

CHAPTER XXIX

Philip arrived home about one o'clock on the Monday, and, after their nursery dinner, Arthur made his way to the study, and soon found himself in the dread presence--for what presence is more dread (most people would rather face a chief-justice with the gout)--of the man whose daughter he was about to ask in marriage.

Philip, whom he found seated by a tray, the contents of which he seemed in no humour to touch, received him with his customary politeness, saying, with a smile, that he hoped he had not come to tell him that he was sick of the place and its inhabitants, and was going away.

"Far from it, Mr. Caresfoot, I come to speak to you on a very different subject."

Philip glanced up with a quick look of expectant curiosity, but said nothing.

"In short," said Arthur, desperately, "I come to ask you to sanction my engagement to Angela."

A pause--a very awkward pause--ensued.

"You are, then, engaged to my daughter?"

"Subject to your consent, I am."

Then came another pause.

"You will understand me, Heigham, when I say that you take me rather by surprise in this business. Your acquaintance with her has been short."

"That is true, but I have seen a great deal of her."

"Perhaps; but she knows absolutely nothing of the world, and her preference for you--for, as you say you are engaged to her, I presume she has shown a preference--may be a mistake, merely a young girl's romantic idea."

Arthur thought of his conversation of the previous day with Angela, and could not help smiling as he answered,

"I think if you ask her that, she will tell you that is not the case."

"Heigham, I will be frank with you. I like you, and you have, I believe, sufficient means. Of course, you know that my daughter will have nothing--at any rate, till I am dead," he added, quickly.

"I never thought about the matter, but I shall be only too glad to

marry her with nothing but herself."

"Very good. I was going to say that, notwithstanding this, marriage is an important matter; and I must have time to think over it before I give you a decided answer, say a week. I shall not, however, expect you to leave here unless you wish to do so, nor shall I seek to place any restrictions on your intercourse with Angela, since it would appear that the mischief is already done. I am flattered by your proposal; but I must have time, and you must understand that in this instance hesitation does not necessarily mean consent."

In affairs of this nature a man is satisfied with small mercies, and willing to put up with inconveniences that appear trifling in comparison with the disasters that might have overtaken him. Arthur was no exception to the general rule. Indeed, he was profuse in his thanks, and, buoyed up with all the confidence of youth, felt sure in his heart that he would soon find a way to extinguish any objections that might still linger in Philip's mind.

His would-be father-in-law contented himself with acknowledging his remarks with courtesy, and the interview came to an end.

Arthur gone, however, his host lost all his calmness of demeanour, and, rising from his untasted meal, paced up and down the room in thought. Everything had, he reflected, fallen out as he wished. Young Heigham wished to marry his daughter, and he could not wish for a

better husband. Save for the fatality which had sent that woman to him on her fiend's errand, he would have given his consent at once, and been glad to give it. Not that he meant to refuse it--he had no such idea. And then he began to think what, supposing that Lady Bellamy's embassy had been of a nature that he could entertain, which it was not, it would mean to him. It would mean the realization of the work and aspirations of twenty years; it would mean his re-entry into the property and position from which he had, according to his own view, been unjustly ousted; it would mean, last but not least, triumph over George. And now chance, mighty chance (as fools call Providence), had at last thrown into his hands a lever with which it would be easy to topple over every stumbling-block that lay in his path to triumph; more, he might even be able to spoil that Egyptian George, giving him less than his due.

Oh, how he hungered for the broad acres of his birthright! longing for them as a lover longs for his lost bride. The opportunity would never come again; why should he throw it away? To do so would be to turn his cousin into an open and implacable foe. Why should he allow this girl, whose birth had bereft him of the only creature he had ever loved, whose sex had alienated the family estates, and for whose company he cared nothing, to come as a destruction on his plans? She would be well-off; the man loved her. As for her being engaged to this young Heigham, women soon got over those things. After all, now that he came to think of the matter calmly, what valid cause was there why the thing should not be?

And as he paced to and fro, and thought thus, an answer came into his mind. For there rose up before him a vision of his dying wife, and there sounded in his ears the murmur of her half-forgotten voice, that, for all its broken softness, had, with its last accents, called down God's winged vengeance and His everlasting doom on him who would harm her unprotected child. And, feeling that if he did this thing, on him would be the vengeance and the doom, he thought of the shadows of the night, and grew afraid.

When Arthur and his host met, according to their custom, that evening, no allusion was made on either side to their conversation of the afternoon, nor did her father even speak a word to Angela on the subject. Life, to all appearance, went on in the old house precisely as though nothing had happened. Philip did not attempt to put the smallest restraint on Arthur and his daughter, and studiously shut his eyes to the pretty obvious signs of their mutual affection. For them, the long June days were golden, but all too short. Every morning found their mutual love more perfect, but when the flakes of crimson light faded from the skies, and night dropped her veil over the tall trees and peaceful lake, by some miracle it had grown deeper and more perfect still. Day by day, Arthur discovered new charms in Angela; here some hidden knowledge, there an unsuspected grace, and everywhere an all-embracing charity and love. Day by day he gazed deeper into the depths of her mind, and still there were more to plumb. For it was a storehouse of noble thoughts and high ambitions--ambitions, many of

which could only find fulfilment in another world than this. And, the more he saw of her, the prouder he was to think that such a perfect creature should so dearly love himself; and with the greater joy did he look forward to that supreme and happy hour when he should call her his. And so day added itself to day, and found them happy.

Indeed, the aspect of their fortunes seemed as smooth and smiling as the summer surface of the lake. About Philip's final consent to their engagement they did not trouble themselves, judging, not unnaturally, that his conduct was in itself a guarantee of approval. If he meant to raise any serious objections, he would surely have done so before, Arthur would urge, and Angela would quite agree with him, and wonder what parent could find it in his heart to object to her bonnie-eyed lover.

What a merciful provision of Providence it is that throws a veil over the future, only to be pierced by the keenest-eyed of Scotchmen! Where should we find a flavour in those unfrequent cups that the shyest of the gods, Joy, holds to our yearning lips, could we know of the bitter that lurks in the tinselled bowl? Surely we have much to be thankful for, but for nothing should we be so grateful as for this blessed impotence of foresight!

But, as it is often on the bluest days that the mercury begins to sink beneath the breath of far-off hurricane, so there is a warning spirit implanted in sensitive minds that makes them mistrustful of too great

happiness. We feel that, for most of us, the wheel of our fortunes revolves too quickly to allow of a long continuance of unbroken joy.

"Arthur," said Angela, one morning, when eight days had passed since her father's return from town, "we are too happy. We should throw something into the lake."

"I have not got a ring, except the one you gave me," he answered; for his signet was on his finger. "So, unless we sacrifice Aleck or the ravens, I don't know what it is to be."

"Don't joke, Arthur. I tell you we are too happy."

Could Arthur have seen through an acre or so of undergrowth as Angela uttered these words, he would have perceived a very smart page-boy with the Bellamy crest on his buttons delivering a letter to Philip. It is true that there was nothing particularly alarming about that, but its contents might have given a point to Angela's forebodings. It ran thus:

"Rewtham House, Monday.

"My dear Mr. Caresfoot,

"With reference to our conversation last week about your daughter and G., can you come over and have a quiet chat with me this afternoon?"

"Sincerely yours,

"Anne Bellamy."

Philip read this note, and then re-read it, knowing in his heart that now was his opportunity to act up to his convictions, and put an end to the whole transaction in a few decisive words. But a man who has for so many years given place to the devil of avarice, even though it be avarice with a legitimate object, cannot shake himself free from his clothes in a moment; even when, as in Philip's case, honour and right, to say nothing of a still more powerful factor, superstition, speak so loudly in his ears. Surely, he thought, there would be no harm in hearing what she had to say. He could explain his reasons for having nothing to do with the matter so much better in person. Such mental struggles have only one end. Presently the smart page-boy bore back this note:

"Dear Lady Bellamy,

"I will be with you at half-past three.

"P.C."

It was with very curious sensations that Philip was that afternoon shown into a richly furnished boudoir in Rewtham House. He had not been in that room since he had talked to Maria Lee, sitting on that very sofa now occupied by Lady Bellamy's still beautiful form, and he could not but feel that it was a place of evil omen for him.

Lady Bellamy rose to greet him with her most fascinating smile.

"This is very kind," she said, as she motioned him to a seat, which Philip afterwards discovered had been carefully arranged so as to put his features in the full light, whilst, sitting on the sofa, her own were concealed. "Well, Mr. Caresfoot," she began, after a little pause, "I suppose I had better come to the point at once. First of all, I presume that, as you anticipated would be the case, there exists some sort of understanding between Mr. Heigham and your daughter."

Philip nodded.

"Well, your cousin is as determined as ever about the matter. Indeed, he is simply infatuated or bewitched, I really don't know which."

"I am sorry for it, Lady Bellamy, as I cannot----"

"One moment, Mr. Caresfoot; first let me tell you his offer, then we can talk it over. He offers, conditionally on his marriage with your daughter, to sell you the Isleworth estates at a fair valuation hereafter to be agreed upon, and to make a large settlement."

"And what part does he wish me to play in the matter?"

"This. First, you must get rid of young Heigham, and prevent him from holding any communication, either with Angela herself, or with any other person connected with this place, for one year from the date of his departure. Secondly, you must throw no obstacle in George's path. Thirdly, if required, you must dismiss her old nurse, Pigott."

"It cannot be, Lady Bellamy. I came here to tell you so. I dare not force my daughter into such a marriage for all the estates in England."

Lady Bellamy laughed.

"It is amusing," she said, "to see a father afraid of his own daughter; but you are over-hasty, Mr. Caresfoot. Who asked you to force her? All you are asked to do is not to interfere, and leave the rest to myself and George. You will have nothing to do with it one way or the other, nor will any responsibility rest with you. Besides, it is very probable that your cousin will live down his fancy, or some

other obstacle will arise to put an end to the thing, in which case Mr. Heigham will come back at the end of his year's probation, and events will take their natural course. It is only wise and right that you should try the constancy of these young lovers, instead of letting them marry out of hand. If, on the other hand, Angela should in the course of the year declare a preference for her cousin, surely that will be no affair of yours."

"I don't understand what your interest is in this matter, Lady Bellamy."

"My dear Mr. Caresfoot, what does my interest matter to you? Perhaps I have one, perhaps I have not; all women love match-making, you know; what really is important is your decision," and she shot a glance at him from the heavy-lidded eyes, only to recognize that he was not convinced by her arguments, or, if convinced, obstinate. "By the way," she went on, slowly, "George asked me to make a payment to you on his account, money that has, he says, been long owing, but which it has not hitherto been convenient to repay."

"What is the sum?" asked Philip, abstractedly.

"A large one; a thousand pounds."

It did not require the peculiar intonation she threw into her voice to make the matter clear to him. He was well aware that no such sum was

owing.

"Here is the cheque," she went on; and, taking from her purse a signed and crossed cheque upon a London banker, she unfolded it and threw it upon the table, watching him the while.

Philip gazed at the money with the eyes of a hungry wolf. A thousand pounds! That might be his for the asking, nay, for the taking. It would bind him to nothing. The miser's greed took possession of him as he looked. Slowly he raised his hand, twitching with excitement, and stretched it out towards the cheque, but, before his fingers touched it, Lady Bellamy, as though by accident, dropped her white palm upon the precious paper.

"I suppose that Mr. Heigham will leave to-morrow on the understanding we mentioned?" she said carelessly, but in a significant tone.

Philip nodded.

The hand was withdrawn as carelessly as it had come, leaving the cheque, blushing in all its naked beauty, upon the table. Philip took it as deliberately as he could, and put it in his pocket. Then, rising, he said good-bye, adding, as he passed through the door:

"Remember, I have no responsibility in the matter. I wash my hands of it, and wish to hear nothing about it."

"The thousand pounds has done it," reflected Lady Bellamy. "I told George that he would rise greedily at money. I have not watched him for twenty years for nothing. Fancy selling an only daughter's happiness in life for a thousand pounds, and such a daughter too! I wonder how much he would take to murder her, if he were certain that he would not be found out. Upon my word, my work grows quite interesting. That cur, Philip, is as good as a play," and she laughed her own peculiar laugh.