

CHAPTER XXVI

One Saturday morning, when May was three-parts gone, Philip announced his intention of going up to London till the Monday on business. He was a man who had long since become callous to appearances, and though Arthur, fearful lest spiteful things should be said of Angela, almost hinted that it would look odd, his host merely laughed, and said that he had little doubt but that his daughter was quite able to look after herself, even when such a fascinating young gentleman as himself was concerned. As a matter of fact, his object was to get rid of Angela by marrying her to this young Heigham, who had so opportunely tumbled down from the skies, and whom he rather liked than otherwise. This being the case, he rightly concluded that, the more the two were left together, the greater probability there was of his object being attained. Accordingly he left them together as much as possible.

It was on the evening of this Saturday that Arthur gathered up his courage and asked Angela to come and walk through the ruins with him. Angela hesitated a little; the shadow of something about to happen had fallen on her mind; but the extraordinary beauty of the evening, to say nothing of the prospect of his company, turned the scale in Arthur's favour.

It was one of those nights of which, if we are lucky, we get some five or six in the course of an English summer. The moon was at her full, and, the twilight ended, she filled the heavens with her light. Every

twig and blade of grass showed out as clearly as in the day, but looked like frosted silver. The silence was intense, and so still was the air that the sharp shadows of the trees were motionless upon the grass, only growing with the growing hours. It was one of those nights that fill us with an indescribable emotion, bringing us into closer companionship with the unseen than ever does the garish, busy day. In such an hour, we can sometimes feel, or think that we can feel, other presences around us, and involuntarily we listen for the whisper of the wings and the half-forgotten voices of our beloved.

On this particular evening some such feeling was stirring in Angela's heart as with slow steps she led the way into the little village churchyard, a similar spot to that which is to be found in many a country parish, except that, the population being very small, there were but few recent graves. Most of the mounds had no head-stones to recall the names of the neglected dead, but here and there were dotted discoloured slabs, some sunk a foot or two into the soil, a few lying prone upon it, and the remainder thrown by the gradual subsidence of their supports into every variety of angle, as though they had been suddenly halted in the maddest whirl of a grotesque dance of death.

Picking her way through these, Angela stopped under an ancient yew, and, pointing to one of the two shadowed mounts to which the moonlight scarcely struggled, said, in a low voice,

"That is my mother's grave."

It was a modest tenement enough, a little heap of close green turf, surrounded by a railing, and planted with sweet-williams and forget-me-nots. At its head was placed a white marble cross, on which Arthur could just distinguish the words "Hilda Caresfoot," and the date of death.

He was about to speak, but she stopped him with a gentle movement, and then, stepping forward to the head of the railing, she buried her face in her hands, and remained motionless. Arthur watched her with curiosity. What, he wondered, was passing in the mind of this strange and beautiful woman, who had grown up so sweet and pure amidst moral

desolation, like a white lily blooming alone on the black African plains in winter? Suddenly she raised her head, and saw the inquiring look he bent upon her. She came towards him, and, in that sweet, half-pleading voice which was one of her greatest charms, she said,

"I fear you think me very foolish?"

"Why should I think you foolish?"

"Because I have come here at night to stand before a half-forgotten grave."

"I do not think you foolish, indeed. I was only wondering what was

passing in your mind."

Angela hung her head and made no answer, and the clock above them boomed out the hour, raising its sullen note in insolent defiance of the silence. What is it that is so solemn about the striking of the belfry-clock when one stands in a churchyard at night? Is it that the hour softens our natures, and makes them more amenable to semi-superstitious influences? Or is it that the thousand evidences of departed mortality which surround us, appealing with dumb force to natural fears, throw open for a space the gates of our world-sealed imagination, to tenant its vast halls with prophetic echoes of our end? Perhaps it is useless to inquire. The result remains the same: few of us can hear those tones at night without a qualm, and, did we put our thoughts into words, they would run something thus:

"That sound once broke upon the living ears of those who sleep around us. We hear it now. In a little while, hour after hour, it will echo against the tombstones of our graves, and new generations, coming out of the silent future, will stand where we stand, and hearken; and muse, as we mused, over the old problems that we have gone to solve; whilst we--shall we not be deaf to hear and dumb to utter?"

Such, at any rate, were the unspoken thoughts that crept into the hearts of Arthur and Angela as the full sound from the belfry thinned itself away into silence. She grew a little pale, and glanced at him, and he gave an involuntary shiver, while even the dog Aleck sniffed

and whined uncomfortably.

"It feels cold," he said. "Shall we go?"

They turned and walked towards the gate, and, by the time they reached it, all superstitious thoughts had vanished--at any rate, from Arthur's mind, for he recollected that he had set himself a task to do, and that now would be the time to do it. Absorbed in this reflection, he forgot his politeness, and passed first through the turnstile. On the further side he paused, and looked earnestly into his beloved's face. Their eyes met, and there was that in his that caused her to swiftly drop her own. A silence ensued as they stood by the gate. He broke it.

"It is a lovely night. Let us walk through the ruins."

"I shall wet my feet: the dew must be falling."

"There is no dew falling to-night. Won't you come?"

"Let us go to-morrow; it is later than I generally go in. Pigott will wonder what has become of me."

"Never mind Pigott. The night is too fine to waste asleep; besides, you know, one should always look at ruins by moonlight. Please come."

She looked at him doubtfully, hesitated, and came.

"What do you want to see?" she said presently, with as near an approach to irritation as he had ever heard her indulge in. "That is the famous window that Mr. Fraser always goes into raptures about."

"It is beautiful. Shall we sit down here and look at it?"

They sat down on a low mass of fallen masonry some fifteen paces from the window. Around them lay a delicate tracery of shadows, whilst they themselves were seated in the eye of the moonlight, and remained for a while as silent and as still as though they had been the shades of the painted figures that had once filled the stony frame above them.

"Angela," he said at length--"Angela, listen, and I will tell you something. My mother, a woman to whom sorrow had become almost an inspiration, when she was dying, spoke to me something thus: 'There is,' she said, 'but one thing that I know of that has the power to make life happy as God meant it to be, and as the folly and weakness of men and women render it nearly impossible for it to be, and that is --love. Love has been the consolation of my own existence in the midst of many troubles; first, the great devotion I bore your father, and then that which I entertain for yourself. Without these two ties, life would indeed have been a desert. And yet, though it is a grief to me to leave you, and though I shrink from the dark passage that lies before me, so far does that first great love outweigh the love I bear

you, that in my calmer moments I am glad to go, because I know I am awaited by your father. And from this I wish you to learn a lesson: look for your happiness in life from the love of your life, for there only will you find it. Do not fritter away your heart, but seek out some woman, some one good and pure and true, and in giving her your devotion, you will reap a full reward, for her happiness will reflect your own, and, if your choice is right, you will, however stormy your life may be, lay up for yourself, as I feel that I have done, an everlasting joy."

She listened to him in silence.

"Angela," he went on, boldly enough, now that the ice was broken, "I have often thought about what my mother said, but until now I have never quite understood her meaning. I do understand it now. Angela, do you understand me?"

There was no answer; she sat there upon the fallen masonry, gazing at the ruins round her, motionless and white as a marble goddess, forgotten in her desecrated fane.

"Oh, Angela, listen to me--listen to me! I have found the woman of whom my mother spoke, who must be so 'good and pure and true.' You are she. I love you, Angela, I love you with my whole life and soul; I love you for this world and the next. Oh! do not reject me; though I am so little worthy of you, I will try to grow so. Dearest, can you

love me?"

Still there was silence, but he thought that he saw her breast heave gently. Then he placed his hand, all trembling with the fierce emotion that throbbed along his veins, upon the palm that hung listless by her side, and gazed into her eyes. Still she neither spoke nor shrank, and, in the imperfect light, her face looked very pale, while her lovely eyes were dark and meaningless as those of one entranced.

Then slowly he gathered up his courage for an effort, and, raising his face to the level of her own, he kissed her full upon her lips. She stirred, she sighed. He had broken the spell; the sweet face that had withdrawn itself drew nearer to him; for a second the awakened eyes looked into his own, and filled them with reflected splendour, and then he became aware of a warm arm thrown about his neck, and next-- the stars grew dim, and sense and life itself seemed to shake upon their thrones, for a joy almost too great for mortal man to bear took possession of his heart as she laid her willing lips upon his own. And then, before he knew her purpose, she slid down upon her knees beside him, and placed her head upon her breast.

"Dearest," he said, "don't kneel so; look at me."

Slowly she raised her face, wreathed and lovely with many blushes, and looked upon him with tearful eyes. He tried to raise her.

"Let me be," she said, speaking very low. "I am best so; it is the attitude of adoration, and I have found--my divinity."

"But I cannot bear to see you kneel to me."

"Oh! Arthur, you do not understand; a minute since I did not understand that a woman is very humble when she really loves.

"Do you--really love me, Angela?"

"I do."

"Have you known that long?"

"I only knew it when--when you kissed me. Before then there was something in my heart, but I did not know what it was. Listen, dear," she went on, "for one minute to me first, and I will get up" (for he was again attempting to raise her). "What I have to say is best said upon my knees, for I want to thank God who sent you to me, and to thank you too for your goodness. It is so wonderful that you should love a simple girl like me, and I am so thankful to you. Oh! I have never lived till now, and" (rising to her full stature) "I feel as though I had been crowned a queen of happy things. Dethrone me, desert me, and I will still be grateful to you for this hour of imperial happiness. But if you, after a while, when you know all my faults and imperfections better, can still care for me, I know that there is

something in me that will enable me to repay you for what you have given me, by making your whole life happy. Dear, I do not know if I speak as other women do, but, believe me, it is out of the fulness of my heart. Take care, Arthur, oh! take care, lest your fate should be that of the magician you spoke of the other day, who evoked the spirit, and then fell down before it in terror. You have also called up a spirit, and I pray that it was not done in sport, lest it should trouble you hereafter."

"Angela, do not speak so to me; it is I who should have knelt to you. Yes, you were right when you called yourself 'a queen of happy things.' You are a queen----"

"Hush! Don't overrate me; your disillusion will be the more painful. Come, Arthur, let us go home."

He rose and went with her, in a dream of joy that for a moment precluded speech. At the door she bade him good-night, and, oh! happiness, gave him her lips to kiss. Then they parted, their hearts too full for words. One thing he asked her, however.

"What was it that took you to your mother's grave to-night?"

She looked at him with a curiously mixed expression of shy love and conviction on her face, and answered,

"Her spirit, who led me to your heart."