

CHAPTER XVII

The winter months passed away slowly for Angela, but not by any means unhappily. Though she was quite alone and missed Mr. Fraser sadly, she found considerable consolation in his present of books, and in the thought that she was getting a good hold of her new subjects of study. And then came the wonder of the spring with its rush of budding life, and who, least of all Angela, could be sad in springtime? But nevertheless that spring marked an important change in our heroine, for it was during its sweet hours, when, having put her books aside, she would roam alone, or in company with her ravens, through the flower-starred woods around the lake, that a feeling of restlessness, amounting at times almost to dissatisfaction, took possession of her. Indeed, as the weeks crept on and she drew near the completion of her twentieth year, she realized with a sigh that she could no longer call herself a girl, and began to feel that her life was incomplete, that something was wanting in it. And this was what was wanting in Angela's life: she had, if we except her nurse, no one to love, and she had so much love to give!

Did she but guess it, the still recesses of her heart already tremble to the footfall of one now drawing near: out of the multitude of the lives around her, a life is marked to mingle with her own. She does not know it, but as the first reflection of the dawn strikes the unconscious sky and shadows the coming of its king, so the red flush that now so often springs unbidden to her brow, tells of girlhood's

twilight ended, and proclaims the advent of woman's life and love.

"Angela," called her father one day, as he heard her footsteps passing his study, "come in here; I want to speak to you."

His daughter stopped, and a look of blank astonishment spread itself over her face. She had not been called into that study for years. She entered, however, as bidden. Her father, who was seated at his writing-table, which was piled up with account-books, did not greatly differ in appearance from what he was when we last saw him twenty years ago. His frame had grown more massive, and acquired a slight stoop, but he was still a young, powerful-looking man, and certainly did not appear a day more than his age of forty-two. The eyes, however, so long as no one was looking at them, had contracted a concentrated stare, as though they were eternally gazing at some object in space, and this appearance was rendered the more marked by an apparently permanent puckering of the skin of the forehead. The moment, however, that they came under the fire of anybody else's optics, and, oddly enough, more particularly those of his own daughter, the stare vanished, and they grew shifty and uncertain to a curious degree.

Philip was employed in adding up something when his daughter entered, and motioned to her to sit down. She did so, and fixed her great grey

eyes on him with some curiosity. The effect was remarkable; her father fidgeted, made a mistake in his calculations, glanced all round the room with his shifty eyes (ah, how changed from those bold black eyes with which Maria Lee fell in love four-and-twenty years ago!) and finally threw down his pen with an exclamation that would have shocked Angela had she understood it.

"How often, Angela, have I asked you not to stare me out of countenance! It is a most unladylike trick of yours."

She blushed painfully.

"I beg your pardon; I forgot. I will look out of the window."

"Don't be a fool; look like other people. But now I want to speak to you. In the first place, I find that the household expenditure for the last year was three hundred and fifty pounds. That is more than I can afford; it must not exceed three hundred this year."

"I will do my best to keep the expenses down, father; but I can assure you that there is no money wasted now."

Then came a pause, which, after humming and hawing a little, Philip was the first to break.

"Do you know that I saw your cousin George yesterday? He is back at

last at Isleworth."

"Yes, Pigott told me that he had come. He has been away a long while."

"When did you last see him?"

"When I was about thirteen, I believe; before he lost the election, and went away."

"He has been down here several times since then. I wonder that you did not see him."

"I always disliked him, and kept out of his way."

"Gad, you can't dislike him more than I do; but I keep good friends with him for all that, and you must do the same. Now, look here, Angela, will you promise to keep a secret?"

"Yes, father, if you wish it."

"Well, then, I appear to be a poor man, don't I? And remember," he added, hastily, "that, with reference to household expenses, I am poor; but, as a matter of fact"--and here he sunk his voice, and glanced suspiciously round--"I am worth at this moment nearly one hundred and fifty thousand pounds in hard cash."

"That is six thousand pounds a year at four per cent.," commented Angela, without a moment's hesitation. "Then I really think you might put a flue into the old greenhouse, and allow a shilling a week to Mrs. Jakes' mother."

"Curse Mrs. Jakes' mother! Nobody but a woman would have interrupted with such nonsense. Listen. You must have heard how I was disinherited on account of my marriage with your mother, and the Isleworth estates left to your cousin George, and how, with a refined ingenuity, he was forbidden to bequeath them back to me or to my children. But mark this, he is not forbidden to sell them to me; no doubt the old man never dreamt that I should have the money to buy them; but, you see, I have almost enough."

"How did you get so much money?"

"Get it! First, I took the gold plate my grandfather bought, and sold it. I had no right to do it, but I could not afford to have so much capital lying idle. It fetched nearly five thousand pounds. With this I speculated successfully. In two years I had eighteen thousand. The eighteen thousand I invested in a fourth share in a coal-mine, when money was scarce and coals cheap. Coals rose enormously just then, and in five years' time I sold my share to the co-holders for eighty-two thousand, in addition to twenty-one thousand received by way of interest. Since then I have not speculated, for fear my luck should desert me. I have simply allowed the money to accumulate on mortgage

and other investments, and bided my time, for I have sworn to have those estates back before I die. It is for this cause that I have toiled, and thought, and screwed, and been cut by the whole neighbourhood for twenty years; but now I think that, with your help, my time is coming."

"With my help. What is it that you wish me to do?"

"Listen," answered her father, nervously tapping his pencil on the account-book before him. "George is not very fond of Isleworth--in fact, he rather dislikes it; but, like all the Caresfoots, he does not care about parting with landed property, and, though we appear to be good friends, he hates me too much ever to consent, under ordinary circumstances, to sell it to me. It is to you I look to overcome that objection."

"I! How?"

"You are a woman and you ask me how you should get the blind side of a man!"

"I do not in the least understand you."

Philip smiled incredulously.

"Then I suppose I must explain. If ever you take the trouble to look

at yourself in the glass, you will probably see that Nature has been very kind to you in the matter of good looks; nor are you by any means deficient in brains. Your cousin George is very fond of a pretty woman, and, to be plain, what I want you to do is to make use of your advantages to get him under your thumb and persuade him into selling the property."

"Oh! father, how can you?" ejaculated Angela, in an agony of shame.

"You idiot, I won't want you to marry him; I only want you to make a fool of him. Surely, being of the sex you are, you won't find that an uncongenial occupation."

Angela's blushes had given away to pallor now, and she answered with cold contempt:

"I don't think you quite understand what a girl feels--at least, what I feel, for I know no other girls. Perhaps it would be useless for me to try to explain. I had rather go blind than use my eyes for such a shameful purpose."

"Angela," said her father, with as much temper as he ever showed now, "let me tell you that you are a silly fool; you are more, you are an encumbrance. Your birth," he added, bitterly, "robbed me of your mother, and the fact of your being a girl deprived our branch of the family of their rights. Now that you have grown up, you prefer to

gratify your whims rather than help me to realize the object of my life by a simple course of action that could do no one any harm. I never asked you to commit yourself in any way. Well, well, it is what I must expect. We have not seen much of each other heretofore, and perhaps the less we meet in the future the better."

"You have no right to talk to me so," she answered, with flashing eyes, "though I am your daughter, and it is cowardly to reproach me with my birth, my sex, and my dependence. Am I responsible for any of these things? But I will not burden you long. And as to what you wanted me to do, and think such a little of, I ask you, is it what my poor mother would have wished her daughter----"

Here Philip abruptly rose, and left the room and the house.

"She is as like her mother as possible," he mused, as soon as he was clear of the house. "It might have been Hilda herself, only she is twice as beautiful as Hilda was. I shall have another bad night after this, I know I shall. I must get rid of that girl somehow, I cannot bear her about me; she is a daily reminder of things I dare not remember, and whenever she stares at me with those great eyes of hers, I feel as though she were looking through me. I wonder if she knows the story of Maria Lee!"

And then dismissing, or trying to dismiss, the matter from his mind, he took his way across the fields to Isleworth Hall, a large white

brick mansion in the Queen Anne style, about two miles distant from the Abbey, and, on arrival, asked for his cousin George, and was at once shown into that gentleman's presence.

Years had told upon George more than they had upon Philip, and, though there were no touches of grey in the flaming red of his hair, the bloodshot eyes, and the puckered crowsfeet beneath them, to say nothing of the slight but constant trembling of the hand, all showed that he was a man well on in middle-life, and who had lived every day of it. Time, too, had made the face more intensely unpleasant and vulgar-looking than ever. Such Caresfoot characteristics as it possessed were, year by year, giving place, in an increasingly greater degree, to the kitchen-maid strain introduced by the mother. In short, George Caresfoot did not even look a gentleman, whereas Philip certainly did.

"You don't seem very well, George. I am afraid that your travels have not agreed with you."

"My dear Philip," answered his cousin, in a languid and affected voice, "if you had lived the life that I have for the last twenty years, you would look a little knocked up. I have had some very good times; but the fact is, that I have been too prodigal of my strength, not thought enough about the future. It is a great mistake, and one of the worst results is that I am utterly _blase_ of everything; even _la belle passion_ is played out for me. I haven't seen a woman I care

twopence about for ten years."

"Ah! you should sell this place, and take a house in town; it would suit you much better."

"I can do that without selling the place. I don't intend to sell the place--in fact, nothing would induce me to do so. Some day I may marry, and want to transmit it to some future Caresfoot; but I confess I don't mean to do that just yet. Marry when you want a nurse, but never before; that's my maxim. Marriage is an excellent institution for parsons and fools, the two classes that Providence has created to populate the world; but a wise man should as soon think of walking into a spring-trap. Take your own case, for instance, my dear Philip; look what marriage led to."

"At any rate," answered his cousin, bitterly, "it led to your advantage."

"Exactly; and that is one of the reasons why I have such a respect for the institution in the abstract. It has been my personal benefactor, and I worship it accordingly--at a distance. By the way, talking of marriage reminds me of its legitimate fruits. Bellamy tells me that your daughter Angela (if I had a daughter, I should call her Diabola, it is more appropriate for a woman) has grown uncommonly handsome. Bring her to see me; I adore beauty in all its forms, especially its female form. Is she really so handsome?"

"I am no judge, but you will soon have an opportunity of forming an opinion--that is, I hope so. I propose coming with Angela to make a formal call on you to-morrow."

"Good. Tell my fair cousin that I shall be certain to be in, and be prepared, metaphorically, to fall at the feet of so much loveliness. By the way, that reminds me; you have heard of Bellamy's, or rather Mrs. Bellamy's, good fortune, I suppose?"

"No."

"What--not? Why, he is now Sir John Bellamy, knight."

"Indeed! How is that?"

"You remember the bye-election six months back?"

"Oh, yes! I was actually badgered by Mrs. Bellamy into promising to vote, much against my personal convenience."

"Exactly. Well, just at the time, old Prescott died, you may remember that Mr. Showers, the member of the Government, was unseated on petition from some borough or other, and came down here post-haste to get re-elected. But he had Sir Percy Vivyan against him, and, as I

know to my cost, this benighted country is not fond of those who preach the gospel of progress. Bellamy, who is a stout Radical, as you know--chiefly, I fancy, because there is more to be got out of that side of politics--got the job as Showers' agent. But, three days before, it became quite clear that his cause, cabinet minister or not, was hopeless. Then it was that Mrs.--I beg her pardon, Lady--Bellamy came to the fore. Just as Showers was thinking of withdrawing, she demanded a private interview with him. Next day she posted off to old Sir Percy, who is a perfect fool of the chivalrous school, and was desperately fond of her, and, *_mirabile dictu_*, that evening Sir Percy withdraws on the plea of ill-health or some such rubbish, and Showers walks over. Within three months, Mr. Bellamy becomes Sir John Bellamy, nominally for his services as town-clerk of Roxham, and I hear that old Sir Percy is now perfectly rampant, and goes about cursing her ladyship up hill and down dale, and declaring that he has been shockingly taken-in. How our mutual friend worked the ropes is more than I can tell you, but she did work them, and to some purpose."

"She is an uncommonly handsome woman."

"Ah! yes, you're right there, she is A1; but let us stroll out a little; it is a fine evening for the 30th of April. To-morrow will be the 1st of May, so it will, a day neither of us are likely to forget."

Philip winced at the allusion, but said nothing.

"By the way," George went on, "I am expecting a visitor, my ward, young Arthur Heigham, who is just back from India. He will be twenty-five in a few days, when he comes of age, and is coming down to settle up. The fact is, that ten thousand of his money is on the Jotley property, and both Bellamy and myself are anxious that it should stop there for the present, as if the mortgage were called in it might be awkward."

"Is he well off?"

"Comfortably; about a thousand a year; comes of an old family too. Bellamy and I knew his father, Captain Heigham, slightly, when we were in business. His wife, by the way, was a distant cousin of ours. They are both dead now; the captain was wiped out at Inkerman, and, for some unknown reason, left me the young gentleman's sole guardian and joint trustee with a London lawyer, a certain Mr. Borley. I have never seen him yet--my ward, I mean--he has always been at Eton, or Cambridge, or in India, or somewhere."

Here Philip began to manifest signs of considerable uneasiness, the cause of which was sufficiently apparent; for, whilst they were talking, a very large and savage-looking animal of the sheep-dog order had emerged from the house, and was following him up and down, growling in a low and ominous undertone, its nose being the while glued to his calves as they alternately presented themselves in his line of vision.

"Would you mind calling off this animal, George?" he said at length.

"He does not look amiable."

"Oh! that's Snarleyow; don't mind him, he never bites unless you stop." Philip instinctively quickened his pace. "Isn't he a beauty? He's a pure bred Thibet sheep-dog, and I will back him to fight against any animal of his own weight. He killed two dogs in one morning the other day, and pulled down a beggar-woman in the evening. You should have heard her holler."

At that moment, fortunately for Philip's calves, which were beginning to tingle with an unwholesome excitement, Mr. Snarleyow's attention was diverted by the approach of a dog-cart, and he left to enjoy the amusement of snapping and barking at the horse. The cart pulled up at the door, and out of it emerged a tall and extremely gentlemanly-looking young fellow, followed by a very large red bull-dog.

"Mr. Caresfoot, I believe," said the young gentleman to George, taking off his hat.

"Yes, Mr. Heigham, at your service. I am very glad to see you. My cousin, Mr. Philip Caresfoot."