

## CHAPTER XXVII

George's recovery, when the doctors had given up all hope, was sufficiently marvellous to suggest the idea that a certain power had determined--on the hangman's principle, perhaps--to give him the longest of ropes; but it could in reality be traced to a more terrestrial influence--namely, Lady Bellamy's nursing. Had it not been for this nursing, it is very certain that her patient would have joined his forefathers in the Bratham churchyard. For whole days and nights she watched and tended him, scarcely closing her own eyes, and quite heedless of the danger of infection; till in the end she conquered the fever, and snatched him from the jaws of the grave. How often has not a woman's devotion been successful in such a struggle!

On the Monday following the events narrated in the last chapter, George, now in an advanced stage of convalescence, though forbidden to go abroad for another fortnight, was sitting downstairs enjoying the warm sunshine, and the sensation of returning life and vigour that was creeping into his veins, when Lady Bellamy came into the room, bringing with her some medicine.

"Here is your tonic, George; it is the last dose that I can give you, as I am going back to my disconsolate husband at luncheon-time."

"I can't have you go away yet; I am not well enough."

"I must go, George; people will begin to talk if I stop here any longer."

"Well, if you must, I suppose you must," he answered, sulkily. "But I must say I think that you show a great want of consideration for my comfort. Who is to look after me, I should like to know? I am far from well yet--far from well."

"Believe me," she said, softly, "I am very sorry to leave you, and am glad to have been of help to you, though you have never thought much about it."

"Oh, I am sure I am much obliged, but it is not likely that you would leave me to rot of fever without coming to look after me."

She sighed as she answered,

"You would not do as much for me."

"Oh, bother, Anne, don't get sentimental. Before you go, I must speak to you about that girl Angela. Have you taken any steps?"

Lady Bellamy started.

"What, are you still bent upon that project?"

"Of course I am. It seemed to me that all my illness was one long dream of her. I am more bent upon it than ever."

"And do you still insist upon my playing the part you had marked out for me? Do you know, George, that there were times in your illness when, if I had relaxed my care for a single five minutes, it would have turned the scale against you, and that once I did not close my eyes for five nights? Look at me, how thin and worn I am: it is from nursing you. I have saved your life. Surely you will not now force me to do this unnatural thing."

"If, my dear Anne, you had saved my life fifty times, I would still force you to do it. Ah! it is no use your looking at that safe. I have no doubt that you got my keys and searched it whilst I was ill, but I was too sharp for you. I had the letters moved when I heard that you were coming to nurse me. They are back there now, though. How disappointed you must have been!" And he chuckled.

"I should have done better to let you die, monster of wickedness and ingratitude that you are!" she said, stamping her foot upon the floor, and the tears of vexation standing in her eyes.

"The letters, my dear Anne; remember that you have got to earn your letters. I am very much obliged to you for your nursing, but business is business."

She was silent for a moment, and then spoke in her ordinary tone.

"By the way, talking of letters, there was one came for you this morning in your cousin Philip's handwriting, and with a London postmark. Will you read it?"

"Read it--yes; anything from the father of my inamorata will be welcome."

She fetched the letter and gave it him. He read it aloud. After a page of congratulations on his convalescence, it ended,

"And now I want to make a proposal to you--viz., to buy back the Isleworth lands from you. I know that the place is distasteful to you, and will probably be doubly so after your severe illness; but, if you care to keep the house and grounds, I am not particularly anxious to acquire them. I am prepared to offer a good price," &c. &c.

"I'll see him hanged first," was George's comment. "How did he get the money?"

"Saved it and made it, I suppose."

"Well, at any rate, he shall not buy me out with it. No, no, Master Philip; I am not fond enough of you to do you that turn."

"It does not strike you," she said, coldly, "that you hold in your hands a lever that may roll all your difficulties about this girl out of the way."

"By Jove, you are right, Anne. Trust a woman's brain. But I don't want to sell the estates unless I am forced to."

"Would you rather part with the land, or give up your project of marrying Angela Caresfoot?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you will have to choose between the two."

"Then I had rather sell."

"You had better give it up, George. I am not superstitious, but I have knowledge in things that you do not understand, and I foresee nothing but disaster in this plan."

"Once and for all, Anne, I will not give it up whilst I have any breath left in my body, and I take my oath that unless you help me, and help me honestly, I will expose you."

"Oh! I am your very humble servant; you may count on me. The galley-slave pulls well when the lash hangs over his shoulders," and she

laughed coldly.

Just then a servant announced that Mr. Caresfoot was at the door, and anxious to speak to his cousin. He was ordered to show him into the drawing-room. As soon as he had gone on his errand, George said,

"I will not see him; say I am too unwell. But do you go, and see that you make the most of your chance."

Lady Bellamy nodded, and left the room. She found Philip in the drawing-room.

"Ah! how do you do, Mr. Caresfoot? I come from your cousin to say that he cannot see you to-day; he has scarcely recovered sufficiently from the illness through which I have been nursing him; but of course you know all about that."

"Oh! yes, Lady Bellamy, I have heard all about it, including your own brave behaviour, to which, the doctor tells me, George owes his life. I am sorry that he cannot see me, though. I have just come down from town, and called in on my way from Roxham. I had some rather important business that I wanted to speak about."

"About your offer to repurchase the Isleworth lands?" she asked.

"Ah! you know of the affair. Yes, that was it."

"Then I am commissioned to give you a reply."

Philip listened anxiously.

"Your cousin absolutely refuses to sell any part of the lands."

"Will nothing chance his determination? I am ready to give a good price, and pay a separate valuation for the timber."

"Nothing; he does not intend to sell."

A deep depression spread itself over her hearer's face.

"Then there go the hopes of twenty years," he said. "For twenty long years, ever since my misfortune, I have toiled and schemed to get these lands back, and now it is all for nothing. Well, there is nothing more to be said," and he turned to go.

"Stop a minute, Mr. Caresfoot. Do you know, you interest me very much."

"I am proud to interest so charming a lady," he answered, a touch of depressed gallantry.

"That is as it should be; but you interest me because you are an

instance of the truth of the saying that every man has some ruling passion, if only one could discover it. Why do you want these particular lands? Your money will buy others just as good."

"Why does a Swiss get home-sick? Why does a man defrauded of his own wish to recover it?"

Lady Bellamy mused a little.

"What would you say if I showed you an easy way to get them?"

Philip turned sharply round with a new look of hope upon his face.

"You would earn my eternal gratitude--a gratitude that I should be glad to put into a practical shape."

She laughed.

"Oh! you must speak to Sir John about that. Now listen; I am going to surprise you. Your cousin wants to get married."

"Get married! George wants to get married!"

"Exactly so; and now I have a further surprise in store for you--he wants to marry your daughter Angela."



This time Philip said nothing, but he started in evident and uncomfortable astonishment. If Lady Bellamy wished to surprise him, she had certainly succeeded.

"Surely you are joking!" he said.

"I never was further from joking in my life; he is desperately in love with her, and wild to marry her."

"Well?"

"Well, don't you now see a way to force your cousin to sell the lands?"

"At the price of Angela's hand?"

"Precisely."

Philip walked up and down the room in thought. Though, as the reader may remember, he had himself, but a month before, been base enough to suggest that his daughter should use her eyes to forward his projects, he had never, in justice to him be it said, dreamt of forcing her into a marriage in every way little less than unnatural. His idea of responsibility towards his daughter was, as regards sins of omission, extremely lax, but there were some of commission that he did not care to face. Certain fears and memories oppressed him too much to allow of

it.

"Lady Bellamy," he said, presently, "you have known my cousin George intimately for many years, and are probably sufficiently acquainted with his habits of life to know that such a marriage would be an infamy."

"Many a man who has been wild in his youth makes a good husband," she answered, quietly.

"The more I think of it," went on Philip, excitedly, after the fashion of one who would lash himself into a passion, "the more I see the utter impossibility of any such thing, and I must say that I wonder at your having undertaken such an errand. On the one hand, there is a young girl who, though I do not, from force of circumstances, see much of myself, is, I believe, as good as she is handsome----"

"And on the other," broke in Lady Bellamy, ironically, "are the Isleworth estates."

"And on the other," went on Philip, without paying heed to her remark --"I am going to speak plainly, Lady Bellamy--is a man utterly devoid of the foundations of moral character, whose appearance is certainly against him, who I have got reason to know is not to be trusted, and who is old enough to be her father, and her cousin to boot--and you ask me to forward such a marriage as this! I will have nothing to do

with it; my responsibilities as a father forbid it. It would be the wickedest thing I have ever done to put the girl into the power of such a man."

Lady Bellamy burst into a low peal of laughter; she never laughed aloud. She thought that it was now time to throw him a little off his balance.

"Forgive me," she said, with her sweetest smile, "but you must admit that there is something rather ludicrous in hearing the hero of the great Maria Lee scandal talking about moral character, and the father who detests his daughter so much that he fears to look her in the face, and whose sole object is to rid himself of an encumbrance, prating of his paternal responsibilities."

Philip started visibly at her words.

"Ah! Mr. Caresfoot," she went on, "I surprise you by my knowledge, but we women are sad spies, and it is my little amusement to find out other people's secrets, a very useful little amusement. I could tell you many things----"

"I was about to say," broke in Philip, who had naturally no desire to see more of the secrets of his life unveiled by Lady Bellamy, "that, even if I did wish to get rid of Angela, I should have little difficulty in doing so, as young Heigham, who has been stopping at the

Abbey House for a fortnight or so, is head over ears in love with her; indeed, I should think it highly probable that they are at this moment engaged."

It was Lady Bellamy's turn to start now.

"Ah!" she said, "I did not know that; that complicates matters." And then, with a sudden change of tone--"Mr. Caresfoot, as a friend, let me beg of you not to throw away such a chance in a hurry for the sake of a few nonsensical ideas about a girl. What is she, after all, that she should stand in the way of such grave interests as you have in hand? I tell you that he is perfectly mad about her. You can make your own terms and fix your own price."

"Price! ay, that is what it would be--a price for her body and soul."

"Well, and what of it? The thing is done every day, only one does not talk of it in that way."

"Who taught you, who were once a young girl yourself, to plead such a cause as this?"

"Nonsense, it is a very good cause--a cause that will benefit everybody, especially your daughter. George will get what he wants; you, with the recovery of the estates, will also recover your lost position and reputation, both to a great extent an affair of landed

property. Mr. Heigham will gain a little experience, whilst she will bloom into a great lady, and, like any other girl in the same circumstances, learn to adore her husband in a few months."

"And what will you get, Lady Bellamy?"

"I!" she replied, with a gay laugh. "Oh! you know, virtue is its own reward. I shall be quite satisfied in seeing everybody else made happy. Come, I do not want to press you about the matter at present. Think it over at your leisure. I only beg you not to give a decided answer to young Heigham, should he ask you for Angela, till I have seen you again--say, in a week's time. Then, if you don't like it, you can leave it alone, and nobody will be a penny the worse."

"As you like; but I tell you that I can never consent;" and Philip took his leave.

"Your cousin entirely refuses his consent, and Angela is by this time probably engaged to your ex-ward, Arthur Heigham," was Lady Bellamy's not very promising report to the interesting invalid in the dining-room.

After relieving his feelings at this intelligence in language more forcible than polite, George remarked that, under these circumstances, matters looked very bad.

"Not at all; they look very well. I shall see your cousin again in a week's time, when I shall have a different tale to tell."

"Why wait a week with that young blackguard making the running on the spot?"

"Because I have put poison into Philip's mind, and the surest poison always works slow. Besides, the mischief has been done. Good-by. I will come and see you in a day or two, when I have made my plans. You see I mean to earn my letters."