

## CHAPTER XV

It is perhaps time that the reader should know a little of the ancient house and loyalty where many of the personages of whose history these pages treat, lived and moved and had their being.

The Abbey House, so called, was in reality that part of the monastery which had been devoted to the use of successive generations of priors. It was, like the ruins that lay to its rear, entirely built of grey masonry, rendered greyer still by the lichens that fed upon its walls, which were of exceeding strength and thickness. It was a long, irregular building, and roofed with old and narrow tiles, which from red had, in the course of ages, faded to sober russet. The banqueting-hall was a separate building at its northern end, and connected with the main dwelling by a covered way. The aspect of the house was westerly, and the front windows looked on to an expanse of park-like land, heavily timbered with oaks of large size, some of them pollards that might have pushed their first leaves in the time of William the Conqueror. In spring their vivid green was diversified by the reddish brown of a double line of noble walnut-trees, a full half mile in length, marking the track of the carriage-drive that led to the Roxham high-road.

Behind the house lay the walled garden, celebrated in the time of the monks as being a fortnight earlier than any other in the neighbourhood. Skirting the southern wall of this garden, which was a

little less than a hundred paces long, the visitor reached the scattered ruins of the old monastery that had for generations served as a stone quarry to the surrounding villages, but of which enough was left, including a magnificent gateway, to show how great had been its former extent. Passing on through these, he would come to an enclosure that marked the boundaries of the old graveyard, now turned to agricultural uses, and then to the church itself, a building with a very fine tower, but possessing no particular interest, if we except some exceedingly good brasses and a colossal figure of a monk cut out of the solid heart of an oak, and supposed to be the effigy of a prior of the abbey who died in the time of Edward I. Below the church again, and about one hundred and fifty paces from it, was the vicarage, a comparatively modern building, possessing no architectural attraction, and evidently reared out of the remains of the monastery.

At the south end of the Abbey House itself lay a small grass plot and pleasure-garden fringed with shrubberies, and adorned with two fine cedar-trees. One of these trees was at its further extremity, and under it there ran a path cut through the dense shrubbery. This path, which was edged with limes and called the "Tunnel Walk," led to the lake, and debouched in the little glade where stood Caresfoot's Staff. The lake itself was a fine piece of water, partly natural and partly constructed by the monks, measuring a full mile round, and from fifty to two hundred yards in width. It was in the shape of a man's shoe, the heel facing west like the house, but projecting beyond it, the narrow part representing the hollow of the instep, being exactly

opposite to it, and the sole swelling out in an easterly direction.

Bratham Abbey was altogether a fine old place, but the most remarkable thing about it was its air of antiquity and the solemnity of its peace. It did not, indeed, strike the spirit with that religious awe which is apt to fall upon us as we gaze along the vaulted aisles of great cathedrals, but it appealed perhaps with equal strength to the softer and more reflective side of our nature. For generation after generation that house had been the home of men like ourselves; they had passed and were forgotten, but it remained, the sole witness of the stories of their lives. Hands of which the very bones had long since crumbled into dust had planted those old oaks and walnuts, that still donned their green robes in summer, and shed them in the autumn, to stand great skeletons through the winter months, awaiting the resurrection of the spring.

There lay upon the place and its surroundings a burden of dead lives, intangible, but none the less real. The air was thick with memories, as suggestive as the grey dust in a vault. Even in the summer, in the full burst of nature revelling in her strength, the place was sad. But in the winter, when the wind came howling through the groaning trees, and drove the grey scud across an ashy sky, when the birds were dumb, and there were no cattle on the sodden lawn, its isolated melancholy was a palpable thing.

That hoary house might have been a gateway of the dim land we call the

Past, looking down in stony sorrow on the follies of those who so soon must cross its portals, and, to the wise who could hear the lesson, pregnant with echoes of the warning voices of many generations.

Here it was that Angela grew up to womanhood.

Some nine and a half years had passed from the date of the events described in the foregoing pages, when one evening Mr. Fraser bethought him that he had been indoors all day, and proposed reading till late that night, and that therefore he had better take some exercise.

A tall and somewhat nervous-looking man, with dark eyes, a sensitive mouth, and that peculiar stoop and pallor of complexion which those devoted to much study almost invariably acquire, he had "student" written on his face. His history was a sufficiently common one. He possessed academical abilities of a very high order, and had in his youth distinguished himself greatly at college, both as a classical and a mathematical scholar. When quite young, he was appointed, through the influence of a relation, to his present living, where the income was good and the population very small indeed. Freed from all necessity for exertion, he shut himself up with his books, having his little round of parish work for relaxation, and never sought to emerge from the quiet of his aimless studies to struggle for fame and place

in the laborious world. Mr. Fraser was what people call an able man thrown away. If they had known his shy, sensitive nature a little better, they would have understood that he was infinitely more suited for the solitary and peaceful lot in life which he had chosen, than to become a unit in the turbulent and greedy crowd that is struggling through all the ages up the slippery slopes of the temple of that greatest of our gods--Success.

There are many such men, probably you, my reader, know one or two. With infinite labour they store up honey from the fields of knowledge, collect endless data from the statistics of science, pile up their calculations against the very stars; and all to no end. As a rule, they do not write books; they gather the learning for the learning's sake, and for the very love of it rejoice to count their labour lost. And thus they go on from year to year, until the golden bowl is broken and the pitcher broken at the fountain, and the gathered knowledge sinks, or appears to sink, back to whence it came. Alas, that one generation cannot hand on its wisdom and experience--more especially its experience--to another in its perfect form! If it could, we men should soon become as gods.

It was a mild evening in the latter end of October when Mr. Fraser started on his walk. The moon was up in the heavens as he, an hour later, made his way from the side of the lake, where he had been wandering, back to the churchyard through which he had to pass to reach the vicarage. Just before he came to the gate, however, he was

surprised, in such a solitary spot, to see a slight figure leaning against the wall opposite the place where lay the mortal remains of the old squire and his daughter-in-law, Hilda. He stood still and watched; the figure appeared to be gazing steadily at the graves. Presently it turned and saw him, and he recognized the great grey eyes and golden hair of little Angela Caresfoot.

"Angela, my dear, what are you doing here at this time of night?" he asked, in some surprise.

She blushed a little as she shook hands rather awkwardly with him.

"Don't be angry with me," she said in a deprecatory voice; "but I was so lonely this evening that I came here for company."

"Came here for company! What do you mean?"

She hung her head.

"Come," he said, "tell me what you mean."

"I don't quite know myself. How can I tell you?"

He looked more puzzled than ever, and she observed it and went on:

"I will try to tell you, but you must not be cross like Pigott when

she cannot understand me. Sometimes I feel ever so much alone, as though I was looking for something and could not find it, and then I come and stand here and look at my mother's grave, and I get company and am not lonely any more. That is all I know; I cannot tell you any more. Do you think me silly? Pigott does."

"I think you are a very strange child. Are you not afraid to come here alone at night?"

"Afraid--oh, no! Nobody comes here; the people in the village dare not come here after dark, because they say that the ruins are full of spirits. Jakes told me that. But I must be stupid; I cannot see them, and I want so very much to see them. I hope it is not wrong, but I told my father so the other day, and he turned white and was angry with Pigott for giving me such ideas; but you know Pigott did not give them to me at all. I am not afraid to come; I like it, it is so quiet, and, if one listens enough in the quiet, I always think one may hear something that other people do not hear."

"Do you hear anything, then?"

"Yes, I hear things, but I cannot understand them. Listen to the wind in the branches of that tree, the chestnut, off which the leaf is falling now. It says something, if only I could catch it."

"Yes, child, yes, you are right in a way; all Nature tells the same

eternal tale, if our ears were not stopped to its voices," he answered, with a sigh; indeed, the child's talk had struck a vein of thought familiar to his own mind, and, what is more, it deeply interested him; there was a quaint, far-off wisdom in it.

"It is pleasant to-night, is it not, Mr. Fraser?" said the little maid, "though everything is dying. The things die softly without any pain this year; last year they were all killed in the rain and wind. Look at that cloud floating across the moon, is it not beautiful? I wonder what it is the shadow of; I think all the clouds are shadows of something up in heaven."

"And when there are no clouds?"

"Oh! then heaven is quite still and happy."

"But heaven is always happy."

"Is it? I don't understand how it can be always happy if we go there. There must be so many to be sorry for."

Mr. Fraser mused a little; that last remark was difficult to answer. He looked at the fleecy cloud, and, falling into her humour, said--

"I think your cloud is the shadow of an eagle carrying a lamb to its little ones."



"And I think," she answered confidently, "that it is the shadow of an angel carrying a baby home."

Again he was silenced; the idea was infinitely more poetical than his own.

"This," he reflected, "is a child of a curious mental calibre."

Before he could pursue the thought further, she broke in upon it in quite a different strain.

"Have you seen Jack and Jill? They are jolly."

"Who are Jack and Jill?"

"Why, my ravens, of course. I got them out of the old tree with a hole in it at the end of the lake."

"The tree at the end of the lake! Why, the hole where the ravens nest is fifty feet up. Who got them for you?"

"I got them myself. Sam--you know Sam--was afraid to go up. He said he should fall, and that the old birds would peck his eyes. So I went by myself one morning quite early, with a bag tied round my neck, and got up. It was hard work, and I nearly tumbled once; but I got on the

bough beneath the hole at last. It shook very much; it is so rotten, you have no idea. There were three little ones in the nest, all with great mouths. I took two, and left one for the old birds. When I was nearly down again, the old birds found me out, and flew at me, and beat my head with their wings, and pecked--oh, they did peck! Look here," and she showed him a scar on her hand; "that's where they pecked. But I stuck to my bag, and got down at last, and I'm glad I did, for we are great friends now; and I am sure the cross old birds would be quite pleased if they knew how nicely I am educating their young ones, and how their manners have improved. But I say, Mr. Fraser, don't tell Pigott; she cannot climb trees, and does not like to see me do it. She does not know I went after them myself."

Mr. Fraser laughed.

"I won't tell her, Angela, my dear; but you must be careful--you might tumble and kill yourself."

"I don't think I shall, Mr. Fraser, unless I am meant to. God looks after me as much when I am up a tree as when I am upon the ground."

Once more he had nothing to say; he could not venture to disturb her faith.

"I will walk home with you, my dear. Tell me, Angela, would you like to learn?"

"Learn!--learn what?"

"Books, and the languages that other nations, nations that have passed away, used to talk, and how to calculate numbers and distances."

"Yes, I should like to learn very much; but who will teach me? I have learnt all Pigott knows two years ago, and since then I have been trying to learn about the trees and flowers and stars; but I look and watch, and can't understand."

"Ah! my dear, contact with Nature is the highest education; but the mind that would appreciate her wonders must have a foundation of knowledge to work upon. The uneducated man is rarely sensitive to the thousand beauties and marvels of the fields around him, and the skies above him. But, if you like, I will teach you, Angela. I am practically an idle man, and it will give me great pleasure; but you must promise to work and do what I tell you."

"Oh, how good you are! Of course I will work. When am I to begin?"

"I don't know--to-morrow, if you like; but I must speak to your father first."

Her face fell a little at the mention of her father's name, but presently she said, quietly--

"My father, he will not care if I learn or not. I hardly ever see my father; he does not like me. I see nobody but Pigott and you and old Jakes, and Sam sometimes. You need not ask my father; he will never miss me whilst I am learning. Ask Pigott."

At that moment Pigott herself hove into view, in a great flurry.

"Oh, here you are, Miss Angela! Where have you been to, you naughty girl? At some of your star-gazing tricks again, I'll be bound, frightening the life out of a body. It's just too bad of you, Miss Angela."

The little girl looked at her with a peculiarly winning smile, and took her very solid hand between her own tiny palms.

"Don't be cross, Pigott, dear," she said. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I couldn't help going--I couldn't indeed; and then I stopped talking to Mr. Fraser."

"There, there, I should just like to know who can be cross with you when you put on those ways. Are your feet wet? Ah! I thought so. Run on in and take them off."

"Won't that be just a little difficult?" and she was gone with a merry laugh.

"There, sir, that's just like her, catching a body up like and twisting what she says, till you don't know which is head and which is heels. I'll be bound you found her down yonder;" and she nodded towards the churchyard.

"Yes."

Pigott drew a little nearer, and spoke in a low voice.

"'Tis my belief, sir, that that child sees things; she is just the oddest child I ever saw. There's nothing she likes better than to slip out of a night, and to go to that there beastly churchyard, saving your presence, for 'company,' as she calls it--nice sort of company, indeed. And it is just the same way with storms. You remember that dreadful gale a month ago, the one that took down the North Grove and blew the spire off Rewtham Church. Well, just when it was at its worst, and I was a-sitting and praying that the roof might keep over our heads, I look round for Angela, and can't see her. 'Some of your tricks again,' thinks I to myself; and just then up comes Mrs. Jakes to say that Sam had seen little missy creeping down the tunnel walk. I was that scared that I ran down, got hold of Sam, for Jakes said he wouldn't go out with all them trees a-flying about in the air like straws--no, not for a thousand pounds, and off we set after her." Here Pigott paused to groan at the recollection of that walk.

"Well," said Mr. Fraser, who was rather interested--everything about this queer child interested him; "where did you find her?"

"Well, sir, you know where the old wall runs out into the water, before Caresfoot's Staff there? Well, at the end of it there's a post sunk in, with a ring in it to tie boats to. Now, would you believe it? out there at the end of the wall, and tied to the ring by a scarf passed round her middle, was that dreadful child. She was standing there, her back against the post, right in the teeth of the gale, with the spray dashing over her, her arms stretched out before her, her hat gone, her long hair standing out behind straight as an iron bar, and her eyes flashing as though they were on fire, and all the while there were the great trees crashing down all round in a way enough to make a body sick with fright. We got her back safe, thank God; but how long we shall keep her, I'm sure I don't know. Now she is drowning herself in the lake, for she takes to the water like a duck, and now breaking her neck off trees, and now going to ghosts in the churchyard for company. It's wearing me to the bone--that's what it is."

Mr. Fraser smiled, for, to tell the truth, Pigott's bones were pretty comfortably covered.

"Come," he said, "you would not part with her for all her wicked deeds, would you?"

"Part with her," answered Pigott, in hot indignation, "part with my

little beauty? I would rather part with my head. The love, there never was another like her, nor never will be, with her sweet ways; and, if I know anything about girls, she'll be the beauty of England, she will. She's made for a beautiful woman; and look at them eyes and forehead and hair--where did you ever see the like? And, as for her queer ways, what can you expect from a child as has got a great empty mind and nothing to put in it, and no one to talk to but a common woman like me, and a father"--here she dropped her voice--"as is a miser, and hates the sight of his own flesh and blood?"

"Hush! you should not say such things, Pigott! Now I will tell you something; I am going on to ask your master to allow me to educate Angela."

"I'm right glad to hear it, sir. She's sharp enough to learn anything, and it's kind of you to teach her. If you can make her mind like what her body will be if she lives, somebody will be a lucky man one of these days. Good-night, sir, and many thanks for bringing missy home."

Next day Angela began her education.