

## CHAPTER XXIV

Next morning, when they met at their eight o'clock breakfast, Arthur noticed that Angela was distressed about something.

"There is bad news," she said, almost before he greeted her; "my cousin George is very ill with typhus fever."

"Indeed!" remarked Arthur, rather coolly.

"Well, I must say it does not appear to distress you very much."

"No, I can't say it does. To be honest, I detest your cousin, and I don't care if he is ill or not; there."

As she appeared to have no reply ready, the subject then dropped.

After breakfast Angela proposed that they should walk--for the day was again fine--to the top of a hill about a mile away, whence a view of the surrounding country could be obtained. He consented, and on the way told her of his curious experiences with her father on the previous night. She listened attentively, and, when he had finished, shook her head.

"There is," she said, "something about my father that separates him from everybody else. His life never comes out into the sunlight of the

passing day, it always gropes along in the shadow of some gloomy past. What the mystery is that envelops him I neither know nor care to inquire; but I am sure that there is one."

"How do you explain the shadows?"

"I believe your explanation is right; they are, under certain conditions of light, thrown by a tree that grows some distance off. I have seen something that looks like figures on that wall myself in full daylight. That he should interpret such a simple thing as he does shows a curious state of mind."

"You do not think, then," said Arthur, in order to draw her out, "that it is possible, after all, he was right, and that they were something from another place? The reality of his terror was almost enough to make one believe in them, I can tell you."

"No, I do not," answered Angela, after a minute's thought. "I have no doubt that the veil between ourselves and the unseen world is thinner than we think. I believe, too, that communication, and even warnings sometimes, under favourable conditions, or when the veil is worn thin by trouble or prayer, can pass from the other world to ourselves. But the very fact of my father's terror proves to me that his shadows are nothing of the sort, for it is hardly possible that spirits can be permitted to come to terrify us poor mortals; if they come at all, it is in love and gentleness, to comfort or to warn, and not to work upon

our superstitions."

"You speak as though you knew all about it; you should join the new Ghost Society," he answered, irreverently, sitting himself down on a fallen tree, an example that she followed.

"I have thought about it sometimes, that is all, and, so far as I have read, I think that my belief is a common one, and what the Bible teaches us; but, if you will not think me foolish, I will tell you something that confirms me in it. You know that my mother died when I was born; well, it may seem strange to you, but I am convinced that she is sometimes very near me."

"Do you mean that you see or hear her?"

"No, I only feel her presence; more rarely now, I am sorry to say, as I grow older."

"How do you mean?"

"I can hardly explain what I mean, but sometimes--it may be at night, or when I am sitting alone in the daytime--a great calm comes upon me, and I am a changed woman. All my thoughts rise into a higher, purer air, and are, as it were, tinged with a reflected light; everything earthly seems to pass away from me, and I feel as though fetters had fallen from my soul, and I know that I am near my mother. Then

everything passes, and I am left myself again."

"And what are the thoughts you have at these times?"

"Ah! I wish I could tell you; they pass away with her who brought them, leaving nothing but a vague after-glow in my mind like that in the sky after the sun has set. But now look at the view; is it not beautiful in the sunlight? All the world seems to be rejoicing."

Angela was right; the view was charming. Below lay the thatched roofs of the little village of Bratham, and to the right the waters of the lake shone like silver in the glancing sunlight, whilst the gables of the old house, peeping out from amongst the budding foliage, looked very picturesque. The spring had cast her green garment over the land; from every copse rang out the melody of birds, and the gentle breeze was heavy with the scent of the unnumbered violets that starred the mossy carpet at their feet. In the fields where grew the wheat and clover, now springing into lusty life, the busy weeders were at work, and on the warm brown fallows the sower went forth to sow. From the early pastures beneath, where purled a little brook, there came a pleasant lowing of kine, well-contented with the new grass, and a cheerful bleating of lambs, to whom as yet life was nothing but one long skip. It was a charming scene, and its influence sank deep into the gazers' hearts.

"It is depressing to think," said Arthur, rather sententiously, but

really chiefly with the object of getting at his companion's views, "that all this cannot last, but is, as it were, like ourselves, under sentence of death."

"It rose and fell and fled  
Upon earth's troubled sea,  
A wave that swells to vanish  
Into eternity.  
Oh! mystery and wonder  
Of wings that cannot fly,  
Of ears that cannot hearken,  
Of life that lives--to die!"

quoth Angela, by way of comment.

"Whose lines are those?" asked Arthur. "I don't know them."

"My own," she said, shyly; "that is, they are a translation of a verse of a Greek ode I wrote for Mr. Fraser. I will say you the original, if you like; I think it better than the translation, and I believe that it is fair Greek."

"Thank you, thank you, Miss Blue-stockings; I am quite satisfied with your English version. You positively alarm me, Angela. Most people are quite content if they can put a poem written in English into Greek;

you reverse the process, and, having coolly given expression to your thoughts in Greek, condescend to translate them into your native tongue. I only wish you had been at Cambridge, or--what do they call the place?--Girton. It would have been a joke to see you come out double-first."

"Ah!" she broke in, blushing, "you are like Mr. Fraser, you overrate my acquirements. I am sorry to say I am not the perfect scholar you think me, and about most things I am shockingly ignorant. I should indeed be silly if, after ten years' patient work under such a scholar as Mr. Fraser, I did not know some classics and mathematics. Why, do you know, for the last three years that we worked together, we used as a rule to carry on our ordinary conversations during work in Latin and Greek, month and month about, sometimes with the funniest results. One never knows how little one does know of a dead language till one tries to talk it. Just try to speak in Latin for the next five minutes, and you will see."

"Thank you, I am not going to expose my ignorance for your amusement, Angela."

She laughed.

"No," she said, "it is you who wish to amuse yourself at my expense by trying to make me believe that I am a great scholar. But what I was going to say, before you attacked me about my fancied acquirements,

was that, in my opinion, your remark about the whole world being under sentence of death, was rather a morbid one."

"Why? It is obviously true."

"Yes, in a sense; but to my mind this scene speaks more of resurrection than of death. Look at the earth pushing up her flowers, and the dead trees breaking into beauty. There is no sign of death there, but rather of a renewed and glorified life."

"Yes, but there is still the awful fact of death to face; Nature herself has been temporarily dead before she blooms into beauty; she dies every autumn, to rise again in the same form every spring. But how do we know in what form we shall emerge from the chrysalis? As soon as a man begins to think at all, he stands face to face with this hideous problem, to the solution of which he knows himself to be drawing daily nearer. His position, I often think, is worse than that of a criminal under sentence, because the criminal is only being deprived of the employment of a term, indefinite, indeed, but absolutely limited; but man at large does not know of what he is deprived, and what he must inherit in the aeons that await him. It is the uncertainty of death that is its most dreadful part, and, with that hanging over our race, the wonder to me is not only that we, for the most part, put the subject entirely out of mind, but that we can ever think seriously of anything else."

"I remember," answered Angela, "once thinking very much in the same way, and I went to Mr. Fraser for advice. 'The Bible,' he said, 'will satisfy your doubts and fears, if only you will read it in a right spirit.' And indeed, more or less, it did. I cannot, of course, venture to advise you, but I pass his advice on; it is that of a very good man."

"Have you, then, no dread of death, or, rather, of what lies beyond it?"

She turned her eyes upon him with something of wonder in them.

"And why," she said, "should I, who am immortal, fear a change that I know has no power to harm me, that can, on the contrary, only bring me nearer to the purpose of my being? Certainly I shrink from death itself, as we all must, but of the dangers beyond I have no fear.

Pleasant as this world is at times, there is something in us all that strives to rise above it, and, if I knew that I must die within this hour, I believe that I could meet my fate without a qualm. I am sure that when our trembling hands have drawn the veil from Death, we shall find His features, passionless indeed, but very beautiful."

Arthur looked at her with astonishment, wondering what manner of woman this could be, who, in the first flush of youth and beauty, could face the great unknown without a tremor. When he spoke again, it was with



something of envious bitterness.

"Ah! it is very well for you, whose life has been so pure and free from evil, but it is different for me, with all my consciousness of sins and imperfections. For me, and thousands like me, strive as we will, immortality has terrors as well as hopes. It is, and always will be, human to fear the future, for human nature never changes. You know the lines in 'Hamlet.' It is

"that the dread of something after death,--  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns,--puzzles the will  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of.  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.'

"They are true, and, while men last, they always will be true."

"Oh! Arthur," she answered, earnestly, and for the first time addressing him in conversation by his Christian name, "how limited your trust must be in the mercy of a Creator, whose mercy is as wide as the ocean, that you can talk like that! You speak of me, too, as better than yourself--how am I better? I have my bad thoughts and do bad things as much as you, and, though they may not be the same, I am sure they are quite as black as yours, since everybody must be responsible according to their characters and temptations. I try,

however, to trust in God to cover my sins, and believe that, if I do my best, He will forgive me, that is all. But I have no business to preach to you, who are older and wiser than I am."

"If," he broke in, laying his hand involuntarily upon her own, "you knew--although I have never spoken of them to any one before, and could not speak of them to anybody but yourself--how these things weigh upon my mind, you would not say that, but would try to teach me your faith."

"How can I teach you, Arthur, when I have so much to learn myself?" she answered, simply, and from that moment, though she did not know it as yet, she loved him.

This conversation--a very curious one, Arthur thought to himself afterwards, for two young people on a spring morning--having come to an end, nothing more was said for some while, and they took their way down the hill, varying the route in order to pass through the little hamlet of Bratham. Under a chestnut-tree that stood upon the village green, Arthur noticed, not a village blacksmith, but a small crowd, mostly composed of children, gathered round somebody. On going to see who it was, he discovered a battered-looking old man with an intellectual face, and the remnants of a gentlemanlike appearance, playing on the violin. A very few touches of his bow told Arthur, who knew something of music, that he was in the presence of a performer of no mean merit. Seeing the quality of his two auditors, and that they

appreciated his performance, the player changed his music, and from a village jig passed to one of the more difficult opera airs, which he executed in brilliant fashion.

"Bravo!" cried Arthur, as the last notes thrilled and died away; "I see you understand how to play the fiddle."

"Yes, sir, and so I should, for I have played first violin at Her Majesty's Opera before now. Name what you like, and I will play it you. Or, if you like it better, you shall hear the water running in a brook, the wind passing through the trees, or the waves falling on the beach. Only say the word."

Arthur thought for a moment.

"It is a beautiful day, let us have a contrast--give us the music of a storm."

The old man considered a while.

"I understand, but you set a difficult subject even for me," and taking up his bow he made several attempts at beginning. "I can't do it," he said, "set something else."

"No, no, try again, that or nothing."

Again he started, and this time his genius took possession of him. The notes fell very softly at first, but with an ominous sound, then rose and wailed like the rising of the wind. Next the music came in gusts, the rain pattered, and the thunder roared, till at length the tempest seemed to spend its force and pass slowly away into the distance.

"There, sir, what do you say to that--have I fulfilled your expectations?"

"Write it down and it will be one of the finest pieces of violin music in the country."

"Write it down. The divine 'afflatus' is not to be caged, sir, it comes and goes. I could never write that music down."

Arthur felt in his pocket without answering, and found five shillings.

"If you will accept this?" he said.

"Thank you, sir, very much. I am gladder of five shillings now than I once was of as many pounds;" and he rose to go.

"A man of your talent should not be wandering about like this."

"I must earn a living somehow, for all Talleyrand's witticism to the contrary," was the curious answer.

"Have you no friends?"

"No, sir, this is my only friend; all the rest have deserted me," and he tapped his violin and was gone.

"Lord, sir," said a farmer, who was standing by, "he's gone to get drunk; he is the biggest old drunkard in the countryside, and yet they do say he was gentleman once, and the best fiddler in London; but he can't be depended on, so no one will hire him now."

"How sad," said Angela, as they moved homewards.

"Yes, and what music that was; I never heard any with such imagination before. You have a turn that way, Angela; you should try to put it into words, it would make a poem."

"I complain like the old man, that you set a difficult subject," she said; "but I will try, if you will promise not to laugh at the result."

"If you succeed on paper only half so well as he did on the violin, your verses will be worth listening to, and I certainly shall not laugh."