

## CHAPTER XXVIII

With what degree of soundness our pair of lovers slumbered on that memorable Saturday night, let those who have been so fortunate or unfortunate as to have been placed in analogous circumstances, form their own opinion.

It is, however, certain that Arthur gazed upon the moon and sundry of the larger planets for some hours, until they unkindly set, and left him, for his candle had burnt out, to find his way to bed in the dark. With his reflections we will not trouble ourselves; or, rather, we will not intrude upon their privacy. But there was another person in the house who sat at an open window and looked upon the heavens--Angela to wit. Let us avail ourselves of our rightful privilege, and look into her thoughts.

Arthur's love had come upon her as a surprise, but it had found a perfect home. All the days and hours that she had spent in his company, had, unknown to herself, been mysteriously employed in preparing a habitation to receive it. We all know the beautiful Bible story of the Creation, how first there was an empty void, and the Spirit brooding on the waters, then light, and then life, and last, man coming to turn all things to his uses. Surely that story, which is the type and symbol of many things, is of none more so than of the growth and birth of a perfected love in the human heart.

The soil is made ready in the dead winter, and receives the seed into its bosom. Then comes the spring, and it is clothed with verdure. Space is void till the sun shoots its sudden rays athwart it, and makes it splendid; the heart is cold and unwitting of its ends, till the spirit broods upon it, as upon the waters, and it grows quick with the purposes of life. And then what a change is there! What has the flower in common with the seed from whence it sprang, or the noonday sky with the darkness before the dawn?

Thinking in her chamber, with the night air playing on her hot brow, and her hand pressed upon her heart, as though to still the tumult of its joy, Angela grew vaguely conscious of these things.

"Was she the same in heart and mind that she had been a month ago? No, a thousand times, no. Then what was this mysterious change that seemed to shake her inmost life to its foundations? What angel had troubled the waters into which she had so newly plunged? And whence came the healing virtue that she found in them, bringing rest after the vague trouble of the last two weeks, with sight to see the only good--her love, with speed to follow, and strength to hold? Oh, happy, happy world! oh, merciful Creator, who gave her to drink of such a living spring! oh, Arthur, beloved Arthur!"

On Sunday mornings it was Pigott's habit to relax the Draconian severity of her laws in the matter of breakfast, which, generally speaking, was not till about half-past eight o'clock. At that hour

precisely, on the Sabbath in question, she appeared as usual--no, not as usual, for, it being Sunday, she had on her stiff, black gown--and, with all due solemnity, made the tea.

A few minutes elapsed, and Angela entered, dressed in white, and very lovely in her simple, tight-fitting robe, but a trifle pale, and with a shy look upon her face.

She greeted her nurse with a kiss.

"Why, what is the matter with you, dearie?" ejaculated Pigott, whose watchful eye detected a change she could not define; "you look different somehow."

"Hush! I will tell you by-and-by."

At that moment Arthur's quick step was heard advancing down the passage, together with a pattering noise that announced the presence of Aleck. And, as they came, Angela, poor Angela, grew red and redder, and yet more painfully red, till Pigott, watching her face, was enabled to form a shrewd guess as to what was the cause of her unaccustomed looks.

On came the steps, and open flew the door, more and more ready to sink into the earth looked Angela, and so interested grew nurse Pigott, that she actually poured some hot tea on to her dress, a thing she

could never remember having done before.

The first to enter was Aleck, who, following his custom, sprang upon Angela and licked her hand, and behind Aleck, looking somewhat confused, but handsome and happy--for his was one of those faces that become handsome when their owners are happy--came Aleck's master. And then there ensued an infinitesimal but most awkward pause.

On such occasions as the present, namely, the first meeting after an engagement, there is always--especially when it occurs in the presence of a third person--a very considerable difficulty in the minds of the parties to know what demeanour they are to adopt towards one another. Are they to treat the little affair of the previous evening as a kind of confidential communication, not to be alluded to except in private conversation, and to drop into the Mr. and Miss of yesterday? That would certainly be the easiest, but then it would also be a decided act of mutual retreat. Or are they to rush into each other's arms as becomes betrothed lovers? This process is so new that they feel that it still requires private rehearsal. And, meanwhile, time presses, and everybody is beginning to stare, and something must be done.

These were very much the feelings of Arthur and Angela. He hesitated before her, confused, and she kept her head down over the dog. But presently Aleck, getting bored, moved on, and, as it would have been inane to continue to stare at the floor, she had to raise herself as slowly as she might. Soon their eyes arrived in the same plane, and

whether a mutual glance of intelligence was exchanged, or whether their power of attraction overcame his power of resistance, it is not easy to determine, but certain it is that, following a primary natural law, Arthur gravitated towards her, and kissed her on the face.

"My!" exclaimed Pigott, and the milk-jug rolled unheeded on the floor.

"Hum! I suppose I had better explain," began he.

"I think you have spilt the milk," added she.

"That we have become engaged and are----"

"All to pieces, I declare," broke in Angela, with her head somewhere near the carpet.

And then they both laughed.

"Well, I never, no, not in all my born days! Sir and Miss Angela, all I have got to say about this extraordinary proceeding"--they glanced at each other in alarm--"is that I am very glad to hear on it, and I hope and pray how as you may be happy, and, if you treat my Angela right, you'll be just the happiest and luckiest man in the three kingdoms, including Ireland the Royal Family, and, if you treat her wrong, worse will come to you; and her poor mother's last words, as I heard with my own ears, will come true to you, and serve you right--"

and there's all the milk upon the floor. And God bless you both, my dears, is the prayer of an old woman."

And here the worthy soul broke down, and began to cry, nor were Angela's eyes free from tears.

After this little episode, breakfast proceeded in something like the usual way. Church was at 10.30, and, a while before the hour, Arthur and Angela strolled down to the spot that had already become as holy ground to them, and looked into each other's eyes, and said again the same sweet words. Then they went on, and mingling with the little congregation--that did not number more than thirty souls--they passed into the cool quiet of the church.

"Lawks!" said a woman, as they went by, "ain't she just a beauty. What a pretty wedding they'd make!"

Arthur overheard it, and noted the woman, and afterwards found a pretext to give her five shillings, because he said it was a lucky omen.

On the communion-table of the pretty little church there was spread the "fair white cloth" of the rubric. It was the day for the monthly celebration of the Sacrament, that met the religious requirements of the village.

"Will you stay to the Sacrament with me?" whispered Angela to her lover, in the interval between their seating themselves and the entry of the clergyman, Mr. Fraser's *\_locum tenens\_*.

Arthur nodded assent.

And so, when the time came, those two went up together to the altar-rails, and, kneeling side by side, ate of the bread and drank of the cup, and, rising, departed thence with a new link between them. For, be sure, part of the prayers which they offered up at that high moment were in humble petition to the Almighty to set His solemn seal and blessing on their love. Indeed, so far as Angela was concerned, there were few acts of her simple life that she did not consecrate by prayer, how much more, then, was she bent on bringing this, the greatest of all her acts, before her Maker's throne.

Strange indeed, and full of a holy promise, is the yearning with which we turn to Heaven to seek sanctification of our deeds, feeling our weakness and craving strength from the source of strength; a yearning of which the church, with that subtle knowledge of human nature, which is one of the mainsprings of its power, has not been slow to avail itself. And this need is more especially felt in matters connected with the noblest of all passions, perhaps because all true love and all true religion come from a common home.

Thus pledged to one another with a new and awful pledge, and knit

together in the bonds of an universal love, embracing their poor affection as the wide skies embrace the earth, they rose, and went their ways, purer to worship, and stronger to endure.

That afternoon, Arthur had a conversation with his betrothed that, partaking of a business nature in the beginning, ended rather oddly.

"I must speak to your father when he comes back to-morrow, dear," he began.

"My father! Oh yes, I had forgotten about that;" and she looked a little anxious.

"Fortunately, I am fairly well off, so I see no cause why he should object."

"Well, I think that he will be rather glad to get rid of Pigott and myself. You know that he is not very fond of me."

"That is strange want of taste on his part."

"Oh, I don't know. Everybody does not see me with your eyes, Arthur."

"Because they have not the chance. All the world would love you, if it knew you. But, seriously, I think that he can hardly object, or he would not have allowed us to be thrown so much together; for, in nine



cases out of ten, that sort of thing has only one result."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that to import a young fellow into the house, and throw him solely into a daughter's company, is very apt to bring about--well, what has been brought about."

"Then you mean that you think that I should have fallen in love with any gentleman who had come here?"

Arthur, not seeing the slight flash of indignation in her eyes, replied,

"Well, you know, there is always a risk, but I should imagine that it would very much depend upon the gentleman."

"Arthur"--with a little stamp--"I am ashamed of you. How can you think such things of me? You must have a very poor opinion of me."

"My dear, why should I suppose myself superior to anybody else, that you should only fall in love with me? You set too high a value on me."

"And you set too low a value on me; you do not understand me. You are my fate, my other self; how would it have been possible for me to love any one but you? I feel as though I had been travelling to meet you

since the beginning of the world, to stand by your side till it crumbles away, yes, for eternity itself. Oh! Arthur, do not laugh at what I say. I am, indeed, only a simple girl, but, as I told you last night, there is something stirring in me now, my real life, my eternal part, something that you have awakened, and with which you have to deal, something apart from the \_me\_ you see before you. As I speak, I feel and know that when we are dead and gone, I shall love you still; when more ages have passed than there are leaves upon that tree, I shall love you still. Arthur, I am yours for ever, for the time that is, and is to be."

She spoke with the grand freedom of one inspired, nay, he felt that she was inspired, and the same feeling of awe that had come upon him when he first saw her face, again took possession of him. Taking her hand, he kissed it.

"Dearest," he said, "dearest Angela, who am I that you should love me so? What have I done that such a treasure should be given to me? I hope that it may be as you say!"

"It will be as I say," she answered, as she bent to kiss him. And they went on in silence.