CHAPTER XXV

On the following day the somewhat curious religious conversation between Arthur and Angela--a conversation which, begun on Arthur's part out of curiosity, had ended on both sides very much in earnest--the weather broke up and the grand old English climate reasserted its treacherous supremacy. From summer weather the inhabitants of the county of Marlshire suddenly found themselves plunged into a spell of cold that was by contrast almost Arctic. Storms of sleet drove against the window-panes, and there was even a very damaging night-frost, while that dreadful scourge, which nobody in his senses except Kingsley _can_ ever have liked, the east wind, literally pervaded the whole place, and went whistling through the surrounding trees and ruins in a way calculated to make even a Laplander shiver.

Under these cheerless circumstances our pair of companions--for as yet they were, ostensibly at any rate, nothing more--gave up their outdoor excursions and took to rambling over the disused rooms in the old house, and hunting up many a record, some of them valuable and curious enough, of long-forgotten Caresfoots, and even of the old priors before them; a splendidly illuminated missal being amongst the latter prizes. When this amusement was exhausted, they sat together over the fire in the nursery, and Angela translated to him from her favourite classical authors, especially Homer, with an ease and fluency of expression that, to Arthur, was little short of miraculous. Or, when they got tired of that, he read to her from standard writers, which,

elaborate as her education had been, in certain respects, she had scarcely yet even opened, notably Shakespeare and Milton. Needless to say, herself imbued with a strong poetic feeling, these immortal writers were a source of intense delight to her.

"How is it that Mr. Fraser never gave you Shakespeare to read?" asked Arthur one day, as he shut up the volume, having come to the end of "Hamlet."

"He said that I should be better able to appreciate it when my mind had been prepared to do so by the help of a classical and mathematical education, and that it would be 'a mistake to cloy my mental palate with sweets before I had learnt to appreciate their flavours.'"

"There is some sense in that," remarked Arthur. "By the way, how are the verses you promised to write me getting on? Have you done them yet?"

"I have done something," she answered, modestly, "but I really do not think that they are worth producing. It is very tiresome of you to have remembered about them."

Arthur, however, by this time knew enough of Angela's abilities to be sure that her "something" would be something more or less worth hearing, and mildly insisted on their production, and then, to her confusion, on her reading them aloud. They ran as follows, and

whatever Angela's opinion of them may have been, the reader shall judge of them for himself:

A STORM ON THE STRINGS

"The minstrel sat in his lonely room,
Its walls were bare, and the twilight grey
Fell and crept and gathered to gloom;
It came like the ghost of the dying day,
And the chords fell hushed and low.
Pianissimo!

"His arm was raised, and the violin
Quivered and shook with the strain it bore,
While the swelling forth of the sounds within
Rose with a sweetness unknown before,
And the chords fell soft and low.
Piano!

"The first cold flap of the tempest's wings
Clashed with the silence before the storm,
The raindrops pattered across the strings
As the gathering thunder-clouds took form--
Drip, drop, high and low.
Staccato!

"Heavily rolling the thunder roared,
Sudden and jagged the lightning played,
Faster and faster the raindrops poured,
Sobbing and surging the tree-crests swayed,
Cracking and crashing above, below.
Crescendo!

"The wind tore howling across the wold,
And tangled his train in the groaning trees,
Wrapped the dense clouds in his mantle cold,
Then shivered and died in a wailing breeze,
Whistling and weeping high and low,
Sostenuto!

"A pale sun broke from the driving cloud,
And flashed in the raindrops serenely cool:
At the touch of his finger the forest bowed,
As it shimmered and glanced in the ruffled pool,
While the rustling leaves soughed soft and low.
Gracioso!

"It was only a dream on the throbbing strings,
An echo of Nature in phantasy wrought,
A breath of her breath and a touch of her wings
From a kingdom outspread in the regions of thought.

Below rolled the sound of the city's din,
And the fading day, as the night drew in,
Showed the quaint old face and the pointed chin,
And the arm that was raised o'er the violin,
As the old man whispered his hope's dead tale,
To the friend who could comfort, though others might fail,
And the chords stole hushed and low.
Pianissimo!"

He stopped, and the sheet of paper fell from his hands.

"Well," she said, with all the eagerness of a new-born writer, "tell me, do you think them _very_ bad?"

"Well, Angela, you know----"

"Ah! go on now; I am ready to be crushed. Pray don't spare my feelings."

"I was about to say that, thanks be to Providence, I am not a critic; but I think----"

"Oh! yes, let me hear what you think. You are speaking so slowly, in order to get time to invent something extra cutting. Well, I deserve it."

"Don't interrupt; I was going to say that I think the piece above the average of second-class poetry, and that a few of the lines touch the first-class standard. You have caught something of the 'divine afflatus' that the drunken old fellow said he could not cage. But I do not think that you will ever be popular as a writer of verses if you keep to that style; I doubt if there is a magazine in the kingdom that would take those lines unless they were by a known writer. They would return them marked, 'Good, but too vague for the general public.' Magazine editors don't like lines from 'a kingdom outspread in the regions of thought,' for, as they say, such poems are apt to excite vagueness in the brains of that dim entity, the 'general public.' What they do like are commonplace ideas, put in pretty language, and sweetened with sentimentality or emotional religious feelings, such as the thinking powers of their subscribers are competent to absorb without mental strain, and without leaving their accustomed channels. To be popular it is necessary to be commonplace, or at the least to describe the commonplace, to work in a well-worn groove, and not to startle--requirements which, unfortunately, simple as they seem, very few persons possess the art of acting up to. See what happens to the unfortunate novelist, for instance, who dares to break the unwritten law, and defraud his readers of the orthodox transformation scene of the reward of virtue and the discomfiture of vice; or to make his creation finish up in a way that, however well it may be suited to its tenor, or illustrate its more subtle meaning, is contrary to the 'general reader's' idea as to how it should end--badly, as it is

called. He simply collapses, to rise no more, if he is new at the trade, and, if he is a known man, that book won't sell."

"You talk quite feelingly," said Angela, who was getting rather bored, and wanted, not unnaturally, to hear more about her own lines.

"Yes," replied Arthur, grimly; "I do. Once I was fool enough to write a book, but I must tell you that it is a painful subject with me. It never came out. Nobody would have it."

"Oh! Arthur, I am so sorry; I should like to read your book. But, as regards the verses, I am glad that you like them, and I really don't care what a hypothetical general public would say; I wrote them to please you, not the general public."

"Well, my dear, I am sure I am much obliged to you; I shall value them doubly, once for the giver's sake, and once for their own."

Angela blushed, but did not reprove the term of endearment which had slipped unawares from his lips. Poetry is a dangerous subject between two young people who at heart adore one another; it is apt to excite the brain, and bring about startling revelations.

The day following the reading of Angela's piece of poetry was rendered remarkable by two events, of which the first was that the weather suddenly turned a somersault, and became beautifully warm; and the

second that news reached the Abbey House that, thanks chiefly to Lady Bellamy's devoted nursing--who, fearless of infection, had, to the great admiration of all her neighbours, volunteered her services when no nurse could be found to undertake the case--George was pronounced out of danger. This piece of news was peculiarly grateful to Philip, for, had his cousin died, the estates must have passed away for ever under the terms of his uncle's will, for he knew that George had made none. Angela, too, tried, like a good girl as she was, to lash herself into enthusiasm about it, though in her heart she went as near hating her cousin, since his attempted indignity towards herself, as her gentle nature would allow. Arthur alone was cynically indifferent; he hated George without any reservation whatsoever.

And after this their came for our pair of embryo lovers some ten or twelve such happy days (for there was no talk of Arthur's departure, Philip having on several occasions pointedly told him that the house was at his disposal for as long as he chose to remain in it). The sky was blue in those days, or only flecked with summer clouds, just as Arthur and Angela's perfect companionship was flecked and shaded with the deeper hues of dawning passion. Alas, the sky in this terrestrial clime is never _quite_ blue!

But as yet nothing of love had passed between them, no kiss or word of endearment; only when hand touched hand a strange thrill had moved them both, and sent the warm blood to stain Angela's clear brow, like a wavering tint of sunlight thrown upon the marble features of some

white Venus; only in each other's eyes they found a holy mystery. The spell was not yet fully at work, but the wand of earth's great enchanter had touched them, and they were changed. Angela is hardly the same girl she was when we met her a little more than a fortnight back. A nameless change has come over her face and manner; the merry smile, once so bright, has grown softer and more sweet, and the laughing light of her grey eyes has given place to a look of some such gratitude and wonder, as that with which the traveller in lonely deserts gazes on the oasis of his perfect rest.

Many times Arthur had almost blurted out the truth to the woman he passionately adored, and every day so added to the suppressed fire of his love that at length he felt that he could not keep his secret to himself much longer. And yet he feared to tell it; better, he thought, to live happy, if in doubt, than to risk all his fortune on a single throw, for before his eyes there lay the black dread of failure; and then, what would life be worth? Here with Angela he lived in a Garden of Eden that no forebodings, no anxieties, no fear of that partially scotched serpent George, could render wretched, so long as it was gladdened by the presence of her whom he hoped to make his Eve. But without, and around where she could not be, there was nothing but clods and thistles and a black desolation that, even in imagination, he dared not face.

And Angela, gazing on veiled mysteries with wondering eyes, was she happy during those spring-tide days? Almost; but still there was in

her heart a consciousness of effort, a sense of transformation and knowledge of the growth of hidden things. The bud bursting into the glory of the rose, must, if there be feeling in a rose, undergo some such effort before it can make its beauty known; the butterfly but newly freed from the dull husk that hid its splendours, at first must feel the imperfect wings it stretches in the sun to be irksome to its unaccustomed sense. And so it was with Angela; she spread her half-grown wings in the sun of her new existence, and found them strange, not knowing as yet that they were shaped to bear her to the flower-crowned heights of love.

Hers was one of those rare natures in which the passion that we know by the generic term of love, approached as near perfection as is possible in our human hearts. For there are many sorts and divisions of love, ranging from the affection, pure, steady, and divine, that is showered upon us from above, to the degrading madness of such a one as George Caresfoot. It is surely one of the saddest evidences of our poor humanity that, even among the purest of us, there are none who can altogether rid the whiteness of the love they have to offer of its earthly stain. Indeed, if we could so far conquer the promptings of our nature as to love with perfect purity, we should become like angels. But, just as white flowers are sometimes to be found on the blackest peak, so there do bloom in the world spirits as pure as they are rare--so free from evil, so closely shadowed by the Almighty wing, that they can almost reach to this perfection. Then the love they have to give is too refined, too holy and strong, to be understood of the

mass of men: often it is squandered on some unequal and unanswering nature; sometimes it is wisely offered up to Him from whom it came.

We gaze upon an ice-bound river, and there is nothing to tell us that beneath that white cloak its current rushes to the ocean. But presently the spring comes, the prisoned waters burst their fetters, and we see a glad torrent sparkling in the sunlight. And so it was with our heroine's heart; the breath of Arthur's passion and the light of Arthur's eyes had beat upon it, and almost freed the river of its love. Already the listener might hear the ice-sheets crack and start; soon they will be gone, and her deep devotion will set as strong towards him as the tide of the torrent towards its receiving sea.

"Fine writing!" perhaps the reader will say; but surely none too fine to describe the most beautiful thing in this strange world, the irrevocable gift of a good woman's love!

However that may be, it will have served its purpose if it makes it clear that a crisis is at hand in the affairs of the heart of two of the central actors on this mimic stage.