

CHAPTER XXII

The dog-cart that Arthur had hired to take him away belonged to an old-fashioned inn in the parish of Rewtham, situated about a mile from Rewtham House (which had just passed into the hands of the Bellamys), and two from Bratham Abbey, and thither Arthur had himself driven. His Jehu, known through all the country round as "Old Sam," was an ancient ostler, who had been in the service of the Rewtham "King's Head," man and boy, for over fifty years, and from him Arthur collected a good deal of inaccurate information about the Caresfoot family, including a garbled version of all the death of Angela's mother and Philip's disinheritance.

After all, there are few more comfortable places than an inn; not a huge London hotel, where you are known as No. 48, and have to lock the door of your cell when you come out of it, and deliver up your key to the warder in the hall; but an old-fashioned country establishment where they cook your breakfast exactly as you like it, and give you sound ale and a four-poster. At least, so thought Arthur, as he sat in the private parlour smoking his pipe and reflecting on the curious vicissitudes of existence. Now, here he was, with all the hopes and interests of his life utterly changed in a single space of six-and-twenty hours. Why, six-and-twenty hours ago, he had never met his respected guardian, nor Sir John and Lady Bellamy, nor Philip and his daughter. He could hardly believe that it was only that morning that he had first seen Angela. It seemed weeks ago, and, if time could have

been measured on a new principle, by events and not by minutes, it would have been weeks. The wheel of life, he thought, revolves with a strange irregularity. For months and years it turns slowly and steadily under the even pressure of monotonous events. But, on some unexpected day, a tide comes rushing down the stream of being, and spins it round at speed; and then tears onward to the ocean called the Past, leaving its plaything to creak and turn, to turn and creak, or wrecked perhaps and useless.

Thinking thus, Arthur made his way to bed. The excitement of the day had wearied him, and for a while he slept soundly, but, as the fatigue of the body wore off, the activity of his mind asserted itself, and he began to dream vague, happy dreams of Angela, that by degrees took shape and form, till they stood out clear before the vision of his mind. He dreamt that he and Angela were journeying, two such happy travellers, through the green fields in summer, till by-and-by they came to the dark entrance of a wood, into which they plunged, fearing nothing. Thicker grew the overshadowing branches, and darker grew the path, and now they journeyed lover-wise, with their arms around each other. But, as they passed along, they came to a place where the paths forked, and here he stooped to kiss her. Already he could feel the thrill of her embrace, when she was swept from him by an unseen force, and carried down the path before them, leaving him rooted where he was. But still he could trace her progress as she went, wringing her hands in sorrow; and presently he saw the form of Lady Bellamy, robed as an Egyptian sorceress, and holding a letter in her hand, which she

offered to Angela, whispering in her ear. She took it, and then in a second the letter turned to a great snake, with George's head, that threw its coils around her and struck at her with its fangs. Next, the darkness of night rushed down upon the scene, and out of the darkness came wild cries and mocking laughter, and the choking sounds of death. And his senses left him.

When sight and sense came back, he dreamt that he was still walking down a wooded lane, but the foliage of the overhanging trees was of a richer green. The air was sweet with the scent of unknown flowers, beautiful birds flitted around him, and from far-off came the murmur of the sea. And as he travelled, broken-hearted, a fair woman with a gentle voice stood by his side, and kissed and comforted him, till at length he grew weary of her kisses, and she left him, weeping, and he went on his way alone, seeking his lost Angela. And then at length the path took a sudden turn, and he stood on the shore of an illimitable ocean, over which brooded a strange light, as where

"The quiet end of evening smiles
Miles on miles."

And there, with the soft light lingering on her hair, and tears of gladness in her eyes, stood Angela, more lovely than before, her arms outstretched to greet him. And then the night closed in, and he awoke.

His eyes opened upon the solemn and beautiful hour of the first quickening of the dawn, and the thrill and softness that comes from contact with the things we meet in sleep was still upon him. He got up and flung open his lattice window. From the garden beneath rose the sweet scent of May flowers, very different from that of his dream which yet lingered in his nostrils, whilst from a neighbouring lilac-bush streamed the rich melody of the nightingale. Presently it ceased before the broadening daylight, but in its stead, pure and clear and cold, arose the notes of the mavis, giving tuneful thanks and glory to its Maker. And, as he listened, a great calm stole upon his spirit, and kneeling down there by the open window, with the breath of spring upon his brow, and the voice of the happy birds within his ears, he prayed to the Almighty with all his heart that it might please Him in His wise mercy to verify his dream, inasmuch as he would be well content to suffer, if by suffering he might at last attain to such an unutterable joy. And rising from his knees, feeling better and stronger, he knew in some dim way that that undertaking must be blest which, in such a solemn hour of the heart, he did not fear to pray God to guide, to guard, and to consummate.

And on many an after-day, and in many another place, the book of his life would reopen at this well-conned page, and he would see the dim light in the faint, flushed sky, and hear the song of the thrush swelling upwards strong and sweet, and remember his prayer and the peace that fell upon his soul.

By ten o'clock that morning, Arthur, his dog, and his portmanteau, had all arrived together in front of the Abbey House. Before his feet had touched the moss-grown gravel, the hall-door was flung open, and Angela appeared to welcome him, looking, as old Sam the ostler forcibly put it afterwards to his helper, "just like a hangel with the wings off." Jakes, too, emerged from the recesses of the garden, and asked Angela, in a tone of aggrieved sarcasm, as he edged his way suspiciously past Aleck, why the gentleman had not brought the "rampingest lion from the Zoologic Gardens" with him at once? Having thus expressed his feelings on the subject of bull-dogs, he shouldered the portmanteau, and made his way with it upstairs. Arthur followed him up the wide oak stairs, every one of which was squared out of a single log, stopping for a while on the landing, where the staircase turned, to gaze at the stern-faced picture that hung so that it looked through the large window facing it, right across the park and over the whole stretch of the Abbey lands, and to wonder at the deep-graved inscription of "Devil Caresfoot" set so conspicuously beneath.

His room was the largest upon the first landing, and the same in which Angela's mother had died. It had never been used from that hour to this, and, indeed, in a little recess or open space between a cupboard and the wall, there still stood two trestles, draped with rotten black cloth, that had originally been brought there to rest her coffin on, and which Angela had overlooked in getting the room ready.

This spacious but somewhat gloomy apartment was hung round with portraits of the Caresfoots of past ages, many of which bore a marked resemblance to Philip, but amongst whom he looked in vain for one in the slightest degree like Angela, whose handiwork he recognized in two large bowls of flowers placed upon the dark oak dressing-table.

Just as Jakes had finished unbuckling his portmanteau, a task that he had undertaken with some groaning, and was departing in haste, lest he should be asked to do something else, Arthur caught sight of the trestles.

"What are those?" he asked, cheerfully.

"Coffin-stools," was the abrupt reply.

"Coffin-stools!" ejaculated Arthur, feeling that it was unpleasant to have little details connected with one's latter end brought thus abruptly into notice. "What the deuce are they doing here?"

"Brought to put the last as slept in that 'ere bed on, and stood ever since."

"Don't you think," insinuated Arthur, gently, "that you had better take them away?"

"Can't do so; they be part of the furniture, they be--stand there all

handy for the next one, too, maybe you;" and he vanished with a sardonic grin.

Jakes did not submit to the indignities of unbuckling portmanteaus and having his legs sniffed at by bull-dogs for nothing. Not by any means pleased by suggestions so unpleasant, Arthur took his way downstairs, determined to renew the coffin-stool question with his host. He found Angela waiting for him in the hall, and making friends with Aleck.

"Will you come in and see my father for a minute before we go out?" she said.

Arthur assented, and she led the way into the study, where Philip always sat, the same room in which his father had died. He was sitting at a writing-table as usual, at work on farm accounts. Rising, he greeted Arthur civilly, taking, however, no notice of his daughter, although he had not seen her since the previous day.

"Well, Heigham, so you have made up your mind to brave these barbarous wilds, have you? I am delighted to see you, but I must warn you that, beyond a pipe and a glass of grog in the evening, I have not much time to put at your disposal. We are rather a curious household. I don't know whether Angela has told you, but for one thing we do not take our meals together, so you will have to make your choice between the dining-room and the nursery, for my daughter is not out of the nursery yet;" and he gave a little laugh. "On the whole, perhaps you had

better be relegated to the nursery; it will, at any rate, be more amusing to you that the society of a morose old fellow like myself. And, besides, I am very irregular in my habits. Angela, you are staring at me again; I should be so very much obliged if you would look the other way. I only hope, Heigham, that old Pigott won't talk your head off; she has got a dreadful tongue. Well, don't let me keep you any longer; it is a lovely day for the time of year. Try to amuse yourself somehow, and I hope for your sake that Angela will not occupy herself with you as she does with me, by staring as though she wished to examine your brains and backbone. Good-by for the present."

"What does he mean?" asked Arthur, as soon as they were fairly outside the door, "about your staring at him?"

"Mean!" answered poor Angela, who looked as though she were going to cry. "I wish I could tell you; all I know is that he cannot bear me to look at him--he is always complaining of it. That is why we do not take our meals together--at least, I believe it is. He detests my being near him. I am sure I don't know why; it makes me very unhappy. I cannot see anything different in my eyes from anybody else's, can you?" and she turned them, swimming as they were with tears of mortification, full upon Arthur.

He scrutinized their depths very closely, so closely indeed, that presently she turned them away again with a blush.

"Well," she said, "I am sure you have looked long enough. Are they different?"

"Very different," replied the oracle, with enthusiasm.

"How?"

"Well, they--they are larger."

"Is that all?"

"And they are deeper."

"Deeper--that is nothing. I want to know if they produce any unpleasant effect upon you--different from other people's eyes, I mean?"

"Well, if you ask me, I am afraid that your eyes do produce a strange effect upon me, but I cannot say that it is an unpleasant one. But you did not look long enough for me to form a really sound opinion. Let us try again."

"No, I will not; and I do believe that you are laughing at me. I think that is very unkind;" and she marched on in silence.

"Don't be angry with me, or I shall be miserable. I really was not

laughing at you; only, if you knew what wonderful eyes you have got, you would not ask such ridiculous questions about them. Your father must be a strange man to get such ideas. I am sure I should be delighted if you would look at me all day long. But tell me something more about your father: he interests me very much."

Angela felt the tell-tale blood rise to her face as he praised her eyes, and bit her lips with vexation; it seemed to her that she had suddenly caught an epidemic of blushing.

"I cannot tell you very much about my father, because I do not know much; his life is, to a great extent, a sealed book to me. But they say that once he was a very different man, when he was quite young, I mean. But all of a sudden his father--my grand-father, you know--whose picture is on the stairs, died, and within a day or two my mother died too; that was when I was born. After that he broke down, and became what he is now. For twenty years he has lived as he does now, poring all day over books of accounts, and very rarely seeing anybody, for he does all his business by letter, or nearly all of it, and he has no friends. There was some story about his being engaged to a lady who lived at Rewtham when he married my mother, which I daresay you have heard; but I don't know much about it. But, Mr. Heigham"--and here she dropped her voice--"there is one thing that I must warn you of: my father has strange fancies at times. He is dreadfully superstitious, and thinks that he has communications with beings from another world. I believe that it is all nonsense, but I tell you so that you may not

be surprised at anything he says or does. He is not a happy man, Mr. Heigham."

"Apparently not. I cannot imagine any one being happy who is superstitious; it is the most dreadful bondage in the world."

"Where are your ravens to-day?" asked Arthur, presently.

"I don't know; I have not seen very much of them for the last week or two. They have made a nest in one of the big trees at the back of the house, and I daresay that they are there, or perhaps they are hunting for their food--they always feed themselves. But I will soon tell you," and she whistled in a soft but penetrating note.

Next minute there was a swoop of wings, and the largest raven, after hovering over her for a minute, lit upon her shoulder, and rubbed his black head against her face.

"This is Jack, you see; I expect that Jill is busy sitting on her eggs. Fly away, Jack, and look after your wife." She clapped her hands, and the great bird, giving a reproachful croak, spread his wings, and was gone.

"You have a strange power over animals to make those birds so fond of you."

"Do you think so? It is only because I have, living as I do quite alone, had time to study all their ways, and make friends of them. Do you see that thrush there? I know him well; I fed him during the frost last winter. If you will stand back with the dog, you shall see."

Arthur hid himself behind a thick bush and watched. Angela whistled again, but in another note, with a curious result. Not only the thrush in question, but quite a dozen other birds of different sorts and sizes, came flying round her, some settling at her feet, and one, a little robin, actually perching itself upon her hat. Presently she dismissed them as she had done the raven, by clapping her hands, and came back to Arthur.

"In the winter time," she said, "I could show you more curious things than that."

"I think that you are a witch," said Arthur, who was astounded at the sight.

She laughed as she answered,

"The only witchery that I use is kindness."