage, I shall never see you again. Pray get married as soon as you can. I want to know that you are Mrs. Grey before I go.”

There was another letter for her from Kate, full of congratulations, and promising to be at the wedding; “that is,” said Kate, “unless it takes place at the house of some of your very grand friends;” and also telling her that aunt Greenow was to be married in a fortnight, and begging her to attend that wedding. “Do come,” said Kate. “Journeys are nothing nowadays. Don’t you know I would go seven times the distance for you? Mr. Cheesacre and Captain Bellfield are friends again, and Mr. Cheesacre is to be best man. Is it not beautiful? As for poor me, I’m told I haven’t a chance left of becoming mistress of Oileymead.”

Alice began to think that her hands were almost too full. Yet she did not know how to refuse any of the requests. She must of course visit Lady Macleod at once. She would stay one day in London, and then go down to Cheltenham. As to that wedding in Westmorland, she sighed as she thought of it, but she feared that she must go there also, for Kate’s sake.

Then her father came in. “I didn’t know when you might arrive,” said he apologetically.

Alice refrained from reminding him that she had told him the precise time of the train.

“It’s all right, papa. I was very glad to have an hour to write a letter or two. Poor Lady Macleod is very ill. I must go to her the day after tomorrow.”

“Dear, dear! I had heard that she was poorly. So, Alice, you’ve made it all square with Mr. Grey at last?”

“Yes, papa.”

“Well; I can tell you this, Alice, he is a man in a thousand. You’ve heard about the money?”

“What money, papa?”

“The money that George had.” As the reader is aware, Alice had heard nothing about this money. She thought that she had given three thousand pounds to her cousin. But now her father explained the whole transaction.

“Grey knew that some men must have rope enough before they can hang themselves,” he said.

“Mr. Grey must be paid, papa,” she said.

“Paid! He can pay himself now. It may make some difference in the settlements, but he and the lawyers can arrange that. I shan’t think of interfering. If you could only know, my dear, what I’ve suffered!” Alice expressed her sorrow, and he assured her that he had forgiven her. “Bless you, my child!” he said, “and make you happy, and good – and very comfortable.” After that he went back to his club.

Alice travelled down to Cheltenham, and was received by Lady Macleod with open arms. The old lady was very eager to know all about the coming marriage.

“I knew he’d persist for ever, my dear. He told me so himself in confidence.”

“He has persisted, aunt, certainly.”

“And I hope you’ll reward him. A beautiful woman without discretion is like a pearl in a swine’s snout; but a good wife is a crown of glory to her husband. Remember that, my dear.”

“I won’t be that unfortunate pearl, if I can help it, aunt.”

“And Alice, you must be careful to find out all his likes and dislikes. Dear me! I remember how hard I found it, but then I don’t think I was so clever as you are.”

“Sometimes I think nobody has ever been so stupid as I have.”

“Not stupid, my dear; self-willed, perhaps. But all that is forgiven now. Is it not?”

“There is a forgiveness which it is rather hard to get,” said Alice.

Her aunt said something about looking for pardon beyond this world, which I need not here repeat. Alice was much more attentive than usual to her old friend’s little sermons, so that Lady Macleod took heart, and at last brought forth a letter from the Countess of Midlothian, which she had received a day or two since.

“I was not quite sure whether I’d show it you,” said Lady Macleod, “because you wouldn’t answer her when she wrote to you. But when I’m gone, she will be your nearest relative on your mother’s side, you know, Alice.”

The letter was as follows:

Dear Lady Macleod,—

I am sorry to hear of your symptoms. I strongly advise you to depend chiefly on beef-tea. They should be very careful to send it up quite free from grease, and there should be no vegetables in it. I would go to you if I thought that my presence would be any comfort to you, but I know how sensitive you are, and the shock might be too much for you.

If you see Alice Vavasor on her return to England, pray tell her from me that I give her my warmest congratulations, and that I am heartily glad that matters are arranged. I think she treated my attempts to heal the wound in a manner that they did not deserve; but all that shall be forgiven, as shall also her original bad behaviour to poor Mr. Grey.

I trust that we may yet meet and be friends. I am extremely gratified at finding that she has been thought so much of by Mr. Palliser. I'm told that Mr. Palliser and Mr. Grey have become great friends, and if this is so, Alice must be happy to feel that she has had it in her power to confer so great a benefit on her future husband as he will receive from this introduction.

"I ain't a bit happy, and I have conferred no benefit on Mr. Grey," exclaimed Alice, unable to repress her anger at the last paragraph.

"But it is a great benefit, my dear."

"Mr. Palliser has every bit as much cause to be gratified as Mr. Grey, and perhaps more."

Poor Lady Macleod could not argue. She merely sighed, and moved her shrivelled old hand up and down upon the counterpane.

Alice finished the letter without further remarks. It merely went on to say how happy the writer would be to see her cousin as Mrs. Grey, and gave a general invitation to Mr. and Mrs. Grey to come to Castle Reekie whenever they might be able.

"I'm sure she means well," said Alice.

"Indeed she does," said Lady Macleod.

Alice remained a week with her aunt, and went from there direct to Westmorland. On her single day in London, we must presume she gave some order about bridal preparations; and she had a very urgent letter from Glencora. If the marriage did not take place in September she would not be present at it. It had been decided that Lady Glencora was to be moved in October to Gatherum Castle, and remain there till the following spring, so that the heir would be born there.

"It is such a bore," said Lady Glencora, "and I know it will be a girl. But the Duke isn't to be there, except for the Christmas week."

An invitation for the wedding ceremony at Matching had been sent from Mr. Palliser to Mr. Vavasor, and another from Lady Glencora to Kate, "whom I long to know," said her ladyship, "and with whom I should like to pick an argument, if I dared, as I'm sure she did all the mischief."

CHAPTER 78

Mr. Cheesacre's Fate

It must be acknowledged that Mrs. Greenow was a resourceful woman, and very prudent for others, though perhaps not for herself. Her marriage with Captain Bellfield was certainly a rash act, although she did take so much care to keep her income in her own hands; but the manner in which she made him live discreetly for some months before their marriage, the tact with which she renewed the friendship between him and Mr. Cheesacre, and the skill she used in at last providing Mr. Cheesacre with a wife, oblige us to admit that, as a general, she had great powers.

When Alice reached Vavasor Hall she found Charlie Fairstairs staying there on a long visit. Charlie and Kate were to be the two bridesmaids, and, as Kate told her cousin in their first confidential talk that evening, there were already great hopes that the master of Oileymead might be brought to surrender.

It was true that Charlie had not a shilling, and that Mr. Cheesacre had set his heart on marrying an heiress. It was true that Miss Fairstairs' connections were without rank or fashion, and that the gentleman loved rank and fashion dearly. It was true that Charlie was no beauty, and that Cheesacre had an eye for feminine charms. It was true that he had despised Charlie, and had spoken his contempt openly; that he had learned to regard her as poor and despicable, because she was common in his eyes. It is thus that the Cheesacres judge of people. But in spite of all these difficulties Mrs. Greenow had taken up poor Charlie's case, and Kate Vavasor expressed a strong opinion that her aunt would win.

"What has she done to the man?" Alice asked.

"Coaxed him; simply that. He doesn't know how to say no to her. Sometimes I have thought that he might run away, but I don't think so now. She has little chats with him from day to day, which are so alluring to him that he cannot tear himself off. In the middle of one of them he will find himself engaged."

"But the unfortunate girl! Won't it be a wretched marriage for her?"

"Not at all. She'll make him a very good wife. He's one of those men to whom any woman, after a little time, will be the same. He'll be rough with her once a month or so, and perhaps tell her that she brought no money; but that won't break any bones, and Charlie will know how to fight her own battles. She'll save his money if she brings none, and in a few years' time they will quite understand each other."

Mr. Cheesacre and Captain Bellfield were at this time living in lodgings together, at Penrith, but came over and spent every other day at Vavasor, returning to their lodgings in the evening. It was eight days to the marriage when Alice arrived.

"It's to be very quiet, Alice," said her aunt; "as quiet as can be. I owe that to the memory of the departed one. I know that he is looking down upon me, and that he approves all that I do."

She took Alice up to see her trousseau, and gave the other expectant bride some useful little hints about linen.

"Look here, these are quite new – have never been on yet, and I had them when I was married before. I hate meanness; but there is nothing like being careful, my dear. You have a lot of rich people about you just now, and will have ever so many things given you which you won't want. Do keep them all carefully. They may turn out useful, you know."

And then Mrs. Greenow opened her mind about the Captain. "He's as good as gold, my dear, in his own way. Of course, I know that he has faults, and I should like to know who hasn't. Bellfield may have been a little extravagant, I dare say. But how can a man help being extravagant when he hasn't got any regular income? He has been ill-treated in his profession. After fighting his country's battles through blood, and dust, and wounds – but I'll tell you about that another time."

"I suppose a man seldom does make a fortune, aunt, by being a soldier?"

"Never, my dear. But he is the best-tempered creature alive, and the staunchest friend I ever met. You should hear what Mr. Cheesacre says of him! But you don't know Mr. Cheesacre?"

"No, aunt, not yet."

"Between you and me, Kate might have had him if she liked; but perhaps Kate was right."

"I don't think he would have suited Kate at all."

"Because of the farmyard, you mean? Kate shouldn't give herself airs. But perhaps it's all for the best. But as I was saying, the friendship between those two men is quite wonderful, and I have always observed that when a man can create that kind of affection in the bosom of another man, he is the sort of man who makes a good husband."

Alice knew almost as much of Bellfield's past life as Mrs. Greenow did herself; and Mrs. Greenow was aware of it. Nevertheless, she had a pleasure in telling her own story, and seemed to believe every word that she spoke.

On the following day the two gentlemen came over, and Alice observed that Miss Fairstairs hardly spoke to Mr. Cheesacre, but avoided him very markedly. They drank tea out of doors, and when Mr. Cheesacre sauntered towards the end of the bench on which Charlie was sitting, Charlie got up and walked away. And when they strolled about the place afterwards, she was at great pains to attach herself to some other person, so that Mr. Cheesacre could not attach himself to her.

At one time Mr. Cheesacre did get close to her and spoke some indifferent word. He knew that he was being cut.

"I don't know, sir," said Charlie, again moving away with dignity to Alice, who was close by. "I know you have just come home from Switzerland," said Charlie. "Beautiful Switzerland! Do tell me something about Switzerland!"

Mr. Cheesacre had heard that Alice was the dear friend of a lady who would some day become a duchess. He therefore naturally held her in awe, and slunk away. Mrs. Greenow clung lovingly to her future husband, and Mr. Cheesacre was very much alone and unhappy. He had generally enjoyed these days at Vavasor Hall, having fancied himself to be the dominant spirit there. That Mrs. Greenow was always in truth the dominant spirit I need hardly say; but she knew how to make a companion happy, and also how to make him wretched. On this day poor Cheesacre was very wretched.

"I don't think I shall go there any more," he said to Bellfield, as they drove back to Penrith that evening.

"Not go there any more, Cheesy?" said Bellfield; "why, we are to have the dinner in the field on Friday. It's your own doing."

"Well, yes; I'll go on Friday, but not after that."

"You'll stop and see me married, old fellow?"

"What's the use? You'll get your wife, and that's enough for you. The truth is, that since that girl came down from London with her d—d airs;" – he meant poor

Alice – “the place is quite changed. I do hate your swells.” Captain Bellfield argued with him; but Cheesacre was cross and touchy.

“You did it admirably, my dear,” said Mrs. Greenow that night to Charlie Fairstairs. “I really did not think you had so much in you.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Charlie, blushing at the praise.

“And it’s the only way, my dear, with such a one as him. If he does come round, you’ll find him an excellent husband.”

“I don’t think he cares for me a bit,” said Charlie, whimpering.

“Pooh, nonsense! Girls never know whether men care for them or not. If he asks you to marry him, won’t that be a sign that he cares for you? and if he don’t, why, there’ll be no harm done.”

“If he thinks it’s his money—” began Charlie.

“Now, don’t talk nonsense, Charlie,” said Mrs. Greenow, “Of course it’s his money, more or less. You don’t mean to tell me you’d go and fall in love with him if he was like Bellfield, and hadn’t got a rap? I can afford that sort of thing; you can’t. I don’t mean to say you ain’t to love him. I’ve no doubt you will, and make him a very good wife. And now, my dear, mind you look your best on Friday. I’ll get him away immediately after dinner, and when he’s done with me you can contrive to be in his way, you know.”

The next day the ladies were all alone, and devoted themselves to millinery and household cares. Large trunks of household linen had arrived, all of it marked with the name of Greenow.

“We must cut out the pieces, Jeannette, and work ’em in again ever so carefully,” said the widow.

“It will always show,” said Jeannette, shaking her head.

“But not one person in ten will notice it. We’d always put them on the beds with the name to the feet, you know.”

It was not quite true that Cheesacre had arranged the dinner out in the field, although no doubt he thought he had done so. The little treat had been arranged by Mrs. Greenow. There was not much scope for a picnic here. Besides their own party, no guest could be caught except the clergyman. He was soon to perform Mrs. Greenow’s marriage ceremony, and had promised to grace this little festival. It amounted to this: that they were to eat their dinner uncomfortably in the field instead of comfortably in the dining-room. But Mrs. Greenow knew that Charlie’s charms would be much strengthened by a dinner out-of-doors.

“Nothing,” she said to Kate, “makes a man come forward so well as putting him of his usual track.”

At two o’clock the gig from Penrith arrived at the Hall, and for the next hour both Cheesacre and the Captain were engaged in preparing the tables and carrying out the food. The Captain and Charlie Fairstairs were going to lay the cloth.

“Let me do it,” said Cheesacre, taking it out of the Captain’s hands.

“Oh, certainly,” said the Captain.

“Captain Bellfield would do it much better,” said Charlie, with a little toss of her head; “he’s as good as a married man, and they always do these things best.”

The day was fine, and although the midges were troublesome, the dinner went off very nicely. Mrs. Greenow remembered the grace just in time, with the clergyman there. Mr. Cheesacre sat on her right, and the clergyman on her left, and she hardly spoke a word to Bellfield. Her sweetest smiles were all given to Cheesacre. She was anxious to keep the parson in good-humour, and therefore illuminated him once in every five minutes with a passing ray, but the full splendour of her light was poured

out upon Cheesacre, as it never had before been poured. How she did flatter him! Oileymead was the only paradise she had ever seen.

“Ah, me; when I think of it sometimes – but never mind.” A moment came to him when he thought that even yet he might win the race, and send Bellfield away howling into outer darkness. The widow saw the moment well. “I know I have done for the best,” said she, “and at any rate, it’s done now.”

“Not done yet,” said he plaintively.

“Yes; done. Besides, a man in your position in the county should always marry a wife younger than yourself.” Cheesacre did not understand the argument, but he liked the allusion to his position in the county, and he was happy. Both during and after the dinner, he was allowed to give his orders to Bellfield in a manner that gratified him much.

“You must have another glass of champagne with me, my friend,” said Mrs. Greenow; and Mr. Cheesacre drank the other glass of champagne.

After dinner they started off for a ramble through the fields, and Mrs. Greenow and Mr. Cheesacre were together. Charlie Fairstairs did not go with them at all. I think she went into the house and washed her face, and brushed her hair, and settled her muslin. Captain Bellfield went with Alice, and assured her that he fully meant to correct the error of his ways.

“I know what it is,” he said, “to be connected with such a family as yours, Miss Vavasor.” He too had heard about the future duchess, and wished to be on his best behaviour. Kate fell to the lot of the parson.

“This is the last time we shall ever be together in this way,” said the widow to her friend. “On Wednesday I become Mrs. Bellfield; but Mr. Cheesacre, I hope we are not to be strangers hereafter?” Mr. Cheesacre said that he hoped not. Oileymead would always be open to Captain and Mrs. Bellfield.

“We all know your hospitality,” said she; “my husband to be always declares that you are the very ideal of an English country gentleman.”

“Merely a poor Norfolk farmer,” said Cheesacre. “There has been some talk about the Commission of the Peace, but I don’t think anything of it.”

“It has been the greatest blessing in the world for him that he has known you,” said Mrs. Greenow.

“I’ve tried to be good-natured; that’s all. There isn’t a better fellow than Bellfield living. He and I ran for the same plate, and he has won it. He’s a lucky fellow, and I don’t begrudge him his luck.”

“That’s so manly of you, Mr. Cheesacre! But, indeed, the plate you speak of was not worth your running for.”

“I may have my own opinion about that, you know.”

“It was not. I know very well what my mission is in life. The mistress of your house, Mr. Cheesacre, should not be any man’s widow. A virgin heart should be yours; and a virgin heart may be yours, if you choose to accept it.”

“Oh, bother!”

“If you choose to take my solicitude in that way, of course I will stop. You were good enough to say that you wished to see me and my husband in your hospitable halls. But do you think that I could be a visitor at your house unless there is a mistress there?”

“Upon my word, I think you might.”

“No, Mr. Cheesacre; certainly not. But if you were married—”

“You are always wanting to marry me off, Mrs. Greenow.”

“I am. It is the only way in which there can be any friendship between us. If you value the warm affection of a virgin heart—”

“Why, Mrs. Greenow, all yesterday she wouldn’t say a word to me.”

“Is that all you know about it? Are you so ignorant that you cannot see when a girl’s heart is breaking beneath her stays?” This almost improper allusion had quite an effect on Mr. Cheesacre’s sensitive bosom. “Did you say a word to her yesterday?”

“Oh, Mrs. Greenow; come!”

“But it is time that we should go back to them. We will have our tea, and you shall have your pipe and brandy-and-water, and Charlie shall bring it to you. Shall she, Mr. Cheesacre?”

“If she likes she shall, of course.”

“But remember, Mr. Cheesacre, I’m quite serious in what I say about your having a mistress for your house. Only think what an age you’ll be when your children grow up, if you don’t marry soon.”

They returned to the field in which they had dined, and found Charlie under the trees, with her muslin looking very fresh.

“I have told him that you should fill his pipe for him,” said Mrs. Greenow.

“He doesn’t care for ladies to fill his pipe for him,” said Charlie.

“Try,” said the widow, “while I go indoors and order the tea.”

It had been necessary to put the bait very close before Cheesacre’s eyes, or there would have been no hope that he might take it. The bait had been put so very close that we must feel sure that he saw the hook. But there are fish so silly that they will take the bait although they know the hook is there. Cheesacre understood it all. He could see that Mrs. Greenow was trying to catch him as a husband for Charlie Fairstairs; and he knew also that he had always despised Charlie, and that no worldly advantage whatever would accrue to him by a marriage with such a girl.

But there she was, and he didn’t quite know how to avoid it. She did look rather nice in her muslin frock, and he felt that he should like to kiss her. He needn’t marry her because he kissed her. The champagne which had created the desire also gave him the audacity. He gave one glance around him to see that he was not observed, and then he did kiss Charlie Fairstairs under the trees.

“Oh, Mr. Cheesacre,” said Charlie.

“Oh, Mr. Cheesacre,” echoed a laughing voice; and poor Cheesacre, looking round, saw that Mrs. Greenow, who ought to have been inside the house looking after the boiling water, was for some reason quite close by.

“Mr. Cheesacre,” said Charlie sobbing, “how dare you do that? – where all the world could see you?”

“It was only Mrs. Greenow,” said Cheesacre.

“And what will she think of me?”

“Lord bless you – she won’t think anything about it.”

“But I do; I think a great deal about it. I don’t know what to do.” Whereupon Charlie got up from her seat under the trees and began to move away slowly.

Cheesacre thought about it for a moment or two. Should he follow her or should he not? He knew that he had better not follow her. He knew that she was bait with a very visible hook. But after all, perhaps it wouldn’t do him much harm to be caught.

So he got up and followed her. I don’t suppose she meant to take the way towards the woods and the old summer-house: she was too much beside herself to know where she was going, no doubt. But that was the path she did take, and before long she and Cheesacre were in the summerhouse together.

“Don’t, Sam, don’t! Somebody really will be coming. Well, then, there. Now I won’t do it again.” ’Twas thus she spoke when the last kiss was given; unless there may have been one or two later in the evening, to which it is not necessary to allude here. But by the time of that last kiss in the summer-house Miss Fairstairs was the promised bride of Mr. Cheesacre.

However, Mr. Cheesacre was troubled as he rose from his happy seat after that last embrace. How would he tell his friends? He had promised Charlie, and perhaps he would keep his promise, but it might be as well not to make it all too public at once.

But Charlie wasn’t going to be thrown over. She returned therefore triumphantly among them all, blushing indeed, and with her hand upon her lover’s arm; but so close to him that there could be no mistake.

“Goodness, gracious, Charlie! where have you and Mr. Cheesacre been?” said Mrs. Greenow.

“We got up into the woods and lost ourselves,” said Charlie.

It would be too long to tell now, in these last pages of our story, how Cheesacre strove to escape, and with what skill Mrs. Greenow kept him to his bargain. Before that evening was over, under the comfortable influence of a glass of hot brandy-and-water, he was forced to confess that he had made himself the happy possessor of Charlie Fairstairs’ heart and hand.

“And you are a lucky man,” said the widow with enthusiasm; “and I congratulate you with all my heart. Don’t let there be any delay now, because a good thing can’t be done too soon.” And indeed, before that night was over, Mrs. Greenow had fixed the day. She was a woman who was quite in earnest when she went to work, and I hope that Miss Fairstairs was grateful. Then, in her presence, the last kiss on that eventful evening was given.

“Come, Charlie, be good-natured to him. He’s as good as your own now,” said the widow. And Charlie was good-natured.

Mrs. Greenow said to Kate, the next day, “I’m lending her money to get all her things. He shall come to the scratch, if I have to go all the way to Norfolk and fetch him by his ears.”

“And I shouldn’t wonder if she did have to go to Norfolk,” said Kate to her cousin.

I cannot relate that far. I can only say that, when I think of Mrs. Greenow’s force of character and warmth of friendship, I feel that Miss Fairstairs’ prospects are good.

Mrs. Greenow’s own marriage was completed. She took Captain Bellfield for better or for worse, with a thorough determination to make the best of his worst. He was a lucky man. He had found a wife who could forgive all his past offences – and also, if necessary, some future ones; who had money enough for all his wants, and kindness enough to gratify them, and who had, most importantly, strength enough to keep him from ruining them both. Reader, let us wish a happy married life to Captain and Mrs. Bellfield!

The day after the ceremony Alice and Kate started for Matching Priory.

CHAPTER 79

Diamonds Are Diamonds

Kate and Alice, as they drew near to their journey's end, were both a little flurried and nervous. Kate was to meet Mr. Grey for the first time. He was now staying at Matching and was to remain there until a week before his marriage. He would then return to Cambridgeshire for a day or two, and after that was to be a guest at the rector's house at Matching the evening before the ceremony.

"Why not let him come here at once?" Lady Glencora had said to her husband. "It is such nonsense, you know." But Mr. Palliser, though a Radical in public life, would not for worlds transgress the social laws of his ancestors.

Kate could not help feeling that she had been the means of doing Mr. Grey much injury. She was awed by the Pallisers, because of their rank and wealth; but of Mr. Grey she was very much afraid.

And Alice also was not at her ease. Both Lady Midlothian and the Marchioness of Auld Reekie were coming, and she had no means of escape.

"Lady Macleod is right in nearly all that she says," Lady Glencora had written to her. "At any rate, you needn't be such a fool as to run away from your cousins, simply because they have titles."

Lady Glencora, moreover, had settled the list of bridesmaids. Alice had asked that she might have only one – Kate. But she should have known that when she consented to be married at Matching, all such questions would be decided for her. So two daughters of Lady Midlothian were to act, Lady Jane and Lady Mary, and the daughter of the Marchioness, who was also a Lady Jane, and there were to be two Miss Howards who were distant relations. Lady Glencora swore that the bridesmaids should be very smart. She was to give all the dresses, and Mr. Palliser was to give a brooch and an armband to each.

All this was very terrible to Kate, who had not much taste for finery. There was a dress waiting at Matching to be made up after her arrival, though as yet she knew nothing of the trinkets. Although Lady Glencora was not inclined to patronize or condescend in her kindnesses, Kate Vavasor was one to whom such submission would not come easily.

"I wish I was out of this boat," she said to Alice in the train.

"So that I might be shipwrecked alone!"

"No; there can be no shipwreck for you. But what are they to do with me? I'd sooner be bridesmaid to Charlie Fairstairs. My place in the world is not among Cabinet Ministers and countesses."

"Nor mine."

"Yes; they are your cousins, and you have made one great friend at least among them."

"Are you going to throw me over, Kate?"

"To tell the truth, Alice, I sometimes think you had better throw me over. I know it would be sad, but perhaps it would be better. I have done you much harm and no good; and now I shall disgrace you." She even talked of getting out at some station, and would have done so if Alice had not made it impossible.

As it was, that evening they entered the park-gate at Matching in Lady Glencora's carriage. None of the Lady Janes and Lady Marys were there when they arrived. Indeed, there was no guest but Mr. Grey, for which Kate felt extremely

grateful. Mr. Grey came into the hall behind Mr. Palliser, and Alice was at once in her lover's arms.

"I must introduce myself," said Lady Glencora to Kate, "and my husband also. I have heard so much about you, and I know how good you've been; and how wicked you have been," she added in a whisper.

Then Mr. Grey was brought up to her, and they were introduced. It was not for some days that she felt at her ease with Mr. Grey, and I doubt whether she ever reached that point with Mr. Palliser; but Lady Glencora she knew, and liked, and almost loved, from the first moment of their meeting.

"Have you heard the news?" said Lady Glencora to Alice, the first minute that they were alone. Alice, of course, had not heard the news. "Mr. Bott is going to marry Mrs. Marsham. There is such a row about it. Plantagenet is nearly mad. I never knew him so disgusted in my life. Of course I don't dare to tell him, but I am so happy. You know how I love them both, and I could not wish any better reward for either."

Alice, who had known more of Mr. Bott than of Mrs. Marsham, said that she was sorry for the lady.

"She's old enough to be his mother," said Lady Glencora, "otherwise I really don't know any people better suited to each other. The best of it is, that Mr. Bott is doing it to regain his footing with Mr. Palliser! I am sure of that – and Plantagenet will never speak to him again. But, Alice, there is other news."

"What other news?"

"It is hardly news yet, and of course I am very wicked to tell you. But I feel sure Mr. Grey knows all about it, and if he tells you, you must pretend not to know. I believe Mr. Palliser will certainly be Chancellor of the Exchequer before next month, and, if so, he'll never stand for Silverbridge again."

"But he'll be in Parliament; will he not?"

"Oh, yes; he'll be in Parliament. I don't understand all about it. There is a man going out for Barsetshire, and the Duke wants Plantagenet to stand there. I can't understand what difference it makes."

"But he will be in the Cabinet?"

"Oh, yes. But who do you suppose is to be the new Member for Silverbridge?"

"I can't guess," said Alice. Though, of course, she did guess.

"Mind, I don't know it. But he told me that he had been with the Duke, and asked the Duke to let Jeffrey have the seat. The Duke became as black as thunder, and said that Jeffrey had no fortune. He wouldn't hear of it. Poor Jeffrey! we must try to do something for him, but I really don't know how. Then the Duke said that Plantagenet should put in for Silverbridge some friend who would support himself; and I think that Plantagenet mentioned – one Mr. Grey."

"Oh, Glencora!"

"They've been talking together till sometimes I think Mr. Grey is worse than Plantagenet. He'll be a financial Secretary; you see if he isn't; or an under-somebody of State; and then some day he'll go mad, either because he does or doesn't get into the Cabinet." Lady Glencora, as she said all this, knew well that the news she was giving would please her cousin better than any other.

The guests came: the two Miss Howards first, who expressed themselves delighted with Lady Glencora's taste and with Mr. Palliser's generosity with the trinkets. Kate had said very little about these, but the Miss Howards were loud in their thanks. They were good-humoured, merry girls, and the house was pleasanter after their arrival.

Then came the dreaded Lady Midlothian! Kate had really become curious about her. Lady Midlothian came, and with her came Lady Jane and Lady Mary, and as they were to be Alice's bridesmaids they were gracious to her. To Kate, too, they were civil enough, and things, in public, went on very pleasantly at Matching.

Of course there was a scene in private between Alice and Lady Midlothian.

"You must go through it," Lady Glencora had said, with joking mournfulness; "and why should you not let her jump upon you a little? It can't hurt you now."

"But I don't like people to jump upon me," Alice said.

"Why are you to have everything just as you like it? Think how I've been jumped on! If you knew the things she used to say to me, you would not be such a coward. And the Marchioness used to look at me, and groan, and hold up her hands till I hated her the worse of the two. Yet they are my dear friends now. Why should you escape altogether?"

Alice could not escape altogether, and therefore was closeted with Lady Midlothian for the best part of an hour.

"Did Lady Macleod read to you what I wrote?" the Countess asked.

"Yes."

"And I hope you understand me, Alice?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so."

"You suppose so, my dear! I am most anxious about your future life, and am thoroughly satisfied with the step you are now taking." The Countess paused, but Alice said nothing. She was being jumped upon, and it was unpleasant; but, after all that had happened, it was only fitting that she should undergo much unpleasantness.

"Thoroughly satisfied," continued the Countess; "and now, I only wish to refer, in the slightest manner possible, to what took place between us last winter."

"Why refer to it at all, Lady Midlothian?"

"Because I think it may do good, and because I wish to tell you that I have forgiven that also. On that occasion I had come all the way from Scotland on purpose to say a few words to you."

"I am so sorry that you should have had the trouble."

"I do not regret it, Alice. I never do regret doing anything which I believe to be my duty. I must confess that what I then understood to be your obstinacy, and in truth, your indifference to all prudential considerations, shocked me very much. It did, indeed, my dear. I don't know that I was ever more shocked in my life!" Here Lady Midlothian held up one hand in an imposing manner. "But that is all over now. I forgive and forget it. I shall never think of it any more."

Here Lady Midlothian put up both her hands as though wafting the injury away into the air. "But what I wish specially to say to you is this; your own conduct is forgiven also!" Here she paused again, and Alice winced. What was the Countess to her, that she should be thus tormented with the old woman's forgiveness? John Grey had forgiven her, and that was enough. She had not forgiven herself; and no old woman in England could help her do so. She had sinned, but not against Lady Midlothian.

"The Marchioness and I have talked it over," continued Lady Midlothian, "and she has asked me to speak for her. We have resolved that all those little mistakes should be as though they had never been committed. We shall both be most happy to receive you and your husband, who is, I must say, one of the most gentlemanly men I ever saw. It seems that he and Mr. Palliser are on most friendly terms, and that must be quite a pleasure to you."

"It's a pleasure to him, which is more to the purpose," said Alice.

“Exactly so. And now, my dear, come and give me a kiss, and let me wish you joy.”

Alice accepted the kiss and the congratulations, and a little box of jewellery which Lady Midlothian produced from out of her pocket.

“The diamonds are from the Marchioness, my dear, whose means, as you doubtless are aware, greatly exceed my own. The garnets are from me. I hope they may both be worn long and happily.”

I hardly know which was the worst, the lecture, the kiss, or the present. The last Alice would have declined; but it was not possible. Although she fretted greatly under the infliction of Lady Midlothian, she acknowledged to herself that she deserved all the lashes she received. She had made a fool of herself in her vain attempt to be greater and grander than other girls, and it was only fair that her folly should be punished before it was fully pardoned. John Grey punished it after one fashion, by declining to allude to it, or to take any account of it. And now Lady Midlothian had punished it after another fashion.

Two days before the ceremony the Marchioness and her daughter came. Lady Jane was very much more august than the other Lady Jane. She had very long flaxen hair, and very light blue eyes, and she spoke very little, and she never seemed to do anything. But she was very august, and was engaged to marry the Duke of Dumfriesshire, though he was twice her age, as soon as he had completed his mourning for his first wife. But Lady Jane and her mother were both harmless. The Marchioness never spoke to Kate and hardly spoke to Alice, and Lady Jane was quite as silent as her mother.

On the morning after their arrival, a telegram arrived for Mr. Palliser calling for his immediate presence in London. He came, full of regret, to Alice, who now regarded him quite as a friend.

“Of course I understand,” she said, “and I know that the business which takes you up to London pleases you.”

“Well; yes; it does. But it does not please me to think that I shall be away at your marriage. Pray make your father understand that it was absolutely unavoidable. But I shall see him, of course, when I come back. And I shall see you too before very long.”

“Why so?”

“Because Mr. Grey must be at Silverbridge for his election. But perhaps I ought not tell you his secrets.” Then he took her into the breakfast-parlour and showed her his present. It was a service of Sèvres china, very precious and beautiful. “I got you these things because Grey likes china.”

“So do I,” said she, her face brighter than he had ever yet seen it.

“I thought you would like them best,” said he. Alice, looking up at him with her eyes full of tears, told him that she did like them best; and then, as he wished her all happiness, and was stooping over her to kiss her, Lady Glencora came in.

“I beg pardon,” said she, “I was just one minute too soon; was I not? All the wedding gifts are displayed here. It’s easy to get somebody to pack them again.”

Among the wedding gifts were the jewels that Lady Midlothian had brought.

“Upon my word, her ladyship’s diamonds are not to be sneezed at,” said Lady Glencora.

“I don’t care for diamonds,” said Alice.

Lady Glencora took up the Countess’s trinkets, and shook her head and turned up her nose with a wonderfully comic expression.

“To me they are just as good as the others,” said Alice.

“To me they are not,” said Lady Glencora. “Diamonds are diamonds, and garnets are garnets.”

On the evening before the wedding Alice and Lady Glencora walked for the last time through the Priory ruins. It was now September, and the evenings were still long. Whether Lady Glencora would have been allowed to walk through the ruins at half-past eight in the evening if her husband had been there may be doubtful, but her husband was away.

“Do you remember that night we were here?” said Lady Glencora.

“How could I forget it?”

“Oh dear, what wonderful things have happened since that! Do you ever think of Jeffrey?”

“Yes, of course. I did like him so much. I hope I shall see him some day.”

“And he liked you too; and, what was more, I thought at one time that you were going to like him in earnest.”

“Not in that way, certainly.”

“You’ve done much better, of course. If I have a boy, I wonder whether Jeffrey will hate me? I can’t help it if he does. Only think what it is to Plantagenet. Have you seen the difference it makes in him already?”

“Of course it makes a difference; the greatest difference in the world.”

“And think what it will be to me, Alice. I used to wish myself dead. I shan’t think any more of that poor fellow now.” Then she told Alice what had been done for Burgo. “Poor fellow!” said Lady Glencora, “that allowance won’t do more than buy him gloves, you know.”

The wedding was magnificent, greatly to the dismay of Alice and to the discomfort of Mr. Vavasor, who arrived while his daughter and Lady Glencora were in the ruins. Mr. Grey seemed to take it all very easily, and, as Lady Glencora said, played his part exactly as though he were in the habit of being married once a year.

“Nothing on earth will ever put him out, so you need not try, my dear,” she said, as Alice stood with her a moment alone.

“I know,” said Alice, “and therefore I shall never try.”

CHAPTER 80

The Story Is Finished Within the Halls of the Duke of Omnium

Mr. Grey and wife were duly carried away from Matching Priory for their honeymoon. When Alice was first asked where she wished to go, she simply suggested that it should not be to Switzerland. They travelled slowly through Italy to Rome, although that had not been their original intention, because Mr. Grey believed that he would be wanted in England, down at Silverbridge, very shortly. But he soon learned that things were to be postponed.

“There will be no vacancy till Parliament meets.” That had been the message sent to him by Mr. Palliser. Lady Glencora’s message to Alice had been rather longer, covering three pages; she had abused Lord Brock, had abused Mr. Finespun, and had abused all public things, because the arrangements now proposed would not be very comfortable to herself.

“You can go to Rome and see everything and enjoy yourself, which I was not allowed to do; and all this bother of electioneering will take place just when I am in the middle of all my trouble.”

Many very long letters came from Lady Glencora to Rome during the winter – letters which Alice enjoyed thoroughly, but which were very indiscreet. The Duke was at the Castle for Christmas, and Glencora’s descriptions of him were very comic.

“He comes and bends over me on the sofa in the most stupendous way, as though a woman who may the mother of his heir must be a miracle. The other day the devil prompted to say that I hoped it would be a girl. The look on his face nearly frightened me. If it is a girl, I believe he will turn me out of the house; but how can I help it? I wish you were going to have a baby at the same time. Then, if yours was a boy and mine a girl, we’d exchange.” This was very indiscreet, and it was a pity Alice could not show it to her husband.

But December and January wore themselves away, and the time came for the Greys to return to England. The husband had discussed his parliamentary ambition with his wife, and found her a very ready listener. Having made up his mind to do this, he was resolved to do it thoroughly, and was becoming almost as full of politics as Mr. Palliser himself.

Then, when they reached London, they heard the news from Mr. Vavasor, who met them at the railway.

“The Duke has got an heir,” he said, before the carriage-door was open; “born this morning!” One might have supposed that it was the Duke’s baby, and not Lady Glencora’s and Mr. Palliser’s.

There was a note from Mr. Palliser to Mr. Grey. “Thank God!” it said, “Lady Glencora and the boy are quite as well as can be expected. Both the new writs were moved for last night.” Mr. Palliser’s honours came rushing upon him all at once.

Wondrous little baby! Better than royal rank will be thine, with influence more than royal. All that the world can give will be thine; and yet when we talk of thee, we are wont to declare that thy chances of happiness are no better than those of thine infant neighbour, in the farmyard cradle. Who shall say that they are better or worse? And how shall we reconcile to ourselves that seeming injustice?

And now we will pay a little visit to the small one, to end our history. It was early in April, when Mrs. Grey was at Gatherum Castle, but Mr. Grey was absent at

Silverbridge with Mr. Palliser. This was the day of the Silverbridge election. Lady Glencora and Alice were sitting upstairs with the small, noble-born one lying in Alice's lap.

"It is such a comfort that it is over," said the mother.

"You are the most ungrateful of women."

"Oh, Alice! Your baby may come just as it pleases. You won't lie awake trembling how on earth you will bear your disgrace if it should be a girl."

"I'm sure Mr. Palliser would not have said a word."

"No, he would have said nothing, nor would the Duke. The Duke would simply have gone away instantly, and never have seen me again till the next chance comes – if it ever does come. And Mr. Palliser would have been as gentle as a dove. But I should have known what they both thought and felt."

"It's all right now, dear."

"Yes, my bonny boy, you have made it all right for me; have you not?" And Lady Glencora took her baby into her own arms. "But, oh, Alice, if you had seen the Duke's long face through those three days; if you had heard the oppressive cheerfulness of those two London doctors – doctors are such bad actors – you would have thought it impossible for any woman to live through it. But you have made everything right, my little man." Then there were various ceremonies of feminine idolatry till an old nurse carried the idol away.

That afternoon Lady Glencora took Alice all over the house. It was a castle of enormous size, quite new, very cold, very handsome, and very dull.

"What an immense place!" said Alice, as she stood looking round her in the grand hall.

"Is it not? And it cost a hundred thousand pounds or more. Well, that would be nothing to the Duke. But the joke is, nobody ever thinks of living here. Who'd live in such a great, overgrown place such as this, if they could get a comfortable house like Matching? The Duke comes for one week in the year, and Plantagenet says he hates to do that. As for me, nothing on earth shall ever make me live here. I couldn't help their bringing me here; but I shall assert myself now. Come, we must go away to avoid being caught by the public tour."

That evening Mr. Palliser and Mr. Grey returned home from Silverbridge together. Mr. Grey was by then a Member of Parliament, but Mr. Palliser had to wait for the county election. But there was no rival candidate for the position, and Mr. Palliser was thoroughly contented. He was now Chancellor of the Exchequer, and in about ten days' time would be on his feet in the House proposing his scheme of finance.

The two men were seated together in an open carriage. Although Mr. Palliser was rejoicing, he did not speak a word that was triumphant in its tone.

"I hope you'll like it," he said to Grey.

"I shall never like it as you do," Grey answered.

"Why not?"

"In the first place, I have not begun it so young."

"Any time before thirty-five is young enough."

"For useful work, yes – but hardly for enjoyment in the thing. And then I don't believe it all as you do. To you the British House of Commons is everything."

"Yes; everything," said Mr. Palliser with unusual enthusiasm; "everything, everything. That and the Constitution are everything."

"It is not so to me."

“Ah, but it will be. If you really take to the work, you’ll get to feel it as I do. The man who is number one on the Treasury Bench in the English House of Commons, is the first of living men. That’s my opinion. I don’t know that I ever said it before; but that’s my opinion.”

“And who is the second; the purse-bearer to this great man?”

“I don’t know that there is any second. I wonder how we shall find Lady Glencora and the boy.” They had arrived at the Castle, and Mr. Grey ran upstairs to his wife’s room to receive her congratulations.

“And you are a Member of Parliament?” she asked.

“They tell me so.”

“I am so happy. There’s no position in the world so glorious!”

“It’s a pity you are not Mr. Palliser’s wife. That’s just what he has been saying.”

“Oh, John, I am so happy. It is so much more than I have deserved. I hope – that is, I sometimes think—”

“Think what, dearest?”

“I hope nothing that I have ever said has driven you to it.”

“I’d do more than that, dear, to make you happy,” he said, as he put his arm round her and kissed her.

Probably my readers may agree with Alice that she had received more than she deserved. All her friends, except her husband, thought so.

But as they have all forgiven her, including even Lady Midlothian herself, I hope that they who have followed her story to its close will not be less generous.

The End

Other abridged books in this series

This is one of a series of abridgements of classic novels available free from Emma Laybourn's website, www.englishliteratureebooks.com

Others in the series are:

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*
George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*
Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*
Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*
W.M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*
Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*
Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*
Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*
Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

At the same website, you will also find free ebooks of classic English poetry, including selections by Tennyson, Keats, Donne, Yeats, Coleridge and John Clare. Additionally there are three ebook anthologies: 101 Memorable Poems, English Landscape Poetry and The Poetry of Sleep.

All ebooks are downloadable in pdf, epub and mobi formats. In addition, for Kindle owners, omnibus editions of some of the abridgments have been published. For further details please see the webpage at:
<http://www.englishliteratureebooks.com/omnibuseditions.html>

Abridgements are by Emma Laybourn MA PGCE.

[Return to the start of the book.](#)