

CHAPTER XIX

Arthur's sleep was oppressed that night by horrible nightmares of fighting dogs, whereof the largest and most ferocious was fitted with George's red head, the effect of which, screwed, without any eye to the fitness of things, to the body of the deceased Snarleyow, struck him as peculiarly disagreeable. He himself was armed with a gun, and whilst he was still arguing with Sir John Bellamy the nice point whether, should he execute that particular animal, as he felt a carnal longing to do, it would be manslaughter or dogslaughter, he found himself wide awake.

It was very early in the morning of the 1st of May, and, contrary to the usual experience of the inhabitants of these islands, the sky gave promise of a particularly fine day, just the day for fishing. He did not feel sleepy, and, had he done so, he had had enough of his doggy dreams; so he got up, dressed, and taking his fishing-rod, let himself out of the house as he had been instructed to do on the previous evening, and, releasing Aleck from his outhouse, proceeded towards Bratham Lake.

And about this time Angela woke up too, for she always rose early, and ran to the window to see what sort of a day she had got for her birthday. Seeing it to be so fine, she threw open the old lattice, at which her pet raven Jack was already tapping to be admitted, and let the sweet air play upon her face and neck, and thought what a

wonderful thing it was to be twenty years old. And then, kneeling by the window, she said her prayers after her own fashion, thanking God who had spared her to see this day, and praying Him to show her what to do with her life, and, if it was His will, to make it a little less lonely. Then she rose and dressed herself, feeling that now that she had done with her teens, she was in every respect a woman grown--indeed, quite old. And, in honour of the event, she chose out of her scanty store of dresses, all of them made by Pigott and herself, her very prettiest, the one she had had for Sunday wear last summer, a tight-fitting robe of white stuff, with soft little frills round the neck and wrists. Next she put on a pair of stout boots calculated to keep out the morning dew, and started off.

Now all this had taken a good time, nearly an hour perhaps; for, being her birthday, and there having been some mention of a young gentleman who might possibly come to fish, she had plaited up her shining hair with extra care, a very laborious business when your hair hangs down to your knees.

Meanwhile our other early riser, Arthur, had made his way first to the foot of the lake and then along the little path that skirted its area till he came to Caresfoot Staff. Having sufficiently admired that majestic oak, for he was a great lover of timber, he proceeded to investigate the surrounding water with the eye of a true fisherman. A few yards further up there jutted into the water that fragment of wall on which stood the post, now quite rotten, to which Angela had bound

herself on the day of the great storm. At his feet, too, the foundations of another wall ran out for some distance into the lake, being, doubtless, the underpinning of an ancient boathouse, but this did not rise out of the water, but stopped within six inches of the surface. Between these two walls lay a very deep pool.

"Just the place for a heavy fish," reflected Arthur, and, even as he thought it, he saw a five-pound carp rise nearly to the surface, in order to clear the obstruction of the wall, and sink silently into the depths.

Retiring carefully to one of two quaintly carved stone blocks placed at the foot of the oak-tree, on which, doubtless, many a monk had sat in meditation, he set himself to get his fishing-gear together.

Presently, however, struck by the beauty of the spot and its quiet, only broken by the songs of many nesting birds, he stopped a while to look around him. Above his head the branches of a great oak, now clothing themselves with the most vivid green, formed a dome-like roof, beneath the shade of which grew the softest moss, starred here and there with primroses and violets. Outside the circle of its shadow the brushwood of mingled hazel and ash-stubs rose thick and high, ringing-in the little spot as with a wall, except where its depths were pierced by the passage of a long green lane of limes that, unlike the shrubberies, appeared to be kept in careful order, and of which the arching boughs formed a perfect leafy tunnel. Before him lay the lake where the long morning lights quivered and danced, as its calm

was now and again ruffled by a gentle breeze. The whole scene had a lovely and peaceful look, and, gazing on it, Arthur fell into a reverie.

Sitting thus dreamily, his face looked at its best, its expression of gentle thoughtfulness giving it an attraction beyond what it was entitled to, judged purely from a sculptor's point of view. It was an intellectual face, a face that gave signs of great mental possibilities, but for all that a little weak about the mouth. The brow indicated some degree of power, and the mouth and eyes no small capacities for affection and all sorts of human sympathy and kindness. These last, in varying lights, could change as often as the English climate; their groundwork, however, was blue, and they were honest and bonny. In short, a man in looking at Arthur Heigham at the age of twenty-four would have reflected that, even among English gentlemen, he was remarkable for his gentleman-like appearance, and a "fellow one would like to know;" a girl would have dubbed him "nice-looking;" and a middle-aged woman--and most women do not really understand the immense difference between men until they are getting on that way--would have recognized in him a young man by no means uninteresting, and one who might, according to the circumstances of his life, develop into anything or--nothing in particular.

Presently, drawn by some unguessed attraction, Arthur took his eyes off an industrious water-hen, who was building a nest in a hurried way, as though she were not quite sure of his intentions, and

perceived a large raven standing on one leg on the grass, about three yards from him, and peering at him comically out of one eye. This was odd. But his glance did not stop at the raven, for a yard or two beyond it he caught sight of a white skirt, and his eyes, travelling upwards, saw first a rounded waist, and then a bust and pair of shoulders such as few women can boast, and at last, another pair of eyes; and he then and there fell utterly and irretrievably in love.

"Good heavens!" he said, aloud--poor fellow, he did not mean to say it, it was wrung from the depths of his heart--"good heavens, how lovely she is!"

Let the reader imagine the dreadful confusion produced in that other pair of eyes at the open expression of such a sentiment, and the vivid blush that stained the fair face in which they were set, if he can.

But somehow they did not grow angry--perhaps it was not in the nature of the most sternly repressive young lady to grow angry at a compliment which, however marked, was so evidently genuine and unpremeditated. In another moment Arthur bethought him of what he had said, and it was his turn to blush. He recovered himself pretty well, however. Rising from his stone seat, he took off his hat, and said, humbly,

"I beg your pardon, but you startled me so, and really for a moment I thought that you were the spirit of the place, or," he added, gracefully, pointing to a branch of half-opened hawthorn bloom she

held in her hand, "the original Queen of the May."

Angela blushed again. The compliment was only implied this time; she had therefore no possible pretext for getting angry.

For a moment she dropped the sweet eyes that looked as though they were fresh from reading the truths of heaven before his gaze of unmistakable admiration, and stood confused; and, as she stood, it struck Arthur that there was something more than mere beauty of form and feature about her--an indescribable something, a glory of innocence, a reflection of God's own light that tinged the worship her loveliness commanded with a touch of reverential awe.

"The angels must look like that," he thought. But he had no time to think any more, for next moment she had gathered up her courage in both her hands, and was speaking to him in a soft voice, of which the tones went ringing on through all the changes of his life.

"My father told me that he had asked you to come and fish, but I did not expect to meet you so early. I--I fear that I am disturbing you," and she made as though she would be going.

Arthur felt that this was a contingency to be prevented at all hazards.

"You are Miss Caresfoot," he said, hurriedly, "are you not?"

"Yes--I am Angela; I need not ask your name, my father told it me. You are Mr. Arthur Heigham."

"Yes. And do you know that we are cousins?" This was a slight exaggeration, but he was glad to advance any plea to her confidence that occurred to him.

"Yes; my father said something about our being related. I have no relations except my cousin George, and I am very glad to make the acquaintance of one," and she held out her hand to him in a winning way.

He took it almost reverently.

"You cannot," he said with much sincerity, "be more glad than I am. I, too, am without relations. Till lately I had my mother, but she died last year."

"Were you very fond of her?" she asked, softly.

He nodded in reply, and, feeling instinctively that she was on delicate ground, Angela pursued the conversation no further.

Meanwhile Aleck had awoke from a comfortable sleep in which he was indulging on the other stone seat, and, coming forward, sniffed at

Angela and wagged his tail in approval--a liberty that was instantly resented by the big raven, who had now been joined by another not quite so large. Advancing boldly, it pecked him sharply on the tail--a proceeding that caused Master Aleck to jump round as quickly as his maimed condition would allow him, only to receive a still harder peck from its companion bird; indeed, it was not until Angela intervened with the bough of hawthorn that they would cease from their attack.

"They are such jealous creatures," she explained; "they always follow me about, and fly at every dog that comes near me. Poor dog! that is the one, I suppose, who killed Snarleyow. My father told me all about it."

"Yes, it is easy to see that," said Arthur, laughing, and pointing to Aleck, who, indeed, was in lamentable case, having one eye entirely closed, a large strip of plaster on his head, and all the rest of his body more or less marked with bites. "It is an uncommonly awkward business for me, and your cousin will not forgive it in a hurry, I fancy; but it really was not poor Aleck's fault--he is gentle as a lamb, if only he is let alone."

"He has a very honest face, though his nose does look as though it were broken," she said, and, stooping down, she patted the dog.

"But I must be going in to breakfast," she went on, presently. "It is eight o'clock; the sun always strikes that bough at eight in spring,"

and she pointed to a dead limb, half hidden by the budding foliage of the oak.

"You must observe closely to have noticed that, but I do not think that the sun is quite on it yet. I do not like to lose my new-found relations in such a hurry," he added, with a somewhat forced smile, "and I am to go away from here this evening."

The intelligence was evidently very little satisfactory to Angela, nor did she attempt to conceal her concern.

"I am very sorry to hear that," she said. "I hoped you were going to stay for some time."

"And so I might have, had it not been for that brute Aleck, but he has put a long sojourn with your cousin and the ghost of Snarleyow out of the question; so I suppose I must go by the 6.20 train. At any rate," he added, more brightly, as a thought struck him, "I must go from Isleworth."

She did not appear to see the drift of the last part of his remark, but answered,

"I am going with my father to call at Isleworth at three this afternoon, so perhaps we shall meet again there; but now, before I go in, I will show you a better place than this to fish, a little higher

up, where Jakes, our gardener, always sets his night-lines."

Arthur assented, as he would have been glad to assent to anything likely to prolong the interview, and they walked off slowly together, talking as cheerfully as a sense that the conversation must soon come to an end would allow. The spot was reached all too soon, and Angela with evident reluctance, for she was not accustomed to conceal her feelings, said that she must now go.

"Why must you go so soon?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, to-day is my birthday--I am twenty to-day--and I know that Pigott, my old nurse, means to give me a little present at breakfast, and she will be dreadfully disappointed if I am late. She has been thinking a great deal about it, you see."

"May I wish you many, very many, happy returns of the day? and"--with a little hesitation--"may I also offer you a present, a very worthless one I fear?"

"How can I----" stammered Angela, when he cut her short.

"Don't be afraid; it is nothing tangible, though it is something that you may not think worth accepting."

"What do you mean?" she said bluntly, for her interest was aroused.

"Don't be angry. My present is only the offer of myself as your sincere friend."

She blushed vividly as she answered,

"You are very kind. I have never had but one friend--Mr. Fraser; but, if you think you can like me enough, it will make me very happy to be your friend too." And in another second she was gone, with her ravens flying after her, to receive her present and a jobation from Pigott for being late, and to eat her breakfast with such appetite as an entirely new set of sensations can give.

In the garden she met her father, walking up and down before the house, and informed him that she had been talking to Mr. Heigham. He looked up with a curious expression of interest.

"Why did you not ask him in to breakfast?" he said.

"Because there is nothing to eat except bread and milk."

"Ah!--well, perhaps you were right. I will go down and speak to him. No; I forgot I shall see him this afternoon."

And Arthur, let those who disbelieve in love at first sight laugh if they will, sat down to think, trembling in every limb, utterly shaken

by the inrush of a new and strong emotion. He had not come to the age of twenty-four without some experience of the other sex, but never before had he known any such sensation as that which now overpowered him, never before had he fully realized what solitude meant as he did now that she had left him. In youth, when love does come, he comes as a strong man armed.

And so, steady and overwhelming all resistance, the full tide of a pure passion poured itself into his heart. There was no pretence or make-believe about it; the bold that sped from Angela's grey eyes had gone straight home, and would remain an "ever-fixed mark," so long as life itself should last.

For only once in a lifetime does a man succumb after this fashion. To many, indeed, no such fortune--call it good or ill--will ever come, since the majority of men flirt or marry, indulge in "platonic friendships," or in a consistent course of admiration of their neighbours' wives, as fate or fancy leads them, and wear their time away without ever having known the meaning of such love as this. There is no fixed rule about it; the most unlikely, even the more sordid and contemptible of mankind, are liable to become the subjects of an enduring passion; only then it raises them; for though strong affection, especially, if unrequited, sometimes wears and enervates the mind, its influence is, in the main, undoubtedly ennobling. But, though such affection is bounded by no rule, it is curious to observe how generally true are the old sayings which declare that a man's

thoughts return to his first real love, as naturally and unconsciously as the needle, that has for a while been drawn aside by some overmastering influence, returns to its magnetic pole. The needle has wavered, but it has never shaken off its allegiance; that would be against nature, and is therefore impossible; and so it is with the heart. It is the eyes that he loved as a lad which he sees through the gathering darkness of his death-bed; it is a chance but that he will always adore the star which first came to share his loneliness in this shadowed world above all the shining multitudes in heaven.

And, though it is not every watcher who will find it, early or late, that star may rise for him, as it did for Arthur now. A man may meet a face which it is quite beyond his power to forget, and be touched of lips that print their kiss upon his very heart. Yes, the star may rise, to pursue its course, perhaps beyond the ken of his horizon, or only to set again before he has learnt to understand its beauty--rarely, very rarely, to shed its perfect light upon him for all his time of watching. The star may rise and set; the sweet lips whose touch still thrills him after so many years may lie to-day

"Beyond the graveyard's barren wall,"

or, worse still, have since been sold to some richer owner. But if once it has risen, if once those lips have met, the memory must

remain; the Soul knows no forgetfulness, and, the little thread of life spun out, will it not claim its own? For the compact that it has sealed is holy among holy things; that love which it has given is of its own nature, and not of the body alone--it is inscrutable as death, and everlasting as the heavens.

Yes, the fiat has gone forth; for good or for evil, for comfort or for scorn, for the world and for eternity, he loves her! Henceforth that love, so lightly and yet so irredeemably given, will become the guiding spirit of his inner life, rough-hewing his destinies, directing his ends, and shooting its memories and hopes through the whole fabric of his being like an interwoven thread of gold. He may sin against it, but he can never forget it; other interests and ties may overlay it, but they cannot extinguish it; he may drown its fragrance in voluptuous scents, but, when these have satiated and become hateful, it will re-arise, pure and sweet as ever. Time or separation cannot destroy it--for it is immortal; use cannot stale it, pain can only sanctify it. It will be to him as a beacon-light to the sea-worn mariner that tells of home and peace upon the shore, as a rainbow-promise set upon the sky. It alone of all things pertaining to him will defy the attacks of the consuming years, and when, old and withered, he lays him down to die, it will at last present itself before his glazing eyes, an embodied joy, clad in shining robes, and breathing the airs of Paradise!

For such is love to those to whom it has been given to see him face to

face.