

CHAPTER XXXVI

One day, some three weeks after Arthur had gone, Angela strolled down the tunnel walk, now, in the height of summer, almost dark with the shade of the lime-trees, and settled herself on one of the stone seats under Caresfoot's staff.

She had a book in hand, but it soon became clear that she had come to this secluded spot to think rather than read, for it fell unopened from her hand, and her grey eyes were full of a far-off look as they gazed across the lake glittering in the sunlight, away towards the hazy purple outline of the distant hills. Her face was quite calm, but it was not that of a happy person; indeed, it gave a distinct idea of mental suffering. All grief, however acute, is subject to fixed gradations, and Angela was yet in the second stage. First there is the acute stage, when the heart aches with a physical pain, and the mind, filled with a wild yearning or tortured by an unceasing anxiety, well-nigh gives beneath the abnormal strain. This does not last long, or it would kill or drive us to the mad-house. Then comes that long epoch of dull misery, enduring till at last kindly nature in pity rubs off the rough extremes of our calamity, and by slow but sure degrees softens agony into sorrow.

This was what she was now passing through, and--as all highly organized natures like her own are, especially in youth, very sensitive to those more exquisite vibrations of pain and happiness

that leave minds of a coarser fibre comparatively unmoved--it may be taken for granted that she was suffering sufficiently acutely.

Perhaps she had never quite realized how necessary Arthur had become to her, how deep his love had sent its fibres into her heart and inner self, until he was violently wrenched away from her and she lost all sight and knowledge of him in the darkness of the outside world. Still she had made no show of her sorrow; but once, when Pigott told her some pathetic story of the death of a little child in the village, she burst into a paroxysm of weeping. The pity for another's pain had loosed the flood-gates of her own, but it was a performance that she did not repeat.

But Angela had her anxieties as well as her griefs, and it was over these former that she was thinking as she sat on the great stone under the oak. Love is a wonderful quickener of the perceptions, and, ignorant as she was of all the world's ways, the more she thought over the terms imposed by her father upon her engagement, the more distrustful did she grow. Lady Bellamy, too, had been to see her twice, and on each occasion had inspired her with a lively sense of fear and repugnance. During the first of these visits she had shown a perfect acquaintance with the circumstances of her engagement, her "flirtation with Mr. Heigham," as she was pleased to call it. During the second call, too, she had been full of strange remarks about her cousin George, talking mysteriously of "a change" that had come over him since his illness, and of his being under a "new influence." Nor

was this all; for, on the very next day when she was out walking with Pigott in the village, she had met George himself, and he had insisted upon entering into a long rambling conversation with her, and on looking at her in a way that made her feel perfectly sick.

"Oh, Aleck," she said, aloud, to the dog that was sitting by her side with his head upon her knee, for he was now her constant companion, "I wonder where your master is, your master and mine, Aleck. Would to God that he were back here to protect me, for I am growing afraid, I don't know of what, Aleck, and there are eleven long silent months to wait." At this moment the dog raised his head, listened, and sprang round with an angry "woof." Angela rose up with a flash of hope in her eyes, turned, and faced George Caresfoot.

He was still pale and shrivelled from the effects of his illness, but otherwise little changed, except that the light-blue eyes glittered with a fierce determination, and that the features had attained that fixity and strength which sometimes come to those who are bent heart and soul upon an enterprise, be it good or evil.

"So I have found you out at last, Cousin Angela. What, are you not going to shake hands with me?"

Angela touched his fingers with her own.

"My father is not here," she said.

"Thank you, my dear cousin, but I did not come to see your father, of whom I have seen plenty in the course of my life, and shall doubtless see more; I came to see you, of whom I can never see enough."

"I don't understand you," said Angela, defiantly, folding her arms across her bosom and looking him full in the face with fearless eyes, for her instinct warned her that she was in danger, and also that, whatever she might feel, she must not show that she was afraid.

"I shall hope to make you do so before long," he replied, with a meaning glance; "but you are not very polite, you know, you do not offer me a seat."

"I beg your pardon, I did not know that you wanted to sit down. I can only offer you a choice of those stones."

"Then call that brute away, and I will sit down."

"The dog is not a brute, as you mean it. But I should not speak of him like that, if I were you. He is sensible as a human being, and might resent it."

Angela knew that George was a coward about dogs; and at that moment, as though to confirm her words, Aleck growled slightly.

"Ah, indeed; well, he is certainly a handsome dog;" and he sat down suspiciously. "Won't you come and sit down?"

"Thank you. I prefer to stand."

"Do you know what you look like, standing there with your arms crossed? You look like an angry goddess."

"If you mean that seriously, I don't understand you. If it is a compliment, I don't like compliments."

"You are not very friendly," said George, whose temper was fast getting the better of him.

"I am sorry. I do not wish to be unfriendly."

"So I hear that my ward has been staying here whilst I was ill."

"Yes, he was staying here."

"And I am also told that there was some boy-and-girl love affair between you. I suppose that he indulged in a flirtation to wile away the time."

Angela turned upon him, too angry to speak.

"Well, you need not look at me like that. You surely never expect to see him again, do you?"

"If we both live, I shall certainly see him again; indeed, I shall, in any case."

"You will never see him again."

"Why not?"

"Because he was only flirting and playing the fool with you. He is a notorious flirt, and, to my certain knowledge, has been engaged to two women before."

"I do not believe that that is true, or, if it is true, it is not all the truth; but, true or untrue, I am not going to discuss Mr. Heigham with you, or allow myself to be influenced by stories told behind his back."

"Angela," said George, rising, and seizing her hand.

She turned quite pale, and a shudder passed over her frame.

"Leave my hand alone, and never dare to touch me again. This is the second time that you have tried to insult me."

"So!" answered George, furious with outraged pride and baffled passion, "you set up your will against mine, do you? Very well, you shall see. I will crush you to powder. Insult you, indeed! How often did that young blackguard insult you? I warrant he did more than take your hand."

"If," answered Angela, "you mean Mr. Heigham, I shall leave you to consider whether that term is not more applicable to the person who does his best to outrage an unprotected woman, and take advantage of the absent, than to the gentleman against whom you have used it;" and, darting on him one glance of supreme contempt, she swept away like an angry queen.

Left to his meditations, George shook his fist towards where she had vanished.

"Very well, my fine lady, very well," he said, aloud. "You treat me as so much dirt, do you? You shall smart for this, so sure as my name is George Caresfoot. Only wait till you are in my power, and you shall learn that I was never yet defied with impunity. Oh, and you shall learn many other things also."

From that time forward, Angela was, for a period of two months or more, subjected to an organized persecution as harassing as it was cruel. George waylaid her everywhere, and twice actually succeeded in entering into conversation with her, but on both occasions she managed

to escape from him before he could proceed any further. So persistently did he hunt her, that at last the wretched girl was driven to hide herself away in odd corners of the house and woods, in order to keep out of his way. Then he took to writing her letters, and sending handsome presents, all of which she returned.

Poor Angela! It was hard both to lose her lover, and to suffer daily from the persecutions of her hateful cousin, which were now pushed forward so openly and with such pertinacity as to fill her with vague alarm. What made her position worse was, that she had no one in whom to confide, for Mr. Fraser had not yet returned. Pigott indeed knew more or less what was going on, but she could do nothing, except bewail Arthur's absence, and tell her "not to mind." There remained her father, but with him she had never been on sufficiently intimate terms for confidence. Indeed, as time went on, the suspicion gathered strength in her mind that he was privy to George's advances, and that those advances had something to do with the harsh terms imposed upon Arthur and herself. But at last matters grew so bad that, having no other refuge, she determined to appeal to him for protection.

"Father," she said, boldly, one day to Philip, as he was sitting writing in his study, "my cousin George is persecuting me every day. I have borne it as long as I can, but I can bear it no longer. I have come to ask you to protect me from him."

"Why, Angela, I should have thought that you were perfectly capable of

protecting yourself. What is he persecuting you about? What does he want?"

"To marry me, I suppose," answered Angela, blushing to her eyes.

"Well, that is a very complimentary wish on his part, and I can tell you what it is, Angela, if only you could get that young Heigham out of your head, you might do a deal worse."

"It is quite useless to talk to me like that," she answered, coldly.

"Well, that is your affair; but it is very ridiculous of you to come and ask me to protect you. The woman must, indeed, be a fool who cannot protect herself."

And so the interview ended.

Next day Lady Bellamy called again.

"My dear child," she said to Angela, "you are not looking well; this business worries you, no doubt; it is the old struggle between duty and inclination, that we have most of us gone through. Well, there is one consolation, nobody who ever did his or her duty, regardless of inclination, ever regretted it in the end."

"What do you mean, Lady Bellamy, when you talk about my duty?"

"I mean the plain duty that lies before you of marrying your cousin George, and of throwing up this young Heigham."

"I recognize no such duty."

"My dear Angela, do look at the matter from a sensible point of view, think what a good thing it would be for your father, and remember, too, that it would re-unite all the property. If ever a girl had a clear duty to perform, you have."

"Since you insist so much upon my 'duty,' I must say that it seems to me that an honest girl in my position has three duties to consider, and not one, as you say, Lady Bellamy. First, there is her duty to the man she loves, for her the greatest duty of any in the world; next her duty to herself, for her happiness and self-respect are involved in her decision; and, lastly, her duty to her family. I put the family last, because, after all, it is she who gets married, not her family."

Lady Bellamy smiled a little.

"You argue well; but there is one thing that you overlook, though I am sorry to have to pain you by saying it; young Mr. Heigham is no better than he should be. I have made inquiries about him, and think that I ought to tell you that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that his life, young as he is, has not been so creditable as it might have been. He has been the hero of one or two little affairs. I can tell you about them if you like."

"Lady Bellamy, your stories are either true or untrue. If true, I should take no notice of them, because they must have happened before he loved me; if untrue, they would be a mere waste of breath, so I think that we may dispense with the stories--they would influence me no more than the hum of next summer's gnats."

Lady Bellamy smiled again.

"You are a curious woman," she said; "but, supposing that there were to be a repetition of these little stories _after_ he loved you, what would you say then?"

Angela looked troubled, and thought awhile.

"He could never go far from me," she answered.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I hold the strings of his heart in my hands, and I have only to lift them to draw him back to me--so. No other woman, no

living force, can keep him from me, if I choose to bid him come."

"Supposing that to be so, how about the self-respect you spoke of just now? Could you bear to take your lover back from the hands of another woman?"

"That would entirely depend upon the circumstances, and upon what was just to the other woman."

"You would not then throw him up without question?"

"Lady Bellamy, I may be very ignorant and simple, but I am neither mad nor a fool. What do you suppose that my life would be worth to me if I threw Arthur up? If I remained single it would be an aching void, as it is now, and if I married any other man whilst he still lived, it would become a daily and shameful humiliation such as I had rather die than endure."

Lady Bellamy glanced up from under her heavy-lidded eyes; a thought had evidently struck her, but she did not express it.

"Then I am to tell your cousin George that you will have absolutely nothing to do with him?"

"Yes, and beg him to cease persecuting me; it is quite useless; if there were no Arthur and no other man in the world, I would not marry

him. I detest him--I cannot tell you how I detest him."

"It is amusing to hear you talk so, and to think that you will certainly be Mrs. George Caresfoot within nine months."

"Never," answered Angela, passionately stamping her foot upon the floor. "What makes you say such horrible things?"

"I reflect," answered Lady Bellamy, with an ominous smile, "that George Caresfoot has made up his mind to marry you, and that I have made up mine to help him to do so, and that your will, strong as it certainly is, is, as compared with our united wills, what a straw is to a gale. The straw cannot travel against the wind, it must go with it, and you must marry George Caresfoot. You will as certainly come to the altar-rails with him as you will to your death-bed. It is written in your face. Good-bye."

For the first time Angela's courage really gave way as she heard these dreadful words. She remembered how she herself had called Lady Bellamy an embodiment of the "Spirit of Power," and now she felt that the comparison was just. The woman was power incarnate, and her words, which from anybody else she would have laughed at, sent a cold chill through her.

"She is a fine creature both in mind and body," reflected Lady Bellamy, as she stepped into her carriage. "Really, though I try to

hate her, I can find it in my heart to be sorry for her. Indeed, I am not sure that I do not like her; certainly I respect her. But she has come in my path and must be crushed--my own safety demands it. At least, she is worth crushing, and the game is fair, for perhaps she will crush me. I should not be surprised; there is a judgment in those grey eyes of hers--*Qui vivra verra*. Home, William."