

CHAPTER XXXVIII

George had spoken no falsehood when he said that he felt as though he must marry Angela or go mad. Indeed, it is a striking proof of how necessary he thought that step to be to his happiness, that he had been willing to consent to his cousin's Shylock-like terms about the sale of the property, although they would in their result degrade him from his position as a large landed proprietor, and make a comparatively poor man of him. The danger or suffering that could induce a Caresfoot to half ruin himself with his eyes open had need to be of an extraordinarily pressing nature.

Love's empire is this globe and all mankind; the most refined and the most degraded, the cleverest and the most stupid, are all liable to become his faithful subjects. He can alike command the devotion of an archbishop and a South-Sea Islander, of the most immaculate maiden lady (whatever her age) and of the savage Zulu girl. From the pole to the equator, and from the equator to the further pole, there is no monarch like Love. Where he sets his foot, the rocks bloom with flowers, or the garden becomes a wilderness, according to his goodwill and pleasure, and at his whisper all other allegiances melt away like ropes of mud. He is the real arbiter of the destinies of the world.

But to each nature of all the millions beneath his sway, Love comes in a fitting guise, to some as an angel messenger, telling of sympathy

and peace, and a strange new hope; to others draped in sad robes indeed, but still divine. Thus when he visits such a one as George Caresfoot, it is as a potent fiend, whose mission is to enter through man's lower nature, to torture and destroy; to scorch the heart with fearful heats, and then to crush it, and leave its owner's bosom choked with bitter dust.

And, so far as George is concerned, there is no doubt but what the work was done right well, for under the influence of what is, with doubtful propriety, known as the "tender passion," that estimable character was rapidly drifting within a measurable distance of a lunatic asylum. The checks and repulses that he had met with, instead of cooling his ardour, had only the effect of inflaming it to an extraordinary degree. Angela's scornful dislike, as water thrown upon burning oil, did but diffuse the flames of his passion throughout the whole system of his mind, till he grew wild with its heat and violence. Her glorious beauty daily took a still stronger hold upon his imagination, till it scorched into his very soul. For whole nights he could not sleep, for whole days he would scarcely eat or do anything but walk, walk, walk, and try to devise means to win her to his side. The irritation of the mind produced its natural effects upon his conduct, and he would burst into fits of the most causeless fury. In one of these he dismissed every servant in the house, and so evil was his reputation among that class, that he had great difficulty in obtaining others to take their place. In another he hurled a heavy pot containing an azalea-bush at the head of one of the gardeners, and had

to compromise an action for assault. In short, the lunatic asylum loomed very near indeed.

For a week or so after the memorable night of his interview with Philip, an interview that he, at least, would never forget, George was quite unable, try as he would, to get a single word with Angela.

At last, one day, when he was driving, by a seldom-used road, past the fields near the Abbey House on his way from Roxham, chance gave him the opportunity that he had for so long sought without success. For, far up a by-lane that led to a turnip-field, his eye caught sight of the flutter of a grey dress vanishing round a corner, something in the make of which suggested to him that Angela was its wearer. Giving the reins to the servant, and bidding him drive on home, he got out of the dog-cart and hurried up the grassy track, and on turning the corner came suddenly upon the object of his search. She was standing on the bank of the hedge-row, and struggling with a bough of honeysuckle from which she wished to pluck its last remaining autumn bloom. So engaged was she that she did not hear his step, and it was not until his hard voice grated on her ear, that she knew that she was trapped.

"Caught at last. You have given me a pretty hunt, Angela."

The violent start she gave effectually carried out her purpose as regards the honeysuckle, which snapped in two under the strain of her backward jerk, and she turned round upon him panting with fear and

exertion, the flowery bough grasped within her hand.

"Am I, then, a wild creature, that you should hunt me so?"

"Yes, you are the loveliest and the wildest of creatures, and, now I have caught you, you must listen to me."

"I will not listen to you; you have nothing to say to me that can interest me. I will not listen to you."

George laughed a little--a threatening, nervous laugh.

"I am accustomed to have my own way, Angela, and I am not going to give it up now. You must and you shall listen. I have got my opportunity at last, and I mean to use it. I am sorry to have to speak so roughly, but you have only yourself to thank; you have driven me to it."

His determination frightened her, and she took refuge in an armour of calm and freezing contempt.

"I don't understand you," she said.

"On the contrary, you understand me very well. You always avoid me; I can never see you, try how I will. Perhaps," he went on, still talking quite quietly, "if you knew what a hell there is in my heart and brain

you would not treat me so. I tell you that I am in torture," and the muscles of the pallid face twitched in a way that went far to confirm his words.

"I do not understand your meaning, unless, indeed, you are trying to frighten and insult me, as you have done before," answered Angela.

Poor girl, she did not know what else to say; she was not of a nervous disposition, but there was something about George's manner that alarmed her very much, and she glanced anxiously around to see if any one was within call, but the place was lonely as the grave.

"There is no need for you to look for help, I wish neither to frighten nor insult you; my suit is an honourable one enough. I wish you to promise to marry me, that is all; you must and shall promise it, I will take no refusal. You were made for me and I for you; it is quite useless for you to resist me, for you must marry me at last. I love you, and by that right you belong to me. I love you--I love you."

"You--love--me--you----"

"Yes, I do, and why should you look at me like that? I cannot help it, you are so beautiful; if you knew your loveliness, you would understand me. I love those grey eyes of yours, even when they flash and burn as they do now. Ah! they shall look softly at me yet, and those sweet lips that curl so scornfully shall shape themselves to

kiss me. Listen, I loved you when I first saw you there in the drawing-room at Isleworth, I loved you more and more all the time that I was ill, and now I love you to madness. So you see, Angela, you must marry me soon."

"I marry you!"

"Oh! don't say you won't, for God's sake, don't say you won't," said George, with a sudden change of manner from the confident to the supplicatory. "Look, I beg you not to, on my knees," and he actually flung himself down on the grass roadway and grovelled before her in an abandonment of passion hideous to behold.

She turned very pale, and answered him in a cold, quiet voice, every syllable of which fell upon him like the stroke of a knife.

"Such a thing would be quite impossible for many reasons, but I need only repeat you one that you are already aware of. I am engaged to Mr. Heigham."

"Bah, that is nothing. I know that; but you will not throw away such a love as I have to offer for the wavering affection of a boy. We can soon get rid of him. Write and tell him that you have changed your mind. Listen, Angela," he went on, catching her by the skirt of her dress; "he is not rich, he has only got enough for a bare living. I have five times the money, and you shall help to spend it. Don't marry

a young beggar like that; you won't get value for yourself. It will pay you ever so much better to marry me."

George was convinced from his experience of the sex that every woman could be bought if only you bid high enough; but, as the sequel showed, he could not well have used a worse argument to a person like Angela, or one more likely to excite the indignation that fear of him, together with a certain respect for the evident genuineness of his suffering, had hitherto kept in suppression. She wrenched her dress free from him, leaving a portion of its fabric in his hand.

"Are you not ashamed?" she said, her voice trembling with indignation and her eyes filled with angry tears; "are you not ashamed to talk to me like this, you, my own father's cousin, and yourself old enough to be my father? I tell you that my love is already given, which would have been a sufficient answer to any gentleman, and you reply by saying that you are richer than the man I love. Do you believe that a woman thinks of nothing but money? or do you suppose that I am to be bought like a beast at the market? Get up from the ground, for, since your brutality forces me to speak so plainly in my own defence, I must tell you once and for all that you will get nothing by kneeling to me. Listen: I would rather die than be your wife; rather than always see your face about me, I would pass my life in prison; I had sooner be touched by a snake than by you. You are quite hateful to me. Now you have your answer, and I beg that you will get up and let me pass!"

Drawn up the full height of her majestic stature, her face flushed with emotion, and her clear eyes flashing scornful fire, whilst in her hand she still held the bough of sweet honeysuckle; Angela formed a strange contrast to the miserable man crouched at her feet, swaying himself to and fro and moaning, his hat off and his face hidden in his trembling hands.

As he would not, or could not move, she left him there, and slipping through a neighbouring gap vanished from sight. When she was fairly gone, he stirred, and having risen and recovered his hat, which had fallen off in his excitement, his first action was to shake his fist in the direction in which she had vanished, his next to frantically kiss the fragment of her dress that he still held in her hand.

"You shall marry me yet, my fine lady," he hissed between his teeth; "and, if I do not repay your gentle words with interest, my name is not George Caresfoot;" and then, staggering like a drunken man, he made his way home.

"Oh, Arthur," thought Angela, as she crept quite broken in spirit to the solitude of her room, "if I only knew where you were, I think that I would follow you, promise or no promise. There is no one to help me, no one; they are all in league against me--even my own father."